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Article

Rural Students' College Choice and the Impact of Dual Enrollment Programs and College Cost

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Abstract

This article explores the college-choice processes of two college students who graduated high school from rural areas in New York State. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of the college-choice process was used as the theoretical framework for this study. To gain in-depth knowledge about students' predisposition, search, and choice stages, narrative inquiry was employed. This article specifically highlights how dual enrollment courses played key roles within the college-choice processes of these students. These findings suggest that there is a need for additional education about college costs and dual enrollment programs for rural students and their families.

Keywords: college choice, dual enrollment, rural college students



In New York State although most of the population lives in urbanized areas or urban clusters (United States Census Bureau, 2010), 16.7% of the state's school districts are in rural areas and almost 290,000 school-aged children attend public schools in rural areas (Showalter, Hartman et al., 2019). Rural students in New York and nationally were graduating high school at rates of 88.2% and 88.7%, respectively (Showalter et al., 2019). Yet, people aged 18-24 from rural areas were enrolled in colleges and universities at the lowest rate (29%) compared to the people from town (41%), suburban (42%), and city (48%) locations (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015). Compared to the number of adults in urban areas with bachelor's degrees or higher, fewer adults in rural areas had these same degrees (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to explore the college-choice processes of two college students from rural areas as one avenue to gain understandings about their educational pathways. This study uses narrative inquiry to access in-depth accounts from two college students from rural areas in New York about the factors that influenced their college-choice processes. This article is an important contribution to the literature because the geographic backgrounds of people are often overlooked as social contributors to their access to higher education. Since the average student attends college 82 miles from their hometown (Hillman & Weichman, 2016), focusing on the narratives of students specifically from rural areas may be relevant for scholars and practitioners who work at higher education institutions because like these two students, other rural students are likely to attend their institutions. Since college costs and completing college credits while enrolled in high school played key roles within the college-choice processes of the students in this study, there may be a need for additional education about college costs and dual enrollment programs for students and their families from rural areas. This additional education can equip rural students with the knowledge they need to understand their realistic college options earlier in their college-choice processes, allowing them more time to make purposeful college choice decisions. These decisions are important for students and higher education institutions due to the positive association between students' college-choice processes and their retention in college (Kalsbeek, 2013; Villeda & Hu, 2008).

Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this article is guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college-choice. The first stage in the model is called the predisposition phase (Hossler

& Gallagher, 1987). This stage refers to the plans students develop relating to education and work after they graduate from high school. The model posits that factors, such as family backgrounds, peers, and academic performance, influence the development of students' post-high school plans (Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The second stage in the model is called the search stage (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this stage, students find and evaluate possible colleges to attend. This part of the process helps students choose what characteristics they need in a college and which colleges meet these needs. The third stage in the model is the choice stage (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this stage, students select an institution from the ones they have considered. Some students only consider one institution; other students consider multiple institutions before making their selection. This final stage is influenced by several factors, including people (e.g. parents, teachers, peers), academic achievement, perceptions of financial aid and college costs, and the students' information-gathering activities (Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

College Choice of Students from Rural Areas

Within literature there is some information available about the factors that influence the college-choice processes of college students from rural areas summarized here using the three-stage model as a guide.

Predisposition

The educational and vocational aspirations of students from rural areas provides some information about rural students' post-high school plans. Meece et al. (2013) found that slightly more than half (51%) of the rural students aspired to attend or complete two- or four-year college degrees. In addition, 56% of the rural students aspired for a career requiring a college education or a postgraduate degree (Meece et al., 2013).

Rural students' individual, family, and school experiences all influence their future aspirations. Rural students who identified as female were more likely to aspire for postsecondary education than rural males (Meece et al., 2014; Meece et al., 2013). Students who identified as multiracial were more likely to aspire for graduate and professional degrees compared to White, African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American students (Meece et al., 2013). Students whose parents had higher educational attainment and students whose parents had higher educational expectations were more likely to aspire for four-year or graduate and professional degrees (Byun et al., 2017; Meece et al., 2013). There were also positive associations between

students' participation in college prep programs, students' academic achievements, students' participation in postsecondary preparation activities, and students' valuing of school with the students' levels of postsecondary education that they aspired to complete (Byun et al., 2015 ; Byun et al., 2017; Meece et al., 2013).

