



### Between Home and Opportunity: Sociocultural Factors in Rural Student Perceptions of Geographic and Socioeconomic Mobilities

**Michelle Bailey**

University of Delaware

[mjbailey@udel.edu](mailto:mjbailey@udel.edu)

#### Abstract

Much of the academic literature on postsecondary planning for rural students has presented socioeconomic and geographic mobilities as intrinsically linked, arguing that a central dilemma for rural students is whether to stay in their home communities or leave to pursue upward socioeconomic mobility. The present narrative study explores this dilemma from the perspective of two high school juniors from one rural high school in the United States. Though Allen and Gabriella (pseudonyms) attended the same high school, their conceptualisations of their futures were vastly different. Gabriella dreamed of becoming an orthodontist and living in a city. Allen dreamed of owning his own agricultural business and staying in the local community. This article examines each student's thought process as they chose whether or not to leave their home community. Findings indicate that a combination of sociocultural factors 'push' or 'pull' students in their respective directions. These factors include students' lifestyle aspirations, their social identities and relationships with their community, and their views on the role of higher education in financial success. This suggests that rural students' residential aspirations are more nuanced, individualised, and context-dependent than previously thought.

**Keywords:** *career decision-making, post-secondary education, rural schools and communities, student aspirations*

#### Introduction

Rural students comprise 24% of the United States' high school enrolment (Sowl & Crain, 2021). These students have unique strengths and face unique challenges (Crumb et al., 2023; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). For example, rural youth tend to live near extended family and have close-knit social networks, with many reporting that they feel well-supported in their communities (Byun et al., 2012). However, economic shifts in rural communities have left many youths facing a series of complex decisions when planning for their futures. Traditional blue-collar industries in rural communities have been rapidly declining, leaving lower-wage service jobs in their wake (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). This has led some scholars to argue that higher education is important for rural youth as a vehicle for social mobility (Sowl & Crain, 2021).

Yet, some rural communities remain ambivalent toward this idea (Sherman & Sage, 2011). In their study of a small town in California, Sherman and Sage (2011) found that the community did not want their children to leave home to pursue higher education; yet they recognised that higher education was a "necessary evil" if they wanted their children to succeed economically (Sherman & Sage, 2011, p. 7). But why is higher education a necessary evil? First, many rural communities exist in education deserts, or areas with no accessible postsecondary options (Hillman, 2016). This means that youth must travel great distances to attend college (Hillman & Weichman, 2016;

Kim, 2019). Second, many industries requiring higher education are located in urban areas (Thomas & Fulkerson, 2020), meaning that students may have to leave their communities permanently to pursue employment that requires higher education. For rural youth, this leads to what Means and colleagues called “*the tension of staying or going*” (p. 555). In many studies, rural youth link geographic mobility with socioeconomic mobility, and must decide whether to leave their community to pursue that mobility or stay and potentially miss out on ‘better’ economic outcomes (see Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Cox et al., 2014; Means et al., 2016; Petrin et al., 2014). This phenomenon not only occurs in the United States, but globally as well (see Rönnlund, 2020; Webb et al., 2024).

This article, part of a larger narrative study on postsecondary decision-making for students from one rural high school in the United States, illustrates how two focal students think about the relationship between geographic mobility, higher education, and socioeconomic mobility. This study explored students’ postsecondary future selves, or the future lives that students envision for themselves (Carey, 2021; 2024). This exploration of the students’ imagined futures revealed holistic insights into how students make decisions to reach those futures. Findings indicate that students’ lifestyle aspirations play as much of a role as educational or career aspirations in their decisions to stay or leave the community. Further, findings reveal that other sociocultural factors, such as the students’ social identities and the beliefs of their family members, influence the students’ decisions more than local labour market conditions.

