Small Town, Not Small Time: Understanding the Experiences of Rural Students

Karen M. Ast

I graduated high school with 62 other peers in my class. At the commencement ceremony, held in the high school gym, school personnel lined us up to walk in by height, shortest to tallest, a simple process with the small number of seniors. Of my graduating class, most of which I had known since preschool, only a handful of students chose to leave our small community to pursue higher education. Several others chose to stay at home and attend the local college, which was about 15 miles down the road. The other half of my class remained in the community; some took over their parents' business, others worked on farms, and a few focused on starting a family. Almost 10 years later, as a second-year graduate student, I am the only individual I know of from my senior class who pursued a master's degree. The purpose of this reflection is not to boast about my success, rather it is to explain the experiences of those students from rural communities who are entering our educational systems and, to some extent, voice the struggles of those who are not.

The importance of respecting various dimensions of identity in students is evident in student affairs literature. Intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, and faith background continues to be key to our understanding of college student development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). However, often overlooked are the geographic backgrounds and the role of the community size in which students grow up (Bergerson, Heiselt, & Aiken-Wisniewski, 2013). Identifying as someone from a rural community can have tangible impacts on the student experience, and due to myriad factors, enrollment rates for the rural student population are lagging behind those of urban populations (Gibbs, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007). In addition, over the past decade, student enrollment in rural secondary districts is greatly outpacing enrollment of students in urban school districts (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Therefore, as student affairs professionals, we must seek to understand the experiences of this underrepresented population in higher education to better facilitate their success in college.

Reflecting on my journey, as well as those experiences of self-identified rural

Karen M. Ast (karenast@suu.edu) is the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Orientation at Southern Utah University.

students that I work with, the transition from small town America to college life varies based upon many factors. Sheer size of college campuses and the cities they are often located in can have a great impact on the adjustment of individuals from rural areas. For example, in the qualitative research conducted for my thesis, which focused on the experiences of rural students transitioning into college, students expressed their feelings of anxiety regarding the short period between classes, where they were suddenly surrounded by thousands of students. This new experience is overwhelming for students who feel lost in a classroom the size of their entire high school. For these students, the lack of understanding that others, including administrators and instructors, have regarding their struggles can be frustrating. Perspective in this regard is essential, as I most recently lived in Corvallis, Oregon, an area referred to by others as "just a small cow town," yet this community of approximately 60,000 is the biggest city I have ever lived in. As with many identities we hold, it is important to refrain from making assumptions about the backgrounds of others.

My research surrounded the lived experiences of rural students transitioning into a medium-sized, public research institution. Those students I spoke with were enrolled in their first term; therefore, they were the success stories. They left their small communities and survived in a college environment. Although unpublished, the rural student conversations from my research revealed similar stories to which I can relate when reflecting upon my college journey. In terms of negative college experiences, participants pointed out how the sheer size of their new environment brought about feelings of being lost. Many of them described barriers to their enrollment, such as a lack of college-preparatory work in high school, financial difficulty, and the great physical distance many travel to get to campus and back home. Although many of these rural students were highly involved in co-curricular activities in high school, they mentioned their hesitation to join organizations on campus, as they note being overwhelmed with all the options. A few described their inability to make social connections, as they were surrounded by the same friendship group for their entire life and never experienced seeking out friends. Even as a graduate student, I experienced anxiety because of the large student population, Division I sporting events, and the options available in coursework and student organizations.

I was so fortunate to hear the stories of these students and their reasons for enrolling in college. Like myself, many of these rural students were at the top of their high school class. Although they may not have had many college-level courses before, many indicated feeling academically prepared for their courses in the first term. They also cited mentors (parents, teachers, and counselors) as key figures who pushed them toward college enrollment. Although neither of my parents went to college, I know I would not be where I am today without the constant support of my family. Finally, past familiarity with campus, such as visiting for high school activities or sporting events, seems to have lessened rural students' anxiety in enrolling. Those who were most positive about their experiences made connections through their current residence halls or academic programs.

As a student affairs professional and a researcher, my thoughts rest not only on these rural students who have successfully made the leap into our university system, but to those who chose to attain only a high school diploma. These are the individuals I see when I return to my hometown: the ones that are farming the land, working at the local grocery store, and creating the rural families of the future. What about rural students who lack the encouragement of their parents to enroll in college? What about those who do not have the ability to travel the great distances to campus and back home to visit family? What about those who were not at the top of their class and did not receive scholarships? When I return to my hometown of 5,000 people, I see amazing potential and intelligence in current high school students as well as my fellow graduates who chose to not attend college. These individuals are looking to us, as college professionals, to create intentional pathways to ensure their successful transition to higher education. I see a need not only for us to partner with high school administrators to bridge the gap between secondary and higher education, but also to ensure that we assist in connecting these rural students to campus activities once they do enroll.

It never occurred to me to identify as someone from a rural area—that is, not until I lived in a larger community with a college campus five times the size of my hometown. In a similar way, I believe that we, as higher education professionals, are not paying attention to this hidden social identity in our students. These individuals do not wear a physical indication that they are from a small town, but they harbor deep, interesting, and inspiring stories about their background. Keep in mind that, like myself, these students may not recognize their struggles as stemming from their rural identity. I would encourage you to have authentic conversations with students you interact with, ask them about their background, empathize with their struggles, and praise their choice of higher education because, although these students may be from a small town, they have a big time influence on our work in student transition and retention.

References

Bergerson, A. A., Heiselt, A. K., & Aiken-Wisniewski, S. (2013). Refocusing college choice: Women's reflections on their postsecondary education choices. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education, 6*(2), 185-211. doi:10.1515/njawhe-2013-0013

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA : Jossey-Bass.

Gibbs, R. M. (2003). *Rural education at a glance*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Provasnik, S., KewalRamani, A., Coleman, M.M., Gilbertson, L., Herring, W., & Xie, Q. (2007). *Status of education in rural America*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences.

Strange, M., Johnson, J., Showalter, D. & Klein, R. (2012). *Why rural matters 2011-12: The condition of rural education in the 50 states*. Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust.