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# Rural Community College Student Perceptions of Barriers to College Enrollment

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## **Abstract**

Rural community college students face unique difficulties in higher education for many reasons, including the resources they typically have access to, their collective histories, and in many cases, the preparation they received in high school. These challenges might be low-performing secondary schools, a lack of tradition and precedence in attending college, and even limited technology connectivity. These difficulties can be seen as barriers to college attendance, and it is important to understand how rural community college students see these barriers, and even more important to understand how they can be overcome. The current study sought to take the first step in understanding what inhibits college student enrollment by exploring self-reported barriers to community college matriculation. Using two case study institutions and a modified survey instrument, results largely supported existing research in that preparation for postsecondary education and finances were critical in deciding whether or not to enroll in the community college. Additionally, parental enrollment in higher education was perceived to play a role in attending college, validating the growing literature base on college attendance, in general, and rural students

in particular. Somewhat contradictory to the literature of rural education, however, was the finding that technology connectivity was not seen as a barrier to education.

## Introduction

Access to higher education for all students is drawing increased attention among researchers in postsecondary education, and the need for an educated workforce has never been stronger as the global economy develops. “Some predict that by 2020, 40 percent of the global workforce will be knowledge workers with a need for tertiary qualifications” (Daniel, Kanwar & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2009, p. 30). Also important is equal access for all students to higher education regardless of income or family background (Boggs, 2011). Equal access to higher education can provide students the opportunity to obtain a college degree, and Teran (2007) noted that “anything can be considered a barrier if it impedes the path to a college degree” (p. 17).

“Despite the need for more students entering higher education, there are many barriers that have still been identified” (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). Rural community college students, in particular, continue to face obstacles in accessing postsecondary education, as these students are challenged by living in areas with weak economies, traveling long distances to get to schools, poor educational preparation, and inconsistent access to technology (Garza & Eller, 1998). According to Webber and Boehmer (2008), another problem for many students is poor educational college preparation, and these students are often first-generation, require basic information about financial aid and general college information, and in many cases access community colleges first in their postsecondary enrollment. A study by Mckinney and Novak (2013) found students who enrolled in community colleges often had the most difficulty acquiring the information and guidance they needed to make informed decisions about the college process because many of them were first-generation or came from low-income backgrounds. Consequently, rural community colleges must employ new and different measures to reach students.

Higher education completion is associated with higher income, a better quality of life, and a higher socioeconomic status (Boggs, 2011). However, rural community college students face a plethora of non-educational barriers such as a lack of child-care services, reliable transportation, financial aid (Bell, Rowen-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009), and inadequate internet access (Cejda, 2012; Wilson, 2012). This study was designed to explore the barriers rural community college students see themselves.

The purpose for conducting this study was to examine factors related to rural low-income, first-generation college students’ obstacles to community college enrollment. The study examined barriers students overcame to attend college and how well prepared they perceive themselves to be once enrolled. The study focused on rural college students from two similar community colleges in Missouri and Arkansas.

By exploring the obstacles faced by rural community college students, high school administrators, policy makers, and higher education faculty and administrators can better understand these students, their needs, and provide them with better services. This might mean the most effective recruitment of students from these backgrounds, providing better transition experiences, and

enhancing retention activities. Also, findings might provide policy makers with the data to show funding needs for services and programs that can assist students in higher education.

## **Background**

There have been rapid changes in programs offered by community colleges in recent years, including the growing emphasis on the community college role in preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions (Nutting, 2011). Along with the changing needs of the current workforce have come changes in the needs of the community college student. For instance, community colleges have been challenged in balancing vocational training programs for the local workforce with four-year degree transfer programs (Vacik, Nadler, & Miller, 2006).

An example of the trend away from workforce preparation is the movement to four-year degree program offerings on community college campuses. This allows students to complete their associate's degree or general education and then move directly into a four-year bachelor's degree program. "Students who elect to enroll in higher education no longer need to immediately leave rural areas for their entrance into higher education, as articulation agreements have opened access at local community colleges" (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2006, p. 716). By providing a skilled workforce, this allows communities to attract better jobs to their community. "In order to offer these industries a skilled workforce, rural communities must improve their schools and point the way for students to seek lifelong education" (Killackey & Valadez, 1995).

Important to the study is an understanding of the background of the students being served at the rural community college. "Each institution must know the population it serves and develop strategies and plans that complement the political realities and technical capacities of each state and school" (Baldwin, Bensimon, Dowd, & Kleinman, 2011, p. 86). America's community colleges serve thirty-seven percent of the 10.2 million students enrolled nationwide in higher education institutions ("Fast Facts," 2012). Although these students face barriers common to all community college students, they face additional obstacles-some that have been identified and some that were attempted to identify in this study.