## Literature Review

### ***Changing Local Economies and Choosing to Stay or Leave***

Economic opportunity structures (Parsons, 2022) in rural communities have undergone massive shifts in recent decades, as traditional rural industries, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and mining, have become increasingly outsourced, corporatised, or automated (Corbett, 2021; Ruiz & Perna, 2017; Thomas et al., 2011). This means that the high-wage, blue-collar jobs on which rural communities have traditionally relied on are becoming increasingly scarce (Ruiz & Perna, 2017), though not completely obsolete (Carnevale et al., 2024a). Meanwhile, more lucrative industries that require postsecondary credentials, such as technology and finance, are concentrated in urban areas, where educational attainment is higher (Kim, 2019; McDonough et al., 2010). Thus, attending college (two- or four-year), once considered an option, is now perceived by some rural communities as a necessity for upward mobility (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Further, since jobs requiring higher education are concentrated in urban areas, some rural youth feel they must leave their home communities permanently (Means et al., 2016; Parsons, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014).

In their seminal work on postsecondary planning for rural youth in the United States, Carr and Kefalas (2009) created a typology of students based on their postsecondary plans. There were those who leave to pursue education (and never return), those who never leave their home communities, and those in between. The leavers, dubbed ‘achievers’, performed well academically and had high educational aspirations. The ‘stayers’ did not perform as well academically and had lower educational aspirations (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). This typology became a mainstay in the literature for many years, with countless studies using variations on these categories (see for example Cox et al., 2014; Parsons, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Though the literature has trended away from the ‘achiever/stayer’ language, the central postsecondary dilemma for rural students in many studies was what Means and colleagues (2016) called “*the tension of staying or going*” (p. 555). Many studies centred around the act of going, or what differentiates a leaver identity from a stayer one. For example, Petrin and colleagues (2014) found that the biggest motivational factor in developing a stayer or leaver identity is student perception of local employment opportunities. Leavers did not believe there were lucrative job

opportunities in their home communities. Stayers were more likely to believe that they could find good jobs within their home communities. Cox and colleagues (2014) found that both stayers and leavers made practical decisions. Stayers perceived staying as a sounder financial choice, because they were able to utilise local resources (such as community college). They categorised the leavers as being more risk tolerant, though leaver participants cited upward socioeconomic mobility as the reason they wanted to leave. However, stayers tended to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than leavers (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Hutchins et al., 2012). Despite this, stayers also might have access to more local social capital than leavers, rooting them more closely to the community (Rönnlund, 2020).

This tension is not to be taken lightly, as there can be real consequences for leaving, considering that rural youth typically have tight-knit social networks and extended family in their home communities (Byun et al., 2012; Puente, 2020; Sims et al., 2021). Moving away from home can be a significant sacrifice for any person but is especially so for rural youth. Because of the geographic isolation of rural communities, returning home to visit family can be more logistically difficult for rural youth. Many rural communities even lie in education deserts, making higher education options difficult to access. (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Kim, 2019). Overall, for rural youth planning their futures, residential aspirations are just as, if not more, important than educational or career aspirations. This is something that youth themselves are aware of, as rural youth are more likely than urban or suburban youth to think about their residential aspirations (Wang et al., 2021).

### **Higher Education, Career, and Residential Aspirations**

College, career, and residential aspirations are inherently linked in the minds of rural youth (McDonough et al., 2010). Some rural students receive messaging in school that ties higher education directly to career. In her study of postsecondary messaging in a rural high school, Tieken (2016) observed adults offering students a “*jobs-oriented rationale for higher education*” (p. 204). Kryst et al. (2018) and Tieken (2016) both found that school counsellors and administrators believed that higher education was primarily for vocational purposes and encouraged students to attend only if it was required for their desired careers. For some rural students, higher education does not seem worthwhile, as the jobs available in their communities do not require it (McDonough et al., 2010; Ruiz & Perna, 2017). Means and colleagues (2016) found that students who did want to pursue higher education felt they would need to permanently leave their communities. These student perceptions make sense, given the changes in the rural economic landscape and the concentration of jobs requiring higher education in urban areas.

Social identities also affect student thinking. For example, Hallmark and Ardoin (2021) found community narratives that feminised higher education in their study of two rural communities in the southeastern United States. In these communities, the careers that required higher education were typically those found in care fields (e.g., healthcare, social work, education, etc.). Because care fields were considered feminine, and higher education was solely viewed as vocational in these communities, higher education became feminised. Importantly, jobs in care fields were available in the local communities, meaning that girls were able to pursue higher education without permanently leaving their community—an option which boys may not have felt was open to them (Hallmark & Ardoin, 2021). Sharp and colleagues (2020) also found that rural boys tended to have lower educational aspirations than girls because of beliefs about the gendered nature of certain occupations. They suggested that the decline in blue-collar industries may necessitate a shift in gendered perceptions of care work and other ‘feminine fields’ (Sharp et al., 2020).

