From 7,000 to 700,000:

A Comparative Analysis of Rural Students' Applications to Elite Undergraduate Institutions

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I. Introduction

Despite similar graduation rates, rural students attend college at a much lower rate than their urban and suburban counterparts (AASA Rural Equity Report, 2017; Flora & Flora, 2013). In some states, this gap in postsecondary enrollment reaches as high as 20% (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). This issue appears to have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the number of rural students filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) decreased by a whopping 18% from 2019 to 2020 (FSA, 2019-2020). These patterns are especially prevalent in the area of "elite" postsecondary educational attainment (Byun, Irvin, and Meece 2015; Koricich et al. 2018). Despite a 25% overall increase in applicants when compared to pre-pandemic levels, the Georgetown University Admissions Office reports that they are not receiving as many applications from rural students as they would prefer, and they aren't alone (Haddad, 2022). Nearly a third of surveyed admissions directors at elite institutions have expressed the need to recruit more rural students (Jaschik and Lederman 2017).

Given that an increasing share of workplaces have begun to require bachelor's degrees for employment, this disparity threatens to further damage the economy of rural communities (World Economic Forum, 2018). Rural populations already experience high unemployment and lower median incomes, a phenomenon that has been intensified by both the Great Recession and the COVID-10 pandemic (USDA, 2022). Increased education levels can serve to correct this trend. Research has made abundantly clear that education is the key to modern economic prosperity (USDA, 2021; USDA, 2017). This is especially true for individuals who have attended elite undergraduate institutions (Witteveen and Attewell 2017; Hoxby & Terry, 1999). However, the statistics alone aren't enough to sway many rural students.

There are a number of reasons why rural students are enrolling in postsecondary education at a rate much lower than their non-rural counterparts. One possible reason is the perceived devaluation of postsecondary education among residents in rural communities. A 2020 study conducted by the Strada Education Network and Gallup found that 73% of rural residents reported being satisfied with their current level of education. It's important to note that 77% of respondents in this study had not completed a

four-year postsecondary program (Keily & McCann, 2021). Further, less than half (40%) of rural respondents saw enrolling in education as a means to get a stable job in times of economic uncertainty (Keily & McCann, 2021). This can likely be attributed to the massive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural communities' unemployment rates, regardless of education level. This community context surely has had an impact on the postsecondary aspirations of rural students. When surveyed, 25% of rural respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic made them less likely to enroll in postsecondary education and training, while only 5% reported that they were more likely to enroll (Keily & McCann, 2021). The major decrease in rural postsecondary enrollment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is inextricably linked to the economic, social, and political climate of rural communities, all of which can serve to divide these communities from the non-rural areas that house America's elite colleges and universities.

While many external barriers to rural students' postsecondary aspirations and attainment have been identified, it's important for institutions of higher education to examine their role in perpetuating this systemic disparity. Historically, access to higher education has been reserved for individuals of privileged identities (Thelin, 2004). Although explicitly discriminatory admissions policies are no longer legal, the existence of systemic barriers to postsecondary attainment for underprivileged groups is well documented (Jack, 2019; Bergerson, 2009). Georgetown University has recognized their role in perpetuating systemic barriers to elite higher education for *some* disadvantaged groups. For example, the Community Scholars Program (CSP) was established in 1968 to help provide students of color with the educational tools they need to succeed in elite higher education (Sullivan, 2019). Additionally, the Georgetown Scholars Program (GSP) was founded in 2004 to provide first-generation low-income students with social, financial, and academic resources. However, until recent years, no attention has been given to the systemic barriers faced by rural students.

The overarching goal of this research is to examine how the Georgetown application process can better accommodate students from rural communities. However, another important objective is to identify

why these rural students applied to Georgetown at all. In order to accomplish these goals, the following research questions were applied:

1. What differences can be seen between the applications of students from rural communities and students from non-rural communities?
2. How are the disparate circumstances of rural and non-rural students manifested in their applications?

With the data gathered in this research, it is my hope that rural schools will gain a better understanding of how to accommodate their students' needs and that postsecondary institutions will gain insight into how to better recruit and retain these students. I believe that a more equitable college application process will empower more rural students to make the jump, like I did one year ago, from a town of 7,000 to 700,000.