Search

During the search stage, college students from rural areas were primarily influenced by the social and cultural capital of family members and schools (Ardoin, 2018; Nelson, 2016). Relating to family support, Nelson (2016) found some rural students took a collaborative approach with their parents, sharing the task of the search process. Other students had a more student-driven approach, taking on the responsibilities of the search process by themselves. Whether students had high or low family support, schools provided relationships and pro-college environments that supported high achieving rural students in their pursuit of higher education (Nelson, 2016). Ardoin (2018) noted how a lack of college knowledge and university jargon created challenges for rural students and their families as they navigated the search stage of their college-choice processes.

Choice

The final stage is the choice stage. College students from rural areas were more likely than their urban peers to attend public institutions and attend less selective colleges (Byun et al., 2015). Most (65%) rural students who participated in postsecondary education attended two-year institutions at some point in their college career, with 24% of students enrolled in a two-year college before they transferred into a four-year college (Byun et al., 2017).

Methods

Narrative inquiry methodology was utilized in this study due to its focus on the experiences of people (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It uses the concept of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to target thinking in multiple areas within time, relationships, and situations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study focused on the past, present, and anticipated future experiences of the rural students, on relationships and interactions the students had with other people, their personal feelings, and on situations within the places where these experiences happened. The overarching research question guiding this study was: what are the college-choice processes (i.e. predisposition, search, choice) of college students from rural New York areas?

Participants

This article is part of a larger study that included 10 undergraduate students from a public research university located in New York State. Two of those students were selected for inclusion in this article due to the richness of their data relating to their college-choice processes.

Participants were recruited through the university's student email news system. The students completed a brief electronic survey to confirm they met the inclusion criteria of the study, namely that they were at least 18 years old and graduated from public high schools in rural remote or rural distant school districts (NCES, 2006). For inclusion within this article, the participants graduated from high schools in New York State. For participating in the study, students were offered a \$20 gift card.

Data Collection

Each participant was interviewed twice to create an oral history of the students' lives from birth through college as well as the students' goals for the future. To learn about students' college-choice processes, they were asked questions like why they chose to attend the university and what influenced their decision. All the interviews were semi-structured, lasted about an hour, and were audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

The audio-recordings were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo 12 for analysis. Using the transcriptions, researcher notes, and the recordings, a narrative account was created for each participant. Each narrative account was then reviewed by one outside examiner familiar with the methodology. The reworked the narratives were shared with the student participants. The students then provided feedback through email correspondences and edits for inclusion within this manuscript. Throughout the research process the researcher was mindful of the elements of trustworthiness (i.e., voice, signature, audience, and form) in narrative inquiry as defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), taking steps to increase trustworthiness when possible.

Researcher Positionality

Because research is infused with interpretations, the positionality of the researcher is a key factor within qualitative research and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I have several similarities to the students discussed in this article because I attended a rural New York State high school. My personal and social identities may have influenced my perspectives on this topic. I identify as a White, cisgender female who grew up in a working to middle-class family

environment. In order to remain attentive to how my positionality impacted this project, I journaled about my personal ideas, thoughts, and assumptions throughout the research process.

Findings

The following sections present excerpts of the narratives of two students, Riley and Charlotte (pseudonyms), relating to their college-choice processes. Following narrative inquiry protocol, the narratives are presented in this section and then analyzed in the following sections. This formatting is purposeful to allow “participants to tell their stories in their own way” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 111).

Riley’s Narrative

Riley was a first-year, political science major at the university. She identified as a White, Jewish female. Riley graduated from a New York State high school located in a rural, distant town about 100 minutes from the university. She grew up in a home with both of her biological parents and one older sister. Riley’s mother earned a bachelor’s degree, but her father never attended college.

Business Club Involvement

There was an organization Riley got involved in when she was in high school that played an important part in her life.

