

# Rural community colleges developing perceptions of self-identity

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*Rural America, in direct competition with growing suburban and urban America, has struggled to maintain a high quality of life. Rural out-migration levels are high, as are poverty and illiteracy rates. Rural community colleges have worked to defend and expand opportunities in rural settings, yet face their own challenges tied to resources, business partners, and secondary education quality. An unexplored area that rural community colleges may find useful to consider is their role in formulating personal identity development. The current study explores how three case study institutions in the mid-south influenced the identity development of youth, college students, alumni, business and industries and their leaders, and college faculty. The findings support the contention that rural colleges do play a major role in helping students and community members learn to question their assumptions about others and their own life choices.*

A WIDE VARIETY of stakeholders and constituents have an interest in the performance, behavior, and activities of community colleges. The success of community colleges depends significantly on their ability to connect with their communities, whether public agencies or students looking for job training. The connection is often obviously economic or educational, but it can be closely interconnected with societal progress. Community colleges can be important mechanisms in improving a locale's quality of life and how communities view themselves. Through the provision of resources and opportunities—both educational and social—community colleges can be an integral part of community success. Their role is particularly important for rural America, where the out-migration of the rural population has been over 15% during the past decade. Additionally, rural America has struggled to keep up with the economic

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pace of suburban and urban areas on many fronts including employment opportunities, wealth creation, and business growth (Annie Casey Foundation, 2004). Rural America has been further challenged by the exportation of many manufacturing jobs and the rise of corporate farming industries that diminish the need for labor in rural settings (Drabenstott, 2005).

About one-fifth of the United States population lives in what could be defined as a rural location, even though 85% of U.S. geography is defined as rural. A recent report by the Annie Casey Foundation (2004) highlighted the choices rural Americans make to live close to relatives, feel safe and secure, and continue their heritage. In 1993, there were over 56 million people living in rural areas and by 2003, that number had dropped by 16% to 48 million, with the balance moving to metropolitan areas which have a total population of over 232 million. These 48 million rural Americans have had a higher poverty rate than their metropolitan counterparts for the past 40 years (currently 14% compared to 11%), they have a lower per capita income (\$17,884 compared to \$24,069), and they have a lower median household income (\$33,601 compared to \$45,219). Rural Americans are also less likely to hold a college degree (15% compared to 27% in metropolitan areas), are less likely to have graduated from high school (70% compared to 82%), and are less likely to have access to a variety of services including

dedicated telephone lines, computing access, and other amenities (for these and additional figures related to the state of rural America, see the Rural Policy Research Institute at [www.rupri.org](http://www.rupri.org)).

Despite general agreement that higher education can positively influence a community's livelihood, there has been little exploration of the transformational power an institution can exert on a community. Although there have been a number of economic impact studies reporting high returns on investment for college involvement in community businesses (Caffrey & Isaacs, 1971; Brooks, 1996), there has been no effort to explore the social impact of colleges and universities on the individual, particularly the individual's sense of self. The current study was designed to explore the unintentional outcome of rural community college activities that influence the identity development of individuals or how they see themselves. The value of the dialogue is in the promise of improving life in rural America where illiteracy and poverty rates are the most disturbing in the United States.

## **Background of the study**

### **Rural community colleges**

Rural community colleges, defined by their geographic location, constitute approximately one-third of all community colleges operating in America (Katsinas & Miller, 1998). More recent attempts to cat-

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alog such colleges have resulted in the identification of 922 individual rural community college campuses in 533 community college districts (Katsinas, 2004). Rural community colleges face a host of unique and often difficult challenges. These can be as severe as securing the resources necessary to maintain operation of the college. Although only 18 states now rely on local taxation for operation of community colleges (King, 1998), in those service areas real estate taxation can produce only minimal amounts of revenue. By requesting increases to the mill levy, college administrators find themselves battling directly with public school officials and other public fund beneficiaries (Miller & Holt, 2005). Challenges unique to rural colleges also include the recruitment, retention, and development of high quality faculty and administrative teams, resources to support advanced technological applications—including the telecommunications infrastructure necessary to support high-speed computing traffic—the availability of trained staff, and the challenges associated with economic development in areas that have historically underperformed or have suffered from prolonged economic depression (a general discussion of these topics is provided in Killacky & Valadez, 1995; Murray, 2005).

