Rural settings contain 57% of American school districts and 33% of all school buildings, providing education to 12.5 million students, nearly 25% of the total student population (Aud et al, 2013). Despite these numbers, there is little research explaining the needs, approaches, and techniques used to most effectively counsel rural student populations (Breen & Drew, 2012; Griffin, & Galassi, 2010; Grimes et al., 2013). Effective school counseling requires an understanding of the unique social-cultural dynamics and challenges faced by a counselor's school and student population (Grimes et al., 2013; Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015). Given this gap, this article reviews the research of the major challenges faced by rural students and provides implications for rural school counseling practice and research.

## Defining Rural

Governmental and scholarly literature do not have a singular definition for what constitutes a rural setting (Coburn et. al, 2007; Hawley et al., 2016). The United States Federal Government has definitions of rural ranging from areas with populations less than 1,000 to areas with populations containing 50,000 residents (Farrigan, 2019). Under the scope of these definitions, approximately 70% of the counties in the United States are rural, with approximately 46,000,000 people living in these areas (Scala & Johnson, 2017). These overarching definitions lead to areas typically thought of as suburban being categorized as rural, impacting the validity of research results and their implications for working with rural populations (Cromartie & Buchholtz, 2008).

Within this article, rural is defined as an area which meets the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) definition for rural locales (Geverdt, 2015). The NCES definition breaks rural down into three categories, Rural Fringe (areas within five miles of an urbanized area as defined by the United States Census Bureau), Rural Distant (areas between five and twenty-five miles from an urbanized area), and Rural Remote (areas greater than twenty-five miles from an

urbanized cluster). The lowest threshold for an urbanized area is a population of 2,500 as stated by the United States Census Bureau. While there are various measures of rurality available in literature, the NCES categorization presents rurality on a scale, allowing for a deeper analysis of the particular realities affecting a rural community depending upon how geographically isolated it is.

Rural fringe is an area within five miles of an urbanized area as defined by the United States Census Bureau (Geverdt, 2015). Rural fringe areas may have more access to the cultural norms, populations, career opportunities, social services, and educational institutions of cities than other rural areas. Rural distant is an area within between five and twenty-five miles away from an urbanized area as defined by the United States Census Bureau (Geverdt, 2015). Rural distant communities have less access to the social resources cities provide than rural fringe areas but likely more access than rural remote due. Rural remote is an area greater than twenty-fives away from an urbanized area. Rural remote areas are the most geographically isolated category of rurality. The higher levels of geographic isolation may also result in higher levels of cultural and economic isolation due to these communities having limited contact with cities.

Non-Rural refers to a census-designated population living in an urban or suburban area. The United States Census Bureau defines non-rural areas as those being urban or part of an urbanized cluster. These areas must have a population density of 1,000 people per square mile with adjacent communities with 500 or more residents per square mile also included. (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

## Rural Culture

Walsh (2012) suggested that rural Americans operate under a "rural consciousness" that includes distrusting cities and government viewed as elitist and discriminatory. Rural

consciousness entails a perspective that society unfairly allocates more resources and support to cities, focusing on the needs of minority populations while ignoring rural community needs. American television and media culture does not value the rurality, and portrays it to be socially acceptable to stereotype and mock rural individuals and culture and common sayings such as "the middle of nowhere" imply that certain communities and their history are insignificant and negligible (Herzog & Pittman, 1995).

Education is viewed with suspicion in many rural communities since the system tailors itself towards careers that are few and far between in rural settings, having no relevance to a rural way of life, and often serve to take children away from their hometown, rarely to return (Schafft 2016). School funding is often done through property taxes, putting rural districts at a disadvantage compared to urban and suburban communities (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Biddle & Azano, 2016). While funding is largely local, control of educational policy including standardized assessments, curriculums, and school mergers is in the hands of the state, resulting in urban and suburban interests influencing the direction of education in rural communities (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Biddle & Azano, 2016). This alienates rural trust in a system which does not seem to listen to nor value its unique community needs (Schafft, 2016).

