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DOI: 10.1002/ss.20363

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Spatial inequality and social class: Suggestions for supporting rural students across social class backgrounds

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Abstract

This chapter offers insights about the varied social class backgrounds of rural students and how higher education professionals can recognize rural students' different social class experiences and needs.

Students from rural areas are often presumed to have shared experiences, such as remote addresses, small high school graduating classes, and reduced access to advanced coursework (e.g., advanced placement, international baccalaureate), all of which can coalesce into challenges accessing and being successful in higher education. One of these assumed shared experiences relating to rural students and higher education is the notion that all rural people come from poor and working-class backgrounds. Although rural areas encounter the highest rates of poverty, when compared to urban and suburban areas (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2020), rural regions are not monolithic (Koricich, 2012) and rural students exist along a social class continuum. In this chapter, we offer readers insights about the varied social class backgrounds of rural students and how higher education professionals can recognize rural students' different experiences and needs.

WHAT IS SOCIAL CLASS?

In the Editors' notes of this issue, Cain and colleagues describe the challenges in defining what it means for students to be "rural." Adding further complexity to serving rural students across social classes is that social class, like rural, does not have a clear, concise, nor agreed upon definition. While social class is often reduced to three main components: (a) educational attainment, (b) occupation type, and (c) income and finances, those are only some of the elements encompassed within social class identity (Ardoin & Martinez, 2019; Garrison & Liu, 2018). Narrow understandings of social class cause educators to only focus on the financial aspects of social class, preferring and using terms such as low-income,

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low-socioeconomic status, and Pell-eligible. This limited lens is problematic because, when the broader nature of social class is ignored, educators and institutions are unable to fully comprehend the scope of social class supports needed to holistically serve students and to grasp why rural students from families with ample incomes may still face place- and class-based transitions to college.

Conceptual models from Yosso (2005) and Liu (2011) can be helpful in broadening understandings of social class. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model highlights the varying forms of capital that an individual can possess, including cultural capital (knowledge and experiences), social capital (connections), aspirational capital (ambition), familial capital (kinship), linguistic capital (language and dialects), navigational capital (acting in spite of limitations), and resistant capital (action toward equity). Knowing that these various forms of capital exist is helpful in examining how social class may influence students' opportunities, what assets students bring to the educational experience, and how educational systems are set up to give advantage to students who have particular types of capital, which are usually associated with White, middle to upper class-normed forms of capital. For example, while a rural student from an upper social class background may be able to financially access student involvement, they may find it hard to connect with peers from suburban and urban areas based on the different activities their high schools or communities offered (cultural capital) or the accents, slang terms, or idioms used geographically or regionally (linguistic capital).

Liu's (2011) Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM) offers five different elements that are associated with an individual's social class perspective including: (1) consciousness, attitudes, and salience; (2) referent groups, or to whom people compare themselves; (3) property relationships; (4) lifestyle; and (5) behaviors and describes how these elements relate to classism. Having insight into the elements that constitute students' social class perspective can be useful in determining if and how social class is central to their overarching identity, why they may experience cultural mismatch on campus (Stephens et al., 2012), and how institutions can shift their cultures to better support students across social classes (Martin & Ardoin, 2021). For example, when a rural student is meeting with an academic advisor, they may share that they are unsure what they want to study and the advisor may offer suggestions that align with the student's interests or skills with no attention to whether or not the subsequent career path can be fruitful or sustainable in a rural community. This is an example of how upward mobility bias can show up in higher education; upward mobility bias is the assumption that people should always desire more (Liu, 2011) in relation to what is deemed as normed "success," with few of those definitions associated with living in rural areas.