Rural community colleges have been viewed by residents, state legislators, and policy makers as catalysts for sustaining high-quality of life opportunities for rural America. These community colleges indeed

provide key educational opportunities for the local population, but they also provide job training, small business support, and in many cases, the focus of town life. Businesses are more likely to be operated in communities with a college that can provide training, and the training packages also allow for state investment in workforce development. In essence, state governments can filter money to small communities, thereby increasing tax and revenue production, and subsequently improving the quality of life in a given community.

### **Economic development**

Rural community colleges provide three distinct economic development service activities: contract training, small business development, and local economic development planning. Contract training differs from traditional vocational or occupational education in that the “client” for the training is a private business, and the training is being done for the express benefits of the business, that is, to improve worker performance or ability. The training might include learning new computer programs (such as Windows, Computer-Aided Design/Computer-Aided Manufacturing), learning to operate new machinery (such as statistical process control systems [SPS]), learning new compliance standards (such as the International Standards Organization [ISO] series). Businesses will also at times contract developmental education to the extent that it adds to the prof-

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itability of the company. Increasingly, state departments of labor, economic development, education, and social services are working to consolidate some of their programs that serve rural communities. They have found that they can leverage their investment by offering cost sharing with businesses that invest in training through local community colleges. Over 90% of all community colleges offer some form of business and industry related contract training.

The second economic development function of community colleges includes the development of small businesses. The activities can range from incubators that provide free or reduced office space to consultative services and advice. Consultation might include personnel policy development, hiring assistance, help completing and filing appropriate state and federal paperwork, marketing expertise, compiling data sets that can feed into business plan development, and in some instances, offering executive-on-loan programs to provide seasoned business leadership. Some states have found that they are more effective offering such services by developing networks of community colleges, which provide expertise in certain areas from different colleges. The networking approach allows for systems to expand their ability to help rural colleges.

A third area in which community colleges provide economic development support is local economic planning. Activities might include scanning for economic trends and watching legislation for changes

to rules and regulations that affect local business or industry. Several have even moved into the policy making arena, calling meetings of policy makers to debate issues that can influence local industry, actively bringing citizens together to learn about issues that have the potential to affect local business, and providing educational opportunities about potential economic growth activities for local policy makers, such as city council members (Dougherty & Bakia, 2000, provides an excellent synopsis of these activities).

## **Identity development**

Colleges can also play a key role in the self-identity of individuals living in or near the town where the college operates. The premise rests heavily on the concept that people who grow up and live near a college, such as a rural community college, have a fundamentally different outlook or vision of life, pride, and self-identity. Their perceptions can arise from frequent early contact with the college or its faculty, staff, or administrators, from a community's sense of pride in serving as the home for the college, from the prosperity driven by the college, etc.

Identity, whether individual or group (community), is how individuals make sense of who they are, their experience, and how they communicate with others (Josselson, 1987). Self-identity affects occupational choice and success, personal relationships, community

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involvement, value formation, and ultimately economic prosperity or poverty.

The notion that an individual defines and develops a sense of individual identity was first explored by Erikson (Evans, 1998). Working from his initial concepts, others have identified the idea of individual identity as a “primarily unconscious process that unites personality and links the individual to the social world” (Josselson, 1987, p. 10). The process for creating one’s individual identity has consistently been viewed not as an isolated incident or as something static, but rather as an on-going sequence of building upon previous stages and applying new things learned and experienced to new contexts (Evans, 1998; Gunter, 2001). Although there are differing conceptions of how identity is framed, Roethler (1998), for instance, argues for a crisis-driven response process that is a relational concept based on relationships between an individual and another individual or group (Hall, 2001). He also notes that although the process is frequently internally singular, it is largely framed by those around the individual. Reliance on others, then, requires an examination of the role of local communities that have the potential to encourage (or discourage) particular social interactions.

Among the variety of theoretical understandings of identity development, Josselson (1987) has developed one of the most widely accepted and validated measures of identity creation. Her model has been described as consisting of

four distinct resolutions to identity exploration: *moratorium*, *diffusion*, *identity achievement*, and *foreclosure*. The fourth possible resolution represented in the model, termed *foreclosure*, requires an individual, while passing from adolescence to adulthood, to challenge and question personal beliefs and values, particularly those held by parents and other authority figures. Questioning allows the individual to frame and understand the world, and right and wrong, in a meaningful personalized fashion that suggests how the individual fits into the interpretation. Further, by challenging authority through questioning or overt behaviors, the individual becomes empowered to develop life expectations and attitudes about the effort expended to achieve the expectations.