In a study of rural Appalachian high school students, Ali and Saunders (2009) found that students had a negative view of education and its relevance for their lives due to a perception that education was a vehicle for white middle and upper class individuals, a group to which they did not feel included. Further, there was a perception that their culture (such as patterns of speech) was perceived negatively by outside society as a whole, leading to beliefs that they would not be accepted in higher education or white-collar professional fields (Ali & Saunders, 2009). Indeed, the negative stereotypes associated with rural culture are well documented in research such as

labeling rural people as backward, ignorant, and inbred (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). These stereotypes are pervasive and impactful to how rural people view the world outside their community (Ali & Saunders, 2009; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Wallace & Diekroger, 2000).

Economic globalization has taken community autonomy away from rural areas. Local factories, once the staple of many rural communities, have relocated, leaving these areas economically desolate (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Corbett, 2016; Schafft & Biddle, 2014). Thus, rural areas have been losing infrastructure, local control, their most talented students to collegiate out migration, all through the direction of suburban and urban policies. Meanwhile, media portrays rural areas as the backward and the primary source of their own problems. These factors illustrate a combination of social status, race, economic status, cultural marginalization, and media portrayal influencing the development and outlook of the current unique rural identity (Kreiss, Barker, & Zenner, 2017).

## Barriers to Rural Student Success

### Rural Poverty

The lack of economic and educational resources along with geographic isolation from support systems, compounds the challenges facing rural students with other intersectional aspects of their identity. For example, rural areas represent a disproportionate amount of persistent poverty. Murray and Schaefer (2006) found that since 1970, 95% of counties with persistent poverty (20% of the population in poverty over the last 30 years) are rural. The USDA expressed that "persistent poverty tends to be a rural county phenomenon that is often tied to physical isolation, exploitation of resources, limited assets and economic opportunities, and an overall lack of human and social capital" (Farrigan, 2019 pg.1). Persistent poverty among children is of particular concern as the cumulative effect of being poor may lead to especially negative outcomes

and limited opportunities that carry through to adulthood. An analysis by the USDA found that there are currently 708 persistent child poverty counties of which approximately 80% are non-metro (counties without a population center of 50,000) (Farrigan, 2019). The analysis found that one-fourth of children growing up in rural environments are living in poverty as compared to one fifth of children raised in urban environments. In addition, 12% of children under 6 raised in rural environments are living in deep poverty (income half of the family's poverty line threshold) versus 9.2% of children raised in urban areas. Thus, while not all rural communities are impacted by poverty, the reality of rural career development and education is influenced by poverty in a significant portion of the rural American population (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012).

Growing up in an impoverished environment increases the likelihood of an individual remaining in poverty as an adult due an increased likelihood of transitioning through several schools as a child, attending underfunded schools, limited parental access to resources, parental impairment, and less parental investment in education (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). Persistent poverty and poverty-related stress increase the likelihood of a child experiencing educational, physical, and psychological challenges, including trauma, and put students at an increased risk of lower lifetime educational achievement, violent behavior, and teenage pregnancy (Wadsworth et. al, 2008).

Student transience, or a student moving to multiple school districts throughout each year, is common in economically impoverished rural areas (Schafft, 2006). Families who are economically strained or facing homelessness will move multiple times in order to secure a living space, stay with a friend or relative, or pursue a job opportunity. This results in students experiencing multiple educational transitions, putting them at risk for academic, social, and

emotional challenges. Rural schools have difficulty in responding to these student needs due to difficulty in piecing together student needs through pieced out academic history and sometimes incomplete school records.

Academia and greater society have overlooked rural homeless and its corresponding challenges (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2018; Schafft, 2006; Lawrence 1995). Individuals in these situations face several unique challenges within homelessness including the lack of community resources such as homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and community advocacy groups (Hilton & Trella, 2014; Trella & Hilton, 2014). These factors illustrate that rural poverty presents several major barriers to wellness that must be considered when evaluating appropriate rural school counseling responses.