Race is also an important factor. Studies found that, in some Black and Latine rural communities, higher education credentials were seen as a means for individual and community improvement,

which gave higher education more intrinsic value (Boettcher et al., 2022; Puente, 2020; 2022). Some rural students of colour, particularly Black and Latine students, did not see the need to permanently leave their communities, as they saw pursuing higher education was a way to give back to or improve their home communities (Boettcher et al., 2022; Puente, 2020; 2022). However, Black and Latine rural students may also feel ambivalent about college. Pursuing higher education is perceived as risky by some rural students of colour, as the economic return on their investment might be lower than that of their white peers (Parsons, 2022). Further, college might be a particularly isolating experience as few of their classmates might share their combined racial and geographic identities (Woldoff et al., 2011).

### **Postsecondary Future Selves**

One of the guiding conceptual frameworks for the larger narrative study underpinning this article is postsecondary future selves (Carey, 2021; 2024). In his study on the college and career aspirations of Black and Latino boys from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attending a college preparatory high school in the United States, Carey (2021) explored the students' imagined future lives across three domains: college, career, and condition. Condition was defined as lifestyle or material wellbeing (e.g., leisure activities, income level, family life). Carey found that all three domains were connected in students' minds, as participants cited narratives that linked college going with higher paying jobs and, therefore, enough financial resources to support a family and leisure activities. Students' conceptions of their postsecondary future selves did not exist in a vacuum but were context-dependent and influenced by other actors within students' social world.

The present narrative study made two slight adjustments to Carey's (2021; 2024) framework. To examine the "*tension of staying or going*" (Means et al., 2016, p. 555), a fourth domain of location was added. In Rönnlund's (2020) study of the residential aspirations of rural Swedish youth, she conceptualised "*imagined spatial futures*" (p. 125) as students' hoped-for geographic locations as adults, which were often juxtaposed with students' current spatial reality. Further, Carey's (2021) participants attended a college preparatory high school, college was heavily emphasised in their educational context. However, because the research site of this study was a comprehensive high school, and because not all participants intended to pursue higher education, the 'college' domain was renamed 'education/training' to reflect the wider variety of paths that study participants may take.

### **Methods**

This article drew from a larger narrative inquiry study that focused on postsecondary planning for a group of students from one rural high school in a mid-Atlantic state in the United States. This study was approved by the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board (#2042516-1). The research questions for the larger study were as follows:

1. How do high school juniors from one rural community think about life after high school and conceptualise their postsecondary future selves across the domains of education/training, career, condition, and location?
2. How do students factor economic and spatial considerations into their visions of their postsecondary future selves?
3. How are students' visions of their postsecondary future selves situated within their current familial, geographic, social, and cultural contexts?

This article focuses on the findings of Research Question 2, which explored students' perceptions of economic opportunities in their home community.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For the larger study, five 11<sup>th</sup> grade students (16–17-year-olds) from one rural high school were interviewed three times. The first interview focused on students' backgrounds and past educational experiences. The second interview focused on students' current lives and their postsecondary plans. The final interview tasked students with imagining their postsecondary future selves.

Data were analysed narratively. Interview audio files were anonymised and then transcribed using Otter Ai. Each student's set of transcripts was then re-storied (Rolón Dow & Bailey, 2022) into life stories, which were organised around Carey's (2021) postsecondary future selves domains. These stories became the unit of analysis in order to (1) analyse narratives holistically and directly compare participant experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995); (2) identify important elements of meaning, including key characters, setting, and time (Coulter & Smith, 2009); and (3) present a clearer and more succinct narrative for readers, which aids in transparency (Rolón Dow & Bailey, 2022). The stories were then analysed as literary texts, identifying literary elements such as setting, characters, symbols, themes, and metaphors (Coulter & Smith, 2009). After that, they were analysed using a Three-Dimensional Space Analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002) to examine links between psychological, social, cultural, temporal, and spatial story elements. This article explores the narratives of two focal students, Allen and Gabriella (pseudonyms).

