

# Applying Intersectionality to Address Racial and Spatial Postsecondary Disparities—Rural Latino Youth

Teachers College Record  
2023, Vol. 125(5) 59–75  
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DOI: 10.1177/01614681231181802  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tcz



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## Abstract

**Background/Context:** There is a growing concern about the ways in which geography affects the educational opportunity for America’s rural youth. Most research on this population has assumed that rural America is primarily White and that rural college access is stratified by an individual’s ability to complete the application process. Such approaches ignore race and the interplay among geography, admissions practices, and individual behavior and decision-making.

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** This study examines the postsecondary experiences and opportunity structures for Latino youth living in rural Latino communities in South Texas. The purpose of this study is to understand quantitatively and qualitatively how the geographic context of a predominantly rural Latino area shaped the college-going process and pathway decisions for the Latino youth living within these rural communities. To critically understand beyond the individual and learn about how systemic conditions in rural Latino communities can usher in (dis)advantages in their postsecondary experiences and sort students into pathways, this study employed Núñez’s (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality framework. As such, this study asked the following research questions: (1) What is the college access experience for Latino youth living in rural communities in South Texas? (2) In what ways, if any, do rural Latino youth describe how their rural geography structures (in)equalities in the college-going process? (3) How are rural Latino youths’ college access and opportunity structured, and does this differ from other geographic contexts?

**Research Design:** Using a three-phase mixed-methods design (QUAL→quan), this study interviewed 101 Latino youth living in three different rural areas in South Texas

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toward the end of their senior year of high school. The quantitative component of the study used descriptive and spatial data to further expand on, complement, and confirm the intersectional findings in the qualitative data. In the last phase, data were integrated, and inferences were made about how college access opportunities are structured for Latino youth living in rural communities.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** Using an intersectionality framework, this study identified several ways in which the geography of rural Latino communities is structured that render and perpetuate inequities and disadvantages for Latino youth pursuing college. Rural Latino youth lived in communities that systemically experienced higher poverty, lower median incomes, and less access to resources and opportunities as compared with (sub)urban metro areas. Most students discussed how these geographic conditions played a role in the ways that bounded the opportunities they experienced during their college-going process and their decision to enroll at a college within close proximity to their rural region. This study has implications for how intersectionality frames can expand our understanding of the unique characteristics of rural regions that creates both opportunities and challenges for rural Latino youth pursuing postsecondary opportunities. This is significant given that most higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners conflate the racial/ethnic diversity of rural areas with whiteness and being White. In doing so, they overlook the presence of Latinos in rural areas and ignore their intersecting assets and challenges, hindering effective policy solutions that can better support historically marginalized students.

### **Keywords**

Rural Latinos, rural education, college access, intersectionality, critical race theory, mixed methods

## **Introduction to Issue of Focus**

Postsecondary education is not equally accessible across the United States. Youth living in areas where large populations of Latinos reside are disproportionately affected by low educational attainment and poverty, especially when considering the places where large populations of rural Latinos reside (Economic Research Service, 2021). Before the pandemic, Latino youth living in rural areas with large populations of Latinos had limited access to postsecondary institutions of higher education (Hillman, 2016) and enrolled in college at lower rates than their urban and White rural counterparts (Sansone et al., 2020). It is estimated that 24% of all Latinos in rural areas across the United States live in poverty, compared with 13% of rural Whites (Economic Research Service, 2018). At the same time, rural Latinos have the lowest educational attainment levels among their rural counterparts. Among all rural Latinos aged 25 years and older, 39% have not earned a high school diploma, and only 14% have an associate's degree or higher (Economic Research Service, 2017).

Despite ongoing efforts by K–12 school districts, colleges, and federal agencies to provide opportunities to engage *all* students in the college-going process regardless of residence, Latino youth living in rural communities do not have equitable access to high-quality and affordable postsecondary higher education options and remain overlooked in policy (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Lavalley, 2018). Many rural Latino youth are facing multiple hardships that have been influenced by preexisting racial, socioeconomic, and other social cultural disparities affecting rural communities of color (Housing Assistance Council, 2021; Means & Sansone, 2022). All these hardships have been amplified by COVID-19 (Noe-Bustamante, et al., 2021) as well as anti-immigration, anti-English language learner, and anti-Latino federal policy regimes (Núñez, 2014). As such, Latino youth living in rural areas where large populations of Latinos reside are less likely to benefit from college opportunities, and they may continue to experience greater social and economic losses that will have disparate impacts on the individuals, but also on the rural regions where they live (Sansone et al., 2020).