II. Methodology

Two separate data sets were used for the purpose of comparing the content of applications written by rural and non-rural students. The first data set consisted of 30 accepted-applicant files of students from rural school districts. These files were identified and hand-selected by a Georgetown undergraduate admissions committee, with guidance from the Dean of Undergraduate Admissions. This committee generally identified rural applicants by the following guidelines: the applicant must hail from a non-metropolitan area that is at least 30 miles from the nearest metropolitan area, with the definition of metropolitan being a city of more than 30,000 residents. Each secondary school was verified to be rural using the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data. The second data set consisted of 30 accepted-applicant files of students applying from non-rural school districts. These files were randomly selected by a digital system administered by Georgetown's Senior Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions Melissa Costanzi. It's important to emphasize that the rural/non-rural classification is based on the applicant's school district, rather than home address, as one non-rural applicant hails from a rural community but attended an urban boarding school. Each of these data sets were provided by the Georgetown University Office of Undergraduate Admissions with the permission of Dean of Undergraduate Admissions Charles Deacon, who also served as the faculty advisor for this research.

A number of possible control variables were considered when determining the parameters of the respective data sets. Controlling for school type was briefly considered, given that an overwhelming majority of rural students applying to elite institutions attend public schools, whereas non-rural applicants are much more likely to attend private or public-charter schools. However, I decided against this, as it would limit much discussion surrounding how lack of school choice may impact rural students' postsecondary aspirations and attainment. Controlling for parent education level was considered while operating under the hypothesis that accepted rural applicants are more likely to be of first-generation status. Doing so would likely limit any variance in social capital caused by the student's familiarity (or lack thereof) with the American postsecondary education system. However, the sample revealed that the

share of students with first-generation status in the rural data set is consistent with that of the non-rural data set and the broader applicant pool. Ultimately, it was determined that the only controlled variable during data selection would be the status of admission.

Within each admissions file, the following information is presented: applicant name; birth place; permanent address; parent name; parent occupation; parent level of education; legacy status; high school name; class rank; extracurricular activities; demographic information; intended major/program; honors/awards; three personal statements; optional resume; secondary school reports; counselor evaluation; counselor recommendation; teacher evaluation; teacher recommendation; test scores (ACT/SAT); subject test scores (AP/SAT); mid-year school report; alumni interview report; enrollment status; additional recommendations; and additional materials. Nearly all of this information was analyzed to determine the major variances in the content of rural and non-rural applications. However, only some categories proved useful for the purposes of this research. These categories are: parent level of education; legacy status; demographic information; personal statements; counselor recommendation; teacher recommendation; enrollment status; additional recommendations; and additional materials.

Most application content was examined quantitatively, while some content was examined qualitatively. Among the quantitative data collected between the two data sets was: average number of recommendation letters; average length of recommendation letters; average length of counselor recommendation letters; percentage of applicants applying for financial aid; percentage of applicants from public secondary schools; percentage of applicants from private secondary schools; percentage of applicants with legacy status; percentage of applicants with first-generation status; percentage of applicants who mentioned their hometown in their personal statement; and all race, ethnicity, and gender demographic information. While quantitative figures are useful for generalizing the data sets, this type of research also requires qualitative data in order to emphasize the unique nature of each applicant's experiences surrounding their education and college application process. Some qualitative considerations included: topic of personal statement; intended major; and parent origin.

III. Risk Management

Though this study presents minimal risks to subjects, there are procedures in place to lessen the probability or magnitude of possible risks. One possible risk is that the applicant files will be identified. This risk is mitigated in several ways. The applicant files are stored in Slate, the Georgetown Undergraduate Admissions Office's secure database. In order to access this database, an individual must have: a Georgetown SSO login; completed confidentiality/responsible use forms; and permission from the Dean of Undergraduate Admissions. Any documented analysis of data within the applicant files is stored within a password-protected drive.

Any reference to a single applicant file in this analysis will be under a coded identifier (e.g. Non-Rural 1). The coded identifier key is stored separate from personally identifiable information and is within a password-protected drive. The data will be kept for at least 5 years in accordance with IRB policy. All software and hardware will be kept in compliance and updated regularly; only data required for the study will be collected; only members of the research team will have access to the data; and all data will be destroyed after the retention period.