### **Research Site and Participants**

Southeast High School (pseudonym) was a small high school that served approximately 1,000 students, grades 9-12. It was classified as 'fringe rural' by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The student population was 85% white, and 40% of students were considered economically disadvantaged (State Department of Education, 2025). Roughly one third of Southeast graduates pursued postsecondary education, 40% entered the workforce directly after high school, and 5% enlisted in the military (State Department of Education, 2025). According to study participants, major industries in the community included agriculture, healthcare, and construction.

Two students were chosen as focal students for this article. Allen and Gabriella were chosen because they represent heterogeneity among participants (Small & Calarco, 2022). The cases of Allen and Gabriella illuminated both tensions and resonant threads (Clandinin, 2016) in postsecondary decision-making for students from the Southeast community.

### **Findings**

Findings from the present study corroborated that 'leaver' and 'stayer' were not fixed identities, but rather choices arising from a cost-benefit analysis that participants engaged in when making postsecondary decisions. Students' educational, career, and condition aspirations (including residential aspirations) were shaped by a complex set of sociocultural factors, some of which 'pushed' students away and some of which 'pulled' them closer to the community. Interestingly, the same sociocultural factors that pushed one student pulled the other.

### **Focal Students' Present and Future Selves**

The first 'pull/push' factor for Gabriella and Allen were their visions for their postsecondary future selves (Carey, 2021). Gabriella's imagined future included city amenities and having more Black cultural experiences, pushing her from Southeast. Allen's imagined future included a career in agriculture and a rural lifestyle, including owning multiple acres of land, pulling him toward the Southeast community.

**Gabriella.** Gabriella was a straight-A student at Southeast High. She took a rigorous course load, including two Advanced Placement<sup>1</sup> courses, as well as advanced trigonometry and advanced chemistry. She claimed her “*whole life is school*”. At Southeast, she participated in a community service club, the prom committee, and a career mentorship program for girls.

Gabriella was Black, female, heterosexual, and originally from a major metropolitan area. Gabriella moved to the Southeast community the summer before she began high school. Her hometown remained a major part of her identity. She said she was quick to correct those who forgot where she was originally from: “*a lot of my [extended] family, they just kind of forget about it, because we moved, but I'm like, ‘I'm still from [major city]!’*” Gabriella also said that her hometown influenced how she interacted with the world, discussing her open and direct communication style, which she attributed to being socialised in her city.

Gabriella moved to Southeast with her stepmom, her stepmom’s girlfriend, and her younger sister. Gabriella still had a relationship with her biological mother and her older siblings who lived in her hometown, but Gabriella’s stepmom was her primary caretaker. Gabriella admitted that her family had “*money problems*” and sought out Southeast for its lower cost of living. However, at times, Gabriella and her family felt othered in the community as a Black, same sex headed household. Yet Gabriella also expressed positive sentiments toward Southeast, saying, “*other than the cultural differences, I like [Southeast] a lot*”.

For her future self, Gabriella at 36-years old will be living her childhood dream of being an orthodontist. After high school, she will attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). After college, she will go to dental school, where she will earn a coveted orthodontics residency. She will pass all the certification exams and work in an orthodontics office. She will be very happy at this job and have no desire to start her own practice.

Gabriella will live in a city as an adult—maybe her hometown, but maybe not. She will share an apartment with her best friend during college and dental school. She may be living with a romantic partner at 36. Children might be on the horizon for Gabriella—she said she is open to this idea, but it is not integral to her happiness. She will be content to live in her apartment with her partner and an orange or grey cat. Gabriella will enjoy the city amenities, such as easy access to shopping centres and entertainment venues, and she will relish the “*background noise*” of the busy city streets. Outside of work, Gabriella will enjoy hanging out with her friends and partner, reading, shopping, knitting, and volunteering in her local community.