Texas is a case in point. In 2018, Latinos made up 34% of Texas's rural population, but very few (12%) of this same population enrolled in college or earned a postsecondary credential or degree (Leal et al., 2021). Past research has showed that race and place work collectively, not independently, in influencing college enrollment and that there are disparities in accessing postsecondary opportunities for racial/ethnic minorities in rural America, particularly among college-age Latinos living in rural Texas (Sansone et al., 2020). Although a handful of studies have been conducted on rural Latinos' college experiences (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2012; Gildersleeve, 2010; Gonzalez & Ruiz, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2010), the questions of whether and how the rural geography influences Latinos' perceptions about college and enrollment decisions remain unanswered.

## Description of the Research Work

During my doctoral studies, I looked for opportunities to give back to my community (Reyes et al., 2021). Most notably, I founded and organized an annual citywide college fair that promoted college attainment to low-income urban neighborhoods within San Antonio. At this college fair, which averaged 800 attendees annually, I found a pattern: Rural Latino students attended the college fair in large numbers. I found that these rural Latino students and their families, as residents of rural communities, traveled great distances to attend this urban inner-city college fair. In some cases, I identified students who traveled more than 90 miles to attend the college fair. I was moved by the efforts of these rural Latino students and their families to travel such great distances to access college information—but I also did not understand why they were doing this, since it was assumed that every public high school in Texas has equal access to college support services on their campus (Texas Education Agency, 2022b). It was in that moment that I decided to explore this phenomenon.

In summer 2017, I began a three-year longitudinal mixed-methods study focused on understanding the college-going experiences of rural Latino youth in relationship to the rural geography and identities living in South Texas and along the Texas/Mexico

border. In preparation for this research, I immersed myself in the literature on rural communities and rural college access. From the literature reviewed (e.g., Byun et al., 2012, 2017; Petrin et al., 2014), I identified that most research on rural college access focused on White rural populations and neglected the historic and growing population of rural Latinos. Because rural communities of color have not been acknowledged often in the literature, policy discussions about rurality and educational attainment have largely been framed within whiteness and have used the experiences of White rural students (Love & Loh, 2020; Watson, 2019). This approach erases and overlooks the presence, needs, and assets of rural communities of color, like rural Latinos, who represent a growing demographic population in rural America (Lichter & Johnson, 2021).

Given the gaps in the literature, I designed a research project aimed at exploring the role that geography plays in shaping the college-going experiences and pathway decisions of rural youth in South Texas. In doing this work, I chose to focus on the state of Texas because one fifth of all rural Latinos in the United States live in the state (Housing Assistance Council, 2021). I further centered on South Texas along the Texas/Mexico border because this region has been identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2021) as a rural area with a low educational attainment. Therefore, I felt that understanding how geography influences the postsecondary experiences and decision-making for rural Latino students in this region of Texas was critical to informing future research aimed at understanding college access in the United States. For this study, I employed a three-phase mixed-methods approach to examine how geography shapes the college access and pathway decisions of rural students in Texas. My overall research questions were:

1. What is the college access experience for Latino youth living in rural communities in South Texas?
2. In what ways, if any, do rural Latino youth describe how their rural geography structures (in)equalities in the college-going process?
3. How are rural Latino youths' college access and opportunity structured, and does this differ from other geographic contexts?

## Literature Reviewed

In Latino college choice literature, research shows that Latino youth have relied on their social networks, such as family, friends, and high school counselors, as a source of resilience and as an information-gathering strategy to overcome barriers in the college-going process (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Despite this individual feat, systemic factors in the college-going process persist that (dis)advantage in geographic and racialized ways. For instance, research studying college recruitment across place has found that college admissions representatives tend to favor recruiting and visiting high-income and primarily White high schools, neglecting rural locations or those with large proportions of students of color (Salazar, 2022; Salazar et al., 2021). Evidence also shows that

rural high schools that enroll large proportions of Latinos are challenged in their abilities to provide their students with college resources and information (Cabrera et al., 2012; Means & Sansone, 2022). College proximity research has shown that rural areas have limited to no college options located nearby (Hillman & Weichman, 2016), and not being within close proximity to a college serves as a “convenience mechanism” that shapes how low-income students of color, including rural students, think about their college opportunities (Turley, 2009). Additionally, recent college access research has found that rural Latino communities face disparities in access to broadband Internet, which has influenced their youths’ access to college information (Puente, 2022). This matters because findings also suggest that gaining access to information and completing all steps in the college admissions process are significant to a student enrolling in college (Holzman et al., 2020). Therefore, the literature not only frames the challenges facing rural Latino youth related to their college access and recruitment experiences, but also suggests that social forces create deeper disadvantages for rural Latino youth. However, work to date is limited in its intersectional understanding of the college access experiences and decisions of Latino populations within rural areas.

