

**A Focus on Rural Communities: College Student Perspectives on the Strengths and Challenges of Rural Living**

**Authors**

Marexy Guerra  
Kameron Rinehart, M.S.  
Jason Headrick, Ph.D.  
Hoyt Nebgen

**Contact Information**

Texas Tech University  
Department of Agricultural Education and Communication  
Box 42131 Lubbock, TX. 79409  
(806) 742-2818  
Mareguer@ttu.edu  
Kameron.Rinehart@ttu.edu  
Jason.Headrick@ttu.edu  
Hoyt.Nebgen@ttu.edu

## **A Focus on Rural Communities: College Student Perspectives on the Strengths and Challenges of Rural Living**

### **Introduction**

According to the USDA Economic Research Bureau, 46 million people live in rural America, making up 14% of the U.S. population (Dobis et al., 2021). Rural Americans hold communal attitudes that reflect upon their community, such as social cohesion, economic wealth, and personal security (Reimer, 2006). Despite these attitudes, rural communities face challenges regarding education, the economy, infrastructure, mental health, and accessibility. Research shows that communities may struggle to change because they lack the resources, desire to change, lack organization, or believe they cannot change (Cavaye, 2001). Focus on developments such as adequate infrastructure, economy, policy, and delivery of services are critical components in further community development (Cavaye, 2001). The purpose of this study was to investigate how college students from rural areas identify components of rural living to describe the strengths and challenges and the impact on their future after graduation.

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) provided the basis for investigating rural communities (Flora et al., 2005). The idea behind the CCF was to help understand different parts of a community and how they interact with one another: financial, built social, human, cultural, natural, and political capital. These capitals contribute to a community's vitality and the structures and systems in place.

### **Methodology**

Focus groups (FC) are used as a self-contained method and in combination with other research methods to gather qualitative data (Morgan, 1996). Three FCs ( $N = 31$ ) were conducted exploring rural issues through the lens of college students from area communities. The FC discussed challenges related to agricultural and natural resources, mental health, education, economic opportunities, and accessibility. Data was collected and transcribed using OtterAi, and data analysis consisted of a three-stage coding process (Stake, 1994). The coding process included individually identifying common words and statements, combining researchers' notes, developing emerging themes, and then developing the overarching themes and subthemes.

### **Results/Findings**

Data analysis resulted in six emerging themes and encompassed the challenges and experiences of rural students. The *Importance of Community Culture* theme captures the significance of community culture and how this dynamic positively contributes to the values of their rural community. Participants expressed how community members adopt this culture and are willing to establish close relationships. One participant described the culture as “neighbors helping neighbors.” A second theme centered on the *Lack of Broadband and Technology*. Many agreed

that their communities have fewer educational and economic resources than cities. Participants acknowledged a need to improve community infrastructure to attract people to rural communities, including improving technology in the community, addressing internet connection issues, and improving transportation. A third theme focused on *Bringing Knowledge Back*, including ideas focused on teacher retention, funding, and accessibility. Much of the conversation centered on teacher retention. Many participants expressed concern for the “lack of appreciation and understanding” and expressed gratitude for their educational experiences.

A fourth theme focused on *Lack of Response Surrounding Mental Health*, where participants agreed that mental health is not talked about nor recognized. Participants agreed that “there are more resources on campus than there are in a rural community.” A fifth theme centered on *The Idea of Coming Back Home*, where participants expressed a desire to return home but identified that their hometowns lacked opportunities to attract them back after college graduation. One participant stated, “I would love to return home, but there is no job.” The last theme focused on *Leadership Views*. Participants defined community leaders as people in power who are involved in their communities. Several students agreed that those who actively invest in the local community are highlighted as community leaders, including teachers, administration, and school board members. Others suggested that farmers and ranchers take on significant leadership roles within the community.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study showcase that rural communities help develop strong roots for college students and allow them to recognize the challenges of these areas, such as rural broadband, educational opportunities, and access to resources. There is a need for more conversations regarding critical societal challenges like mental health. The value of community and family is strong among participants. It demonstrates a valuable connection to their rural communities (Reimer, 2006), which impacts their decisions to return home after obtaining higher education or technical training. Students see those in a position of power as “leaders” in their community, therefore showing the need for leadership development and education programs in rural areas.

### **Implications & Recommendations**

Based on the study findings, researchers conclude that the focus group data can help better understand the connections and value of rural spaces for college students from rural communities. This provides a clearer understanding of challenges, including the lack of understanding and acknowledgment of mental health challenges in rural communities. Students' experiences growing up in rural communities impact their views on education, leadership, and community based on their individual and unique experiences in their home communities. Future practice in rural communities should investigate advanced education pathways and their motivation to return to the rural community where they grew up. Additionally, these focus groups revealed better ways of understanding students, understanding messages related to these themes in rural communities, and views on rural leadership and the impact of place-based leadership and motivation.

## References

- Barry, M. M. (2000). A community needs assessment for rural mental health promotion. *Health Education Research, 15*(3), 293–304. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/15.3.293>
- Cavaye, J. (2001). Rural Community Development - New Challenges and Enduring Dilemmas [Review of *Rural Community Development - New Challenges and Enduring Dilemmas*]. *Regional Analysis & Policy*. <https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/132204/?v=pdf>
- Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century. (2015). United States: Penn State University Press.
- Dobis, E. A., Krumel, T. P., Cromartie, J., Conley, K., Sanders, A., & Ortiz, R. (2021). Rural American at a Glance. Washington D.C.; United States Department of Agriculture.
- Flora, C. B., Emery, M., Fey, S., & Bregendahl, C. (2005). Community capitals: A tool for evaluating strategic interventions and projects. *Ames, IA: North Central Regional Center for Rural Development*. Retrieved on February, 27, 2007.
- Looker, D. E., & Naylor, T. D. (2010). “At Risk” of Being Rural? The Experience of Rural Youth in a Risk Society. *Journal of Rural and Community Development, 4*(2), 39–64.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus Groups. *Annual Review of Sociology, 22*, 129–152. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083427>
- Provasnik, S. (2007). *Status of Education in Rural America*.
- Sopiko Imedashvili, Ani Kekua, & Polina Ivchenko. (2013). *Rural Entrepreneurship: Challenges and Opportunities*.
- Stake, R. E. (1994). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Whitener, L. A., & McGranahan, D. A. (2003). Rural America Opportunities and Challenges. *Amber Waves, 1*(1), 15–21. <https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.130677>