How individuals see themselves as singular and in collective forms is typically referred to as a community. Communities generally have a sense of their own identity that is something significantly more than a group of individuals. Community has been defined as shared locality, common values and interests, and interrelationships. Further, a community must have certain elements, including role differentiation (age, generation, sex, other common bases—economic allocation, political allocation, cognition, and the non-human environment), solidarity (ideal and actual; not positive-positive correlation, *per se*), economic allocation, political allocation, and integration and expression (Levy, 1966). Social and commercial agen-

cies can be the means by which a sense of community is formed, or it can be formed through community members and one's social networks (Dorfman & Lane, 1997). Sharing their values and interests develops strong bonds and high levels of trust. Consequently, community members realize that their well-being reflects the well-being of their community. With a specific commercial agency in a town, citizens become proud of that specific commercial agency. With feelings to share, a sense of community is created and defined. Also, the types of commercial agencies a town has says a great deal about what is needed and important to its town members. Town members are part of a community that needs and values similar things.

## Research methods

The present exploratory and descriptive study makes use of qualitative research methods, typically an effective tool for telling stories and building conceptualizations of individuals or phenomena in the

participants' natural settings. Using structured interview protocols, 79 individuals were interviewed (see Table 1) at three rural community colleges in the mid-southern United States, including one college in Arkansas, one in Mississippi, and one in Alabama. Qualitative interview strategies are particularly appropriate for descriptive research. Since they are capable of maintaining the distinct voices of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reinharz (1992) has noted that in using interview strategies to tell stories or oral histories, individuals can be helped to understand their own values and develop a sense of personal empowerment.

The three colleges selected for inclusion in the study were chosen based on their willingness to participate, their cooperation in scheduling interviews, and their accessibility. In each setting, interviews were held with students, faculty, staff, private citizens, industry leaders, and civic leaders. The interviews were held on campus, in participants' homes, in offices, in

**Table 1. Summary counts of interviews**

Category	College 1	College 2	College 3	Total
Students	4	7	6	17
Faculty	5	5	4	14
Staff	4	3	5	12
Private citizens	4	5	3	12
Industry leaders	5	4	3	12
Civic leaders	4	5	3	12
Total number of interviews	26	29	24	79

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public libraries, etc. Trustworthiness was achieved through the involvement of multiple interviewers, multiple examinations of interview transcripts and meeting notes, and a validation of interview question prompts by experts in community development. Additional information on communities was gathered from various civic or college documents and supporting and background literature. All interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2005.

## Findings

Interview transcripts, notes, and supporting materials were examined by three external non-participants who developed commonalities and identified themes that arose from the evidence related to identity development. The principal investigators on the project conducted a similar study of data and identified commonalities and themes, and the five reviewers then met and reached consensus on four themes related to individual identity development in rural communities influenced by community colleges. Additional findings related to the economics of the college. Continuing education emphases were also identified and reported in a policy briefing available from the Stennis Institute for Government and the Mid-South Partnership for Community Colleges at Mississippi State University.

## Differences

The most persistent theme of those related to individual identity is exposure to differences, including different points of view, people, value systems, and life expectations. One case in Alabama illustrates the theme particularly well. The woman grew up in the town where the community college is located, attended the community college and reportedly gained the self-esteem necessary to go on to a four-year college. She then moved to Birmingham, the state's largest city. After working there several years, she returned to the small town to work and raise her family. She commented, "There are so many people around [this town] who never look beyond their high school. I got lucky. Growing up, I lived over there and our neighbor moved here from Kentucky to teach at the college. You can say Kentucky, so what? But, around here you don't get a lot of people just moving to town. From knowing [Mr. Smith] and his kids, I kind of picked up that there is more to life than [our town]."

Similar ideas are expressed in all three case study institutions and towns by future and current students, faculty and staff, and community citizens. In Arkansas, a faculty member commented, "Some people would resist living here, but the presence of the college gives it a very cultured feel with lots of different ideas and opinions." In Mississippi, a reflective comment was made by a community citizen who worked at a local convenience

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shop. He said, "The college brings all kinds of people here, and it's fun to see them and see people other than those who you went to [high] school with."

