

Vocational and Educational Aspirations of High School Students: A Problem for Rural America

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There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that rural youth in general, and Maine youth in particular, have lower levels of academic and vocational aspirations than their counterparts in suburban and urban areas. A report from the Maine State Planning Office, based on information derived from college-bound students, cited findings that Maine youth have lower levels of academic and career aspirations than their agemates in the neighboring states of New Hampshire and Vermont (Barringer, 1984). The Preliminary Report of the Governor's Commission on the Status of Education in Maine also reported that through the public hearings conducted across Maine and direct observation of schools, Commission members encountered "aspirations among our students that limit their potential as individuals, and ours as a society" (Commission Report, 1984). Moreover, participants at a 1984 statewide conference on the aspirations of Maine's youth described in elaborate detail problems and examples of low aspirations in youth. The conference attracted nearly 700 people from 70 different communities in Maine. The objectives of the conference were: (1) to explore further what is meant by the term "aspirations;" (2) to assist communities and their schools to determine what the aspiration levels of their young people really are and whether or not they are satisfied with them; and (3) to suggest ways in which they might raise aspiration levels among their young people. The participants and planners committed themselves to further study of this phenomenon.

Earlier studies by College of Education faculty had compared freshmen entering the University of Maine to a national sample of freshmen entering similar institutions across the country. Freshmen entering UM, approximately 83% of whom graduated from Maine high schools, rate themselves above their national agemates in terms of their academic ability. However, Maine freshmen rated themselves below their national cohort in terms of leadership ability, social confidence and drive to achieve.

In addition, through these earlier studies we learned that more Maine youth are choosing to attend college without having a specific career goal in mind than their peers from across the country (McIntire and Pratt, 1984).

More recently, the authors have been analyzing data collected from a longitudinal study entitled "High School and Beyond" (HSB) to determine if aspiration levels of rural students nationwide differ from those of students in urban and suburban settings. Our interests have been to determine if Maine's documented problem of low aspirations of its youth might be related to a larger, national phenomenon. This report represents an analysis of some of the aspirations-related variables which are part of this extraordinary data base.

The HSB data were collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) "to study longitudinally the educational, vocational, and personal development of high school students and the personal, familial, social, institutional, and cultural factors that may affect that development" (NCES, 1983).

In the 1980 sample of the HSB data base, students were selected through a two-stage, stratified probability sample with schools as the first stage units and students within schools as the second stage units of the sampling procedure. Strata used in the school sampling included: nine U.S. census regions; size of enrollment; racial composition; urban, suburban or rural settings; and public, private or parochial focus. The total number of schools selected for the sample was 1015 from a sampling frame of 24,725 schools.

Within each school, 36 seniors and 36 sophomores were randomly selected to participate as subjects in the HSB data collection. In those schools with fewer than 36 seniors or 36 sophomores, all eligible students were included in the sample.

In this study, data from 10,416 seniors from rural, suburban and urban areas and matched for socio-economic variables were analyzed. Rural and urban students in

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this study are nearly identical in terms of distribution by family annual income; the suburban group is somewhat more affluent (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Family Annual Income

	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Total
\$6,999 or less	14.4%	7.1%	14.4%	11.1%
\$7-11,999	19.5%	12.0%	17.3%	15.5%
\$12-15,999	18.9%	15.0%	19.8%	17.4%
\$16-19,999	15.6%	15.9%	18.4%	16.5%
\$24,999	14.9%	18.6%	13.5%	16.0%
\$37,999	10.6%	16.3%	9.2%	12.7%
\$38,000+	6.9%	15.1%	7.4%	10.7%

WHAT ARE ASPIRATIONS?

The term "aspirations" is one which is often used synonymously with goals, ambitions, objectives, purposes, dreams, plans, designs, intentions, desires, longings, wishes, yearnings, cravings or aims. Aspirations are what drive individuals to **do more** and **be more** than they presently are. We may know what we are, but we cannot know for certain what **we can be!**

Some important distinctions need to be made regarding aspirations. First, there is a difference between *educational and career aspirations*, on the one hand, and *quality of life aspirations* on the other. Education and career aspirations relate to how much value people assign to formal education and how far they intend to pursue it, *i.e.* do they seek a high school diploma, a four-year college degree or other post-secondary training, or perhaps a Ph.D. or M.D. degree? Career aspirations pertain to what type of vocation or profession they want to pursue. Quality of life aspirations are those related to such questions as where individuals would prefer to live, what kind of environment they seek for themselves, what kind of community they'd prefer, the kind of family they want, the type of schools they want for their children, etc. While these two major categories of aspirations are different, they nonetheless are inextricably interdependent. This study focuses on variables representative of both educational/career aspirations and quality of life aspirations.