## Theoretical Framework

This work was situated within a critical race framework. Specifically, I employed Núñez’s (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality framework. Núñez’s framework draws from critical race theory (CRT) and the emergence of intersectional perspectives from feminist legal scholars (i.e., Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) and Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) (Villalpando, 2004) to study how institutional and societal power dynamics affect college access and success for Latinos in the United States. In her research, Núñez found that there are multiple individual, cultural, and historical layers of systemic oppression that can shape Latino students’ postsecondary opportunities. Núñez’s (2014) model also emphasizes the “domains of power (i.e., organizational, representational, intersubjective, and experiential) that shape the social conditions of Latinx/a/o groups” (Duran & Núñez, 2021, p. 140), as well as the historical contexts that can influence Latino educational attainment opportunities. Given this, Núñez’s framework was most useful to “go beyond descriptions of multiple social identities experiences” (Núñez, 2014, p. 37) and understand the role of systemic factors. Duran and Núñez (2021) argued that “applying intersectionality, a lens that accounts for multiple marginalized or privileged identities and addresses overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991), can enhance inquiry about the structural realities” (p. 135), shaping the opportunities for Latinos, including policy solutions that can support effective change. When viewed through this lens, the notion of college “choice,” which is usually examined from an individual level (Yamamura et al., 2010), is complicated.

Using Núñez’s (2014) intersectional framework, I considered the context of place, the power dynamics of the participants, and the multiple ways that “choice” can manifest within a rural area. Using intersectionality, I paid particular attention to the ways

in which structural inequities were constructed and overlapped within the rural context and operated in ways that (dis)advantaged Latino youth living in rural places as they navigated the college-going process. I used the model of intersectionality from Núñez's (2014) framework to explore the narratives and observation data about how history, politics, economics, and social factors within the rural areas of South Texas interacted and influenced college-going experiences and opportunities for Latino youth. More specifically, I drew on this framework to help me explain whether and how rural communities where large proportions of Latinos live are structured in ways that disadvantage rural Latino youth in terms of their access to college and postsecondary opportunities.

## Methodological Undertakings

My longitudinal research project on rural Latino college access used a mixed-methods approach. According to Tashakkori and Creswell (2007), mixed methods is a research approach that uses multiple perspectives of investigation to capture a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena. Because examining rural context and its role in shaping students' college access experiences and pathway decisions is complex, using mixed methods is essential to understanding rural Latino youths' college-going experiences and opportunities, and providing in-depth descriptions of the geography that students are navigating in this process. Specifically, I used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAL→quan) in which "researchers implement qualitative and quantitative strands in sequence with the purpose of using follow-up quantitative data to generalize, test, or confirm initial qualitative results" (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016, p. 106). In this design, qualitative data were first collected, analyzed separately, and used to inform the collection of quantitative data. Then, quantitative data were collected and analyzed separately. In the final component, both qualitative and quantitative data were interpreted together to confirm and provide a robust analysis of the phenomena and address the study's research questions.

For the qualitative component, I employed an ethnography approach to explore interview questions and observational data of the phenomena and relate them to the rural geography (Emerson et al., 2011). Ethnography was valuable for me in my application of intersectionality to this study because it provided a lens turned toward understanding the participants' experiences within the rural and social contexts they navigated. Applying intersectionality to this phase of the study was important in understanding the participants' experiences with power and identifying whether interlocking systems of oppression were present in the rural community (Núñez, 2014).

