Structural Barriers to Rural Poor Educational Attainment:

A Response to the Cultural Argument

Introduction

“It’s hard to feel poor with sunsets like this.” I could never hope to sum up the feeling of rural poverty as eloquently as did the fourteen-year-old boy who uttered those words years ago while sitting in the carved up old desks of my mother’s high school English class in a little-known town in southeast Kansas. In that town, many kids live in the trailer park across the street from the high school and many get their two meals a day (breakfast and lunch) by the grace of the federal free-and-reduced lunch program. The numbers say that these kids will probably go on to have kids of their own (likely starting at a young age) and that those kids will probably grow up living in that trailer park across the street from the high school and getting their two meals a day from the free-and-reduced lunch program. The million dollar question, then, is: why? Why is it that the kids sitting at those deteriorating, bright orange desks today, whose parents and grandparents sat there before them and whose children will one day sit there as well, are all so tightly bound to their caste?

In his book, Hillbilly Elegy, J.D. Vance offers up his response to this question based on his observations growing up in the rust-belt town of Middletown, Ohio. (It is, after all, a question that all people who grow up in the Douglasses and Middletowns of the world begin asking themselves from a young age.) He seems to settle on the conclusion that, while there are structural factors which may hamstring the efforts of the rural poor to rise above their station, it is mostly the culture that permeates our small towns that keeps them right where the unforgiving tides of fate decided to place them at birth. With that, he offers no suggestions on structural
policy as a potential solution to the matter—the best route for change, he argues, is to change the hearts and minds of the rural poor to be a bit more optimistic about their own capabilities and to conform their childrearing practices to more closely mirror those seen in middle- and upper-class households. In this paper, I will be presenting a different vision of rural poverty, one that does not hinge on a condemnation of the counterproductive mindset of rural poor parents and children, and one which does offer hope to answer Vance’s concerns that structural change will do nothing to budge what he sees as a cultural problem. I’ll be presenting this case for a structural way out on the framework of what is often considered (and what I believe Vance would agree to be) one of the most important factors in the perpetuation of or departure from poverty: educational attainment, or, rather, a lack thereof, among young people who have grown up in rural poverty. In particular, I’ll be evaluating the structural barriers posed by high costs of college attendance and a lack of proximity to institutions of higher education, two factors which Vance largely overlooks in his cultural assessment of barriers to education in the context of rural poverty.

**Relevance**

The issue of low educational attainment among those living in rural poverty is relevant beyond just the small towns and sprawling fields of rural America. Rural poverty is an extremely pervasive issue in the U.S., with the largest proportion of America’s population of children living in poverty being located in rural areas (Biddle, et. al. 2017). However, despite its prevalence in this issue, much of U.S. policy targeting poverty, especially by way of alterations to educational conditions and quality, is geared towards and based on poverty in the urban, rather than rural, context (Biddle, et. al. 2017). This is significant because the rural setting currently poses many barriers to educational attainment and subsequent mobility which are particular to this setting.
and which require specifically-tailored approaches to properly address. Therefore, working to relieve child poverty requires taking a closer look at how poverty manifests in rural areas. Looking at educational attainment at its relationship to rural poverty additionally offers a valuable insight into why and how rural poor children have such little success in raising their socioeconomic status (SES) as they enter adulthood. This persistence of low SES then continues to impact the childhood experience and expected outcomes of future generations of rural children. Moreover, by analyzing the potential structural causes behind intergenerational rural poverty, as opposed to training our focus on possible cultural causes, we may then evaluate potential structural remedies in the form of policy implementations which may disrupt the persistent cyclical nature of rural poverty based on our findings.