A second distinction should be made between *expressed aspirations* and *manifest aspirations*. Expressed aspirations are self-reported statements of what individuals say they want to do. It is possible for these to be spur of the moment, transient, or the "popular thing to say" reports of personal goals, and as such, do not always present genuine, well-developed aspirations. Manifest aspirations on the other hand are reflected in what individuals actually do with their lives. These readily observable indicators can serve to support or contradict what they say they want to do. For example, the statement, "I really want to do well in high school so that I can go on to

a good college," represents an expressed aspiration while that student's actual daily attendance record and overall academic performance in school would serve as manifest aspiration indicators. It should be noted that this study is based upon findings derived from expressed aspirations only.

Aspirations are influenced considerably by the communicated expectations of the significant people who interact with the individual. If those expectations are high and consistent over time, then there would appear to be a greater likelihood that the individual's aspirations will be similarly high. Conversely, low expectations often result in low aspirations. In this study the investigators also analyzed selected variables from the "High School and Beyond" data to assess students' perceptions of the expectations their parents, teachers, peers and guidance counselors had for them.

FINDINGS

Rural youth value their jobs more and their academics less than urban and suburban youth. When asked if a job was more important for them than school, 14.9% of the rural youngsters replied "Yes" while only 8.9% of the urban and 10.4% of the suburban students agreed (Only 5.9% of the total sample reported that they never worked). Moreover, when asked if their schools should have placed more emphasis on basic academic subjects, 29.2% of the urban students strongly agreed while only 22.4% of the rural students agreed strongly.

Rural youth place lower value on making lots of money than do urban youth, but value friendships more. When asked how important in their life having lots of money was, only 30.8% of the rural respondents said "very important," while 38.6% of urban youth said it was "very important." When asked how important good income was in determining the kind of career they would seek, fewer rural students than urban students said it was "very important." Nearly 78% of the rural students consider strong friendships as "very important" compared to 70% of the urban youngsters.

Rural and urban students aspire to leadership position in their communities more often than suburban students do. Fifty-seven percent of rural youngsters report that being a leader in the community is "somewhat" or "very important" compared to 53% of their urban and suburban peers.

A greater percentage of urban students than rural students report that the goal of being able to give their children better opportunities than they had was very important to them. Nearly 80% of the urban youngsters said this was "very important" while only 70% of both the rural and suburban youth said it was "very important."

Neither rural or suburban respondents see themselves correcting social and economic inequities as frequently as urban respondents do. Only 15% of both rural and suburban youngsters view the social responsibility as being "very important" to them while over 20% of the urban youth do see it as being "very important" to them.

Rural youngsters do not aspire to post-secondary educational opportunities as frequently as either urban or suburban residents do. When asked how far in school they thought they would get, rural students generally answered with fewer years of study than either urban or suburban students. Table 2 depicts the responses of the three groups. When asked what the lowest level of education they would be satisfied with, rural students' responses again depicted satisfaction with lower levels of education than did the urban and suburban students. Table 3 contains the specific responses.

TABLE 2
How Far in School Do You Think You'll Get?

	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Less than high school	.7%	.3%	.8%
High school grad only	14.1%	13.7%	22.8%
Less than two years at business or voc. sch.	5.8%	6.4%	10.2%
Two years or more at business or voc. sch.	11.9%	10.3%	12.8%
Less than two years college	3.2%	2.8%	2.8%
Two or more years of college with Assoc. Degree	12.3%	12.6%	12.6%
Finish college with Bachelors	26.1%	27.8%	22.6%
Master's or equivalent	13.1%	14.2%	9.0%
Ph.D., M.D. or equivalent	12.9%	11.8%	6.3%

TABLE 3
What is the Lowest Level of Education You'd Be Satisfied With?