The quantitative component of the study used descriptive and spatial data to further expand on, complement, and confirm the intersectional findings in the qualitative data. Because the study centers Latino rural geographies and experiences, the quantitative data were also approached using Núñez's (2014) framework. As such, the quantitative data were grounded in CRT and LatCrit to "consider the spatial distribution of privilege and power within a system of white supremacy" (Annamma, 2017, p. 37) for rural

Latino youth. Applying intersectionality to the quantitative data was important in understanding and visualizing how interlocking systems of oppression constrict and construct space to affect the experiences and outcomes of individuals living within them (Annamma, 2017). In the case of this research project, the multiple identities associated with being Latino and experiencing college-going processes within a rural context is considered within a system that centers and privileges rural Whites. Therefore, the data builds off the qualitative findings, centers Latinos, and are analyzed to further understand how their college access opportunities are bounded, constructed, encountered, navigated, and made (in)equitable in rural areas where few White people live.

### *Site Selection*

I used purposive and criterion sampling techniques (Creswell, 2013) to identify rural communities in South Texas where large proportions of Latinos reside. I deliberately chose these communities to build on past research by Sansone et al. (2020), who found a relationship between Texas's rural residency and the proportion of Latinos living in the rural area. More specifically, Sansone et al. (2020) found that students in rural areas in Texas where large proportions of Latinos lived were the least likely to enroll in college when compared with their urban and suburban counterparts. Using the purposive method (Creswell, 2013), I selected rural communities from multiple high schools across three rural regions in South Texas. Selecting three rural regions provided the opportunity to compare similarities and differences in Latino youths' college-going experiences that were occurring *within* and *across* rural South Texas, thus allowing for a more in-depth understanding of how the rural geography might be related to college access for Latino youth living in a rural community. To further identify rural high schools, I used a selection criterion method (Creswell, 2013). The selection of high schools was based on these criteria: (1) being geographically isolated from Texas's metropolitan cities and (2) being classified by the Texas Education Agency as a rural high school (Texas Education Agency, 2022a). Once high schools were identified, I worked with K–12 school district superintendents to explore possibilities for site access and recruitment.

### *Phase I: Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis*

As mentioned, I used a qualitative ethnographic approach in the first phase to collect interview and observational data of the phenomena of college access and relate them to the rural geography of Latino youth. Using ethnography, I participated in and observed the daily lives of not only my participants, but also the rural community. I did this to absorb rural life and gain a more in-depth understanding of the context and culture of the geographic setting (Emerson et al., 2011). Specifically, I lived in the rural areas for one to two months every summer over the course of three years. I did this to collect data and observe the rural environments where my participants lived. I also did this to build



*confianza* among my participants. According to Delgado Bernal (1998), *confianza* is Latino cultural value of “trust” that is important to the ways Latinos relate to one another, which also influences the way Latinos approach and engage with the college-going process (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Given that there is a history of marginalization and exploitation within these South Texas rural communities (Martinez, 2018), building *confianza* was important toward building reciprocity with my participants—I needed them to know that I truly cared about them, their rural community, and their stories. As such, I followed a decolonized relational approach (Patel, 2015) to the work. Living in these rural communities, I was able to experience the geography with my participants and gain a deeper understanding of the area. While participating, I took extensive field notes focused on understanding the interactions among the rural community members and how the rural environment influenced Latino students’ college-going experiences. For my field notes, I used thick description, which involved noting descriptions of the geographic location, its people, and its relational practices (Emerson et al., 2011).

During the qualitative phase of the study, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with rural Latino youth participants between May 2017 and August 2020 (Hays & Singh, 2012). I recruited potential participants by visiting each high school and administering a short survey in their senior-level classes. The survey asked students about their demographic background and their interest in participating in the study. Students selected to participate in the interview were offered a \$25 gift card as an incentive for their participation in the study. The interviews occurred face-to-face in a private room on the campuses of each high school or at a local library. During the interview, students were asked a series of questions related to their college access experiences, their decisions about college, and the preparation and resources accessed that helped them navigate the college process.

I interviewed participants either at the end of their senior year of high school or during the summer after they graduated from high school. The timing of the interviews was deliberate because I wanted to gain more information about each student’s recent college-going experiences and decisions. Asking them before this time would have yielded incomplete information because college enrollment experiences and decisions for graduating high school seniors are mostly in flux during the year. In total, I conducted 101 interviews with student participants across the three rural regions in South Texas, resulting in more than 6,000 hours of interview data and representing 10 rural high schools across South Texas. All interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were audio-recorded using a digital recorder. Upon completion of the interview, each audio recording was sent to a professional translation service, which transcribed each interview verbatim.