**Educational Attainment In Rural America**

Higher education is often viewed as a “great equalizer,” in American society—a place where, no matter what socioeconomic status someone enters from, they may emerge equipped with the tools to enter the middle-class working world (Harris 2018). However, the composition of college campuses is far from perfectly representative of the total population, including on counts of family income and rurality. College participation is lower among students from low-income families as compared with higher income students, in general, and rural students, in particular, are seeing a widening gap between their educational attainment and that of their urban counterparts of any family income level (Cahalan, et. al. 2021; USDA 2017). While there has long been a discrepancy between rural and urban degree attainment, the educational attainment gap has become increasingly detrimental to those on the lower side of it. The “low-skill” jobs which used to fuel America’s rural middle-class, such as farming and manufacturing, have all but vanished in the American market, and the jobs replacing them requiring the same level of
education are service sector jobs, such as positions in grocery stores, gas stations, and retail stores, which offer lower wages and benefits as well as erratic shift times (Vernon-Feagans, et. al. 2015). It is by these changing factors that low educational attainment lies at the heart of intergenerational rural poverty, making understanding why rural Americans aren’t getting degrees is an especially valuable pursuit.

Accordingly, one of the major turning points outlined in Vance’s account of his life is his attendance at Yale Law School. This step marked the moment he stepped out of his rural poor home and into the unfamiliar realm of upper-class society (Vance 2016). As Vance opines on the discrepancy in rural poor college participation outlined above, he generally points to cultural factors as underlying causes, things such as a lack of value for education, a lack of awareness of the opportunities available for financial assistance, and, above all, an excessive sense of futility in evaluating one’s own future prospects and ability to advance upwards on the socioeconomic ladder (Vance 2016). Vance largely attributes the uneven representation of rural poor students on America’s college campuses to a general sense of futility, a sort of deficiency in can-do attitudes among college-aged individuals in rural communities. With this, Vance holds that these individuals are actively choosing not to attend institutions of higher education because they don’t feel they are “cut out” for college life, or perhaps because they think that, even if they did get into college, it wouldn’t really alleviate their economic hardships. Furthermore, he looks to the lack of awareness among prospective rural students of the robust financial aid available to them as a major cause of low educational attainment. In support of this, Vance makes an important observation about his end cost of attendance at Yale Law when factoring in his financial aid package, “Yale wasn’t just my dream school, it was also the cheapest option on the table” (Vance 2016: 199).
Importantly, in Vance’s assessment of why rural poor students aren’t attending college, his exploration of the cost barrier to higher education is a bit hand-wavy. It is undeniably true that, as Vance claims, many rural poor students are unaware of the generous financial aid offered by elite private universities, and for a very small portion of such students, this is critically important information to which they ought to have access. However, such elite schools are, by their very nature, highly selective, with small class sizes and extremely low acceptance rates. This means that, even if unprecedented numbers of qualified students from a background of rural poverty were to be accepted into these small elite private schools, it would only uplift a rather small portion of the overall rural poor population; it is a rather small and individualized fix to what is a much larger-scale issue. This brings us to another aspect of cost barriers to college which Vance, himself, so perfectly highlights in noting that Yale was, to his surprise, his most economical choice of college: it is only these elite, highly selective colleges which can afford to offer such comprehensive financial aid (Vance 2016: 199). What’s far more important to evaluate for addressing the far reaching issue of endemic rural poverty is the accessibility of less-selective institutions which have the potential to buoy the economic growth of far more students than highly-selective colleges.

Cost Barriers

Across the board, the cost of attending college has been increasing steeply over the past several decades. Worth noting is the fact that this issue pertains to all low-SES students, not just those who come from rural backgrounds, but, regardless, the cost barriers outlined below are still very much relevant in the structural ability and ease of college attendance for prospective rural poor students. Moreover, this more wide-spread problem of affordability compounds with more specifically rural barriers, such as those outlined in the next section. What’s more, as this data is
more generally applicable, and therefore relevant to a rather large portion of the general population, there is also a great deal of existing data on the topic of post-secondary affordability, including comprehensive data collection on the part of the Pell Institute and University of Pennsylvania in their co-produced annual “Indicators of Higher Education Equity” report. This report publishes findings on measures of equity in post-secondary education, typically using either family income quartile or student Federal Pell Grant recipient status as a measure of SES. The findings of this report on increasing costs of attendance and stagnating systems of financial aid allow us insight into what costs the average prospective student from a low-income home faces when looking at post-secondary education as an option.

