
Small Room with A Starry Sky: A Literature Study of the Family Experiences of Rural First-Generation Students

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Abstract

As higher education in China has expanded, there is a significant population of first-generation college students, making up 70% of the undergraduate population. These students are the first in their families to attend college and are predominantly from rural areas. This study used a literature review approach to summaries and explore the impact of family experiences on various aspects of rural first-generation students. Their comments indicated that their family's financial challenges, educational approach, and academic expectations had an impact on their adjustment to college life. The family background of rural first-generation college students had a profound influence on their selection of college major, drive, and belief in their own abilities. Additionally, rural first-generation college students were more inclined than their urban counterparts to require assistance from their families, schools, and social networks. For first-generation rural university students coming from economically and culturally disadvantaged backgrounds, their family experience becomes their only form of cultural capital that they can utilize. Given their limited economic resources and lack of cultural exposure, it is crucial to prioritize the development of this group and provide them with additional support and incentives.

Keywords: *Rural first-generation college Student; family experience; Educational development; family support.*

1. Introduction

First-generation college students are commonly characterized as students whose parents lack any previous exposure to higher education. However, a more expansive interpretation includes adolescents whose parents possess either a complete absence of tertiary education or possess some level of tertiary education, such as a certification from a community college or an associate's degree. A nascent area of research in higher education focuses on the examination of first-generation college students. Approximately one-third of college students in the United States are categorized as first-generation, meaning they are the first members of their family to pursue higher education. Nevertheless, a mere 56% of these students manage to attain a bachelor's degree over a span of six years, in contrast to the 74% of students whose parents had already obtained a college degree (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). Traditionally, the predominant demographic of undergraduate students in China consisted of individuals from urban areas, whose parents were part of the intellectual or political elite (Bao, 2013). According to the Chinese College Students Survey (CSS), from 2011 to 2015, the proportion of first-generation college students in the country was consistently over 70%, ranging from 71% to 74%. In addition, the research team discovered that between 2011 and 2018, over 70% of university students were the first in their families to attend college, and 69.74% of these students came from rural areas. Rural students demonstrate a diminished presence in higher education as a result of their much lower rates of college enrollment and graduation in comparison to their non-rural peers. Previous research has mostly focused on the financial status and educational performance of college students who are the first in their family to attend, while paying little attention to the familial experiences of this group in rural areas.

While American scholars have extensively examined the academic progress of first-generation college students from various angles, there is currently a dearth of study on student groups in China or Southeast Asian countries. It is worth noting that although a limited number of studies have investigated the educational experiences of first-generation college students, there has been little focus on their family history, job choices, and participation in extracurricular activities. The families of these particular youngsters are in favor of learning that takes place in school. Nevertheless, there is limited knowledge regarding the process of involvement and academic success, and there is a significant lack of study on the experiences of family development, learning process, and outcomes of college students who are the first in their family to attend. In this study, the term "rural first-generation college students" refers to students who live in rural areas and whose parents have not finished a college education. The study's findings would offer recommendations to assist rural first-generation college students and their parents during the transition. The issue

of first-generation college students is a worldwide concern, and given China's substantial population, it is anticipated that the number of first-generation college students in China will keep growing. This study specifically investigated the family experiences of rural first-generation college students, focusing on aspects such as family rearing patterns, family educational support, and individual psychological development and learning. Universities should focus their efforts on prioritizing assistance for rural first-generation college students and their families. This can be achieved by creating policies, instructional programs, and environmental resources that facilitate their transition to college and enhance the achievement of all students (Moriña, 2017). However, additional research is necessary to comprehensively analyze this goal for the group of rural first-generation college students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 First-generation college students

First-generation college students often face challenges due to their limited cultural (Dumais & Ward,2010) and social (McDonough,1997) resources, which might impede their access to higher education. Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1977), refers to the ability to successfully communicate and understand the workings of the higher education system, as well as possessing the skills to acquire financial resources and academic support. Meanwhile, social capital is the value of a relationship that provides assistance and support in particular social situations (Bourdieu,1977).First-generation college students frequently come from households who do not possess established cultural knowledge or understanding of college degrees and credentials, resulting in a lack of familiarity with the college selection and application process (Castleman&Page,2013).Higher education institutions are becoming more aware of the difficulties that first-generation college students encounter when negotiating their way through postsecondary education (Inkelas et al., 2007; Toutkoushian et al., 2018, 2021).For many individuals who are the first in their family to attend college, they view education as their sole chance to achieve upward social mobility and secure a steady, high-paying profession, something that their parents may not have been able to accomplish (Pérez & McDonough,2008). Each student encounters the challenging responsibility of selecting a major, and this decision is very intricate and supported by extensive research (e.g., Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al.,2016). It is crucial for the field to comprehend and analyze the definition of first-generation college students. Failing to do so can result in research that researchers cannot connect or policies and practices that may disregard the intricacies within this demographic. To comprehensively investigate first-generation college students, it is crucial to grasp their definition and the current status of their progress. By consolidating the insights of different scholars, we can establish a methodical and all-encompassing research framework.