I used the qualitative data to make sense of how my participants described their college-going process and decision-making as related to their rural geography. To do this, I engaged in a narrative analysis procedure in which I read each transcript and wrote annotated memos about each participant. As I did this, I noticed commonalities related to the geography across participants’ interviews. For example, several participants talked about the lack of high-speed broadband in rural areas as a factor they had to navigate in the college-going process. Using Dedoose qualitative software, I



engaged in Saldaña's (2016) cycles of open coding procedures. In the first cycle, I used an open coding procedure in which I went through each sentence and created first-level descriptive codes. Using these first-level codes, I memoed about potential themes that were emerging from the data. I used these memos to create a code book in Dedoose. Then, I engaged in second-level coding in which I took the codes and began to create groupings that were guided by Núñez's (2014) intersectionality theory. In doing this, I illustrated patterns about the interrelated systems of power and oppression affecting rural Latino college access experiences.

### *Phase II: Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis*

The second phase of the study collected quantitative data based on what was identified in the qualitative analysis. To do this, I worked with colleagues from the field of demography to conduct descriptive analyses and data visualizations. Quantitative data were collected from multiple sources, including the American Community Survey 5-year estimates, the Texas Education Agency, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the AtoZdatabases business registration database (<https://www.atozdatabases.com/home>). Using these sources, we identified data that corresponded to the qualitative findings. We then conducted descriptive analyses that described the geographic context of rural communities in Texas and measured variation of college opportunities across metro and nonmetro areas. In this research, we interchange rural with nonmetro. We also used geographic information system (GIS) tools to map descriptive data, which created spatial visualizations demonstrating how college access resources and relationships varied across metro and nonmetro regions.

### *Phase III: Data Integration and Inference*

In the third phase, both qualitative and quantitative data were integrated and analyzed collectively. My intention behind the integration was "to find corroborating evidence and produce a more complete understanding of the research problem" (Clark & Ivankova, 2016, p. 120). I engaged in this approach by integrating the qualitative findings from the interviews with Latino youth from South Texas, who represented college-going experiences in rural communities, with the quantitative characteristics of their rural contexts to develop inferences about how college access opportunities are structured for Latino youth living in rural communities.

### *Positionality*

I drew on my awareness and expertise as a higher education and spatial justice scholar who is also a rural outsider. But, from my own experience growing up in a Black- and Brown-dominated urban community that is being gentrified by White colonizers (Hernández, 2022), I came into this work in recognition of and appreciation for community and place, and respect for the people living within it. Because of this, I approached

this research wanting to work *with* rural communities, not *on* them (Sansone & Hernandez, 2022). As such, I aimed to bracket out my biases and assumptions about rural communities and the choices that students make within them (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Engaging in this process, I positioned myself as an insider/outsider who respected the community but could also identify areas where the college-going process could be better. As a result of this approach, my participants felt okay being vulnerable with me while sharing their stories. At the same time, I identify as a Latina first-generation college student, dark phenotype, and university professor who is a U.S. citizen and grew up in South Texas in a low-income family speaking English and Spanish. Therefore, I bring into this work shared intersectional identities with many of my participants, but I also recognize that I identify, and identified to my participants, as a university professor; this signals that I have “successfully” navigated college and have knowledge about and expertise with this process. And because of my identities, experience, and scholarly expertise, I bring into the work a hyper-awareness of interlocking systems and policies in Texas that could influence my understandings of (dis)advantages that rural Latino youth face in the college-going process (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

### *Trustworthiness*

Using mixed methods, I triangulated the interview data with my observational data and the quantitative data that I gathered for the second phase of the analysis (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). In doing this step, I used analytic memos and written reflections about what I felt the data were identifying while considering my knowledge of the histories and power relations (Patel, 2015). Again, with my outsider position, I wanted to make sure that I was not forcing my own biases to craft a narrative. As a check on this step, I encouraged my participants to engage in member checks and review their transcripts and my observation data (Creswell, 2013). I also engaged in peer debriefs with emography colleagues and graduate student researchers who assisted with the project. The debriefing would at times last hours because my written reflections in the field often left open questions about what I was observing.