**Allen.** Allen has lived in the Southeast community his entire life and attended a private Christian school until he began high school at Southeast High. In middle school, he discovered his love of music. Allen still took piano lessons from his middle-school chorus instructor and occasionally sang or played in various community ensembles. He did well in school but was sceptical of programs such as Advanced Placement, dual enrolment at a local college, and other types of college preparation courses. At school, he was involved in the Southeast band program, a positive behaviour program, and the school play. Allen was white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and a self-described “*country kid*.” Allen’s Christian and rural identities were the most salient for him. Allen lived with his Mom and Dad. He had two older siblings who no longer lived at home. One of Allen’s main goals was to remain in the Southeast community. He had a deep love for the community, noting that he is proud to be from Southeast.

At 36, Allen will own his own trucking company, or perhaps his own farm. After graduating from high school, Allen will work for a local farm as a truck driver for five or six years. This work experience will allow him to obtain his Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) and give him insight into the business aspects of both trucking and farming. When Allen is ready to branch out on his

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<sup>1</sup> Advanced Placement is a program in the United States run by the College Board where students take courses with a standardised curriculum and exams which can earn them postsecondary credits.

own, his boss will invest startup capital in Allen's business. Once Allen's business is successful, he will buy his former boss's portion of the business and own it outright.

Allen will live in a small village within the Southeast school district, close to his old boss's farm. He will have a wife and three or four children. He and his wife will build their own house, with a few acres of land and a stream running through the property. Allen will take a keen interest in his children's activities, attending their games, performances, and other events. He will support the community by donating money to the Southeast band program, sponsoring a local youth sports team, and tithing to his church.

Allen's and Gabriella's visions for the future heavily relied on their future conditions and locations. For Allen, the physical and social distance between his present reality and his envisioned future was smaller, which pulled him to stay in the community. Gabriella's present reality was further away from her envisioned future, pushing her to live somewhere else. Both students' lifestyle and residential aspirations seemed to bear as much weight on their respective decisions as their educational and career aspirations.

### ***Social Identities and Relationship to the Community***

Gabriella and Allen had quite different social identities, which led them to experience Southeast differently. Allen's social identities pulled him closer to the community. However, Gabriella experienced marginalisation and othering in Southeast due to her social identities. This affected her relationship with the community and pushed her away.

Allen held identities that were privileged in Southeast and society more broadly (such as white, male, and middle class). In addition to his "country" identity, his values and religious beliefs aligned with the community's. Further, his family had an extensive local social network. This led Allen to a sense of belonging within the community. He stated:

*We're very, very close to each other. We're very, very much a family. It's very easy to bicker with each other and not get along. But when somebody new comes along... we don't really like them for a while. We're very private, we're very personal... I love [the Southeast community]. I am very proud to be from [Southeast].*

Allen's sense of belonging in the Southeast community instilled in him both a sense of pride and an identity as a Southeast resident. He enjoyed an insider status in the community that was not afforded to all residents, particularly "new" ones. Simultaneously, Allen viewed Southeast as "very much a family," indicating a strong bond with the local community, which pulled him toward staying.

Gabriella held identities that were minoritised more broadly (e.g., Black, female, and working class). These identities were perhaps even more heavily marginalised within the Southeast community, given that the community was predominantly white and tended to have traditional views around gender. In addition, because Gabriella was relatively new to the community, she was not integrated into the community to the same extent as Allen, perhaps encountering the distrust of newcomers described by Allen. Her outsider status was exacerbated by the fact that her caregivers were a same-sex couple.

*It's not a very open place for people of colour, or for queer people. So, it's really hard to try to not play into the aggressive stereotypes by acting out about everything, but also finding that balance between sticking up for what I believe in. So, sometimes when jokes are made, I have to decide whether I want to just laugh it off and pretend that that wasn't just said, or if I want to react to this and possibly lose a friendship or just being comfortable around someone... Because it's like, I don't really know how to find that balance between what I believe in and where I'm living at.*

Though Gabriella said positive things about Southeast, she was honest about her experiences there. She internally struggled with whether and when to stand up for herself, indicating a tension between the need to assert her dignity and the need to protect herself in those moments. Similar to Allen, one of Gabriella's most salient identities was her geographic background. While her race and family composition certainly othered Gabriella in Southeast, as these identities were more visible there than in her hometown, Gabriella also identified as a "city girl", which she believed set her apart from the community.

