

Book Review

Higher Education Access and Success of Rural Students: Ensuring College-going Advice is Relevant to Rural Populations

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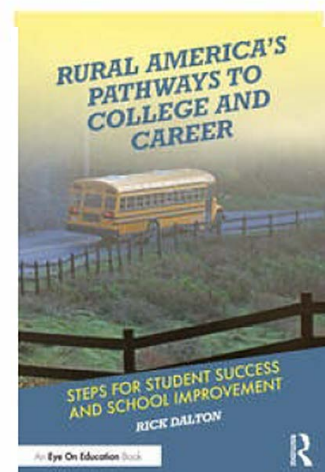
Book Reviewed: *Rural America's Pathways to College and Career: Steps for Student Success and School Improvement*, by Rick Dalton: Routledge, 2021. ISBN 978-1-003-02026-8. 283 pages.

Despite the inclusion of “rural” in the title, *Rural America's Pathways to College and Career: Steps for Student Success and School Improvement* covers content more specific to a particular college access organization than it does direct guidance on rural student achievement. In this review, the authors discuss areas of academia and college access where content of the book may be applied practically to some rural and other populations as well as caution readers to take a critical approach to claims made by author Rick Dalton. Authors conclude that although areas of the book offer practical advice for increasing access to college and career to underrepresented student populations in general, including rural students, there are deficit perspectives on rural people, places, and education presented that warrant more rural-relevant and strengths-based examples in order to more effectively contribute to the current literature on rural education.

Keywords: college access, college success, rural education, community-based organizations

Discussion of rural access to postsecondary education has surged within the past five years. For better or worse, mainstream media spotlighted this topic following the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Belkin, 2017; Marcus & Krupnik, 2017; Pappano, 2017), coinciding with emerging research investigating rural Americans' relationship with higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Koricich et al., 2018; McNamee, 2019; Means et al., 2016; Sansone et al., 2020). Rick Dalton's *Rural America's Pathways to College and Career: Steps for Student Success and School Improvement* (2021) is the latest entry into rural college access literature, described as a “how-to guide for building college and career readiness within rural schools” (p. i). The book centers around Dalton's college access organization, College for Every Student (CFES) Brilliant Pathways. CFES's claims of

helping 100,000 low-income students enroll in college is supported by case studies delineating how CFES students overcome personal challenges and is accompanied by detailed instructions for creating college-going support systems, sometimes in rural spaces.



Review of the Text

Chapter one begins with a broad, but unfortunately often deficit-focused, discussion of

rural America and the “hidden crisis” in rural schools (p. 1), describing how rural communities have been left out of public discourse. The author discusses barriers to higher education for rural students and how a lack of college access impedes rural populations from acquiring jobs that are not “dead-end” and “unskilled” (p. 2). Dalton’s personal connections and CFES initiatives in rural schools are outlined, generally adapted from urban programs. The chapter concludes by encouraging readers to focus on “rural students, rural schools, and rural communities” (p. 19).

Chapters two through six focus on ways rural secondary schools build college-going cultures with the author attributing such success to CFES partnerships. Chapter two highlights a particular rural school, Crown Point Central, located at the junction of rural Upstate New York and Vermont. The author credits CFES’s work with educators, school board members, and students to alter pedagogical and leadership practices as the impetus to turn low test scores and college-going rates around for the better.

CFES’s trademarked “Essential Skills: Goal-Setting, Teamwork, Leadership, Networking, Perseverance, and Agility” are detailed in chapter three. Dalton discusses how students can build and implement the Essential Skills, including school activity examples and an Essential Skills self-assessment rubric. The concluding discussion covers why such skills help rural youth pursue higher education.

Chapter four focuses on CFES’ “college- and career-readiness (CCR) advisors” (p. 86). The author uses “The Rural Trap” (p. 87) to describe how capable and intelligent rural students face “cultural, financial, and logistical obstacles to higher education” (p. 110) and lack individuals to provide college-going knowledge. In response, CFES trains and credentials educators and community members to be CCR advisors who support students in developing the Essential Skills. The funding, job description, and longevity of CCR advisors is unclear.

Chapter five delves into ensuring students are also career-ready. Again, ascribed to CFES’s work, Dalton details school–business partnerships to

foster students’ professional skills. A guide to building such partnerships are outlined, with the author discussing how urban examples can be adapted to rural contexts (yet does not provide specifics on how to accomplish this).