**Access to Health Care Services**

Rural communities face geographic isolation from health care resources, a dearth of qualified professionals, fewer available community resources, and higher rates of serious medical and mental health concerns (Kenny et al, 2013; Riva, Curtis, Gauvin, & Fagg, 2009; Williams & Kulig, 2012). One study found that 75% of rural counties lacked a psychiatrist and 95% lacked a child psychiatrist (Holzer, Goldsmith, & Ciarlo, 1998). Approximately 20% of non-metro counties lack any type of mental health service versus only 5% of metro counties facing this same issue (Hartley, Bird, & Dempsey 1999).

Rural schools lack the monetary and human resources needs to address student mental health problems while reporting a higher percentage of students who are eligible for school-based mental health services (Anderson-Butcher, Hoffman, Rochman, & Fuller, 2017). Rural adolescents are at a higher risk of substance abuse and drunk driving (Carlo, Crockett, Wilkinson & Beal, 2011) while economic and geographic constraints hinder their ability to receive treatment

services (Pruitt, 2009). Rural individuals must travel two to three times the distance to receive specialized mental health services than those living in a city, with long distances corresponding to a willingness to forgo treatment (Chan, Hart, & Goodman, 2006). The geographic challenges in accessing health services highlight the differences between areas considered rural. An area that is Rural Fringe (five miles from an urban center) has closer proximity and thus significantly easier access to the greater array of services and specialties found in urban areas than areas that are Rural Remote, or twenty-five miles from an urban center.

Rural individuals are less likely to utilize mental health resources due to difficulties in accessing them and stigmas associated with mental health care (Gamm, Stone, & Pittman, 2010). Rural culture often encompasses the view of someone seeking mental health services as being weak due to their inability to cope with the issue on their own (Jackson et al, 2007; Lee, Anderson, Horowitz, and August, 2009). Rural individuals tend to believe stigmas associated mental health services at a higher rate than those living in urban settings (Jackson et al., 2007; Talbot, Ziler, & Szlosek, 2017; Rost, Smith, & Taylor, 1993). Rural students therefore have increased mental health needs with decreased access to resources, and cultural stigmas resulting in avoidance of services.

**Academic and Career Barriers**

The growth rate of rural school districts exceeds that of non-rural districts (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). A diverse array of students are moving into rural districts that historically have not had sizable minority populations. Furthermore, the percentage of rural students eligible for free or reduced lunch increased from 41% in 2008 to 46.6% in 2011. The percentage of rural students qualifying for special educational services rose from 12% to 12.8%. Despite the increases in challenges to rural schools, rural education receives a decreased amount

of state policy, attention, and funding, with majority of the resources and attention going towards urban districts and concerns (Johnson et al., 2014). Rural school districts often operate with below average funding due to many states using property taxes as a primary source of income for schools, with rural areas having below average property values compared to towns and cities (Maiden & Stearns, 2007). Underfunding of schools results in more stressful environments for students and teachers due to a lack of financial and human resources (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Rural schools have difficulty keeping qualified teachers and staff due to these financial burdens, resulting in a lack of human resources and increased role allocation for all staff (Hines, 2002). A lack of human resources in rural school districts results in school counselors being asked to perform duties beyond their ideal roles, such as lunch duty, administrative tasks, disciplinary actions, mental health counseling, and special education testing (Monteiro-Leitner et. al, 2006). This deficiency in resources and strain upon the educational system creates barriers to wellness in students, who may not have adequate access to resources they need to succeed. Research into how to establish a rural school counseling identity and role amid these systemic and geographic pressures would be beneficial to guiding incoming professionals as they transition to rural schools.

A majority of rural communities are not located near institutions of higher education, limiting student exposure to postsecondary programs well as increasing the logistic and financial challenges of attending college (Grimes, Arrastia-Chisholm, & Bright, 2019; Schafft, 2016). Rural communities, historically having economic roots in single local industries, also lack exposure to a diversity of professional career options (Corbett, 2007; Schafft, 2016). Lack of exposure to career options results in children never considering potential paths (Blackhurst, Auger, & Wahl, 2003). Rural students also are exposed to less role models, which are shown to positively impact the career aspirations and belief of children (Gibson, 2005; Lent, 2013; Super, 1980). In a 2013 study,

rural students with a positive perception of their home community were more likely to limit their educational and career aspirations to stay closer to home (Meece et al., 2013). Further, students from more remote communities were significantly less likely to consider career fields requiring education beyond a bachelor's degree (Meece et al., 2013). The authors was noted as likely having to do with less exposure to these careers and less relevance of this work in their home community spaces. This lack of exposure to entire career sectors may circumscribe rural student's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations of what is attainable in their futures. The isolation of rural communities from educational training and career development mentors put them at a disadvantage in accessing important social capital for career achievement.