The students' relationships with the community reflected their residential aspirations. Allen felt such a strong connection to the Southeast community that he described it as a "family". This strong sense of community pulled him to stay. Gabriella did not feel this way about Southeast; she mentioned wanting to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) specifically because she was looking for a family-like community.

*For the HBCU decision, that was just because I wanted to be around people with the same experiences—I want to be around, I guess, "my people," or whatever. But also, it's just like, seeing stuff on the internet and seeing how fun and connected HBCUs are. I like that. I like that sense of family, almost.*

While Allen described Southeast as a "family", it is telling that Gabriella used that word to describe the community she hoped to find in the future. Gabriella wanted to be around people who understood her and had shared experiences, pushing her away from Southeast and toward an imagined future community where she could find "her people".

While Gabriella sought refuge in higher education, Allen's identity as a Southeast resident pushed him from going to college. He explained:

*Everybody kind of looks at [Southeast] like, we're the farm kids. We're not that academically great. We're [Southeast]; we don't know how to spell. And so that's a very interesting thing that has to be worked with sometimes. But yeah, I'm very proud to be from [Southeast]. I know a lot of really smart people from [Southeast]... We're pretty intelligent. But we're farmers. We don't really use our intelligence to go to college with it. We do other things with it.*

Though Southeast was located in a predominantly rural county, Allen believed that other nearby towns associated Southeast with negative rural stereotypes, such as lack of intelligence. Interestingly, while refuting this stereotype, Allen drew a distinction between how Southeast residents "use [their] intelligence" and what is expected (i.e. to go to college). Allen did not seem to challenge the notion that rurality and higher education were mutually exclusive. Instead, he inadvertently set up a stayer/leaver dichotomy, in which some Southeast residents forgo college and instead use their talents in local agricultural endeavours. Allen's meaning-making of his Southeast identity may be pushing him from college and pulling him toward his career aspiration of becoming a farmer.

Allen's relationship with the Southeast community indicated both his sense of belonging there and his sense of identity as a Southeast resident. His sense of belonging pulled him toward the community. His belief that a Southeast identity conflicted with college attendance may have pushed him from higher education. Gabriella had the opposite experience, which pushed her away from Southeast and pulled her toward higher education. Though Gabriella embodied a leaver identity in some ways—she was academically high achieving and aspired to higher education—she was clear that her residential aspirations hinged on her search for community, not due to local labour market conditions. Though Allen was also academically high achieving, he aspired to stay in the local community because of his identity and sense of belonging.

### **Higher Education and Socioeconomic Mobility**

Gabriella and Allen's beliefs about higher education and financial success were also push/pull factors. Gabriella's belief that higher education was tied directly to socioeconomic success pushed her to explore higher education options outside of the Southeast community. These beliefs were shaped by messages she received from her family about success, as well as her own personal experiences. Similarly, Allen's scepticism that higher education led to socioeconomic success pulled him toward starting his career in the Southeast community directly after high school. This scepticism had also been formed by family messaging and personal experience.

Gabriella valued higher education, both for her career advancement and for the potential of upward socioeconomic mobility.

*My family, we've always had money problems. And that's part of why I've chosen such a big career with such a big [salary] ... because I don't want to have these money problems. And so, if I don't get these scholarships, I have no way of going to college and I have no way of becoming what I want to be, in my opinion. So, I think that—because of all the pressure—my older brother, he did not go to college, and he graduated like three years ago. He didn't go to college; he went to a trade school like two years after he graduated. And he barely passed that. And he's doing nothing. So [my biological mom is] always like, "Oh, this is my problem child. And this is the child that's going to go somewhere." So, [there's] always this pressure that's kind of like, "you need to do this, you need to do that."*

Gabriella felt pressure to excel academically, not only because her family—particularly her biological mother—viewed her as the family member who was “going to go somewhere”, but also because Gabriella felt she could not afford college without scholarships. She specifically compared herself to her older brother; her aspirations were due, in part, to viewing her brother's journey as a cautionary tale. She believed that attaining advanced degrees and pursuing a specific goal (i.e. to become an orthodontist) would keep her from “doing nothing”. Gabriella wanted to pursue orthodontics because of the salary and prestige a career in medicine would provide, which would align with her family's high expectations.