My freshman year, I got involved in this organization. . . . I don't know what it sparked in me, but I just really loved it so much. And I got involved on the local, state, and national levels. . . . So, that was when I think I came into who I am now.

Completing College Credits in High School

Another detail that played a key role in her college-choice process was that Riley completed several college credits as a high school student.

My school is 15 minutes away from a community college. . . . And so, our school is so small, they don't offer AP or IB courses at all, which is fine because we ended up getting SUNY courses instead. I took 30 credits or 40 credits in high school.

Her older sister encouraged her to take as many college credits as she could during high school. Additionally, Riley talked about how the administrators in her school also encouraged students to complete college courses.

They really push it on to students in high school because I just think that the SUNY program is, they just really push it on to smaller schools especially because a lot of kids

can't afford, from my school, can't afford to go to private universities. So, they just automatically . . . you're sitting there making your schedule and they're like, 'Let's mark you down for these college courses.'

Expecting to Go to College

Riley knew that she was going to attend college from a young age, saying that I just knew that I was going to college because my family personally, my mom really believes in getting an education because she knows it's very hard to settle down without a job that pays. Although my dad didn't have a college education, he also agreed with that because I think that he kind of regretted not going to college.

"You're Going to a SUNY School"

Regarding the type of institution that she would attend, Riley received pressure to attend an in-state, public college. Riley's mother and sister influenced her in her decision. "Especially because my mom and my sister from a younger age, they were like, 'You're going to have to take those college credit courses, 'cause you're going to a SUNY school.'" Riley did not always see attending a SUNY institution as her only option.

When I was just beginning to get involved in [the business club], the people that I was meeting were from different states and different parts of New York. And to them, it was normal to go to a really expensive private university. . . . And so, I just assumed that that's what I would also do. . . . My dream school was [a private university in New York City], which I would never be able to afford, although I did get accepted. But I applied to mostly SUNY schools. . . . because I just knew that financially, I wouldn't be able to. . . . especially considering I had all these SUNY credits and they wouldn't transfer over. But that affected my college choice a lot, the way that my high school pushed us into the SUNY program because I don't think a lot of kids from [my high school] ended up going to universities that aren't [SUNY institutions].

Riley did apply to three private universities in addition to SUNY institutions. She explained her reasons for applying to the private universities by saying:

The private universities that I was choosing, I wanted to go to them because all of my friends who weren't from [my high school] were like, "Oh, I'm going to [a private university]." . . . And I looked into them, and I was like, "Okay. Great academics, it's a

private school, everyone knows about it.” I don't know, I feel like people who go to those schools, to me, are like celebrities sometimes because I could never do that.

Selecting the University

From all the colleges she applied to, Riley decided to attend the public research university. She went into detail about her admissions decision:

Fun fact, when I chose [the university], I hadn't even visited yet. . . . Pretty much for me, it was academics was my first thing. I want a school that's well known for their academics, so that when I go and try to get a higher education, go for a masters, they'll know where I went to school. . . . Another thing, I personally, when I was looking for colleges, I didn't think about financial things as much because I was just thinking about where I'd want to spend the next four years of my life.

Riley also explained that the location of the university influenced her decision to attend the university. She explained, “I knew that I had to go a SUNY school, so this was my top choice because one, academics are amazing. Two, the campus is gorgeous. And three, it's not too far from home for me.”

“Mainly by myself”

During her college-choice process, Riley felt as though she received minimum help from her parents but did get some assistance from her school counselor and club advisor. She explained:

I actually had not a lot of help from my family which was very disappointing because my mom had always, she was very, she always pushed me. She was like, “Please, please go to college.” . . . But I just think that because she had problems applying to college with her parents, they didn't help her either, she just kind of assumed that that was normal. So, . . . when I did my applications, I did them mainly by myself.

Although Riley's financial situation and accumulation of college credits in high school led her to selecting the university, she seemed happy with her choice of attending the university and she was transitioning well during her first semester.