2.2 Rural First-Generation college Students

The results indicate that rural first-generation college students received recommendations from high school counselors and college admissions officials to seek degrees that would increase their prospects for better income, due to shifts in rural economies (Tieken,2016). Lack of parental awareness led to a prolonged decision-making process for first-generation rural children about education (Schultz,2004). Being a first-generation college student often implies a lack of information. Li (2019) discussed two contrasting narratives about the rural experience in general: the "rural disadvantage narrative" which highlights the difficulties faced by rural students, such as limited resources, and the "rural advantage narrative" which emphasizes their distinctive strengths, such as strong family bonds and close social relationships within their communities. Rural schools generally lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts in terms of educational resources. Byun et al. (2017) point out that these schools frequently lack advanced placement courses, extracurricular opportunities, and adequate college preparatory programs. This deficiency results in lower academic readiness among rural first-generation college students, affecting their college performance and persistence. Recent research further elaborates on these disparities, highlighting the persistent gap in educational resources available to rural schools compared to their urban counterparts (Smith et al., 2022). Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu, encompasses the social resources that enable individuals to achieve upward social mobility, independent of their economic resources. According to a study conducted by Stephens et al.(2019), rural first-generation college students frequently lack the cultural knowledge and skills necessary to successfully navigate the academic and social components of college life. Conversely, Yosso (2019) argues that these students possess distinct forms of cultural wealth, such as strong familial and community support, which can be leveraged positively. Further exploration supports these views, emphasizing the importance of leveraging community cultural wealth in supporting rural first-generation college students (Johnson & Martinez,2024).

2.3 Family Experience of Rural First-Generation Students

The success of rural first-generation students greatly relies on the essentiality of family support. Although families may have a limited comprehension of the college experience, they frequently offer substantial emotional and moral support (Sy et al.,2019). This support generally consists of providing motivation, highlighting the significance of education, and offering practical assistance, such as aiding with application and financial aid procedures. According to research conducted by Anderson et al. (2022), emotional support plays a crucial role in helping students persevere during difficult periods in their academic path. Rural first-generation students may experience both inspiration and stress due to the expectations of

their family. These students frequently experience a profound sense of obligation to achieve success and provide for their families (Gibbons et al.,2019). While academic excellence can be fostered by this, it can also lead to substantial stress and worry, particularly when familial expectations conflict with the realities of college. The findings corroborate the notion that familial expectations have a dual purpose, as they might provide assistance but also impose excessive stress (Nguyen & Green,2023).Institutions can provide substantial assistance to the families of rural first-generation students. Initiatives that involve families and offer educational materials to inform them about the college experience have had encouraging outcomes. Castillo-Montoya and Ives (2021) support the implementation of teaching techniques that are culturally responsive and inclusive of families. These practices should recognize and appreciate the varied backgrounds of the pupils. Additional research provides further evidence that family engagement initiatives have the potential to improve student retention and academic achievement (White & Cooper,2022).

3.Overall influencing factors

3.1 Learning Impact

Rural first-generation college students have unique challenges that are influenced by their family history. Lack of parental college education often results in a lack of guidance and support in navigating academic paths. Although families can offer assistance, they may lack the necessary skills to navigate higher education processes, such as college applications and obtaining financial aid. This can lead to further stress and perplexity among students (Schultz, 2004; Forbus et al.,2011). Moreover, research suggests that the economic instability of rural areas can also influence the academic achievement of these students. Financial constraints may require individuals to seek part-time jobs, which can lead to a decrease in study time and an increased probability of encountering academic challenges (Meece et al.,2013). Furthermore, urban children often possess cultural capital, which encompasses their knowledge and understanding of the language used in school and the academic standards they are expected to meet. However, this is seldom the case for their rural counterparts, particularly first-generation students who face difficulties in adjusting to college life (Ardoin, 2013). Parental expectations can exert both beneficial and detrimental influences on students. On one side, they can inspire students to pursue further education in order to enhance their financial prospects. Nevertheless, if parents impose high expectations on their children without comprehending the academic ramifications, it might result in stress and sadness, therefore detrimentally affecting their academic performance (Johnson&Duffett, 2021). While families can provide support, their psychological aid may not be adequate throughout the demanding college years. Inadequate social support systems often result in feelings of isolation and a strong desire for home, which can lead to learners being unfocused on their studies or even

facing complete academic failure (Stebbleton et al.,2014). In summary, the familial background of rural first-generation students can provide them with emotional drive, but it does not completely prepare them to attain academic success. Enhancing the educational accomplishments of these persons is of utmost importance. This can be achieved by offering institutional assistance and organizing community engagement initiatives to tackle these disparities.

3.2 Interpersonal impact

Rural first-generation college students face a variety of societal factors that influence their experiences in college. As a result, a considerable proportion of these individuals pursue higher education with strong connections to their local community and a deep sense of obligation towards their families. This impacts their capacity to establish social connections in the unfamiliar environment (Handke, 2012). Moreover, there is the challenge of societal upheaval. Individuals originating from rural origins may face challenges in establishing connections with individuals from metropolitan or suburban areas due to contrasting societal standards and attitudes. Therefore, alienation can lead to difficulties in forming crucial social relationships that are necessary for both academic and personal aspects (Schultz & Neighbors, 2007). Urbanormativity is the tendency for cultural behaviors that are considered normal to focus mostly on urban people, which leads to further difficulties for rural areas in adjusting to college life (Crain & Newlin, 2021). Family expectations and support can exert a significant influence on social dynamics. When parents encourage study, teenagers may develop a strong work ethic that values academic achievement more than social interactions with their peers. Although this may lead to enhanced academic performance, it limits involvement in extracurricular activities and attendance at social gatherings that are crucial for comprehensive development in college (Tieken,2016). Moreover, a significant number of families living in remote regions lack the financial means to fully cover their children's tuition fees, leading to these students needing to engage in employment alongside their academic pursuits. Consequently, these students have a deficiency of leisure time due to their engagement in extracurricular labor. As a result, they experience social isolation from their classmates at school (Johnson & Martinez, 2024). Ultimately, the familial experiences of rural first-generation college students act as a catalyst for motivation and provide a foundation of support, while also presenting various societal obstacles. In order to address these problems, it is crucial to enact targeted social integration activities and establish inclusive campus settings. This will aid in mitigating these barriers and enhancing the overall college experience for these students.

3.3 Psychological Impact

The familial heritage of rural students who are the inaugural members of their family to pursue higher education has a noteworthy influence on their mental health. These specific students frequently encounter distinct stressors that originate from their familial and economic conditions. People in this circumstance frequently experience substantial pressure to succeed in order to enhance their families' social status, resulting in elevated levels of stress and anxiety (Stebbleton et al.,2014). These learners, whose parents do not have a college education, lack the support systems from their families that understand the challenges and barriers of higher education. Consequently, individuals have increased feelings of alone and self-doubt (Gibbons et al.,2019). A significant barrier stems from cultural factors, particularly the discrepancy between the local environment and educational settings. Rural parents, although occasionally supportive, may lack the necessary competence to offer the best emotional support for their children's academic performance, as the majority of them have not acquired educational abilities beyond high school level (Ardoin,2013). As stated by Meece et.al (2013), this feeling of alienation can result in a psychological condition called impostor syndrome, in which students have a sense of academic incompetence and not belonging. Furthermore, a number of homes face financial difficulties, which require their children to take up part-time jobs while continuing their schooling. This scenario exacerbates the pressure on their psychological welfare as they struggle to balance the conflicting requirements of paying for educational expenses and meeting fundamental necessities like sustenance, housing, and attire. According to Provasnik et al. (2007), this combination of responsibilities commonly leads to burnout and reduced performance. Social isolation diminishes mental well-being by denying youngsters of anticipated support, affection, and nurturing from friends and family members, resulting in feelings of solitude and an elevated susceptibility to developing psychological disorders. Johnson and Martinez (2024). Moreover, these individuals could have internal conflict as a result of their profound emotional attachment to rural communities and their unease about relocating too far. Crain Newlin (2021). To alleviate the psychological effects on rural first-generation college students, institutions should ensure their access to specialized support services, such as counseling, and programs aimed at fostering their resilience. Colleges and universities can enhance the academic progress and mental health of students by addressing their emotional concerns.

3.4 Employment development impact

The professional paths of rural first-generation college students are shaped by several elements that originate from their family backgrounds. These determinants are varied and have both immediate and indirect impacts on their career objectives, employment search tactics, and professional connections. One major factor is the limited access to diverse work options and the absence of role models from other origins in people's families or communities. Rural first-generation students frequently originate from households that value trades or technical institutions over universities, leading to a lack of information regarding prospective career opportunities after completing their education (Provasnik et al.,2007). Insufficient knowledge can hinder individuals from making educated assessments about appropriate job prospects and establishing realistic objectives for their lives (Ardoin,2013). Furthermore, this is intensified by other economic constraints. Consequently, because they work part-time to fund their education while in college, these students may have restricted availability for internships and other activities associated with their future employment, which are essential for acquiring job experience and skills (Schultz,2004). Upon completing their school, individuals with less practical experience have a disadvantage in the fiercely competitive job market (Meece et al.,2013). Similarly, the expectations and support structures provided by families can influence the progress of one's professional growth. Consequently, some families prioritize immediate financial security over future career paths, opting to seek immediate employment instead of investing in additional education or engaging in an extended job search that may offer long-term prospects (Johnson&Martinez,2024).Such pressures can result in premature professional decision-making and the occurrence of underemployment (Tieken, 2016).Nevertheless, due to their rural upbringing, they tend to be hard workers with a strong work ethic. These attributes are highly valued by companies for fostering successful careers once initial challenges are overcome (Crain&Newlin,2021).Although rural first-generation college students may encounter difficulties due to their family background, specialized programs that provide career guidance, mentoring platforms, networking opportunities, and practical work experiences can greatly improve their career prospects and help them smoothly adapt to a new environment.

4.Limitations and future research

The professional paths of rural first-generation college students are impacted by several elements that originate from their familial backgrounds. The factors influencing these determinants are varied and have both direct and indirect impacts on individuals' career objectives, approaches to job hunting, and professional connections. One important factor is the limited access to diverse job prospects and the absence of diverse role models within

individuals' families or communities. Rural first-generation students frequently originate from households that value vocational or technical schools over universities, leading to a restricted comprehension of prospective career prospects upon completing their education (Provasnik et al.,2007). Insufficient knowledge can hinder individuals from generating well-informed assessments regarding appropriate employment prospects and establishing achievable objectives for their lives (Ardoin,2013). Furthermore, this is worsened by extra economic constraints. Consequently, because of their part-time employment to fund their education while in college, these students may have a restricted amount of time available for internships and other activities pertaining to their future career. Engaging in these activities is essential for acquiring job experience and honing skills (Schultz,2004).Recent graduates with insufficient practical experience face a disadvantage in the fiercely competitive job market (Meece et al., 2013).Similarly, the expectations and support systems provided by families can influence the progress of an individual's career growth. Consequently, many families prioritize immediate financial stability over future career prospects, opting for immediate employment instead of investing in further education or engaging in a lengthy job search that could offer long-term benefits (Johnson&Martinez,2024).These pressures can result in premature professional decision-making and the occurrence of underemployment (Tieken,2016). Nevertheless, their upbringing in rural areas frequently instills in them a strong work ethic and unwavering commitment. These attributes are highly valued by companies since they play a crucial role in fostering successful careers, especially in the face of initial challenges (Crain & Newlin, 2021). Rural first-generation college students may have difficulties arising from their familial background. Nevertheless, customized programs that provide career guidance, mentorship platforms, networking events, and practical job experiences can greatly improve their chances of success in their careers and help them adapt to a new environment.

Research should also investigate the intersectionality of rural first-generation students, considering other factors such as ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. The intersection of these diverse identities will influence an individual's understanding of their own subjective experience within society, and also shape the creation of support systems customized to their particular need by institutions (Ardoin,2018). Furthermore, it is imperative for future studies to prioritize investigating the influence of globalization on education, specifically in international contexts where students from various cultural backgrounds, including those from rural areas who are the first in their families to attend college, are employing online learning platforms and virtual support systems. It is possible that specific technologies were not available during past study periods. Hence, exploring this field could uncover specific discoveries concerning the optimal strategies for various cohorts of individuals who come from different regions of the globe but share a common history as first-generation students from rural areas.

5.Conclusion

The family experience has a huge impact on rural first-generation college students, similar to how staring up at the stars in a small room affects their learning, interpersonal connections, psychology, and employment growth, among other elements. Effective upward mobility for rural kids and successful class retrogression for rural first-generation college students can only be achieved when society, families, schools, and people collaborate to make higher education a viable pathway.

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