

The Rural Higher-Education Crisis

When it comes to college enrollment, students in Middle America—many of them white—face an uphill battle against economic and cultural deterrents.



The University of Iowa campus

Ben Smith / The Hechinger Report

JON MARCUS AND MATT KRUPNICK

SEP 27, 2017 | EDUCATION

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

When Dustin Gordon’s high school invited juniors and seniors to meet with recruiters from colleges and universities, a handful of students showed up.

A few were serious about the prospect of continuing their educations, he said. “But I think some of them went just to get out of class.”

In his sparsely settled community in the agricultural countryside of southern Iowa, “There’s just no motivation for people to go” to college, Gordon said.

MORE FROM THE HECHINGER REPORT



THE HECHINGER REPORT

[How one college’s death and rebirth offers lessons for the rest](#)

[Number of single moms in college doubled in 12 years, so why aren’t they graduating?](#)

[Do state takeovers work in Mississippi?](#)

“When they’re ready to be done with high school, they think, ‘That’s all the school I need, and I’m just going to go and find a job’” on the family farm or at the egg-packaging plant or the factory that makes pulleys and conveyor belts, or driving trucks that haul grain.

Variations of this mindset, among many other reasons, have given rise to a reality that’s gotten lost in the impassioned debate over who gets to go to college, which often focuses on low-income people of color: The high-school graduates who head off to campus in the lowest proportions in America are the ones from rural places.

Understanding and addressing this “is critical to our future, not just for employment but for civil discourse and kids feeling like they can contribute and achieve and not feeling lost and ignored,” said Jeff Hawkins, the executive director of the Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative, which works to encourage students in that state’s coal-mining southeast corner to go on to college.

It’s not that rural students aren’t academically prepared. They score better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than urban students and graduate from high school at a higher percentage than the national average, [the U.S.](#)

[Department of Education reports](#). At the regional high school Gordon attended in Lenox, Iowa, the graduation rate is typically [at or near an impressive 100 percent](#).

Yet even the highest-income white students from rural areas are less likely to go to college right from high school than their well-off white city and suburban counterparts, [according to the National Student Clearinghouse](#), which tracks this data: 61 percent, compared to 72 percent from urban schools and 74 percent from suburban ones.

When Dustin Gordon arrived at the University of Iowa, he found himself taking lecture classes with more people in them than his entire hometown of Sharpsburg, Iowa, population 89. (Ben Smith / The Hechinger Report)

Overall, 59 percent of rural high-school grads—white and nonwhite, at every income level—go to college the subsequent fall, a lower proportion than the 62 percent of urban and 67 percent of suburban graduates who do, [the clearinghouse says](#). Forty-two percent of people ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in all of higher education, [according to the National Center for Education Statistics](#), but only 29 percent come from rural areas, compared to nearly 48 percent from cities.

The reasons for this are as myriad as they are consequential, affecting everything from regional economic competitiveness to widening political division.

Many are historic. Rural students live in places where it once was possible to make a decent living from farming, mining, and timber-harvesting, said Charles Fluharty, the president and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the University of Iowa. None of those required college educations.

“You could go to ag[ricultural] school, but you didn’t have to,” said Fluharty, who was raised on a farm in the Appalachian foothills of Ohio that has been in his family for five generations. “You could get those jobs, so why should you go to college?”

Then manufacturing began to leave, agriculture became increasingly automated, and mines closed.

“Since I’ve started going to the University of Iowa, I almost don’t like going home.”

A resulting sense of hopelessness in places where jobs became sparse, Fluharty said, meant that rural students lost interest in their high schools’ field trips to technical colleges or public universities, or in those visits from recruiters.

The same malaise apparently affects their parents. A third of rural whites, and 40 percent of rural white men, are resigned to believing that their children will grow up with a lower standard of living than they did, a far higher proportion than people who live in cities (23 percent) or suburbs (28 percent), [a survey by the Pew Research Center found](#).

This disaffection has been widely cited as a reason the anti-establishment candidate Donald Trump won 62 percent of the rural vote in last year’s presidential election, compared to Hillary Clinton’s 34 percent—a much wider margin than in suburbs. In cities, Trump lost to Clinton by a wide margin.

Dustin Gordon bucked the trend. Though neither of his parents finished college, they insisted that he go. “That’s why I did it, I guess. They kind of pushed it,” he said. “When I think of my [high-school] classmates, the kids that went to college, their parents had better jobs or had gone to college.”

But because of their histories, rural places have fewer such people than urban and suburban areas. Fewer than one in five rural adults aged 25 and older have college degrees, says the [U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service](#). That compares to the national average of nearly half, [according to the Lumina Foundation](#), which is pushing for an increase in the proportion of the population with higher educations. (Lumina is among the funders of *The Hechinger Report*, which produced this story in partnership with *The Atlantic*.)

“We’ve got one physics teacher in the county for three high schools.”

“Because we don’t have a diverse set of vocations kids can look at or try on or have an example of someone in their community that they aspire to be like, they’re kind of pushed into a position of, ‘I have a choice of becoming a coal miner or working in retail or healthcare,’” Hawkins said. “They can see a coal miner or a cashier, but they rarely if anywhere except on television encounter lawyers or doctors or astrophysicists.”