Charlotte's Narrative

Charlotte identified as a White, heterosexual female from a middle-class family. Charlotte was a sophomore, English major at the university. At the time of the interviews, it was Charlotte's second semester at the university because she attended another New York public

university before transferring. Charlotte graduated from a New York high school that is classified within a rural, distant locale. Her high school is about a 2.5-hour drive from the university. Charlotte lived in this area her whole life with her biological parents and an older sister. Neither of her parents have college degrees.

Finding Self in the Tenth Grade

There seemed to be two pivotal events that occurred during Charlotte's tenth-grade year in high school that influenced her in her educational pathway. The first was her participating in a creative writing class.

I think that was a really pivotal point in my life because I was in tenth grade and I think that helped me kind of understand who I was, because we were in this class of people of all different social standings and people with all these different experiences.

Charlotte noted that in many of her other classes she was often grouped with many of the same students who tended to be more likely to attend college and more likely to have higher socioeconomic statuses than the general student population of her class.

The second key event that year was her introduction to her school's newspaper. She recalled being recruited for the newspaper by an English teacher.

I think that was a big factor of leading me in the direction I wanted to go in because I had always really, really liked English, but I'd always heard, "Don't major in it. Don't major in it." And so, I'd always tried to find something that I was . . . something else I was interested in, but there was nothing else that even came close to the way I felt about it.

Choosing a College

In eleventh grade, Charlotte began her college search process, noting:

I always knew that I was going to go to college just because. . . . Neither of my parents went to college and so they stressed the importance of it even though like they didn't know what it would be like.

She talked about not receiving much help during the college-search process from her parents because they were not familiar with the process.

Regarding the process, Charlotte said there was one private university located in New York City that she was very interested in attending.

The appeal for me was I wanted something kind of different from where I grew up, so, you know, I go to the city a couple times a year and I always kind of wanted to try to live there.

As time progressed and Charlotte received her financial aid package and she realized she could not afford to attend this private university. She decided to attend a less expensive public university. Not being able to attend her top-choice private college was a major disappointment for Charlotte.

Once I knew I couldn't go to [the private university] I just picked a random school. I was very like apathetic towards it after I knew I wasn't gonna be able to go where I wanted to go and then I didn't do research into the other schools that I could afford and I just thought, "Well, I visited [public university]. It's a nice campus. I'm sure it'll be fine. I'll just go here."

This rash decision to "just" go to the public university she had visited did not work out as well as Charlotte had hoped. She attended her first institution for only one semester. Even though Charlotte's initial college-choice process led her to an institution that did not work out for her, her negative experiences at her first institution allowed Charlotte to appreciate attending the second university even more, permitting her to be successful in her current college situation.

Discussion

Riley's and Charlotte's narratives detail the specific factors that influenced their college-choice processes when they were in high school, providing more details into the nuances of the factors they considered within their decisions. There are several similarities and differences in the college-choice process narratives of Riley and Charlotte useful to explore within Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college-choice model. This theoretical framing of the narratives is a key step because it allows for a deeper understanding of Riley's and Charlotte's experiences.

Predisposition

Relating to their predisposition stage, both students remarked that they knew they would attend college after high school due to the influence of their parents. The parents of these students motivated their children to attend college due to the potential economic advantage of higher education. Carnevale et al. (2011) concluded that earning a bachelor's degree increased an individual's lifetime earnings by 75% compared to having a high school degree. Moreover, Tieken (2016) found that the educational aspirations of rural, first-generation students were

influenced in part by their parents who promoted college degrees due to declining rural industries, degree requirements of today's employment opportunities, and the necessity of higher education. Hossler et al.'s (1999) determined that parents' expectations and encouragement had the greatest effect on students' predisposition stages, and that most parents and students viewed getting a good job as the most important reason for going to college.

Beyond their parents, Riley and Charlotte's school curriculum impacted their pathways towards higher education. This information is consistent with literature relating to the long history of curriculum tracking of high school students in the United States (e.g. Alexander, Cook, & McDill, 1978; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999; Lee & Bryk, 1988). Riley and Charlotte were placed in advanced classes because they were high-achieving students who did well in school. Their high grades are key because student achievement was the second highest predictor of students' college aspirations, after parental encouragement in Hossler et al.'s (1999) study.