According to the 2021 report, in constant 2019 dollars, the average cost of college (factoring in tuition, required fees, and room and board) has gone up by 154% between 1974 and 2019 (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 126). All the while, the structures intended to assist low SES students overcome monetary barriers to higher education have remained fairly stagnant in their offerings. The maximum federal Pell Award—one of the largest and most consistent forms of publicly-funded, need-based educational grants (NAICU 2021)—increased by only 18% in constant 2019 dollars over the same period, leading to a an increasingly yawning gap between the price of education and the alleviating measures awarded to low-income students (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 126, 127). At its peak in 1975, the Federal Pell Grant maximum award covered over two-thirds of the average cost of college attendance; today it covers only one quarter (keeping in mind, that is for the maximum possible award, not the average, meaning the gap is even larger for most Pell recipients) (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 124-128). These changes in affordability have, as one may suspect, disproportionately weighed on low-income students to a greater extent than their high-income peers, with the average net cost of college attendance totaling 94% of family
income for students in the lowest earning quartile and merely 14% for those in the highest
(Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 152). In 1990, those figures were just 45% and 10%, respectively
(Cahanlan et. al. 2021: 152).

The gap between available aid and the cost of attendance for students from low-income
families is illustrated even more clearly by looking at the overall unmet need of students. The
unmet need for the lowest two family income quartiles has steadily increased over the past few
decades. In 2016, the typical student in the lowest quartile of family income had $9,739 in unmet
need, up from $4,014 in 1990, and those from the second lowest quartile had $8,165, up from
$422, all in constant 2019 dollars (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 133, 134). Additionally, the report notes
that the highest quartile of earners saw a massive increased surplus, going from a need of
-19,865 in 1990 to -$28,755 in 2016 (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 133, 134). While federal aid has
remained relatively constant and costs of attendance have been on the rise, state and local
governments have been covering a decreasing share of higher educational expenditures (Cahalan,
et. al. 2021: 143, 144). From 1970 to around the mid-90s, state and local expenditures constituted
the greatest portion of higher education costs, but now the lion’s share of this expense is paid
directly by the student’s and their families (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 143). This increasing
deficiency of financial aid has had measurable effects on the economic impact of college on
students from low-income families. Students who receive Pell Grants are far more likely to to
take on student loan debt (84% to 51%) and have to take on more debt on average than
borrowers who did not qualify for the Pell Grant (averaging $33,688 as compared to to $28,578,
one year after completing their undergraduate degree) (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 164). Moreover,
Pell recipients tend to face greater struggle in paying off the debt they accrue to complete their
Bachelor’s degree, with the debt gap between the two groups being even greater four years
post-graduation, with Pell recipients’ debt accumulating to an average of $43,446 while non-Pell graduates had an average remaining debt of $25,065 (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 166).

The cost barriers laid out here are clearly sufficiently burdensome such that they provide a clear structural barrier in the way of any low SES student’s educational attainment. With such steep pay walls existing between themselves and the college campus, and limited, insufficient outside help to assist in the scaling of that wall, a student lacking the financial resources required to attend faces a clear structurally derived barrier to continuing their education. In his discussion of rural poor educational attainment, Vance glosses over the reality of cost barriers to education. In his own experience, he was aided by additional federal aid in the form of the GI Bill (Vance 2016: 181) and, later, had the great fortune of attending an elite school which has the means to cover all demonstrated financial need of low income students. It would be unreasonable to argue that either of these assists received by Vance are viable, large-scale solutions to addressing the cost barrier to higher education, as both are highly individualized patches to what is, as demonstrated by the data presented here, a much larger, systemic problem. As costs increase and federal, state, and local contributions remain stagnant, greater and greater financial burdens are placed on low SES students and families, and, for increasingly many, this barrier is simply too steep for higher educational attainment to be seen as a readily accessible option.