Returning to college-going topics, chapter six credits CFES with tools and strategies to foster college readiness—including a college-readiness assessment rubric, student to-do lists, and suggestions on building school–college partnerships. While examples of rural students and schools are provided, most tips outline college readiness broadly, not specifically to rural students.

Chapters seven through ten, while relevant, are a bit disjointed in discussing varying concepts about rural students’ access to and readiness for college. Chapter seven centers on rural issues of broadband connectivity while encouraging rural communities to leverage technology to access education and technological jobs. This conversation is couched within the COVID-19 pandemic that expanded remote learning. While the rest of the book does not often mention rural students returning to their hometown after graduation, this chapter effectively discusses ways to recruit individuals to live and work in rural areas.

Chapter eight outlines “rural America’s dropout crisis” (p. 187), detailing the need to recruit and retain rural students to and throughout college. Dalton expands on rural college student dropout rates by describing the complexity of rural family buy-in and cultural clashes between higher education and rural students’ backgrounds. Practical solutions, tips, strategies, and university initiatives for preparing rural students to thrive in college are provided.

The author in chapter nine details how science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers are important to the future of rural communities while also describing issues faced by rural students in pursuing STEM degrees. Like earlier chapters, examples of programs to interest students in STEM are outlined, followed by features of rural students who pursued STEM careers.

Chapter ten focuses on financial issues, including stories of rural students who encountered

obstacles to pay for college. Practical tips to assist students and families in understanding the financial aid process and examples of rural scholarship programs are provided. While not specific to rural students, this chapter provides a lengthy list of financial aid myths and realities, explanations about deciphering financial aid packages, and a “Glossary of Financial Aid Terms” (p. 250). It concludes with specific lessons learned from one student’s experience in funding their collegiate pursuits.

The conclusion summarizes issues rural students encounter accessing college degrees and indicates “the relationship between rural America and higher education has grown fraught in recent years” (p. 267). While examples of how rural schools and communities have built college-going cultures are included, the conclusion, as the rest of the book, directly mentions CFES college and career readiness activities. Dalton concludes by describing how rural students not pursuing higher education is a loss for themselves and their communities, reiterating the importance of helping rural students reach their “full potential” (p. 269).

Strengths and Weaknesses

Dalton’s book is a valuable guide for those looking to understand the basics of college access advising—yet a glaring issue lies in the inclusion of ‘rural’ in the title, as examples, suggestions, and experiences described rarely utilize rural populations, instead relying on the broader implication that rural schools will also benefit from these strategies. In fact, as rural education researchers ourselves, we conclude that most content is not specific to rural education at all, but instead an expanded summary of CFES accomplishments. In providing solutions to rural educational challenges and serving as a guide for building college and career readiness in rural schools, the author provides a one-dimensional perspective, based substantially on CFES experience. The rural lens seems out of place, given the CFES website states only 23 percent of students in the organization are from rural communities (Brilliant Pathways, 2021).

Despite the broad applicability, Dalton fails to mention other college access organizations and initiatives. Another glaring weakness appearing is

the lack of recent research or citations in general. Although the book is not presented as scholarly research, mention of interviews conducted are not backed by documented citations nor is detail provided as to the scope of interviews. Recent scholarship regarding rural student college enrollment, retention, and success is also missing (such as Chambers, 2020; McNamee, 2019; Means, 2019; National Student Clearinghouse, 2020; Sansone et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2019). Additionally, the deficit perspective of rural America presented throughout is disappointing, highlighting CFES as more a savior than a college access organization. Despite good intentions and some mention of successful rural schools and communities, the language depicts rural schools as “a hidden crisis” (Dalton, 2021, p. 1) without acknowledging more deeply the strengths of rural schools, communities, educators, and students.

Dalton’s extensive experience brings substantial strengths to this book for those interested in providing access to college for underrepresented populations. The practical resources in building college and career readiness allow educators, community members, or students to implement advice almost immediately. Through examples, it is clear that CFES activities are leading more underrepresented students to pursue and complete college degrees (although including more data would be helpful in substantiating claims).

Prospective Audience

For the field of education generally, this book contributes a succinct, easy-to-read introduction to college access. Therefore, audiences who would benefit include community members, educators, and students with little prior knowledge of college and career readiness best practices. However, its applicability in an undergraduate or graduate classroom is limited, and it would best be used as a practical college preparation guide for scholar-practitioners. Intellectually, while this book presents little new knowledge or research related to rural education, its practical implications (based on a long-standing, reputable organization) are worthy of a quick read.

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About the Authors

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