Hossler et al. (1999) found that parents' education levels were the third strongest characteristic associated with students' aspirations to attend college. The positive association between parental education level and students' educational aspirations was found within literature on students from rural areas (e.g. Byun et al., 2015, 2017; Meece et al., 2013). In this study, only Riley's mother had a bachelor's degree. Both Riley's and Charlotte's parents encouraged their daughters to attend college. Tieken (2016) noted that "although most [rural] parents support the idea of higher education, they often do not – cannot - understand the long process of getting there" (p. 215). Riley and Charlotte (and their parents) may have benefitted from additional support from high school or college staff members as they navigated the college application process.

In addition to the top three characteristics associated with students' predisposition stage, Riley and Charlotte had other factors found to be associated with college aspirations. Riley and Charlotte both identified as female. Hossler et al. (1999) found that female students reported talking to their parents more about their educational plans and women from rural areas were more likely to aspire for higher education than men from rural areas and seek career paths that required higher levels of education (Meece et al., 2013, 2014). Riley and Charlotte were involved in student organizations in high school. Student involvement was slightly significantly related to students' college aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999). Ardoin (2018) found that the rural students who were involved in curricular and extracurricular activities were more advanced in their

predisposition stages than uninvolved students because these activities were valued by higher education and because these activities gave students access to college campuses.

Search

Since Riley and Charlotte knew they wanted to attend college, they experienced the process of searching for institutions. One factor that greatly influenced their college search processes was their extracurricular activities. Riley's involvement in her business organization impacted her search process because she built relationships with peers from other areas and through these relationships she gained perspectives about her peers' college-choice processes. Hossler et al.'s (1999) noted that students utilized peers in their search stage. Riley's business organization involvement was a specific example of one type of peer relationship students may use in their search. Likewise, Charlotte's search process was affected by her extracurricular involvement in the school's newspaper and her interest in English. Charlotte's extracurricular activities became an item on her list of desirable college characteristics she used to during her search stage because she saw career potential in these areas (Hossler et al., 1999; Tieken, 2016).

Riley's and Charlotte's search stages were also influenced by the encouragement they received from family members and school professionals to participate in dual enrollment courses. When Hossler and Gallagher published the three-stage college-choice model in 1987, dual enrollment programs were just emerging (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012). In the 2010-2011 academic year about 1.4 million students participated in dual enrollment programs (Fink et al., 2017). Rural students were more likely than all students nationally to take dual enrollment courses in high school for college credit (Showalter et al., 2019). Since there has been great growth in the number of students in these dual enrollment programs and since rural students are more likely to participate in dual enrollment programs, it makes sense that participation in dual enrollment played pivotal parts in Riley's and Charlotte's college-choice processes.

Although they were influenced by the opinions of their parents and school administrators, both students felt that they completed the college application process mostly on their own. Charlotte indicated her parents did not know the information due to not attending college themselves; whereas Riley's mother had attended college yet felt not assisting your child in the process was normal due to her personal experiences. These findings align with Nelson's (2016) conclusions that some rural students had a more student-driven approach to their college-choice process because their parents either had a lack of knowledge or lack of interest in the college

process. These findings also provide examples of how students can be encouraged by their parents to attend college yet may feel that they lack parental support (i.e. through action-oriented activities) in their college preparation activities (Hossler et al., 1999; Tieken, 2016). Although parents play critical roles in the college decision-making process for many students, distinguishing the different types of roles they play is critical to gaining greater understanding about these students' college-choice processes.

Choice

Although Riley and Charlotte considered multiple postsecondary institutions, both selected public research universities in New York. Their selections of these public universities differed slightly. For Riley, it was in her choice stage that she eliminated the private institutions she had considered. She did get accepted at the private institution in New York City, but did not select it for financial reasons. Once Riley narrowed her options to the public institutions, she then made the choice to attend the university due to its academic rigor, campus environment, and proximity to her hometown. Similarly, Charlotte excluded the private institution she was interested in attending after she received her financial aid package. Unlike Riley who closely considered the public institution she would attend, Charlotte became, in her words “apathetic” about the decision and chose the only public institution she had visited.