For students who are able to make the transition to higher education, another problem presents itself. The phenomena of students leaving their rural community after graduation and not returning is known as the rural brain drain (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Within the rural brain drain, students with strong academic abilities are encouraged to pursue higher education and leave the community to settle in spaces where relevant jobs are available (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007, 2010, 2013; Petrin et al., 2014; Schafft, 2010). While the original purpose of rural schools was to strengthen local ties, capital, identity, and values (Tieken, 2014; Tyack, 1972), there has been a shift to rural schools providing the best opportunities for individual students, a process which exports local communities' most valuable human capital (Petrin et al., 2014; Schafft, 2016). In a case study of a rural school district, the researchers posed the idea that the local school district was assisting the town in slowly committing suicide due to it exporting some of its most valuable talent, to which an administrator responded "This is the job we set out to do" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). As one researcher put it, "education then becomes a primary instrument of rural out-migration, a cog in a vicious cycle of limited rural opportunity and underdevelopment, particularly

in rural areas that have struggled with aging populations, poverty, out-migration, and contracting economies" (Schafft, 2016, pg. 3). This invites a process by which rural communities are mortgaging their future by exporting human capital which could positively support local infrastructure.

On a systemic level, educators and community members may hesitate to provide access to the full wealth of college and career opportunities available due to the brain drain (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Schafft, 2016). These implications indicate several challenges within rural settings that should be considered by researchers examining how to promote rural student academic and career success.

## Discussion & Implications

### Implications for School Counselors

Given the lack of training and education given regarding rural culture and rural student needs (Breen & Drew, 2012; Griffin, & Galassi, 2010; Grimes, Haskins, & Paisley, 2013) rural school counselors must first acclimate themselves with the culture and reality of their rural community before best meeting the needs of their students. An area which is Rural Fringe (5 miles from an urbanized center) has greater access to the health, community, educational, and cultural resources of an urbanized center than an area which is Rural Distant (up to 25 miles from an urbanized center) and an area which is Rural Remote (more than 25 miles from an urbanized center). Further, a Rural Town (population over 2,500) may additionally present a greater access to resources, transportation, services, and community members than a rural community which has a population sparsely spread out over a number of miles.

Images of rurality often evoke preconceptions of whiteness and agriculture, however, are becoming more racially diverse at a higher rate than any other areas (Johnson, et al., 2014). In

addition, a substantial amount of rural communities are minority-majority such as rural African American communities in the South, Latino immigrant populations, and Native Americans (Johnson et al., 2014). These factors indicate a higher complexity of required care when considering the needs of rural populations.

Acclamation with the local community and its values benefits the school counselor in integrating into the school district, earning trust, and understanding the perspectives of local students and families (Bright; 2018; Breen & Drew, 2012). In short, the school counselor should *integrate* their role into the community instead of *impose* their role on an area with unique needs and traditions. This not only allows for the school counselor to have a greater understanding of a community's unique rural context, but also facilitates community acceptance of the school counselor and an openness to their methods and approaches (Bright, 2018; Breen & Drew, 2012). Participation in community events and summits may increase the community's level of trust in the school counselor while reducing the stigma of them as an outsider (Grimes, Hankins, & Paisely, 2013). Rural areas are often looked at through a deficits based perspective (Corbett, 2016), therefore a validation and appreciation of the strengths of rural communities may also assist student and family buy-in and assure the appropriate approach for interventions (Grimes, Hankins, & Paisely, 2013). Rural schools are more likely than any other setting to have never had a school counselor (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016) thus, role acclimation and community integration are essential to have families understand and value the school counselor's role.