THE INFLUENCES OF SPATIAL INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL CLASS ON RURAL STUDENT HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS AND SUCCESS

The National Student Clearinghouse (2019) data showed that 62% of rural and urban students attended college, versus 67% of suburban students. Once on campuses, only 41% of rural students and 36% of urban students, compared to 47% of suburban populations, graduated with a postsecondary degree. While one would hope that research addresses the higher education barriers both urban and rural students encounter, this is not the case. Education research has focused heavily on urban, not rural, regions (DeYoung, 1987; Schafft, 2016; Schafft & Biddle, 2014), and postsecondary institutions often do not consider the specific marginalization that rural students may face in their postsecondary pursuits (McDonough et al., 2010). Additionally, while recent years have seen an increase in research, practice, and policy around rural students, these efforts focus predominantly on

enrolling more rural students rather than supporting rural students from enrollment to completion.

Therefore, scant literature exists overall on the higher education access and success of rural students. Of the scholarship that has examined such topics, scholars find that rural students, because of their rural identity, encounter specific obstacles but also possess key strengths in their higher education pursuits. For example, researchers have attributed rural students enrolling in college at lower rates than their suburban peers due to factors such as lack of preparation in high school for rigorous college academics (Byun et al., 2015), physical distance from higher education institutions (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Turley, 2009), or having family members with lower expectations for and less involvement in their education (Byun et al., 2012b). On the other hand, assets-based research has found that rural students are able to access college because of social connections among rural students, families, and community members that support students in their postsecondary application and choice processes (Nelson, 2016).

For those rural students who do find themselves on college and university campuses, rural students may have a difficult time transitioning into their college coursework (C. Stone, 2014), even if they achieve an above-average high school GPA (i.e., greater than a 3.5) (Ganss, 2016). They may also be overwhelmed by the cultural atmosphere of larger campuses with more people than they are used to in their hometowns (A. Stone, 2017; C. Stone, 2014). However, other literature has pointed out that rural students can perform as well and sometimes even better than urban and suburban peers and that rural populations' academic preparedness in high school has little bearing on their college graduation rates (Byun et al., 2012a). These students' success is bolstered by tight-knit relationships that rural students have with their supportive family, community members, and teachers back home (A. Stone, 2017; Byun et al., 2012a; Ganss 2016; Heinisch, 2017), particularly as rural students attempt to recreate those types of close relationships on campus (A. Stone, 2017).

THE SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES OF RURAL, POOR, AND WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS

As noted previously within this issue (see Chapter 1), Abes et al.'s (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) outlines the ways in which college students experience and make meaning of their many overlapping identities, as well as how those students experience higher education because of their simultaneous identities. RMMDI can be utilized to understand the intricate connections between rural students' place-based identities and social class identities. While rural students, in general, will encounter experiences and barriers outlined earlier in this chapter, social class inequalities exist at the broader level amongst rural populations (Jensen, 2018), and these inequalities carry into higher education for rural students who also come from poor or working-class backgrounds.

Rural populations often face educational barriers related to social class, as US poverty rates remain highest in rural areas (USDA ERS, 2020) and 19% of rural students—over two million—come from families living in poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). While these students represent a substantive segment of the US schooling population, their experiences remain understudied and more scholarship is needed that centers the ways in which rurality and social class can compound to impact students' trajectories in higher education (Koricich et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2014). Of the literature that has been written, research has shown that compounding geographic/spatial and social class factors can influence rural, poor, and working-class students' higher education aspi-

rations and attendance (Ardoin, 2018; Byun et al., 2015), as well as institutional choice (Koricich et al., 2018). While strides have been made in recent years, rural students still face a gap in degree attainment compared to their non-rural peers, particularly bachelor's degree completion (Wells et al., 2019). Degree attainment inequities are often attributed to social class factors that affect high-poverty rural regions (Byun et al., 2012a; Byun et al., 2012b).