Allen was critical of the notion that higher education was needed for socioeconomic mobility.

*The idea that, if you're working a physical labour job, you're going to be poor your whole life, like, "I gotta get to college. I gotta get that desk job because that's what's going to pay the bills easily." That's what we've been taught.*

Allen believed that societal messaging about college was tied to a perception that blue-collar jobs do not pay as well as white-collar jobs, meaning that young people are taught to aspire to white-collar jobs. However, Allen cited evidence from his own life that contradicted these messages.

*Some people who go to college for ten years—I mean, my one uncle went to college, has degrees in computer science, mathematical engineering, mathematical research, all sorts of things. And [his family is doing better financially because] he changed jobs recently. But before, when he was teaching [at a university], they were struggling a little bit more. And I guess I come from the other opinion. Both my parents work more physical jobs, and we do fine financially.*

Allen compared the experiences of his uncle to those of his own parents. While he believed that societal narratives push white-collar jobs, seeing the financial difficulties of his uncle made Allen question those narratives. Therefore, Allen was sceptical of the idea that higher education and white-collar jobs were the key to socioeconomic mobility. This pulled Allen toward the idea of a “physical” or blue-collar job, which he believed would be more financially secure.

Gabriella and Allen each had different views of higher education and its relation to socioeconomic mobility. While Gabriella had faith that higher education would be her best

pathway to financial stability, Allen was unconvinced of this idea. Both students' perceptions of higher education stemmed from their families and personal experiences. Gabriella experienced family pressure to "go somewhere" or to be more successful than her older siblings. Allen, on the other hand, believed that higher education was not necessarily tied to better financial outcomes after personally witnessing people with high school diplomas outearn those with advanced degrees. Allen and Gabriella largely based their postsecondary planning on their perceptions of opportunities. Iloh (2018) argued that students' perceptions of opportunities are just as important as 'real' opportunities. These perceptions, informed by family messaging and experiential knowledge, served as push/pull factors for the students, tugging each of them toward a leaving or staying decision.

### Discussion and Directions for Future Research

Prior studies found that rural students linked geographic mobility with socioeconomic mobility in their college and career aspirations, believing that they must leave their home communities for better economic opportunities (see Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Means et al., 2016; Parsons, 2022; Sherman & Sage, 2011). While there is some evidence that Allen and Gabriella linked their career and residential aspirations in their minds, neither's rationale for staying or leaving Southeast was about socioeconomic mobility. Ultimately, each student experienced sociocultural factors that either pulled them toward or pushed them away from their home community. Community relationships and condition aspirations (e.g. family life, lifestyle, material wellbeing) were the two biggest motivators for each student's residential aspirations—not their perceptions of local labour market conditions. However, it is important to note that each student's relationship with the Southeast community also influenced their perceptions of economic opportunity within the community. The students' perceptions of higher education were also closely linked with their desire to stay or leave Southeast.

Allen did not believe that he needed to leave Southeast for economic success; in fact, he believed that he could be very successful in an agricultural career in Southeast. He identified the economic opportunity structures in Southeast and had both the cultural knowledge and social network to thrive in agriculture. This echoes Rönnlund's (2020) findings that students with more social and cultural capital in their communities had stronger stayer identities. Importantly though, Allen's primary motivators to stay in Southeast were his condition aspirations and his love for the community. His condition aspirations (owning land and connection to nature) made Southeast a desirable place to stay. In addition, his positive connection to Southeast likely aided the social and cultural capital Allen drew on as he developed his career aspirations, indicating that a positive relationship with the community may influence students' perceptions of local career opportunities.