The Issue of Proximity

The cost barriers outlined above, while certainly relevant to the evaluation of structural barriers in educational attainment for rural poor populations, applies more generally to low SES people of any background. There are, however, additional barriers to higher education that pertain more specifically to rural students, not the least of which being the issue of proximity to institutions of higher education. This issue is yet another structural barrier which Vance seems to
overlook when assessing the causes of low rural educational attainment. Rural areas, isolated from institutions of higher education, are often referred to as “education deserts”–localities in which the seemingly simple matter of just physically getting to a college campus poses a significant barrier to educational attainment¹ (Harris 2019). Importantly, it would seem that this barrier, were it applied to any group, would pose a problem to any student (regardless of their cultural rearing or origin), as the numbers show that students, overall, tend to elect to attend fairly proximal institutions of higher education. According to one Brookings Institution report, the typical college student travels a median distance of just fifty-one miles from their hometown in order to partake in their postsecondary education (Akers and Soliz 2015). This indicates that many college students actively make the choice to stay relatively close to their place of origin. Such proximity to home, however, is a factual impossibility for the many rural students who lack that option, and the issue is further exacerbated by the fact that as we look at those institutions which offer higher returns on their students’ investments in their education, the fewer and farther away they become in rural areas (Akers and Soliz 2015). This barrier can be viewed as working through two distinct mechanisms to obstruct a rural young adult’s path to higher education and any following benefits of upward mobility that would be derived from higher educational attainment: the doubly rural-specific matter of requiring the disseverment of oneself from community resources and the phenomenon of brain drain.

**Community-Based Assets.** I describe the first mechanism as “doubly rural-specific” because, not only is the issue of proximity one that is uniquely rural, but the leaving of one’s community that it necessitates carries considerably more meaningful implications for the community.

¹ It’s also worth noting that the lack of proximal educational institutions in rural communities creates a gap, not just of distance, but of dollars, as well. For rural poor students, transportation costs cause a significant barrier both in actually getting to the college campus in the first place and also in their ability to return to their community, making the issue of proximity yet another contributor to the cost barriers to educational attainment.
individual coming from a background of rural poverty. In place of material wealth, what people in poor communities can cultivate is interpersonal connections. Where the more well-off may weave their safety net with each dollar they invest in a rainy-day savings account and 401k, the rural poor count the knots in their safety nets in the number of people they have in their lives. For instance, if a loved one falls ill, the rural poor individual may not have money stored away to make up for the costs of medical bills or the loss of income if the sick family member was an earner in the household, but, if they’ve invested in creating ties to people in the community, they’ll receive casseroles on their doorstep so they don’t have to worry about cooking dinner for the kids, they’ll look out the window to see a neighbor mowing their lawn for them to take one less thing off their to-do list, and they may even receive the week’s groceries if a collection of community members can pull together the means to buy a week’s worth of food beyond their own. In this way, community connections make up an important source of security and support for the members therein.

However, these community assets are far less easily transferable over long distances than other forms of support, making the reach of a rural poor family’s offerings & investment far more limited than that of more well-off families. Especially in our increasingly electronic world, money can easily be sent to and from just about anywhere. This means that middle- and upper-class families can easily continue to send their “love and support” directly to their child in the form of financial support, no matter how far from home they venture off to begin their adult lives. The support offered by parents within a lower-class, rural family, however, are far more difficult to wire across state lines. The highest value assets a rural poor young adult can tap into are those rural community assets outlined above–largely consistent of family and community members’ time and labor, as well as the even less tangible offering of a feeling of security.
knowing a safety net of family and community members is always nearby and duty-bound to help you out in a pinch. This lack of transferability of the assets of rural poverty along with the fact that the rural individual has few to no college options near their community combine to mean that, in order to pursue the upward mobility offered by higher education, the rural poor student must leave the family and community, and, therefore, must abandon their safety net, as well.

These considerations weigh significantly on the prospective rural student’s decision to seek higher education, where the prospective urban and suburban student does not tend to face such considerations as they typically have nearby options of schools to attend. This is why the lack of good quality, proximate opportunities for educational attainment in rural areas poses such a massive barrier to education for the rural poor. The shorter radar of the support that can be offered in rural families and communities means that having one’s only option be to move half-way across the country for a high-quality education forces rural students to decide between maintaining their safety net and acquiring a college degree, particularly due to the previously outlined interplaying barriers of elite school affordability combined with a lack of proximity and the improved proximity of public institutions combined with their lack of affordability. That is, with the most affordable education being the farthest away and the nearest available education being the least affordable, rural poor students must face structural barriers to education, no matter where they look.