School counselors working with rural populations need to be prepared to address issues associated with poverty including physical and mental health concerns, student homelessness and transience, and parents requiring assistance locating and obtaining community, state, and federal resources. Given the lack of resources available to many rural communities, a school counselor

should act as a resource hub for rural communities (Bright, 2018; Breen & Drew, 2012) through such roles as coordinating local resources in school fairs, distributing newsletters listing available community resources, coordinating the availability of in-school mental health resources for students, as well as creating local community and educational partnerships.

Rural community members value the school as a communal center (Corbett, 2007, 2010) and may have difficulty in accessing local resources due to distance (Chan, Hart, & Goodman, 2006; Schafft, 2016), therefore integrating local services into the physical school building can further reinforce the school as a crux of the community while providing easier access to assistance for students and family. This includes having local mental health partnerships offering services providers on site for schools. It also included inviting community social agencies to coordinate after school clubs, events, and services. Community mentorship programs may be excellent partners for after school clubs and activities and local charitable organizations (such as food and clothing banks) make excellent partners to invite into the school to coordinate distribution of services and donations. Information regarding these services and informed consent documentation may be sent home proactively to inform parents about the available assistance.

Providing informational resources at the school regarding community resources such as drug and alcohol treatment, transportation assistance, mental health counseling, medical aid and assistance, and charitable social services, can serve to inform and empower families to get the assistance they need as early as possible. The rural school counselor can also provide such information in updated monthly resource bulletins, sent home via mail or email. Finally, hosting community resource fairs at the school concurrently with other school events, such as back to school night or parent teacher conferences, can assure that families gain direct access to resource hubs in a comfortable, accessible manner. While the role of the school counselor always involves

coordinating with service providers, the rural school counselor should put extra emphasis on this due to the geographic barriers in accessing services for rural students (Grimes et al., 2013). In order to facilitate stakeholder buy-in, given the stigma that may exist towards counselors, community integration and family outreach is key (Bright, 2018; Grimes et al., 2013).

Rural low income students exhibit low career self-efficacy and limit their options and expectations based upon perceived barriers in achievement (Ali & McWhirter, 2006). Given rural students' limited exposure to professional and educational role models, the rural school counselor should address career development education early and often in the school counseling curriculum. Career exploration and education about the world of work should begin in the elementary years to expose children to the options available and how to navigate any barriers that may be in place. The rural school counselor can organize career day fairs where professionals are invited in to speak with and present to rural students about their roles (Wood & Kaszubowski, 2008). Local graduates using their education and degrees can be excellent ways to personalize these types of fairs and provide relevant role models and mentors to rural students. An integrated job shadowing program within a school district can provide students the opportunity to further explore and understand the world of work (Lapan, Tucker, Kim, & Kosciulek, 2003). College campus field trips can also make higher education more visible and understood to students geographically isolated from such resources.

The rural school counselor should also be prepared to provide career information and guidance to rural families (Breen & Drew, 2012). This may be accomplished through workshops educating parents about career development and college application process as well as more specific workshops, such as a FAFSA night where parents are assisted in completing the application (King, 2012). Information regarding financial aid, available scholarships can

encourage families to further explore and see higher education as possible for their student. The rural school counselor can facilitate integrated school to work programs, providing high school students with practical working experience to lead them into local careers or better understand their values, skills, and competencies (Hutchins & Akos, 2013).

Finally, while many traditional career and educational resources focus on taking rural students *away* from their communities, a strengths-based approach to rural student career development includes incorporating opportunities *within* the community such as mentoring programs, local career fairs, job shadowing opportunities, and district career development task forces (Grimes, Hankins & Paisely, 2013). Students should be exposed to ways to use education and training to benefit their home community instead of solely being exposed to the idea that they must leave their beloved hometown behind.

As social justice advocates, rural school counselors should strive to bring more light to rural school and student concerns through advocacy such as district partnerships, grant writing, and outreach to local and state governments (Grimes, Hankins & Paisely, 2013). Rural schools often have their needs dictated by governments in urban and suburban areas, with decisions regarding curriculum, consolidation taken out of the hands of local communities (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural school counseling consortiums can provide rural schools with the strength of resources and voice to advocate for local, district, and statewide issues. Rural schools and students receive a disproportionally small amount of statewide policy attention and resources (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural school counselors are in a position to meet the needs of rural students while serving as a bridge assisting rural communities within the broader scope of society.