Such higher education enrollment and attainment inequities have often been explored through the role of financial and cultural capital, which can affect rural and poor and working-class students' access to and journey through higher education (McDonough, 1997; McDonough et al., 2010). Stemming from rural areas' reliance on extraction, trade-based, and other "blue-collar" industries, which often do not require a postsecondary credential, rural, poor, and working-class populations have low rates of college attendance (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019) and tend to value pursuing work over postsecondary education (Antos, 1999; DeYoung, 1987; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Tieken, 2016). Although rural regions are tight-knit and supportive of one another, this form of social capital—isolated social networks with limited numbers of higher education degrees and a preference for work over education—fosters a limited cultural understanding about the importance of higher education on overarching life measures (e.g., income and health over one's lifespan) and how to navigate postsecondary settings (Chambers, 2020; McNamee, 2019). Modern technology has the potential to open up social networks and introduce additional forms of social capital to rural, poor, and working-class students. However, many rural regions lack broadband access (Federal Communications Commission, 2019), which also impedes social connections with individuals from other areas and social classes and organizations who can provide information about postsecondary education.

Due to these remote social settings with specific forms of cultural knowledge, such structural factors impede rural, poor, and working-class students' access to and enrollment in higher education. For example, poor students from rural backgrounds are less likely than their wealthier and non-rural counterparts to have conversations about college (Chambers, 2020; Tieken, 2016), so they possess limited or different cultural understandings of higher education. Even when students do attempt to have these conversations or seek knowledge about postsecondary education, rural students encounter higher education jargon that can be immensely different from the rural linguistic capital they possess (Ardoin, 2018).

These types of experiences for rural, poor, and working-class students carry onto college and university campuses, as they attempt to navigate new and distinctive settings. Navigation of a new institution may begin with feelings of shock and awe—sometimes negative and sometimes positive—as rural students arrive on campuses that can be larger than their home communities, with fewer familiar faces than in their tight-knit, small towns (Heinisch, 2017; Schultz, 2004). As rural, poor, and working-class students integrate into their higher education institutions, they encounter postsecondary cultures that are often more "fluid" (Anderson, 1974, p. 192) and diverse in identities and worldviews than the rural regions in which they were raised. Scholars have noted that this more intense cultural diversity may be difficult for but also exciting to rural students from poor and working-class backgrounds (Anderson, 1974; Heinisch, 2017; Schultz, 2004). In academic spaces, rural, poor, and working-class students may be excited for learning and more course options yet encounter difficulties adjusting to the format and expectations of their postsecondary classes (Heinisch, 2017; Schultz, 2004) or face stereotypes from faculty (Landecker, 2016). Regardless, this population arrives on campuses with positive attributes from their rural, poor, and working-class backgrounds, such as a hard work ethic, self-reliance, and pride, which they hope to use to persevere and be successful in higher education (Heinisch, 2017; Schultz, 2004).

MUSEUS'S (2014) CULTURALLY ENGAGING CAMPUS ENVIRONMENTS MODEL

Knowing that rural students have varying experiences at higher education institutions based on how central their rural identity and social class identity are to their core sense of self (Abes et al., 2007), educators should consider how the RMMDI, which provides an individual level lens, can be combined with environmental models, which provide a collective/systems lens, to achieve a more complete picture of how to support rural students across social class. Utilizing both kinds of models invites educators to consider how individuals are welcomed or excluded within higher education environments based on their combination of identities.

Museus (2014) developed the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model to offer an explanation for how external influences and precollege characteristics can shape individual influences and college success outcomes. The model lists nine indicators of culturally engaging campus environments within two frames: cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness. Cultural relevance includes: (1) cultural familiarity, (2) culturally relevant knowledge, (3) cultural community service, (4) meaningful cross-cultural engagement, and (5) culturally validating environments. Cultural responsiveness includes: (6) collectivist cultural orientations, (7) humanized educational environments, (8) proactive philosophies, and (9) holistic support (Museus, 2014). While the CECE model is primarily used with and for racially and ethnically underserved populations to lead to "positive experiences for diverse students" (Museus & Yi, 2015, p. 17), it also presents insights that can be utilized for recognizing how to better engage rural students across social class backgrounds and advance equity around rurality and social class in higher education.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING RURAL STUDENTS ACROSS SOCIAL CLASSES