### *Limitations*

Although I aimed to investigate the role of rural geographies in South Texas, I was limited by the high schools I was able to work with and observe. South Texas encompasses a vast area with many rural high schools; because of limited time and resources, I chose to focus on rural communities where large populations of Latinos reside. In doing this, I limited my capacity to fully understand the experiences of Latinos living in rural communities where Latinos are the demographic minority; because I focused on rural communities where Latinos are the demographic majority, racial identity—in this case, being Latino—may not have been as salient to my participants’ experiences. It is also important to note that the lack of saliency of race may also signal an underexploration of Latino historical knowledge about colonization, segregation, and other social forces that

have created a second-class history for rural and urban Latinos within Texas and beyond (Martinez, 2018). This is important to mention because intersectionality suggests that race is at the center of racist policies and practices that fail people of color (Crenshaw, 1991). But in rural places, outside the contexts of my site (where Latinos are not the majority), racial identity and racism might be more salient to participants' experiences and/or look different than in rural places where large proportions of Latinos reside. Therefore, more research specific to state and county contexts is needed in future work.

## **Lessons We Have Learned: Findings**

Using an intersectionality framework (Núñez, 2014), we identified several ways that the geography of rural Latino communities is structured that render and perpetuate inequities for Latino youth as they pursue college. In considering the 101 interviews that were conducted across three rural regions in South Texas, two themes were found: (1) navigating challenging socioeconomic disparities and (2) accessing bounded opportunities. I describe each of these next.

### *Navigating Challenging Socioeconomic Disparities*

Data from the analysis indicated that the socioeconomic conditions in rural Latino areas appeared to be more challenging and inhibited. For example, the data showed that rural communities systemically experienced higher poverty and a lower median income when compared with urban communities. While rural counties are not monolithic, collectively, findings also revealed urban–rural differences that demonstrated geographic stratification unique to rural communities. More specifically, the analysis showed that those living in rural Latino communities had less development (i.e., transportation, workforce, health care, postsecondary institutions) and less access to resources and opportunities than those in urban areas. For instance, the data showed that a lack of transportation infrastructure and employment within the rural Latino communities, which are important factors in shaping a student's college and career knowledge (Turley, 2009). Several students discussed how employment in their rural communities was limited and tied to few industries, like oil, ranching, and public education. Further, they discussed how they knew very little about internships, long-term career pathways, and what they could do in these industries outside of the positions held by family members—which were often not upper management or leadership positions.

The analysis also revealed that rural counties had less access to broadband Internet and other daily necessities, like potable water, compared with urban counties. This limitation was even more salient in rural counties near the U.S.–Mexico border, which had some of the lowest broadband Internet access rates; this is important to distinguish, given that intersectionality recognizes that privileged identities can vary depending on context (Hurtado et al., 2015). Thus, these findings seem to suggest that variation does exist, even among rural Latino communities, and is possibly related to broader global relations and immigration policies. During interviews, 86 students

mentioned the region's poor-quality Internet connection. In discussing their frustration with the Internet and how it impacted their college search and submission of college admission materials, Luis said,

So, my Internet at home was pretty bad. I mean, we don't pay for the best Internet, but . . . a lot of times, it cuts out. Like, especially if there is bad weather, it cuts out. Even, like, researching something in the middle of the night, it'll just stop working and our—yeah, it just stops working altogether, and you're just left wanting to do the work and research colleges, but you can't 'cause you don't have Internet.

The lack of necessities, like high-speed broadband, could make the college-going process less of a priority and more of a burden for Latino students from rural communities—especially considering that the postsecondary admissions process is done online, and most of the enrollment process is conducted in the summer, when rural high schools are closed. In the interviews, students noted that in the summer after graduation, they had to travel to public spaces, such as their community library, to access the Internet to complete early college coursework or submit college admissions materials; this created barriers to their college enrollment.

### *Accessing Bounded Opportunities*

The intersectionality framework calls attention to the policies and practices that can expand or hinder the college-going process for rural Latino youth. Considering this, I found a pattern with how the college-going process was organized within the high schools serving these rural Latino communities. This process seemed to be related to a high school's proximity to a college and the fact that more colleges and universities were located within urban areas and not in close proximity to rural counties. The lack of postsecondary institutions in rural communities meant that many rural high schools were often overlooked for recruitment, outreach, and dual credit opportunities, especially those offered from four-year universities. A total of 77 participants shared that they did not always have access to college recruiters outside their geographic location, which signaled to them that they were “outsiders” or not good enough for these academic spaces.

Students also mentioned that their schools were often visited by colleges located within proximity, which in most cases was a rural community college or a rural regional-serving university (Koricich, Sansone, Fryar, Orphan, et al., 2022). A quote that best represents this perception came from Monica: “My bar is set at the community college. Harvard, UT Austin, and all that stuff is set way above. I am intimidated by how other people are smarter there.” Because there were more interactions with rural community colleges or a rural regional-serving university recruiter, students noted that they were more familiar with their admission process, felt more valued, and felt more represented at regional-serving institutions—bounding college opportunity to their rural region. At the same time, these regional colleges were truly *servicing* these

rural Latino communities by playing a major role in providing rural Latino youth with access to and knowledge about postsecondary education, including career and technical (Koricich, Sansone, & Fryar, 2022).

Additionally, 92 students reported that they felt unprepared to apply to colleges and universities outside their rural region, particularly out-of-state colleges. Students identified that this internalized ability stemmed from their perception that the academic preparation received at their rural high school paled in comparison with that received by their urban counterparts. The data revealed that, compared with urban high schools, rural high schools did lack access to on-campus college-going resources, such as full-time college counselors. Rural high schools in these Latino communities showed that they also offered less access to college preparation courses and exams, such as dual credit, AP/Honors, or SAT/ACT preparation, than urban schools. Students reported that they identified these differences when engaging with urban counterparts, usually in statewide academic competitions. During these engagements, participants identified coursework and resources, such as college literature in Spanish, that were available to urban counterparts but not in their rural setting.

In several instances, rural Latino students reported pulling their admissions applications from elite colleges because they had internalized self-doubt related to the difference they perceived between the academic preparation they received at their rural high school and that received by their urban counterparts. These feelings were best described by Marcos, who discussed why he decided to pull his application from a highly selective private university in Texas after making it to the interview process:

I was fortunate enough to be accepted to the next part, which is the interview part. Unfortunately, that's where I stopped it for me because those city kids with those 32 ACT [laughter] all that. My ACT was decent. It was enough for me to, notice me for the interview part. . . . But I think I know my limits, I know I'm not Ivy League material, but of course, when it came to those colleges like Notre Dame and all that, I didn't necessarily apply to Notre Dame, but like I said, I did apply to the one [highly selective private university] but I left before the interview happened and pulled my application.

## Discussion

Using an intersectional frame, this study provides several implications for promoting equity and opportunity in the college-going process for Latino youth living in rural Latino communities. Inspired by the work of Stanley (2006) and Reyes et al. (2021), I offer actionable recommendations for policy and practice.

### *Recommendations for Policy and Practice*

- Increase efforts to expand college-going resources in rural K–12 communities, including more access to dual/advanced credit curriculum and full-time college counselors in rural communities with large proportions of Latinos.

- Invest in increasing affordable and high-speed broadband access during the summers and following college academic calendars to close the digital and postsecondary educational divide in rural Latino communities.
- Dedicate a funding stream to help carry out the authorized provision of the Higher Education Act Part Q, titled Rural Development Grants for Rural-Serving Colleges and Universities, to provide financial support to local and regional higher education institutions that serve rural Latino students.
- Invest in and administer federal agency grant funding programs that focus on higher education institutions that aim to serve more rural Latino students and collaborate with rural Latino communities.
- Promote racial equity by expanding data collection and federal assessment efforts to include measuring the enrollment and graduation outcomes of colleges and universities at intersections of marginalized student groups. Rural Latinos continue to be overlooked when intersections of race and space are not considered.

## Conclusion

Through this study, I have demonstrated how intersectionality expands our understanding of the unique characteristics of rural regions that create both opportunities and challenges for rural Latino youth pursuing postsecondary opportunities. This is significant given that most higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners conflate the racial/ethnic diversity of rural areas with whiteness (Watson, 2019). In doing so, they overlook the presence of Latinos in rural areas and ignore their intersecting assets and challenges. Using intersectionality, I centered both Latinos and rurality, and identified college access disparities interlocking along racial and spatial lines that affect the opportunities for rural Latino youth in the college-going process. Given this, it is critical for policymakers to turn their attention toward addressing postsecondary opportunities in racialized rural areas, which can be layered and intersectional. Without this attention, rural Latino youth and their communities will continue to be geographies of marginalization. What is clear from the findings in this study is that an opportunity exists to develop practices that account for the cultural, historical, and place-based needs of rural Latino youth that can help them to be successful in getting to, and possibly through, college. We should continue to build off this momentum and develop better policy and practices to create equitable college opportunities for all youth—*no matter where they reside*.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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