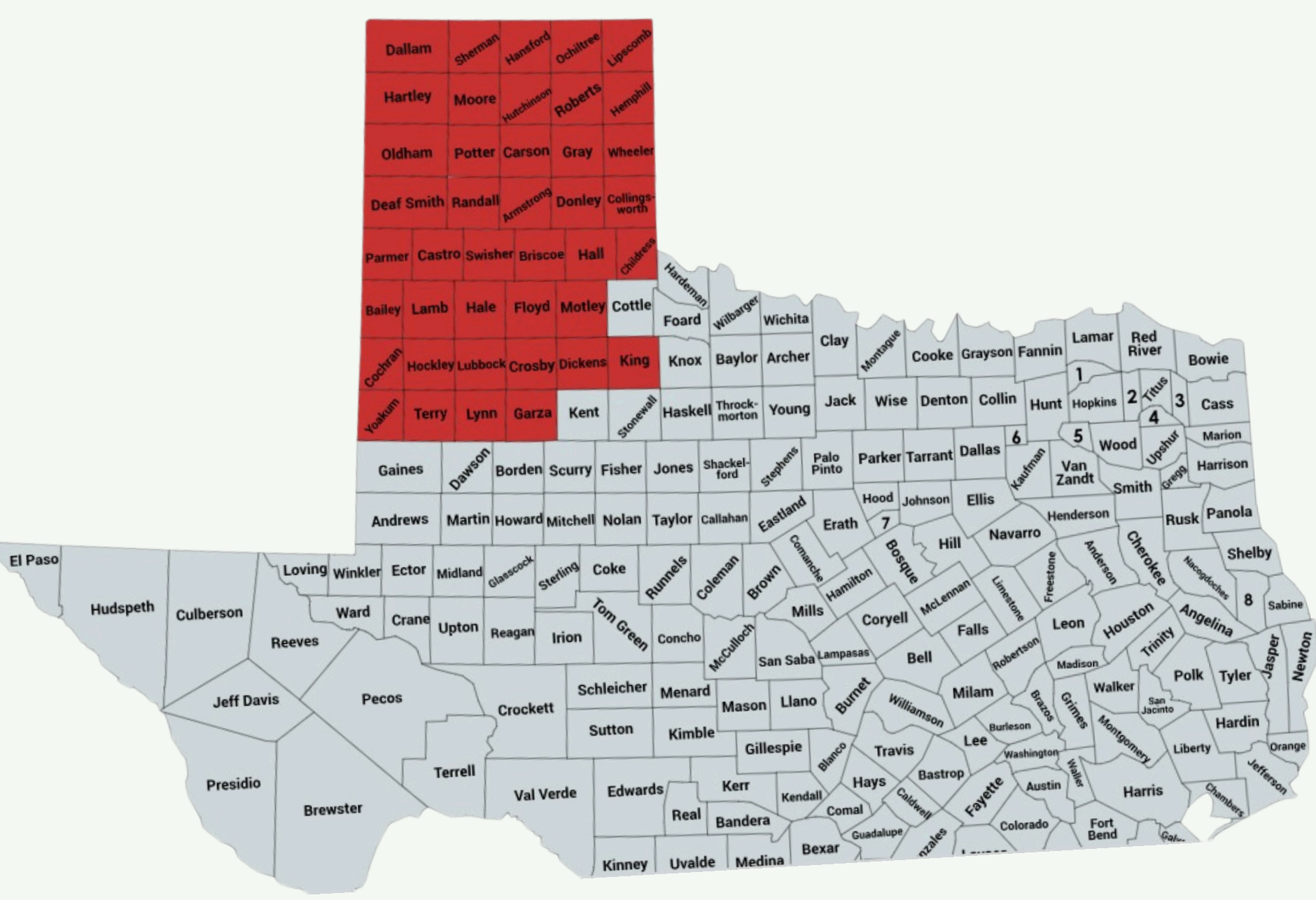


A FOCUS ON RURAL COMMUNITIES: COLLEGE STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF RURAL LIVING

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INTRODUCTION

- The purpose of this study is 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.
- 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).
- Focus on developments such as adequate infrastructure, economy, policy, and delivery of services are critical components in further community development (Cavaye, 2001).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) provided the basis for investigating rural communities (Flora et al., 2005).
- CCF helps us understand different parts of a community and how they interact with one another
 - Financial: Income, wealth, security, & investment.
 - Built Capital: Water systems, sewers, utilities, & health systems.
 - Human: Self-esteem, education, skill, & health.
 - Cultural: Cosmivision, language, rituals, crops, & dress.
 - Natural: Air, soils, water, landscape, & biodiversity.
 - Political Capital: Inclusion, voice, & power.

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 were conducted exploring rural issues through the lens of college students from rural 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 collection consisted of a three-stage coding process (Stake, 1994).
- Focus groups consisted of 5-9 students from 41 counties surrounding the West Texas South Plains and Panhandle Regions, with a total of 31 participants ($N = 31$).

RESULTS & FINDINGS

THEME 1: IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY CULTURE

“There is a bond created in the community.”

One: This dynamic positively contributes to the values of their rural communities. Community members adopt this culture and are willing to establish close relationships.

THEME 3: BRINGING KNOWLEDGE BACK

“I would like to bring back some skills.”

Two: Participants acknowledged a need to improve community infrastructure including improving technology, addressing internet connection issues, and improving transportation.

Three: Participants expressed concern regarding teacher retention, funding, and accessibility. Additionally, there was a common sense of lack of appreciation for educators.

THEME 5: THE IDEA OF COMING BACK HOME

“I would love to return home, but there is no job.”

Four: All participants agreed that mental health is not talked about nor recognized in their rural communities but is recognized and discussed openly on their college campuses.

Five: Rural communities lack opportunities to attract people back after college. Some of the limiting factors include access to jobs, housing, and the ability to advance in their careers.

Six: People who are involved in a community are considered leaders. Community leaders include teachers, administration, school board members, farmers, and ranchers.

“We don’t have as many resources.”

THEME 2: LACK OF BROADBAND AND TECHNOLOGY

THEME 4: LACK OF RESPONSE SURROUNDING MENTAL HEALTH

“There are more (mental health) resources on campus than there are in a rural community.”

THEME 6: LEADERSHIP VIEWS

“What made them leaders was how they would give back to the community.”

CONCLUSIONS

- Rural communities help develop strong roots for college students and allow them to recognize the challenges of these areas.
- The value of community and family is strong among participants.
 - This impacts their decision to return home after obtaining a higher education or technical training.
- Students see those in a position of power as “leaders” in their community, therefore showing a need for leadership development and education programs in rural areas.

ABSTRACT & REFERENCES



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus group data can help better understand the connections and value of rural spaces for college students from rural communities.
- There is a need for a clearer understanding of how students’ experiences growing up in rural communities impact their views on education, leadership, and community.
- Future practice in rural communities should investigate advanced education pathways and their motivation to return to the rural community they grew up in.



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