Many rural students arrive on campuses that are not always culturally considerate of and aligned with their identities and backgrounds (McDonough et al., 2010; McDonough, 1997); particular to those from poor and working-class backgrounds, their social class may also be a point of cultural mismatch (Stephens et al., 2012) with the higher education environment. Thus, rural students can encounter parts of their identity that align with social norms in higher education (e.g., race, gender, ability, age) and other parts of their identity that present feelings of exclusion or ostracization (e.g., rurality, social class) (Abes et al., 2007). While the broader concept of cultural integration seems to ask for some sort of cultural assimilation from individuals, Museus' and colleagues' (2014, 2015) perspectives on cultural relevance and responsiveness provide helpful vantage points from which to draw strategies for supporting rural students across social classes. Three scalable strategies focused on systemic change are offered below as suggestions on how to foster culturally relevant and responsive campus environments for rural students from across social classes: education and training of campus constituents, reduction or elimination of jargon, and creating community.

Education and training

To create a campus climate and culture that provides meaningful cross-cultural engagement, a culturally validating, humanized environment, and holistic support (Museus, 2014)

for rural students across social class backgrounds, institutions should consider how to educate and train across campus constituents—students, faculty, and staff—on rurality and social class. This strategy can often be accomplished with limited financial and human resources. Two examples of this can be found at North Carolina State University (NC State) and Rice University (Rice).

At NC State, the Department of Linguistics, partnering with student affairs and the College of Education, has instituted a program called "Educating the Educated" to contend with higher education preferencing certain linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). The program focuses on dispelling misconceptions and myths about "correct" or "proper" language, exposing issues of language-based stratification and inequality in systematic and comprehensive ways, and illuminating how dialects reflect identity (NC State Department of Linguistics, 2020). In a peer-to-peer model, the Language Diversity Ambassadors were also created as part of this effort; the organization, comprised of both students and faculty, facilitate talks and present workshops to spread knowledge of language diversity across campus and the broader city. The award-winning NC State program not only focuses on the place-based language and accents related to rurality and urbanicity across the state but also race- and ability-based forms of dialect and language (Dunn, 2016).

Rice takes a similar approach in educating its faculty and staff through self-select-in talks and workshops, though they focus more specifically on social class and first-generation college student status. While rural students may or may not be first-generation college students, this idea can still be scalable for rurality. The Rice Firsts Network Supporters offerings allow faculty and staff to learn more about theory, terminology, university-specific data, and best practices related to working with particular student populations. The core of the program is a 2 h training, offered monthly, for groups of 10–20 participants that highlights structural inadequacies (e.g., departmental language, experiential learning opportunity costs) that create barriers for these student populations and suggests good practices (e.g., advising and helping skills, resource referral, use of validation) for support (Rosati & Nguyen, in press). A pre- and post-test are utilized to measure program participants' learning during the training. The Office of Student Success Initiatives, which manages the program, is currently considering adding a second element that invites an entire office or department to request a training specific to their area and how they can implement more inclusive policies and practices (Rosati & Nguyen, in press).

Reduction or elimination of jargon

Related to the NC State and Rice training programs, student affairs educators should also consider how the proliferation of jargon and acronyms can produce student success barriers for students from rural areas across social classes. Higher education has layered jargon from broad jargon used across institutions to specialized phrases and acronyms used within institutions, divisions, and offices. Even terms used in this chapter, such as co-curricular engagement, can lead to confusion. Why not just say: join something, meet people, learn skills? The truth of the matter is that jargon is used because it seemingly adds academic legitimacy or prestige to things and is often easier and quicker for higher education employees, without consideration of how it may create obstacles for students. Ardoin (2018) named common higher education jargon and described how it creates "in-groups" (those who know the language) and "out-groups" (those who are unfamiliar) on campuses, particularly for rural students from poor or working-class backgrounds who often know a completely different set of jargon unrelated to higher education.