**Implications for Counselor Educators**

Rural student needs and school counselor preparation do not receive significant attention in counselor preparation (Bright, 2018; Breen & Drew, 2012; Grimes et al., 2013). One strategy to exposing counselors-in-training to the unique needs of rural students is treating them as a unique sociocultural population (Bright, 2018; Grimes et al., 2013). Rurality is often not crucially examined by those living outside of rural spaces. This results in rurality being thought of in broad stereotypes, limiting students' understanding of the true dynamics of rural communities (Bright, 2018; Breen & Drew, 2012; Grimes et al., 2013). Class lessons and case studies exploring the needs and mindset of rural people would assist counselors-in-training in developing the competencies needed to best serve this population. Class assignments could include exposure to counselors in rural settings to help students more deeply understand working with rural people.

Education regarding rural school counseling should emphasize the role of the school counselor in the community (Breen & Drew, 2012; Grimes et al., 2013). Assignments and case studies should emphasize participation in community events and summits as ways for the rural school counselor to reduce stigma against them (Grimes et al., 2013). Rural areas are often looked at through a deficits-based perspective (Schafft 2016), therefore honoring community strengths and traditions may further cement school, student, and family buy-in for programs and interventions (Grimes et al., 2013).

Rural schools are more likely than any other setting to have never had a school counselor (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). This heightens the need for counselors-in-training to be aware role explanation, acclimation, and integration if they are to work in rural settings. Rural school counselors must be prepared to explain and advocate for their roles, with students, community, and even within the school district.

**Implications for Research**

A more uniform understanding of what constitutes the definition of rural is necessary for counseling literature to be more concise, concrete, and accurate when discussing problems affecting rural populations. Rural Fringe School Districts may have greater access to resources than Rural Distant or Rural Remote areas. Further, the most extreme differences in voting patterns from urban areas are found in the most rural and isolated counties (Farrigan, 2019). While there are rural socio-cultural commonalities between rural areas, the levels of isolation from resources and urban culture affect the unique makeup and needs of a particular area. School counseling researchers need to adopt and consistently use a scaled definition of rural, which accounts for the difference in rurality between rural areas.

The NCES scaled definition would appear to be a good starting place for counseling research to provide three comparable rural categories for consistency of research. The NCES (2006) definition provides three designations useful in identifying a rural area using terminology understood and utilized within the education field. The three categories are easily understood and provide room for comparing results for schools within the same category as well as the differentiation of results between schools in the same category. This allows for greater validity and generalizability for studies conducted at rural schools.

While a rural definition will be helpful in understanding implications of studies, more counseling based research into rural cultural identity is required. Given the unique facets of rural life and the emerging urban rural divisions present in the nation, it is clear that there is a unique rural mindset affecting the lives of millions of Americans. More research into this cultural mindset and identity would benefit school counselors in developing culturally competent responses to rural

student needs and inform school counselors how to serve as a bridge to an underserved and isolated segment of society.

Breen & Drew (2012) recommend that more research is required into the role, function, and required skills of a rural school counselor. They argue that more research is required into the career development and post-secondary transition of rural students and the appropriate approaches and responses by rural school counselors.

Mental health concerns and accessibility to mental health resources is a major impediment to wellness for rural students (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2017). More school counseling focused literature is required regarding the mental health needs and coordination of mental health services for rural students. This will inform school counselors in training how to best coordinate and manage available services for students in rural areas, as well as how to best serve students facing challenges. By focusing on rural student populations and considering rural culture within studies, counseling literature can better understand what is effective for this unique socio-cultural population and better prepare future counselors to address such issues.

## Conclusion

Rural is a construct that includes population and geographic features along with cultural identity and experiences. Rural students have unique barriers to their success which require versatile school counseling responses. School counseling responses include community integration, resource allocation, community education, and heightened focus on college and career development. Future research into the needs and mindsets of rural people will assist in developing more culturally competent school counseling practices. Research into outcomes on rural school counseling practice would be beneficial to students and future school counseling practice.

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