	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Less than high school grad	1.6%	1.1%	1.9%
High school grad	24.1%	25.5%	37.3%
Less than 2 years at vocational sch.	5.5%	5.7%	6.8%
2 years or more at business or voc. sch.	10.0%	9.0%	10.7%
Less than 2 years college	6.4%	5.7%	5.2%
2 or more years college	18.4%	18.3%	14.6%
B.S./B.A. degree	22.6%	24.9%	18.1%
Master's degree	7.2%	6.1%	3.2%
Ph.D. degree	4.2%	3.7%	2.1%

Rural students are not as confident as urban and suburban students in their abilities to complete a college education. When asked if they thought they had the ability to complete college, only 43% of the rural respondents said "Yes, definitely" while 50% of the urban students and 53% of the suburban students answered in the same

manner. Greater percentages of rural students responded "Not sure," "I doubt it," or "Definitely not."

Thirty-two percent of rural students see themselves going to work full-time the first year after high school compared to 24% urban and 22% of the suburban students. Conversely, more urban and suburban students than rural (43%, 44%, and 32% respectively, see themselves going on to a four year college).

Rural youngsters see themselves completing their full-time education at a younger age than either the urban or suburban youngsters. In this study 46.2% of rural students report that they already completed or expect to complete their full-time education at or before the age of twenty. Only 30.3% of their urban peers report similar expectations.

Are these rural-urban differences related to identifiable family and school factors? The seniors surveyed here clearly report that their families are most influential in their post-secondary planning (see Table 4). There are not significant differences by degree or urbanization.

However, in following up this information, we find marked differences between rural and urban families. In response to the question "What does your father (and mother) think you should do after high school?" clear differences between rural and urban parents emerge (see Table 5). Rural parents are perceived as much less often supportive of full-time college (Rural Fathers 49% vs Urban Fathers 58%, Rural Mothers 60% vs Urban Mothers 72%) than their urban counterparts and more supportive of full-time jobs, trade schools, and the military. A greater percentage of rural parents also are reported to "Not Care."

Similarly, students from rural settings report more often than their urban counterparts that their guidance counselors and teachers do not think they ought to go to college (see Table 6). In addition, more rural youngsters than urban report that their teachers and counselors "don't care" what their post-secondary plans are.

The students' perceptions of the relative influences of the various "significant others" in their lives are different by category. The rural students' reported aspirations are consistent with the expectations of their parents and teachers. When asked to respond to the item "I will be disappointed if I don't graduate from a college" fewer rural (61%) than urban (74%) youth responded affirmatively.

More evidence of differences in the aspiration levels of rural and urban students appears in their responses to a question of what kind of job they expect to hold at age 30 (see Table 7). Rather consistently the rural students depict themselves less often in higher level positions, and more often in lower level, less skilled areas. Our rural sample reports itself more often as expecting to be in clerical, craftsman, farmer, housewife, laborer, operator, proprietor-owner, and services roles and "not-working" than the urban students. The urban students more often suggest they will be managers and administrators or in the various professions (accounting, nursing, engineering, medicine, law, college teaching, etc.).

This career expectation data at age 30 is congruent with the educational expectations of these students. In

TABLE 4
How Much Has Each of the Following Persons Influenced Your Plans for After High School?

	Mother	Father	Counselor	Teachers	Friends/ Relatives	Military Recruiter	College Recruiter
Not at all	22.2%	11.1%	44.0%	36.6%	21.4%	83.4%	65.8%
Somewhat	40.7%	40.3%	41.5%	45.3%	50.9%	11.5%	24.4%
A great deal	37.1%	48.6%	14.5%	18.1%	27.7%	5.1%	9.9%

TABLE 5
What Do Your Parents Think You Ought To Do After High School?

	Father		Mother	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
College	57.9%	49.2%	72.3%	60.0%
Full-time Job	8.5%	14.1%	9.2%	14.1%
Trade School	6.0%	9.5%	7.7%	11.5%
Military	3.1%	4.1%	2.9%	3.2%
They don't care	2.5%	3.9%	1.6%	3.1%
I don't know	8.8%	9.9%	3.8%	5.7%
Does not apply	13.2%	9.3%	2.4%	2.3%

TABLE 6
What Do Your Guidance Counselors and Teachers Think You Ought To Do After High School?

	Guidance Counselor		Teacher	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
College	56.1%	50.1%	56.3%	48.6%
Full-time job	1.4%	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%
Trade School	4.2%	6.1%	3.9%	4.3%
Military	.8%	.8%	.8%	1.0%
They don't care	5.7%	5.8%	7.5%	8.7%
I don't know	22.7%	26.1%	22.7%	27.7%
Does not apply	9.3%	9.2%	6.8%	7.6%

response to the question, "How far in school do you think you'll get?" the rural students expect to obtain less education than their urban peers (see Table 2). Not surprisingly and consistent with the picture emerging here, our rural subjects report that their mothers also hold lower expectations for the students' ultimate level of education than the mothers of urban students (see Table 8).