Reducing or eliminating jargon is a proactive philosophy that can create collectivist cultural orientations that are more validating and humanized and offer greater holistic support (Museus, 2014). As another strategy, which requires little financial and human resources, each office can conduct an audit of their websites, hard copy materials, and policies to assess how much jargon is used and if, or preferably how, that jargon could be reduced or eliminated so that anyone reading the information can recognize and understand it. The goal is to have each office communicate in ways that clearly illustrate its offerings. Another option is to create a campus-based dictionary that defines all the jargon used on campus and share that with incoming students (first year and transfer), families and caregivers, new employees, and visitors. Institutions such as the Dartmouth College, Louisiana State University, University of California-Los Angeles, University of Georgia, Weber State University, and Western Illinois University have taken this approach (Jarvis, 2019).

Creating community

One way to aid rural students from across social classes in developing a sense of belonging on campus is to help them find community—people who can offer cultural familiarity and validation, engage in dialogue across identity, and create a collectivist cultural orientation (Museus, 2014). In the past 3 years, students at Yale University, the University of Georgia, University of Colorado Boulder, and Teachers College of Columbia University have founded groups focused on supporting rural students at their institutions and bringing topics related to rurality into campus conversations. Similarly, student collectives around social class identity are also being established on college campuses, including Cornell University, Duke University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Virginia, and Walla Walla Community College. While some of these latter organizations concentrate on the intersection of social class and first-generation college student status, there is still an opportunity for students to connect around social class. While more student driven than systemic, these organizations have the potential to shift the campus culture for rural students and students from poor and working-class backgrounds and offer recommendations to institutions about how to become more culturally relevant and responsive to rural students' needs across social classes. Institutions can support these student groups by allocating funding, space, or opportunities that help preserve these organizations as part of campus culture.

Advancing and institutionalizing the efforts of these student-run communities, some higher education institutions are creating identity-based centers on campus to aid these student populations in finding both community and support. Currently, these types of centers tend to emphasize social class and first-generation college student status; however, a similar model could be used to create rural student centers or rural could be added as an identity served by these centers. For example, Brown University was the first institution to open a center for first-generation college and low-income students in Fall 2016 for the purpose of "contribut[ing] to the endurance of students by providing them with a dedicated space and programming that values their lived experiences as they navigate an elite, historically white institution" (Brown University, 2020, para. 2). A short time later, services and support for undocumented students were incorporated and the center updated its name to the Undocumented, First-Generation College, and Low-Income Student Center. One of the center's programs—the Class Dissonance Series—seeks to explore the complexity of social class, offer social class counternarratives, and affirm the cultural wealth of working-class communities. Brown's center could be a model for other institutions who hope to serve students across multiple identities, including rural students.

These three strategies—education and training of campus constituents, reduction or elimination of jargon, and creating community—are offered as scalable practices that educators and institutions can implement to increase cultural relevance and responsiveness related to rurality and social class on their campuses. We also recognize that, based on institutional type and location, these strategies may be more suited for some campuses than others. While it is evident that higher education is only beginning its work to become culturally inclusive of rural student populations across social class, we hope these strategies can aid educators and institutions in advancing equity focused on place and social class.

CONCLUSION

Rurality and social class are individually complex identity constructs and can be more convoluted when combined. As two educators who grew up in working-class, rural communities and now study students who share those identities, we implore our colleagues to consider what they know about rurality and social class, what they need to learn, and how they can use their spheres of influences within higher education to create more culturally relevant and responsive campuses. Rural students from across social class backgrounds should be able to find a sense of belonging, fully engage in academic and co-curricular engagement, and complete their degrees. Yet, these students face individual and systemic barriers that hinder their success. It is our job, as educators, to identify and eradicate those barriers. Let us get to work.

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How to cite this article: Ardoin, S., & McNamee, T. C. (2020). Spatial inequality and social class: Suggestions for supporting rural students across social class backgrounds. *New Directions for Student Services, 2020,* 37–46. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20363