There are several types of students who attend community colleges, many classified as at-risk, including low-income, first-generation, non-traditional, and students with disabilities. Additionally, research by Miller and Tuttle (2006) concluded that rural community colleges introduce diversity to students, produce an educated workforce, and provide a multitude of new opportunities for students to experience cultural and social opportunities. These experiences give students the skills they need to live outside their rural communities. "Postsecondary education has long been considered one of the surest ways to overcome underprivileged social conditions" (Wang, 2009, p. 570). With this knowledge, students in rural communities can change their family dynamic.

First-generation students have been defined as "undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education" (NCES, 1998). According to NCES (1998), first-generation students were more likely to enroll in two-year community colleges, attend part-time, be older, and have dependents. A study of two-year community college students by Francis and Miller (2008) found that many first-generation students are at risk for academic failure in postsecondary education

because of their communication apprehension levels. Additionally, they concluded that students dealt with this issue of adversity in many ways including humor, assertiveness, and practice.

Low-income students were defined as those whose family income was below 125% of the federally established poverty level for their family size. NCES (2000) reported that in 1995 roughly 26% of community college students were considered low-income students, a statistic more recently confirmed by the Community College Research Center (2015), using 2002-2006 Education Longitudinal Study data, that had 44% of low income students enrolling in community colleges. The report also identified that several minority groups were more likely to be considered low-income as well as students in the 24-29 age range.

Underprepared high school students attending college has had drastic effects on higher education by draining the college's resources. "Estimates regarding the cost of remedial education to colleges and universities in the United States run anywhere between \$1 billion and \$2 billion per year" (Handel & Williams, 2011, p. 29). Not only is this a large expense for colleges, but many underprepared students do not graduate. Another impact on colleges is that faculty members lower expectations of students, as many deem it easier to lower their expectations than to fight for what they think is the best way for students to learn. Often, remedial courses are not faculty members' first choice of classes to teach, yet these classes are needed, especially on community college campuses. "With a majority of beginning community college students enrolling in remedial/developmental coursework, serving these once marginal students is now a central function of most community colleges" (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 59).

The term "access" to higher education may have many meanings in different contexts. In this study, access to higher education is defined by aggressively engaging in outreach initiatives, counseling to students, job placement support, partnerships with community service organizations, recruitment of disadvantaged students, and building partnerships with universities for transfer students (Garza & Eller, 1998).

As the demand for a more skilled workforce has evolved, so has the need for more specialized training and thus, a more educated workforce (Brock, 2010). As attending some form of postsecondary education allows for a clear credentialing of students for the workforce, access to these career pathways is necessary, however, the financing of these opportunities can be a major problem for students (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). As Boggs (2011) noted, fewer state and public resources available to community colleges force them to rely on tuition and other fees to subsidize educational programs. This passing expenses on to students may allow institutions to continue to offer their breadth of programs, but they can also have significant consequences for student access.

Mckinney and Novak (2013) wrote that in "2007-2008, approximately 42% of community college students who were eligible to receive Pell grant funding did not file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Additionally, rural community college students are working on overcoming non-educational barriers such as lack of child-care, health problems, insufficient transportation, inconsistent transportation infrastructure, and technology issues. Community service agencies, legislators, community colleges, and universities all need to work together to aid students in

overcoming these barriers for a better-prepared workforce and for a more seamless transition to higher education.

## **Research Methods**

The study made use of Wilson's (2012) survey of rural community college students. Wilson's 13-item survey was primarily based on Miller, Pope, and Steinmann's (2006) study, but was adapted to specifically identify with students in a rural setting. In its previous implementations, the survey was determined to be both reliable and valid (Cronbach alphas were over .6000 in all previous implementations). The survey was provided to a panel of non-study participants to assure that variations in wording were consistent and easy to understand. The survey was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's university.

For the current study, a convenience sample was used of first-semester, first-time community college students at two colleges in the mid-southern United States. Both colleges were housed in communities of around 10,000 residents, and both colleges had full-time enrollments on their main campuses of around 2,000 students. One of the colleges also offered comprehensive online programs and used off-site locations to have a total enrollment of over 5,000; however, only students on the main campus were involved in the study so that an equivalent number of surveys could be collected from both institutions.