The fact that Riley and Charlotte both wanted to attend private universities but could not attend for financial reasons and only discovered this when they received their financial aid packages, indicating that they may not have had a clear understanding of the college costs and financial aid options related to attending the colleges that they applied to. Some of the students in Ardoin's (2018) study also lacked knowledge regarding the requirements of attending higher education. Since rural students, particularly first-generation students, and their parents may be missing this crucial information, there is an opportunity for higher education institutions to increase their outreach to rural students and families to fill this need. McDonough et al. (2010) suggested that increased outreach of higher education to rural areas might have a “demonstrable impact on the college access for rural students” (p. 205). This type of assistance from the colleges may have assisted Riley and Charlotte in their college-choice processes. Riley's and Charlotte's narratives detailed what they did when they realized their college choice was indeed limited. Riley continued her process by closely considering her remaining institutional options once her top-choice was eliminated, but Charlotte simply selected to enroll at the only state

institution she had visited. Because of the association students' college-choice processes and their retention within higher education (Kalsbeek, 2013; Villella & Hu, 2008), educating students about their realistic options earlier in their college-choice processes may avoid students' disappointment later in their choice stages as well as help institutions retain their students.

Limitations

The depth of the narratives within this study illuminated the college-choice processes of two rural students, however, there are limitations to this research. First, this article includes only the narratives of two individuals who graduated from high schools in rural New York areas and then attended public institutions in the same state. Since the information gathered for this article represents two students who attended public research universities, the profile and factors influencing their college-choice processes could have been different from other students who select other types of colleges (e.g. comprehensive colleges, community colleges, liberal arts colleges) to attend. Finally, since all forms of methodology have their strengths and weaknesses, other types of qualitative and quantitative methodologies will further add different viewpoints to this topic in the future.

Recommendations for Practice

Although there are limitations to the information provided here, there is much potential for practice implications for student affairs professionals based on the narratives of Riley and Charlotte. One suggestion is for higher education to improve its outreach to students and families in rural areas, providing them with educational opportunities about dual-enrollment and college costs. The cost of attending college and Riley's and Charlotte's financial aid packages greatly impacted their selection of institutions. It is unclear how knowledgeable these students were about college costs when they were making their decisions and this issue has been noted in previous literature about rural students (e.g., Ardoin, 2018).

An understanding of the types of college credits students are accumulating in high school and how to ask colleges about applying these credits to the postsecondary level should be outlined for students and their families. By taking college credits through dual enrollment programs during high school, these students felt they were locked into a pathway towards in-state, public institutions. Although from a policy perspective this practice increases access to higher education, if students and their families are not informed of how to transfer dual enrollment credits to various institutions, the students may be misguided during their college-

choice processes. Riley's mother and sister insisted Riley would attend an in-state public institution due to the number of credits she earned without considering other types of institutions. She also felt her school administrators were pressuring her towards only SUNY institutions as well. Since college credits earned through AP courses versus dual enrollment programs were looked at differently by many higher education institutions (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012) and since rural students were less likely to pass AP courses to qualify for college credit than their urban and suburban peers (Showalter et al., 2019), informing students, families, and high school professionals about the benefits and challenges of completing each of these types of credits should become a priority early in students' educational pathways.

Conclusion

In summary, there were important people and factors involved in the college-choice process of Riley and Charlotte. Much of these findings align with other studies about rural college students and students' college-choice processes (e.g. Ardoin, 2018; Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Nelson, 2016). This article makes an important contribution to the literature because it outlines the in-depth college-choice process of two college students who graduated from rural high schools. This study highlighted how dual enrollment and college costs influenced these students' college-choice processes even though these topics had minimal attention within Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model. It is up to higher education professionals to maintain or create educational outreach opportunities with rural students and their families to support students' college-choice processes, enrollment, and retention in the future.

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