This research received approval from the Georgetown University Institutional Review Board on May 12, 2022.

IV. Findings

The applicant data used to conduct this analysis can be broken down into the following sections: demographic observations; parent education; school type; legacy status; letters of recommendation; and personal statements. It's important to keep in mind that this data is descriptive, not causal. Therefore, while these findings may highlight patterns in rural applicants, they cannot discern absolutely *why* or *how* these applicants applied and were admitted. Because of this, additional studies are references in order to make causal inferences.

Demographic Observations

The demographic makeup of the rural applicant sample is somewhat consistent with that of the broader rural American population. As seen in Figure 1, the demographics are as follows: 84.4% White (Non-Hispanic); 6.3% Asian; 6.3% Unspecified; and 3.1% American Indian/Alaska Native. According to 2018 data from the USDA Economic Research Service, 78.2% of the American rural population was White, followed by: 8.6% Hispanic; 7.8% Black; 2.1% American Indian/Alaska Native; and 3.2% other. From this data, we can see that White and Asian rural applicants are slightly overrepresented, while Black and Hispanic applicants are underrepresented. The share of American Indian/Alaska Native applicants is consistent with that of the broader rural population.

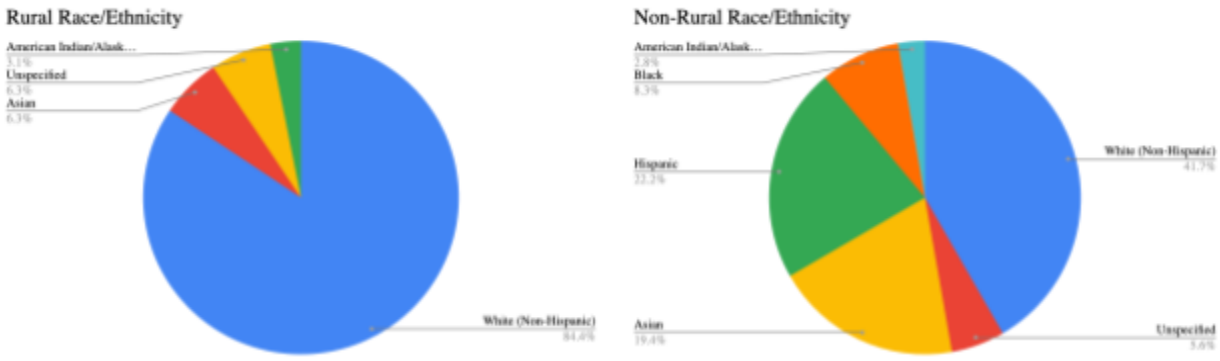

Figure 1: Rural and Non-Rural Demographics based on Race and Ethnicity

In comparing the rural demographics to those of the non-rural sample, we can infer how they relate to Georgetown's general applicant pool. However, it's important to note that the non-rural sample

isn't entirely representative of Georgetown's Class of 2026 applicant pool, as the sample size is quite small. When comparing the data, we can see that rural applicants are more than twice as likely to be white. Conversely, non-rural applicants are three times more likely to be Asian. While Black and Hispanic students are entirely unrepresented in the rural sample, they together make up 20.3% of the non-rural sample. These contrasts can be explained, in part, by the demographic differences between rural and non-rural populations.

The disparity between the number of applications submitted by rural white students and those submitted by rural students of color is not entirely reflective of rural population data. However, it is fairly reflective of rural postsecondary attainment rates by race. Using 2015 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the USDA Economic Research Service found that the postsecondary attainment rates of racial and ethnic minorities in rural communities was half that of Whites. There are a number of possible explanations for this. One explanation is that, on average, racial and ethnic minorities experience higher rates of poverty in rural communities (USDA, 2018). This likely exacerbates any financial concerns associated with attending postsecondary education, especially private institutions like Georgetown with sticker prices of above $60,000 a year (Keily & McCann, 2021; Yoo, 2022). Additionally, racial and ethnic minorities frequently face discrimination and alienation both in the classroom and their rural communities (Han, 2018; Coates, 2011). This is furthered by the lack of racial and ethnic minorities in rural teaching positions (Han et al., 2021). This discrimination and lack of representative authority figures is necessarily linked to diminished educational outcomes, such as low graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates. This can likely account for the underrepresentation of rural Black and Hispanic students in the Georgetown applicant pool (Mickelson, 2003).

