Educational Considerations

Volume 48
Number 2 *Rural Revelations: Our Path Forward*

Article 2

2022

Over at the College

F. Todd Goodson
Kansas State University, tgoodson@ksu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations

 Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation

Goodson, F. Todd (2022) "Over at the College," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 48: No. 2. https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2347

This Introductory Materials is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Considerations by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Over at the College

F. Todd Goodson

Growing up on a farm in northwest Missouri in the 1970s, the phrase "over at the college" was shorthand for Northwest Missouri State University. NWMSU was woven into the fabric of that region, the institution, the children of the surrounding farms, and small towns who identified as college material were pre-programmed to attend when they reached the appointed age. As high school students, we were introduced to the campus through the various academic and athletic contests. I still recall one unseasonably warm spring day when, as a member of my high school's livestock judging team, I struggled awkwardly through trying to give "oral reasons" for why I had ranked a group of sheep in a particular order.

Truth be told, it was the first time I had ever been that close to a sheep. No one I knew raised them, and while we talked in class about how to handle the sheep, feeling through the thick coat of wool for evidence of, well, of something, I was never really sure what I was supposed to consider in my analysis. Was it something about skeletal frame? Maybe evidence of fat content?

I had no clue, and it was easily apparent to the NWMSU agriculture student as I tried my best to sound like I knew what I was talking about, when in fact I knew nothing about sheep.

The agriculture students were sitting along the edges of the seats in a campus theatre, while all of us budding young livestock judges clustered into the center of the facility, waiting in fear that one of our judges would call our name across the room. We watched in morbid fascination as our peers answered their calls and recited reasons before the various audiences.

I've reflected on that afternoon over the years, as it isn't a bad metaphor for the experience that would await me as a first-generation college student who neglected to take good advantage of what "college prep" coursework was available to me in that country high school when I arrived at college a few months later.

Entering college was a lot like stepping up to those four sheep chained to blocks and trying to discover the secret code of sheepness, something I was expected to know and did not.

In those days, the term "first-generation college student" didn't exist. Certainly, no one coded it as part of demographics collected on incoming students. We were just awkward, out-of-place, and the system didn't exhibit a great deal of patience waiting for us to figure out the codes. Lots of people went over to the college and didn't stay long.

Today, we not only gather demographics on first-generation students, we have committed a significant amount of resources toward providing support for under-prepared undergraduates. In many ways, the pathway to an undergraduate degree has never been more accessible to first-generation students.

However, for rural students, it seems to me the pathway is even more complicated today than when I ventured out almost 50 years ago. America in the 1970s had an implicit faith in higher education. I say this without citing sources or making an argument based in data. I suppose my

assertion is grounded in what qualitative researchers call "lived experience." My memories of leaving home and heading to college involve nothing but support from my community.

Today, my lived experience suggests the divide between American rural and non-rural spaces has never been wider; and, as someone with deep roots in both rural America and higher education, the level of suspicion and even hostility concerns me. I would call readers' attention to the Jakubowski piece in this issue of *Educational Considerations*. From the implicit biases of researchers and policy makers to the narratives in our cultural and entertainment industries, the rural deficit narrative has never been stronger.

When I see instance after instance of negative stereotyping of rural America, often from individuals who would (rightly) object to negative assumptions about other groups, and when I see from rural Americans instances of apprehension and even hostility toward all things that are not rural, it makes me wonder how all of this can end.

To draw one more time on my lived experience, I would suggest the problem started about the time color came to our black and white television sets in the early 1970s. When I watched the ancient black and white television as I child, I saw a strong representation of rural America that was positive—from The Andy Griffith Show to Bonanza and Gunsmoke, a lot of what was offered up for cultural consumption in those days was grounded in what I would call a rural ethos.

With the rise in popularity and availability of color television sets in American homes, we transitioned to The Brady Bunch, The Partridge Family, and so on. Again, this analysis is nothing more than one viewer's nostalgic look back, but I think the assertion that the culture took a turn away from a positive rural American outlook as the 1970s progressed would sustain some scrutiny. Moving forward to today, it isn't difficult to see how that rural ethos went from being something central to the American identity to where it is today: largely viewed by non-rural America as something at best quaint and at worst (for the most part) to be either avoided or pitied.

I am not at all sure how we go about healing the cultural divide between rural and non-rural in America today except that we need to confront it. We need to directly engage rural America, not from a stance of superiority, but with a spirit of discovery. Whatever we look for in rural America, we will find. If we seek examples of racism and misogyny, we will find them. If we seek examples of heroism and devotion to ideals larger than self, we will find those as well. Today, rural America is complex and layered, and it deserves the attention of those who have spent far too many years flying over it only to occasionally see through the clouds and wonder what those big circles are below dotting the landscape.

The manuscripts in this issue chart several ways a spirit of new dialogue with rural America can begin. Almond's work on the embedded qualities of higher education demonstrates well how it is possible to anchor the work of post-secondary education in contemporary rural locations, and the other authors represented herein provide their perspectives on that which is possible if we engage productively with rural communities and people.

This engagement is long overdue. I don't believe it is an exaggeration to say the future of our nation depends on healing the divide that has festered entirely too long. Educators have always led the way into the most important work in our society. It is time to boldly approach this work.

F. Todd Goodson (tgoodson@ksu.edu) is professor and chair of Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University. He serves as Executive Editor of Educational Considerations.