In addition to bringing different students and faculty to rural communities—in essence developing a pipeline into rural America—several civic leaders in all three communities indicated that employees were sometimes better prepared for their jobs because they learned to deal with an influx of people and ideas while growing up. One business leader commented, "The college really doesn't bring a lot of people in, other than students, but it does bring in some, and that's important." He added, "I think one of the big things that happens, though, is that the college serves as a community hub, so you get all kinds of kids and parents and students and faculty going there on their free time to hang out or take a recreational class or attend some camp, and they learn to see differences."

By affecting community members at a variety of ages and at a variety of identity development stages, the college provides an initial introduction to the idea of change and begins to allow individuals to see and recognize differences. Though they do not automatically adopt the differences they begin at least to recognize more than one view or way to live life. Thus begins the process of moving past the Josselson *foreclosure* or *guardian* stage.

## Questioning

The second primary theme that arose from the interview data is the initiation of questioning by students, pre-college students, and community citizens. Questioning involves individuals challenging the assumptions and the authority figures that control them, thus helping them move beyond simple role expectations toward clearer self-awareness and identity formation. Within the Josselson framework this stage of identity development is termed *moratorium*.

Current community college students had perhaps the clearest demonstration of the college prompting questioning of their own behaviors and beliefs. Several students noticed that by attending private academies (e.g., private secondary schools) they had matriculated through secondary education in racially homogenous environments. For two institutions, students openly commented that their secondary school academy was all White, while local public schools tended to enroll predominately African-American students. Upon enrolling in the community college, the students experienced racial integration for the first time in their education. One student said, "I went to [a private academy] that was all White, so when I got here I was really shocked. I mean probably half of the students at this college are Black. But, you know, it's college, so we need to learn to live together." A student at one of the other colleges similarly commented, "When I came up here for college, it



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was really the first time that I went to school with any Blacks. And it's been great. I mean we get along really well and the college encourages us to work together and learn together." And another said simply, "There are a lot of White people here—it's not like high school at all." The implication is that college students can begin to examine their assumptions about other races and perhaps begin to challenge, at least internally, parental beliefs about racial co-existence.

Many community citizens who were interviewed reflected on their childhood activities and the role the college played in their identity formation. The use of college facilities was a major factor for many, through hosting community events, family reunions, civic meetings, school graduations, lectures, educational programs, and recreational programs. At one college, the athletic facilities were used to host community recreation programs such as youth soccer. This type of college interaction within the community prompted one local citizen to say, "I've been going over to the college my whole life; I even had my wedding reception in [their main hall]." Another suggested that visiting the college frequently for a variety of activities has led to a greater appreciation of higher education, and in turn, a questioning about life expectations. She noted,

You know, I went over there a lot. I hung out at the library for homework or just to hang out, to look for guys, or what-

ever. But I was over there so much as a kid that I didn't think twice about going to college over there. I don't think I would have ever considered it otherwise, and my parents weren't too thrilled about me still going to school. I don't think that they discouraged me from going to college, but they certainly weren't excited about it. They wanted me to get a job. But, I was so comfortable on campus, I ended up in college there and that led me to transfer down to [another university]. You could say that those early trips to the college changed my life.

Rural community college administrators and teaching faculty interviewed referred to the influx of "outsiders" as shaping their views and attitudes. In more than one instance, community members talked about their sudden exposure to new people in town, that is, faculty members who relocated from other areas to a rural community. By knowing college employees, citizens came to see the world somewhat differently. A student at the Arkansas college commented, "Our neighbor growing up moved here when I was like 10 or something, and they moved here from Chicago and I guess I just never thought about what people were like from there. I think it broadened my horizons just knowing them." Another student commented, "Some people down the street from us growing up moved here from Nebraska. They flew a big 'N' flag outside their house on football Saturdays, and I think it surprised

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me to think that people from there are just as normal as we are.”

These comments are similar to many others, suggesting that the activities of rural community colleges, the people who move to rural America to work in them, and the students who enroll in them all combine to influence the identity development of individuals. The effect is at least partly due to the variation in people encountered, which in turn leads to questioning how to interact with them. These findings are consistent with Josselson’s stage of identity development focused on individual questioning of family, parental, and authority values.