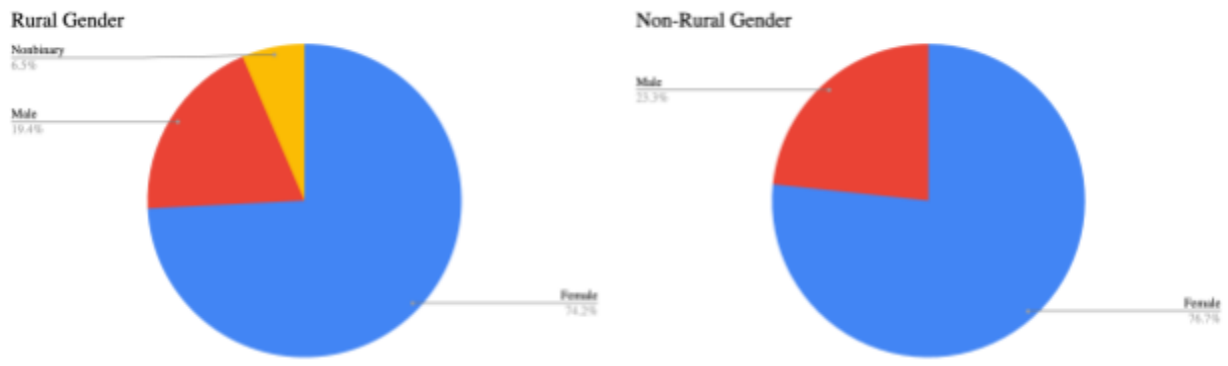

Figure 2: Rural and Non-Rural Demographics based on Gender

Another demographic consideration between the samples was that of gender. As can be seen in Figure 2, the share of female applicants is very consistent between the rural and non-rural samples (Rural=74.2% Female, Non-Rural=76.7% Female). Each of these samples overrepresent the female share of the broader applicant pool, which stood at 60% for the Class of 2026 (Costanzi & Kim, 2022). It's notable that the rural sample contains more non-binary applicants, despite the relative lack of LGBTQ+ diveristy in rural areas. It's possible that this was a push factor for these applicants, as this lack of diversity is accompanied by a comparative lack of public support for LGBTQ+ individuals and policies that would support them (MAP, 2019).

These gender demographics are consistent with the current literature surrounding rural postsecondary attainment. It is true for both rural and non-rural populations that females generally have higher educational attainment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 34% of males ages 25-29 have completed a bachelor's degree, while 44% of females have. This gap is also present in the rural population. A 2017 report by the United States Department of Agriculture revealed that rural women are generally more educated than rural men, a disparity that has increased in the past 15 years. It's possible that rural females are more inclined to enroll in postsecondary education due to their diminished capital in rural communities, many of which are centered around male-dominated trades (Gillon, 2015). However, more research is needed on this topic.

Parent Education

Another comparative consideration was that of parental education. In the general application form, students are asked to report their parents' highest level of education. This is generally used to determine which applicants qualify for admission into the Georgetown Scholars Program and/or Community Scholars Program. As seen in Figure 3, the most commonly reported education level in both the rural and non-rural sample was a graduate degree (Rural=39.0%, Non-Rural=50.8%). The next largest group in each of the samples was those possessing a bachelor's degree (Rural=30.5%, Non-Rural=32.2%). The two samples diverge after this point. The next largest share of the rural sample

was those possessing a high school diploma (11.9%), followed by an associate degree (6.8%) and some college (5.1%). The next largest shares of the non-rural sample were high school and some college, each receiving 3.4%.