**Brain Drain.** The second problem which arises from the issue of proximity is what is commonly referred to as “brain drain,” the phenomenon of outmigration among rural students with the greatest academic promise and greatest ability to rise out of poverty (Artz 2003). Brain drain consists of two structural deficiencies in rural areas: the lack of nearby institutions of
higher education and the lack of “high-skill” job positions for which higher education trains degree recipients. This deficiency of structures of higher education and of the types of jobs that typically follow higher education in rural communities has been shown to have a serious impact on who stays and who leaves in rural localities. In her article “Rural Area Brain Drain: Is It a Reality?,” Georgeanne Artz (2003) found that three quarters of all rural U.S. counties were located in regions where the average competitiveness in attracting highly educated individuals was valued in the negative. In addition, it was reported that the rural Midwest and Mid-Atlantic regions, even those counties which had growing populations experienced a loss in college educated residents on average (Artz 2003).

Brain drain shows us that, as a structural barrier, the problem with the issue of proximity isn’t just that it makes it more difficult for rural students who want to obtain a degree to do so, it is also that it necessitates that those who do, in fact, acquire a degree beyond high school must not then use that degree and the higher income they may expect to earn from it to lift the socioeconomic makeup of their rural communities of origin. The lack of both nearby educational institutions and high-skill career opportunities in their communities means that the highest achieving among any given rural population are steadily siphoned off into larger, metropolitan areas with more opportunities, leaving only those with lower educational attainment and/or lower-skill jobs to comprise the parenting pool to raise the next generation of students in that rural area. It is this particular implication of brain drain that is most insidious to the future prospects of children born into rural communities. As the highest achieving in each generation have no choice but to get out and stay out if they plan to utilize their achievements and acumen for the betterment of their own SES, there are fewer and fewer adults left in the community who have demonstrated a value for education, possession of skills which have been deemed
meaningful for the acquisition of wealth insofar as our contemporary economy places its value, and who has, in fact, managed to orchestrate the SES ladder-climbing feat to which educational attainment is meant to open the doors.

This siphoning of college-educated adults additionally feeds into one of the issues that Vance points to frequently in outlining the barriers to the highly-educated world as he observes them: a lack of access to information (Vance 2016). While Vance would tend to paint this issue in more of a cultural context (i.e., because he views low educational attainment, itself, as culturally derived, the resulting issue of a lack of knowledge and experience found in rural communities regarding institutions of higher education and, more generally, the higher SES life that tends to follow must also be cultural), the prevalence of brain drain would indicate otherwise. That is to say, the issue is not that there are terminally few people who value education or who believe they have the ability to thrive in a higher-ed environment, it is that, as such people arise in each generation, the ones who most strongly possess such lauded attributes then use them to achieve a higher education, but that attainment requires they not stick around to share the know-how gained in their navigation of the collegiate world. Therefore, there’s reason to believe that brain drain may constitute an important underlying structural cause to the cultural concerns voiced by Vance.

**Policy Suggestions**

As mentioned at the start of this paper, one of the most valuable benefits of a structural analysis is the fact that structural factors, if or when identified as an underlying cause of an issue, can be more easily manipulated by changes in policy. With this, based on the findings outlined above, I’ll be presenting here potential policy suggestions which may help to produce higher
educational attainment in areas of rural poverty as a way to help encourage the improved
economic conditions that typically follow higher educational attainment.

Making Educational Attainment Affordable

State Funding. As discussed above, the share of the cost burden of college attendance has increasingly fallen on the individual due to decreasing involvement of state-level funding for higher education (Cahalan, et. al. 2021: 142, 143). This leads us to the conclusion that one of the first and foremost steps towards making higher education more financially accessible is for states to increase the amount of money they put towards their public institutions of higher education. State investment in higher education may generally take two primary forms: direct investment into the institutions and greater aid and scholarships offered to students, individually.