### **Community centering**

The third area identified in interview and supporting data that influences identity development is the role of rural colleges in bringing various and often disparate bodies, groups, and individuals together. Through typically non-credit and continuing education classes, community individuals were consistently brought together to use campus facilities and participate in programs. One of the colleges in the study reported continual use of campus facilities for activities that included a local civic organization’s business meeting, a chamber of commerce luncheon, swimming lessons for elderly community citizens, a high school dance, and recreational basketball for local youth that lasted until 10:30PM. A college president indicated that such programming and facility use

is intentional, commenting, “Our goal is to really be at the center of it all. We want every person in this community to come to our campus, whether it’s for a class or a program.” He went on to describe a summer symphony concert that was held on the college’s campus, and he said “I believe our role is to be the backbone of this town. We are here for, and we’re funded by, this town. We better prove ourselves and our worth every day.” A provost at another institution made similar comments, indicating that the summer months were typically the busiest for their campus. “This facility is used all the time—family reunions, the Chamber’s annual banquet—we have concerts and plays here, and the high school even uses it for their graduation. We were so booked last summer we had a Baptist church picnic on one side of this building and a Methodist church picnic on the other.”

Non-credit coursework brings a variety of individuals to campus. One college offered an array of educational courses for senior citizens that a faculty member was surprised to report enrolled almost as many middle-aged community members. Similar developmental programs focused on adult literacy and job retraining commonly bring diverse segments of the community to campus.

From the perspective of business and industry, rural colleges are seen as important tools for training, an economic function, and perhaps more importantly, the mental health of the community.

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A manufacturing manager in one community said,

When things are going well in town, then they go well at the plant. I don't know how else to say it. But when we are leading up to a town festival or the high school or [the community college's] sports teams are doing well, people at work take more of a pride in what they do, and that's real important to our success.

The implication of these attitudes can be reflected in identity formation in a variety of ways. First, by bringing disparate or even simply unknown individuals and groups together, people are forced to interact on some level, and that can lead to greater questioning and exploration of alternatives. For young citizens, interaction with a variety of people can be especially important as they look for identity in areas such as physical activity, religion, and occupational choice. For those who have claimed a personal identity, activities such as these can cause them to challenge their assumptions about others and ultimately themselves, whether in being more open to religious diversity or developing greater personal aspirations. Second, the community centering function of a college can have implications for the identity of civic and workplace groups. Teams of individuals in the community or work place evolve, change, and grow into powerful forces that can transform civic endeavors or a business' success.

College leaders consistently suggested in interviews that their institutions were intentional in their centering function. Reactions and comments by students, alumni, faculty, and business leaders, however, reflected more of a gravitational pull by the colleges. The most powerful interactions were not from formal programs or activities, but from the informal and casual developments that come from frequent use of a facility or the enrollment of diverse populations in recreational classes.

## Discussion

Rural community colleges have unique aspects that their suburban and metropolitan counterparts do not have. In particular, while many of the functions are similar, there is a greater intensity to rural college's activities; they are more important to the rural community because there are fewer competitors for community attention and few agencies capable of driving a community's interests or behaviors. Rural colleges have the potential to play an important role in the future of rural America, particularly as the national economy embraces a diversified service mentality and a greatly reduced reliance and expectation for manual labor and production-focused industry, both of which were enabling mechanisms for rural America's survival in the previous century.

Findings of the current study provide an important introduction to the concept that rural commu-

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nity colleges are more than educational providers. Their presence has a rippling effect throughout all age groups and community bodies. As illustrated here, rural colleges serve to introduce racial and possibly religious integration, allow for a highly educated workforce to prosper in rural settings, bring geographic diversity representation to a community, and display a variety of cultural and social opportunities that might not otherwise be possible.

Narrative comments suggest the impact of rural colleges on identity development is real and worthy of additional study. Control groups with other rural communities might be one strategy for exploring identity development. Rural colleges being catalysts for adult self-identity re-formation may also be a possibility. If an individual in a rural setting is more likely to fall within the resolution framework of *foreclosure*, e.g., little to no self-exploration and a simple acceptance of previous generations' attitudes and life expectations, then the emergence, success, and activity of rural colleges may well influence

re-formation or re-creation of an individual's identity. Similarly, if rural community colleges do lead to greater questioning and exploration by community members across generations, more individuals may complete the search for personal identity with what Josselson (1987) terms "pathmakers," meaning individuals who have arrived at a satisfying level of personal identification after challenging and questioning themselves and their most basic assumptions.

The subsequent result of knowing more about how people in rural America develop their own identity is that rural communities can be more intentional in their actions, more successful in developing and sustaining a high quality of life, while the economic infrastructure can forecast important changes and rely on a highly qualified workforce. The rural community college is an important element to include along with other governmental, social, and civic agencies and bodies for developing strategies which support rural American life in the twenty-first century.

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