Rural Illinois: Nurturing Rural Roots, Fostering College Futures

Jasmine D. Collins, Ph.D., UIUC
Liz Soellner, UIUC
Introduction
Jasmine D. Collins, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communications Program
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Liz Soellner

Founder and Former President, Rural Area Student Initiative (RASI)
BALAS in Neuroscience & Sociology (Exp. 2024)
1. Speaker Introductions
2. Geographic disparities in educational attainment and economic mobility
3. What does it mean to be “rural?”
4. Navigating challenges: Rural students' experiences and policy support
5. Spotlight on RASI
Rural residents in Illinois face disparities in postsecondary educational attainment and workforce participation. The purpose of our presentation is to shed light on the challenges that rural students face in the high-school-to-college transition, and to consider mechanisms to better recruit, support, and retain Illinois college students from rural areas.
Geographic Disparities in Illinois: Educational Attainment and Economic Mobility
Rural students in Illinois are “significantly more likely to be in the lowest income bracket” and possess more student loan debt than their non-rural counterparts (PCC, 2019, p. 4).

Rural citizens of Color are half as likely to have a Bachelor’s degree compared to rural White residents (Marre, 2017).

Rural parents are more likely to possess only a high school diploma and expect lower rates of educational attainment from their children than non-rural parents (McCulloh, 2022).
### Associate’s Degree or Higher Attainment by IL County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>DuPage</th>
<th>McLean</th>
<th>Champaign</th>
<th>Lake</th>
<th>Macou</th>
<th>Keokuk</th>
<th>Woodh</th>
<th>Cook</th>
<th>Piatt</th>
<th>McDon...</th>
<th>McHenry</th>
<th>Will</th>
<th>DeKalb</th>
<th>Sangamon</th>
<th>Jackson</th>
<th>Peoria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effingham</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willard...</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo Davi...</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stark</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaSalle</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lumina Foundation, 2019)
Educational Attainment in “Chicago 9” (ages 18-24)
Educational Attainment in “Southern 7” (ages 18-24)

Highest Level of Educational Attainment
- No HS diploma or GED
- HS diploma or GED
- Associate’s or some college
- Bachelor’s or higher

Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers
Educational Attainment in “Chicago 9” & “Southern 7” (ages 18-24)
Associate’s Degree or Higher Attainment by IL County

(Lumina Foundation, 2019)

Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers
Defining Rurality
“Policymakers, researchers, and politicians define ‘rural’ in a ‘dizzying’ number of ways” (Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, 2019)

Most metrics define rurality via two variables:

a. Population
b. Distance from an urbanized area
Defining Rural

- The two most commonly used definitions of rurality come from the United States Census and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

- The 2010 Census uses population-based criteria to define rurality as any “population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” (United States Census Bureau, 2021, para. 2)

- Urban areas, in this case, consist of a densely settled core of 50,000 people (2,500-49,999 for an urban cluster) along with “adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land use” (United States Census Bureau, 2021a10, para 2).
### Rural Illinois

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.6 million</td>
<td>1.1 million</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Illinois</td>
<td>residents, total.</td>
<td>residents, rural.</td>
<td>counties, total.</td>
<td>counties, rural.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>residents, total.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Illinois</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>counties, total.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Illinois</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>counties, rural.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Does It Mean to be “Rural”?
Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers

Background

Liz grew up on the Missouri border in Chester, Illinois.

The most largest employers in my area are the coal mines, factories, and prisons.

In fact, half of the town’s 7,000-person population consists of prison inmates.
Past Precedent & College Going Culture

- Fewer adults in the community have college degrees
  - Less exposure to the concept of higher education for rural children
- Forced to be pioneers when applying for and attending college
- Community and familial support issues
  - Post graduation employment opportunities
Opportunity adjacency

“You don’t know what you don’t know”

Rural students must drive farther distances than non-rural students to reach the closest college (Byun et al., 2012).

Rural students that are also of Color, first-generation, and/or low-income can have different experiences tied to those respective identities than their non-rural counterparts.
College Readiness Challenges

- Underfunded school districts
- Little to no access to AP/IB programs
- High teacher and principal turnover
- Lack of dedicated SAT & ACT prep
- College advising gaps
Navigating Challenges: Rural Students' Experiences and Policy Support
Retention

The campus culture shock rural students experience is seldom spoken about, leaving many to struggle silently as a result.

Rural college students are retained at lower rates than their non-rural counterparts (McCulloh, 2022).
Recruitment Challenges

Recruiters don’t make the trek out, and rural students don’t make the trek in. If recruiters do make it out, the "outsider dilemma" poses an additional obstacle.

Rural schools are considered "low-yield", and sparsely populated areas generate less statistical power.

As a result, rural recruitment efforts often require a greater investment but with less of a return than lower energy efforts targeted at non-rural areas.
 Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers

Four Pillars of Policy Support

- Affordability
- Academic Preparation
- College Knowledge
- Workforce Opportunities
Spotlight on RASI
RASI’s mission:

To not only support UIUC students from rural areas as they navigate the transition to higher education, but also provide resources to rural high school students interested in pursuing higher education.
The Liaison Program

The Liaison Program is a grassroots initiative that aims to mitigate the unique financial, academic, and cultural challenges faced by rural high school students.
Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers

- Nurturing rural learners from cradle to career
- Intersectional and targeted policy approaches
- Institutional (HS, 2-and 4-year) collaborations
- Leveraging community knowledge - asset-based thinking
Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers

Questions & Contact

Jasmine D. Collins, Ph.D.
jdcolli2@illinois.edu
Assistant Professor
Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communications Program
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Liz Soellner
ea10@illinois.edu
Founder and President, Rural Area Student Initiative (RASI)
BALAS in Neuroscience & Sociology (Exp. 2024)