For her part, Gabriella also did not necessarily believe that she had to leave Southeast for economic success. Rather, her desire to leave Southeast was linked to both her condition aspirations and her relationships with the local community. In addition to desiring city amenities, Gabriella sought a community that was more aligned with her values and cultural identity. She did not have the same social and cultural capital as Allen in Southeast. Crumb and colleagues (2023) note that doubly minoritised rural residents, like residents of colour or LGBTQ+ residents, often face great pressure to adopt local cultural, political, and religious norms to access social and cultural capital. Gabriella did not wish to do this, which she attributed to her "city girl" identity. Interestingly, both Allen and Gabriella had strong 'country' and 'city' identities, respectively; their perceptions of themselves also likely influenced their residential aspirations. Ultimately, Gabriella's desire to leave Southeast was not explicitly linked to upward socioeconomic mobility, though she did seem to implicitly believe that she would be more successful building her social capital in a community that was a better fit for her.

However, understanding each student's staying/leaving decision would be incomplete without understanding their perceptions of higher education. Gabriella strongly believed that higher education was her pathway to upward socioeconomic mobility. Gabriella stated that part of the draw of a career in medicine was the salary. Therefore, she viewed higher education as the link between her current economic condition and her desired economic condition. Allen did not see such a link for himself, and was sceptical that this link existed at all, citing evidence from his own family. This indicates that, regardless of whether students choose to pursue higher education, their perception of higher education looms large in the development of career aspirations.

The focal students' perceptions of higher education may also be linked to residential aspirations as well. Allen viewed higher education as opposed to a Southeast identity, stating, "we don't really use our intelligence to go to college with it. We do other things with it". This indicates that Allen may have seen higher education as incompatible with his residential aspirations. For Gabriella, the opposite is true. She saw college as a potential place of belonging, after feeling ostracised in Southeast. Each student's decision to stay or leave was closely tied to their beliefs about higher education. Allen's scepticism of higher education aligned with his desire to stay in Southeast, while Gabriella's desire to attend college aligned with her desire to leave.

The students' perceptions of opportunity do largely match actual patterns of opportunity. Allen's assessment that a postsecondary degree was not necessary for success in his chosen career may be correct. Using Carnevale et al. (2024a) recent work on career trends as a measurement of such patterns of opportunity, they found that blue-collar jobs are still more stable and higher paying in rural areas than urban areas in the United States. They also found that white men without a postsecondary degree fare better economically in rural areas than in urban or suburban areas. However, the same is not true for white women or people of colour. Carnevale and colleagues observed that only 21% of rural women with a high school diploma have high paying, full-time jobs (compared with 53% of men). Further, Black Americans only have a 34% chance of securing a high paying, full-time job in rural areas, compared with a 42% chance in urban areas (Carnevale et al., 2024a). Therefore, Gabriella's assessment that she would be more successful if she pursues higher education and moves to an urban area may also be correct. Whether they realised it or not, both students' perceptions of their economic opportunities matched wider patterns of opportunity across race, gender, and geographic locale type in the United States.

The findings of this study indicate that economic and spatial considerations are important factors in rural students' aspirations across the domains of college, career, and condition, and that economic and spatial considerations may be linked in students' minds. Both focal students' residential aspirations were strongly tied to their college and career aspirations. Further, the "tension of staying or going" (Means et al., 2016, p. 555) may be more tied to identity, community connection, and condition aspirations than previously believed. While this exploratory study has highlighted potential sociocultural influences on student postsecondary decision-making, more work on rural students' perceptions of opportunity, culture, and identity is needed to draw any generalised conclusions. Further, this study followed high school juniors, those in their penultimate year of high school. Student plans can change drastically between junior year and high school graduation. Work focused on high school seniors, or even recent high school graduates, may illuminate how student perceptions and thinking shift as students get closer to their adult lives.

## Conclusion

This narrative study explored how two rural students in the United States thought about the relationship between their home communities and socioeconomic success. Allen and Gabriella did not necessarily believe that leaving their home community would result in upward socioeconomic mobility. Rather, their decisions to leave or stay were influenced by a variety of sociocultural factors, such as identity, relationship to the local community, and perceptions of

higher education. Previous literature suggested that decisions to stay or leave home hinged on economic opportunities (see Cox et al., 2014; Parsons, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014). However, this study's findings suggest that, while economic opportunities are a factor, rural students' residential aspirations are more individualised and rooted in social, cultural, and familial contexts. When working with students on postsecondary planning, educators must consider each student's relationship to their home community, condition aspirations, beliefs and worldviews, and other information outside of educational and career aspirations as they guide students.

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