

**Supporting Rural Students at Urban Land Grant Universities**

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

Many land-grant universities sit in the heart of major urban areas forcing students from rural communities to experience a sudden and difficult lifestyle adjustment. Goldman (2019) underlines that such drastic changes also coincide with encountering difficulties due to challenges such as financial hardship or finding a sense of community, leading to feelings of isolation and homesickness, having an adverse effect on mental health and academic performance (Ali et al., 2021). While universities offer a variety of programs, clubs, and organizations specific to hobbies, interests, cultures, and political affiliations, few, if any, cater specifically to these students from rural communities. Goldman (2019) suggests that universities may alleviate some of these challenges by introducing specialized programs that provide financial, academic, and communal support to help students transition from rural life to large, urban institutions. Similarly, the Rurally Engaged Agricultural Leaders (REAL) Program at NC State University aims to connect students from rural communities and provide opportunities to empower them as leaders through sessions and field trip experiences highlighting the diverse agricultural industry in North Carolina, meetings with elected officials to gain policy and advocacy experience, leadership development workshops, and providing conference funding. Additionally, students are paired with career mentors and complete a 20-hour Extension experience.

### **Theoretical framework**

Oberg (1960) described culture shock theory as having four stages that an individual navigates when experiencing a new cultural environment. The first stage, “honeymoon”, provides the individual with a fascination and enthusiasm for the new environment. In the second stage, “rejection/regression”, individuals focus on the differences often blaming the new culture or environment for all the problems. The “adjustment” stage brings awareness that the new culture and environment is not bad, and this awareness is encouraged through meeting new people who provide context to better interpret the situation. Lastly, the “mastery” stage occurs when the individual adopts into the new culture and environment. Furthermore, Furnham and Bochner (1986) expanded upon the cultural shock theory to develop the cultural learning theory which emphasized the intercultural contact that is fueled by social interaction.

### **Methodology**

This research aims to begin the process of interpretive phenomenology. This “participant-oriented” (p. 9) approach allows for several individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon to share their own perspectives (Alase, 2017). Although the students in the program are from different rural areas, their background unites their lived experiences while attending an urban land-grant university. The REAL Program meets biweekly throughout the year with each meeting lasting approximately two hours. During the first meeting, the ten participants of the 2023-2024 cohort were asked three open-ended questions: 1) What are some similarities between your hometown and here?; 2) As a rural student at a major urban land grant university, what were some challenges that you initially faced or face today?; and 3) What resources could the university offer to help students from rural areas adjust to urban life? For each question, participants were asked to write their response on a post-it. The post-its were then organized into categories and the participants verbally shared their rural stories and experiences.

### **Results/Findings**

Students shared that agriculture classes and opportunities were significant aspects of their college experience that reminded them of home with one student stating, “There is still a strong sense of community here, especially within CALS.” Through classes and programs, students have been able to connect with their peers who share a similar background. Meanwhile, one student suggested that they had yet to find similarities between their hometown and college life, which led to their feeling of isolation. The consensus was that the greatest challenges are related to social and city life, rather than academic. These include struggling to adjust to the densely populated, fast-paced, and busy lifestyle that comes with living in a city. Additionally, one student shared that their greatest challenge was “feeling like the people from this area don’t care what is happening in rural areas and that what you’re used to are different than here.” Another expressed feeling “overwhelmed by activities and the timeline of things.” Finally, the balance of being connected and involved on campus while being enrolled full-time a challenge. When asked about how the university could assist rural students adjust to urban life yielded this response, “more connections between CALS and other majors” to help them connect, since many classes are specific to majors and might contribute to the feeling of isolation. Mentoring programs, such as REAL, were suggested as a useful tool for helping students gain early field experience in their intended career field. Many expressed the need for more individual advising when enrolling for classes each semester to ensure they are making the best decisions for their academic career. Going beyond academic suggestions, some students shared the need for more small-scale social activities, like small groups, that encourage students from different departments to mingle and find commonalities because they felt intimidated by some of the campus-wide initiatives.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The experiences of rural students attending urban land-grant institutions are a unique challenge. Many of these encounters are marked by significant obstacles related to lifestyle adjustments and a sense of isolation highlighting that several of the students are in the “rejection” stage. The findings from the 2023-2024 cohort suggest that difficulties acclimating to urban institutions stem from the lack of connection to, and commonalities with, urbanized living on campus. Many students conveyed that academic and social guidance from the university would aid in their adjustment to the institution, thus assisting in moving the students into the “adjustment” stage. Results such as these emphasize the importance of programs such as REAL (Rurally Engaged Agricultural Leaders), which encompass an array of support systems specifically tailored to rural students. Flemming and Grace (2014) support that such programs at flagship universities are successful, mostly due to the intentional recognition of the distinctive experiences of rural and regional students. REAL aims to provide social connection, academic support, and guidance through connections with peers, pairing students with career mentors, and offering financial support for related conferences and workshops. Integrating such strategies and programs holds promise in providing more effective support to rural students, ultimately enriching their time spent at flagship universities (Ali et al., 2021).

Identifying the unique challenges of college students from rural communities can help universities establish effective programs that cater to their specific needs and assist in promoting cultural learning as emphasized by Furnham and BOchner (1986). Parallel to what Stone (2017) suggests, as more research on rural students enrolled in urban universities develops, institutions should look at their recruitment efforts of rural students and support their needs by establishing a sense of belonging and community through intentional programs and initiatives.

## References

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