Data were collected in 2013 at both campuses in a paper-and-pencil format by distributing and collecting them in an introductory, first-year required English class. A first-year English class was chosen to conduct the study, so the majority of first time students were measured and no student was surveyed twice. The instructor of each section administered the surveys, and all on campus sections were surveyed. In addition to the survey items developed by Wilson, students also answered several descriptive questions, including items about gender, enrollment directly out of high school or later, and first-generation status, allowing the study to both describe students' access barriers, but also to consider differences based on the student answers to the descriptive questions.

## **Results**

Data were collected using proxies at each of the institutions who were given guidelines for the distribution of surveys in English classes. Each proxy had the same guidelines for completing the survey, and each survey administration gave potential respondents the same instructions for completing the survey. There were approximately 250 possible student respondents, however, on the day of administration, due to a variety of issues including class absences and students declining participation in the study, 170 completed the entire survey for use in data analysis (68% response rate).

Of the respondents, 67 were male, and 103 were female, nearly two-thirds (74%) were under the age of 20, the majority were single (87%), owned a computer (93.5%) and had internet capabilities of some form at home (86.5%). The majority of students also responded that neither parent had any postsecondary enrollment (56.5%) and 73.5% of the students were classified academically as freshmen.

The survey provided an opportunity for responding students to identify several additional characteristics about themselves and their enrollment. Approximately half (48.8%) were enrolled in some remedial course, yet over half reported having a “B” or better GPA. The majority of respondents (66.5%) were receiving some need-based financial aid, reported studying less than 10 hours per week (61%), and approximately half traveled ten miles or less to the college from their homes (45.9%).

As shown in Table 1, respondents were asked to rate their agreement that some variables were perceived by themselves to be barriers to attending college. Using a three-point Likert-type scale, the greatest barriers identified were financial (mean 2.20), internet or home computer access (1.99), academic performance (GPA, 1.92), and owning a computer (mean 1.89; see Table 1). Further, differences between the self-identified attendance barriers based on gender for male and female rural community college students were analyzed, and the results indicated that there were no differences between the mean ratings. No differences were found between the groups in attendance barriers for rural community college students based on whether they enrolled immediately out of high school or postponed attendance. Additionally, no differences were found in attendance barriers for rural community college students based on low-income or first-generation classifications. Initial methodological plans called for a statistical comparison of mean scores, however the differences in cell sizes prevented such analyses. Conversely, students did not feel their marital status, if they had taken remedial coursework, or the number of semester hours they had completed played a part in their ability to enroll in college.

**Table 1**  
**Self-Reported Agreement that the variables are Barriers to Enrollment**

	Mean	STD	% Not At All	% Somewhat	% A Great Deal
Financial aid	2.2	0.86	29.2	22	48.8
Internet/computer at home	1.99	0.87	38.1	25	36.9
Cumulative GPA	1.92	0.76	6	28.1	65.9
Own a computer/laptop	1.89	0.85	42	26.6	31.4
Either parent attend college	1.84	0.85	45	26	29
Hours a week do you study	1.75	0.7	40.6	44.2	15.2
Miles you travel to school	1.75	0.77	45.3	34.5	20.2
Semester hours completed	1.62	0.72	52.12	33.94	13.94
Remedial class enrollment	1.44	0.71	68.9	18.6	12.5
Marital Status	1.36	0.68	75.8	13	11.2

As shown in Table 2, data from the survey responses were separated into three groups based on self-reported age ranges: under 20 years of age, 21-25, and over 25. Mean scores identified that all three agreed that their biggest barrier to enrolling in college was money in the form of financial aid. All three groups indicated that internet access was also an issue. However, the younger students agreed more that their GPA was a barrier to enrollment, while those in their mid-20’s perceived that the lack of precedence in the form of parental college attendance was a barrier. For those over the age of 25, studying and owning a computer were perceived to be bigger barriers.

**Table 2**  
**Barriers to Enrollment Reported by Age Range**

Variable	Mean Under 20 n=125	Mean 21-25 n=27	Mean Over 25 n=15	Mean Overall n=167
Parents ever attend college	1.77	2.22	1.73	1.84
Cumulative GPA	1.97	1.89	1.5	1.92
Semester hours completed	1.6	1.73	1.53	1.61
Marital status	1.26	1.63	1.67	1.36
Taken basic Math, beginning Reading or beginning English	1.41	1.46	1.6	1.44
Received need-based financial aid (loans or grants)	2.1	2.48	2.4	2.19
Owens a computer or laptop	1.91	1.89	1.8	1.9
Internet connection at home	1.98	2.04	1.93	1.99
Study hours per week	1.7	1.88	1.8	1.74
Miles traveled to school each day	1.74	1.77	1.87	1.75

As shown in Table 3, data were also separated into groups to identify differences in responses between first-generation students and not first-generation students. For these two groups, the most agreed upon barrier to college attendance was financial, followed by internet connectivity for both groups, and owning a computer or laptop for first-generation students and GPA for not first-generation students. The differences ranged from exactly similar overall mean ratings (on study hours per week) to differences in perceptions of GPA (.16 mean difference). The differences in cell sizes again prevented a further analysis.