In The True Costs of College, authors Kendall, et. al. (2020) provide a thorough and compelling argument for why institutional funding promises considerable benefits for low-income students by reducing the need for competitive, profit-driven administrative practices which disadvantage such students. Here, they argue that decreased funding to public universities not only forces these institutions to raise their costs of attendance, but also incentives them to go out of their way to cater to wealthier students (Kendall, et. al. 2020: 133). In the U.S., higher education is a highly competitive marketplace, where students are viewed as consumers to whom institutions must attract and from whom they must turn a profit (Kendall, et. al. 2020: 126). This kind of marketplace stratagem is utterly antithetical to the proposed promise of a public education system—rather than being a bridge to socioeconomic mobility, colleges reproduce stratification by specifically targeting those with existing wealth in order to keep their doors open. If states were to cover a greater portion of their public colleges’ funding needs, the
marketplace pressures which incentivize this kind of class-targeted outreach would be significantly lessened, allowing public schools to reclaim their role as equalizing institutions.

There are, additionally, benefits to increased state-level funding to institutions which are more specifically assistive to rural students. The focus of this policy suggestion on state schools addresses well the needs of rural students by addressing the major paradox of college affordability faced by rural students: the schools which are the most accessible monetarily (elite private schools) are those which are the least accessible in terms of their high selectivity and great distance from rural communities, while those which are the most accessible in terms of ability to be accepted and proximity (state universities) are some of the least affordable do to a lesser ability to offer comprehensive aid. Increased institutional funding would take away some of the cost burden of the latter option, allowing rural poor students an option for higher education which is more proximal, less selective, and more affordable.

State investment in higher education in the form of scholarships and aid to students, while it is a measure which helps make educational attainment possible for many students, is a far less desirable means of reducing cost barriers to education. Such aid is, by its nature, a highly individualized attempt at solving what is clearly an institutional problem (Kendall, et. al. 2020: 131). Moreover, state-level scholarship programs are often merit- rather than need-based, making them even less sufficient in the effort to improve the likelihood and ease of college attendance for rural poor students (Kendall, et. al. 2020: 128). As seen in much of the data presented in this paper, the barrier of affordability to college is a widespread problem which is reproduced and compounded generationally, making more systemic solutions, such as reevaluating budget allocations to higher education to decrease the cost more directly, are of a higher priority. This is to say that, while state scholarship programs are certainly not ill-advised, in a reality where there
is a finite amount of public funds that can be budgeted towards any given issue, the method of institutional cost-reductions through greater funding should be emphasized over individual case-by-case scholarship funds.

**Federal Aid.** In addition to state-level efforts, it is also important for higher education to take a higher priority in our national budget. This is especially important in addressing rural inequities, as this more centralized source of funds allows for resources to flow from areas of higher wealth to those with lesser resources, including rural areas. Additionally, the greater sources to pull from available to the federal government allows them to create less individualized impacts on college affordability in their aid programs, such as FAFSA and the Federal Pell Grant. This makes the federal government an entity better suited to address assisting students through grants and scholarships than a state government, whose resources are better spent increasing funding to the state schools (a task which it, and *not* the federal government, can address).

In 2021, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) published a report outlining why increasing the Pell Grant maximum would be one of the most effective and direct ways the federal government could help to reduce cost barriers to education to low- and middle-income students. The report advocates for a doubling of the maximum Pell award to a total of $13,000 (NAICU 2021). This would increase the amount of costs covered by the maximum of the average four-year public college to 59% of costs from its current 28% (NAICU 2021). Notably, this increase would still leave the Pell Grant short of its highest level of coverage at 75% in the mid-1970s (NAICU 2021), but it would still be a welcome investment in allowing greater access to higher education for low SES students. Increasing the Pell Grant, in particular, is an important means of assisting these students, as the grant is designed to cover
overall calculated costs of attendance, including living costs, rather than solely tuition (NAICU 2021). This is particularly important for rural poor students who lack parental financial resources to fall on in times of scarcity and who are least able to live with family to ease living costs due to the issue of proximity.

**The Case for Free Public Higher Education.** A popular and contentious proposal, tuition-free public college has been at the forefront of discussion of the financial burden of educational attainment (Kendall, et. al. 2020: 144). The arguments against such a measure are fairly straightforward: too-high costs of execution and a lesser sense of personal responsibility on the part of students who no longer have a hefty financial stake in the game (Kendall, et. al. 2020). However, in a composition intent on addressing the issue of structural barriers to educational attainment for rural poor students, the proposal deserves its due consideration.

For one thing, there is an interesting underlying implication in the argument that a free college option would rid students of a sense of personal accountability and commitment to their curricular performance due to the fact that they would not have a monetary investment that they are seeking a return on. By this same logic, one could also argue that free college education may remove, not just the barrier of cost, but also the mental barrier of risk. As it is, the high price of post-secondary education is meant to be seen as an investment which offers returns in terms of better class outcomes after obtaining a degree. For low SES students, however, this may be perceived to be a fairly risky investment, and the low rates of upward mobility, higher level debt after graduation of low SES students, and greater difficulty of repaying student loan debt would seem to support that assessment (Cahalan, et. al. 2021). Moreover, many low SES students do, in fact, lose out on that investment by having to leave college before graduation due to financial constraints or, after graduation, due to lower returns on investment in terms of future job
earnings from more accessible institutions (Kendall, et. al. 2021; Blagg and Blom 2018). Additionally, as the cost of attendance constitutes a larger portion of family income for low SES students and requires a greater amount of student loan debt to be undertaken, the investment is comparatively weighty and riskier for such students relative to their middle- and upper-class cohorts (Cahalan, et. al. 2021). Therefore, removing this risk assessment from the equation may well incentivize more rural poor young people to attend college—they would have less to lose.

What’s more, it may be that we have reached a historical inflection point in our economy and schooling norms which necessitates radical changes. In their inception, universities were institutions built for the wealthy and urbane to gain an education beyond what was necessary to acquire middle-class work (Kendall, et. al. 2020). Nowadays, however, our modern economy necessitates a higher level of education in order to secure a middle-class life (Vernon-Feagans, et. al. 2015), meaning work must actively be done to make universities a place which is accessible to a much broader group. Similarly, in the past rural students used to end their formal education after the 8th grade because they didn't need more education than that to make a good living working in the then lucrative field of agriculture, but the times changed, the markets changed, and so, too, changed the norms of schooling and educational attainment. What we are witnessing now may be yet another iteration of that change. If a middle class life is going to require, now, a college-level education, that level of education needs to be as widely accessible as high school education was made to be in the previous shift of this nature. Every argument leveled against free college education today could have been used with equal theoretical ground against the change to ensuring a K-12 education to all in the past, but, with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, it’s doubtful many would decry that shift today.

**Combating Brain Drain**
In a study of 761 graduating seniors from three public universities in Iowa, Fiore, et. al. (2015) asked respondents to select up to 10 factors which were most important to them when deciding where to live after graduation out of a list of 27 community characteristics. When looking at the top ten most frequently selected characteristics, it was found that, while two of the most frequent selections could be found more readily in rural areas—overall cost of living (ranked number 1) and safety (rank 3)—many of the features preferred where ones directly shown in the data presented in this paper to be deficient in rural communities (Fiore, et. al. 2015: 29). Specifically, “education level of residents” (number 6), “proximity to higher education institutions” (tied for number 9), and “length of commute to work” (tied for number 9) were all found to strongly influence recent graduates’ decisions on residency (Fiore, et. al. 2015: 29).

These results, particularly on the issue of “education level of residents” and “proximity to higher education institutions,” further support the idea that the most effective means of addressing brain drain is to establish or improve educational institutions in rural areas.

However, working to address brain drain means ensuring that there is access in rural areas, not just to higher education, but also to the high-skilled work that follows. To make higher education and higher paying jobs more accessible to rural poor adults without making rural areas, themselves, friendlier to a highly educated job market, would be to euthanize rather than uplift rural poor communities by way of brain drain. This would mean incentivizing businesses to locate in more rural areas, but there are very mixed findings on what, exactly, the best strategy of incentivization is.

In “Opportunities and Limits of Economic Growth,” (2017) Green presents the benefits and drawbacks of various models of attracting businesses to rural localities. He finds that, while tax breaks and subsidies are a common manner of attracting new businesses to a particular area,
there’s reason to believe that there are other, more effective ways of accomplishing that feat, pointing out that “if local governments reduce expenditures for education and social services to provide incentives for businesses, residents and businesses may migrate to other places” (Green 2017: 421). However, it’s also true that many of the issues in encouraging economic growth through job creation in rural areas cited in Green’s work pertain mainly to unemployed adults living in rural areas. As the focus of this paper is on encouraging higher educational attainment among emerging generations of rural poor young adults, these barriers wouldn’t apply to encouraging highly educated rural individuals (or those who intend to become highly educated) to remain in their rural communities.

Nevertheless, there’s reason to believe that improving higher education opportunities in rural localities would also help to draw in businesses. Fiore, et. al. (2015) report that “non-metropolitan counties with higher proportions of people in creative class occupations were associated with higher rates of job growth (p. 25). “Creative class occupations,” are described as including workers in “scientific, technological and artistic creative work,” acting as a sort of sub-category of highly skilled workers (Fiore, et. al. 2015: 25). Additionally, they find that the high levels of human capital (such as a highly educated population) which are more characteristic of urban and suburban areas tend to entice businesses and graduates to a given location (Fiore, et. al. 2015: 25, 26). Plus, Green (2017) finds that “research suggests that factors such as proximity to markets and labor productivity are much more important than taxes and other incentives in business location or expansion decisions” (p. 420), meaning that creating an environment which fosters high levels of educational attainment may actually be a more effective tool for economic growth than financial incentives for business growth.
Overall, these findings suggest a kind of symbiotic relationship between increased numbers of institutions of higher education in an area and increases both in the amount of businesses and of highly skilled workers (or, more generally, increased levels of human capital). This relationship only reinforces the importance of devoting greater funding to higher education in the pursuit of raising economic conditions in rural areas—better funding for education means a more highly educated populace, means greater incentive for businesses to locate to a given area.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

When it comes to disproportionately low rates of educational attainment among rural poor populations, there are substantial structural barriers at play, with two of the largest structures being the high costs of higher education and the lack of higher education institutions in and around rural areas. These barriers go largely overlooked by Vance and, more generally, by the cultural argument in evaluating the causes underlying the connection between rural poverty and low educational attainment. By focusing solely on potential cultural barriers in the way of achieving a higher education for rural poor students, Vance places the blame and responsibility for low educational attainment solely on those rural poor communities. But, in order to come to such conclusions, one must ignore the factual reality of genuine and significant cost barriers and the lack of geographical access to institutions of higher education for rural poor individuals.

It is important that we evaluate these structural barriers to access because they allow us to more easily and effectively address low educational attainment through structural policy changes. Moreover, while a great deal of research exists on the relationship between poverty and educational attainment, much of this research focuses on poverty in the urban context. While this is an important issue, the prevalence of rural poverty, its visible effects on educational attainment and outcomes for rural poor students, and the particular challenges and obstacles to
educational attainment which are exclusive to the rural setting make rural poverty an area worthy of a greater deal of scholarly attention on the topic of educational attainment.

As a final note on Vance’s perspective and the cultural argument, it’s important to point out that the cultural argument is often advanced as a means to the end of allowing us, as a nation, to disregard or dismiss the issues faced by a particular population as not being our problem or being their own issue to solve. I take issue with the conclusion that, even when a barrier to upward mobility does fall within the category of “culture,” it cannot be resolved from without and is a matter which must be dealt with internally. When children are born into families that lack a value for education, that is not the fault of the child, but it is also not a problem that a child can address themselves, making it act as something of a structural barrier. From the perspective of that child, it is a barrier borne from without affecting them in a way which they have no ability to control. More importantly, the “structure” they face is not simply the personal preferences or values of their parents, for something as optional and subjective as an opinion or personal value surely would fall into the realm of personal choice that the cultural argument would stamp as needing to be resolved through personal efforts. No, what truly makes this issue structural is the fact that the parents, themselves, were just as affected by the generation preceding them as the generation below is affected by them. When a problem is one that is reproduced and reinforced from one generation to the next over such a great stretch of history, as the issue of low educational attainment in settings of rural poverty has been, that is when it crosses the barrier from cultural to structural. A problem cannot be individualized (i.e., cultural) when none of the individuals involved ever truly elected to be imbued with “poverty culture” characteristics; they have inherited them through a much larger structure which we, as a nation, are compelled to investigate and intervene in, as appropriate.
References


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