One last area of interest relative to rural-urban differences is the expectation or willingness of our high school students to "leave home." *When asked if they were willing to move for a job they wanted, more rural than urban youth not only were willing to move, they preferred to move!* (see Table 9). This finding is, of course, consistent with demographic history. Rural Americans have sought out city life in increasing proportions for over a century.

The data here suggest that the desire to move is somewhat related to family relations. When asked to respond to the question "How important to you is living close to parents and relatives?" 14% of rural youth responded "very important" compared to 17% of urban youth, and 33% responded "not important" compared to 30% of their urban peers.

SUMMARY

The analysis of these national data suggest that the phenomena we have observed in Maine is not unique to Maine. We have a population of young people in Maine whose aspiration patterns reflect those of rural youth throughout the United States. In terms of post-secondary educational aspirations, America's rural high school seniors

TABLE 7
Which Category Describes the Job
You Expect to Have at Age 30?

	Urban	Rural
Clerical	11.3%	11.6%
Craftsman	5.9%	9.3%
Farmer	.5%	3.5%
Housewife	1.2%	3.4%
Laborer	.7%	2.7%
Manager-Admin.	7.6%	5.3%
Military	2.5%	2.6%
Operative	1.9%	3.9%
Professional (Lower)	29.1%	24.2%
Professional (Higher)	15.2%	9.0%
Proprietor-owner	2.9%	3.3%
Protective services	1.7%	1.7%
Sales	1.8%	1.8%
School teacher	3.5%	4.2%
Service	3.3%	4.1%
Technical	9.7%	8.1%
Not working	1.3%	1.5%

TABLE 8
How Far In School Does Your Mother Want You To Go?

	Urban	Rural
Less than high school	.6%	.5%
High school graduate	5.3%	10.6%
Less than 2 years vocational or business	3.2%	5.6%
More than 2 years vocational or business	6.9%	10.2%
Less than 2 years of college	1.5%	2.0%
2 or more years of college	7.5%	8.8%
B.A.	28.7%	26.0%
M.S. or equivalent	10.5%	7.8%
Ph.D., M.D., or other	18.5%	9.7%
Don't know	17.4%	18.8%

TABLE 9
Are You Willing To Move For The Job You Want?

	Urban	Rural
Yes, prefer	28.3%	40.0%
Yes, no difference	30.3%	31.6%
Yes, but prefer to stay	33.2%	23.8%
No, won't move	8.2%	4.7%

aspire less often than their urban and suburban peers to continuing their education. And when they do aspire to post-secondary education, their expectations for the level of educational attainment are lower, their expressed levels of self-confidence in completing degree requirements

are not as high, and they don't expect to pursue further education for as long as urban youngsters.

With respect to career aspirations, rural students, more often than their urban counterparts, expect to enter the work force immediately following high school. Moreover, their aspirations for specific careers or professions are generally at lower levels than their urban peers.

In terms of the impact that the expectations of parents, teachers and counselors have on aspiration levels of young people, the results of this analysis suggest that a relationship exists between the communicated expectations of these "significant others" and the resulting expressed aspirations of the youngsters. The expectations rural adults hold for their youth are reflected clearly in the aspiration statements of rural high school seniors. Rural parents, teachers and counselors evidently do not hold career and educational aspirations for youth that are as high as those held by urban and suburban adults, and their students' goals are not as high as those of urban and suburban students.

With respect to *quality of life* aspirations, rural youth value "making lots of money" less than urban youth, and they value friendships more. They aspire to leadership positions in their communities more often than suburban youth, but they do not see themselves correcting social and economic inequities as often. And finally, they seek opportunities to move away from their home communities after high school more often than urban youngsters.

DISCUSSION

Our purpose in undertaking this study was to determine if the problem of low aspirations among youth was unique to Maine. The results of our analysis have convinced us that low aspirations among rural youth is a problem which exists nationally. It does appear that intervention is possible.

Conscious planning and concerted efforts by parents, school personnel, concerned citizens and municipal officials, can be effective. The goals, dreams, and ambitions of our young people should not be a function of whether they live in a rural, urban or suburban environment. But the evidence is clear—those who live in rural America are evidencing generally lower aspirations. Rural states have a special responsibility to their young which must be recognized and fulfilled. Certainly, America's young people are deserving of any efforts which can be made to promote higher aspirations.

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