**Table 3**  
**Group Mean Score Results for First-Generation Students**

Variable	Mean First-Generation n=73	Mean Not First Generation n=96	Mean Overall n=196
Parents ever attend college	1.82	1.85	1.84
Cumulative GPA	1.83	1.99	1.92
Semester hours completed	1.56	1.67	1.62
Marital status	1.48	1.26	1.36
Taken basic Math, beginning Reading or beginning English	1.53	1.37	1.44
Received need-based financial aid (loans or grants)	2.17	2.22	2.2
Owens a computer or laptop	1.88	1.91	1.89
Internet connection at home	1.99	1.99	1.99
Study hours per week	1.3	1.76	1.75
Miles traveled to school each day	1.78	1.73	1.75

## Discussion

The profile of these responding students was reflective of traditional college students, and similarly, the challenges they report in enrolling in college echo past research: money and academic performance impact the decision to attend college. Findings did, however, suggest that variables such as distance to the college and remediation are not significant variables that students are considering when choosing a community college to enter postsecondary education. These findings provide a critical baseline of information about who is attending the rural college. These individuals do not seem to be significantly scared off from attending college by their lack of academic performance, and in fact, seem to do quite well once they are enrolled. Similarly, although money may be an issue for initial enrollment, only two-thirds were receiving financial aid once they did enroll. Expanding the study to additional institutions would be helpful in identifying how strong these trends are or if they are an anomaly with these two mid-southern institutions.



One unexpected outcome of the study was that the majority of survey respondents were women under the age of 20. Although this is consistent with AACC data, there has been no prior finding that this trend applied to the rural college setting. There has been some research to suggest that rural community colleges are a gateway for returning students, particularly mothers who are attempting to redefine their career post childrearing, but the trend has not been previously identified for women directly out of the secondary school.

An econometric model of attending college would suggest a weighing of perceived benefits versus costs (Perna, 2000). The study found that rural sample students displayed this type of judgement. When asked how many miles the students drive to and from school each day and if this affected their choice in enrolling in college over 50% agreed. Students weighed the cost of gasoline and car maintenance to the perceived benefits of earning a college degree. Additionally, 70% of respondents believed that by receiving financial aid this helped them in re-enrollment. Students weighed the cost of tuition with the perceived benefits of obtaining a college degree. Students clearly weighed the cost versus the rewards in these cases.

To a large extent, data seemed to suggest that enrollment in a community college was at least partially an enrollment of convenience, reflecting personal ambition and desire for personal growth and well-being improvement. In rural settings, students may find migration to college towns and immersive four-year college experiences beyond their personal comfort as well as beyond their personal financial capacity. Also, the size of many public four-year institutions may factor in the decision making process since many attended small rural high schools. The suggestion seems to be that rural community college attendance is not just a question of first-choice, but perhaps also only-choice. The rise in online programs, however, does introduce some options for rural students, although technology access that is inconsistent may serve as a stumbling block for students in many locations.

The Cultural Capital Theory explains how low-income, first-generation students enter school at a lower social level than their peers from a higher socioeconomic status. The survey results showed that over 66% of respondents reported that they have received some form of financial aid. Also 55% of students believed either “somewhat” or “a great deal” that their parents educational attainment level influenced them in their enrollment. The survey data coincides with cultural capital theory in that many rural community college students may be entering college without the necessary skills to navigate the varied avenues of higher education in which middle and upper class students come prepared. It is important to identify this obstacle so that administrators can make adjustments to college policies. One suggestion would be to make entrance requirements less daunting and without such formal rhetoric to ensure that students from low-income and first-generation homes feel more comfortable when entering college. Another suggestion would be to have proper placement exams in place to ensure students are advised correctly. This would allow students a better opportunity to be academically successful.

Finally, further research needs to consider different types of rural environments, including those that have an agricultural foundation and those that do not, and how an individual’s sense of place and personal identity impact student choice in pursuing postsecondary education. Frameworks that differentiate types of colleges are helpful in describing rural characteristics, and might be helpful in isolating variables that impact student development and ultimately, postsecondary plans.

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