Although rural areas are far from homogenous—contrast Marion County and its tiny population of 30,000 with California’s sprawling Kern County, which has nearly 890,000 residents spread across a wide-open patchwork of farms, small towns, and larger cities such as Bakersfield—their challenges are largely the same.

The Tennessee-based National Rural Education Association notes that, in addition to other problems, rural areas contend with drug and mental-health issues, poverty, and a lack of high-speed access to the internet, for instance.

Some remote areas can't attract enough teachers to offer college-preparatory classes. In Marion County, Tennessee, where Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee meet, the county school district struggled to find enough math teachers for this academic year, said Mark Griffith, the director of schools. Finding teachers for other subjects was also a challenge.

"There aren't any applicants out there," Griffith said. "We've got one physics teacher in the county for three high schools."

Nor is there widespread confidence in rural places that going to college is worth it. Compared to their counterparts in more populous areas, fewer rural white men are convinced that colleges and universities have a role in providing necessary skills, [Pew found](#); 71 percent think they do, compared to 82 percent of urban and 84 percent of suburban white men.

"This has become a cultural phenomenon. It's not an educational phenomenon," Fluharty said. Encouraging a rural student to go to college instead of doing the same work as the adults in a community, he said, is like "suggesting that that child should not do what I have done, should not be where I have been, should not value all that I have raised them to honor, whether that's going to the mill or turning on the tractor at 6 a.m."

Hawkins's program to encourage college-going tries to overcome this by connecting its students with people who are already enrolled in college. Some come to serve as judges of a multi-district entrepreneurship competition, which also brings together college-bound kids from different schools. "They strike up a relationship that could extend online and they begin to create a future support group for when they get to college," he said.

Such a support system is important because those rural students who do get that far are more likely to drop out between the first and second year on campus than their urban and suburban classmates, [the National Student Clearinghouse reports](#).

Of the 618 high-school graduates who went to college in the fall of 2015 from Pike County, which is part of his cooperative, said Hawkins, only 350 went back for the

spring semester and, of those, 281 for a second year. “So basically we lost more than half those kids.”

Disdain toward rural people ...“is the last acceptable prejudice in America.”

One reason is cost. For others, the problem is culture shock. “They go from 80 or 90 kids in their entire graduating class and now they’re on campus with 20,000 kids,” said Hawkins. In rural towns, “We grow up knowing our neighbors, going to church with them, shopping at the Dollar General store. There is more of a familiarity.”

It was a jolt to Gordon when, after first enrolling at the community college where his mother works, he transferred to the University of Iowa and found himself in lecture classes with more people in them than his entire hometown of Sharpsburg, population 89. The regional school he attended houses all 12 grades in the same building. There were 29 students in his graduating class.

“Coming from a rural community, everybody knows who you are,” said Gordon, who quarterbacked his high-school football team, played baseball, and ran track and field. When he got to the University of Iowa, “I literally knew nobody on campus. Going to the other side of the state with people from the Chicago area and bigger places, it’s just kind of intimidating. It’s tough to connect with people, coming from a small, rural community” to an institution with 33,334 students from 114 countries and all 50 states.

It’s not only their size that makes coming to some colleges particularly tough adjustments for students from small towns. There is the less tangible issue of stereotypes, Fluharty said. Disdain toward rural people, which he called commonplace on campus, “is the last acceptable prejudice in America,” Fluharty said. “Rural kids aren’t stupid. And they’re not lacking in perception. They see it.”

There are practical reasons to raise rural college-going rates. Economies in states including Iowa are shifting toward such industries as information technology, wind energy, and healthcare, which require postsecondary educations.

In California, the largely rural San Joaquin Valley and Inland Empire produce 27 percent of the state's high-school graduates but only 12 percent of its bachelor's degrees, [the Public Policy Institute of California points out](#) in a new report.

That's getting new attention as the state falls behind in its projected need for 1.1 million more college-educated workers by 2030 than it's producing now.

“The regional differences are striking,” said Hans Johnson, the report's lead author. Boosting the number of college students from its rural areas, he said, is “critical for California.”

Back in southern Iowa, one of Gordon's high-school friends now works on farms; another, at his father's feed lot. Openings also come up now and then in Lenox at the egg-packaging plant and at the factory that manufactures fertilizer spreaders.

Those aren't terrible occupations, he said, “as long as those things stay around there. It's not something I would want to do. Those are labor-intensive jobs, and long hours. And the pay just isn't worth it.”

Yet most of his high-school classmates and teammates “are going to stay in rural Iowa and not really get out to see much of the world.”

As for him, said Gordon, he's hoping to become a financial planner when he graduates in May, and he has his eye on moving to Des Moines.

“Since I've started going to the University of Iowa,” he said, “I almost don't like going home. I've kind of changed. I probably won't end up back in Lenox, Iowa.”

This post appears courtesy of [The Hechinger Report](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JON MARCUS is the higher-education editor at *The Hechinger Report*.

MATT KRUPNICK is a freelance reporter and editor based in New York. He has written for *The New York Times* and *The Hechinger Report*.