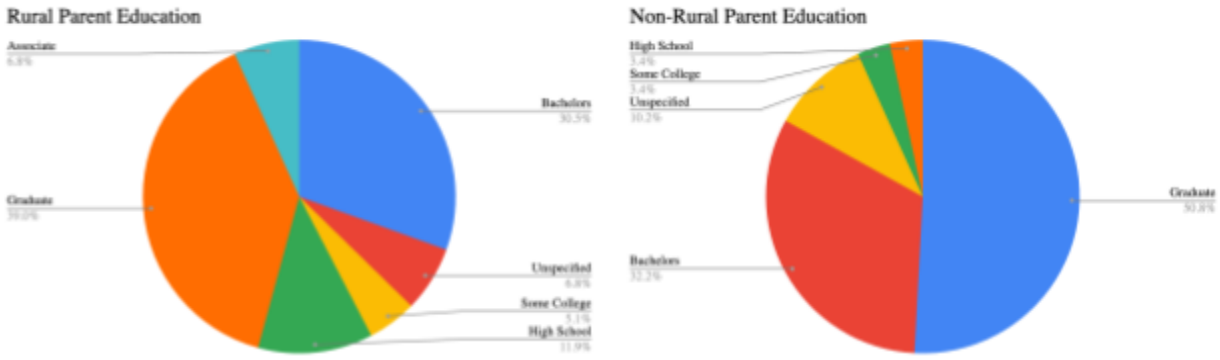

Figure 3: Rural and Non-Rural Parental Education Data

The educational demographics of the rural sample differ dramatically from those of the broader rural population. As of 2019, 48.7% of rural Americans ages 25 and older had attained a high school diploma or less as their highest level of education. Conversely, only 21% of rural Americans had attained a bachelor's degree or higher as their highest level of education (USDA, 2021). Using this data, it can be seen that Georgetown's rural applicant pool overrepresents the college-educated sect of rural America by a margin of 48.5%. However, this isn't unique to rural applicants. The non-rural sample overrepresents college educated Americans ages 25 and older by a margin of 48.3%.

It's unsurprising that both the rural and non-rural sample overrepresent the educated portion of the population. It has been reported that parental education is directly correlated with children's academic achievement and postsecondary attainment (Dubow et al., 2009). There have even been studies indicating a positive correlation between parental education level and their children's high school grade point average (Assari & Caldwell, 2019). This phenomenon presents itself heavily in the area of elite postsecondary attainment (Jack, 2019). Despite the fact that over 40% of college applicants can be considered first-generation college students (i.e. they do not have at least one parent with a completed bachelor's degree), these students only comprised 11% of Georgetown's Class of 2026 applicant pool

(Startz, 2022; Constanzi & Kim, 2022). Given their stark contrast from the broader rural population, as well as their consistency with the non-rural applicant pool; we can reasonably infer that rural students are underrepresented due to the fact that there is a smaller concentration of college-educated parents in rural areas.

It's also important to factor in the inextricable connection between education and socioeconomic status. Education is directly correlated with job earnings, regardless of geographic location. As reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals with professional degrees have the highest median income, while individuals with less than a high school diploma have the lowest median income (Torpey, 2018). It is thus reasonable to infer that applicants with at least one parent possessing a professional degree are of higher socioeconomic status than applicants without. This also relates to educational achievement. Hoxby and Avery (2012) found that 34% of high achieving students come from families in the top income quartile and another 27% come from families in the third income quartile. Given that America's elite colleges and universities overwhelmingly overrepresent students from upper-income families, rural applicants can understandably find themselves in the minority, as there is a smaller concentration of upper-income families in rural areas (Aisch et al., 2017).

School Type

Differences in reported school type were also considered. As can be seen in Figure 4, there is a vast discrepancy in secondary school type of rural and non-rural applicants. 93.3% of rural applicants were enrolled in general public secondary schools, compared to only 23.3% of non-rural applicants. Of the rural students not enrolled in general public schools, one reported attending a private school, while another was homeschooled. Looking back at the non-rural sample, 60% of applicants attended a private school. Of the non-rural students not attending general public or private school, 10% attended a selective public magnet school and 6.7% attended a selective public charter school.

While the rural sample is fairly consistent with rural population data, the non-rural sample and Georgetown's broader applicant pool drastically overrepresent applicants attending private schools

(NCES, 2019; NCES, 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 9% of the nation's primary and secondary students attend private schools. At Georgetown University, on the other hand, 36% of applicants hail from private secondary schools. This is similar to the rates at which other elite universities enroll students from private schools, which generally ranges from 30% to 50% (Jack, 2019).

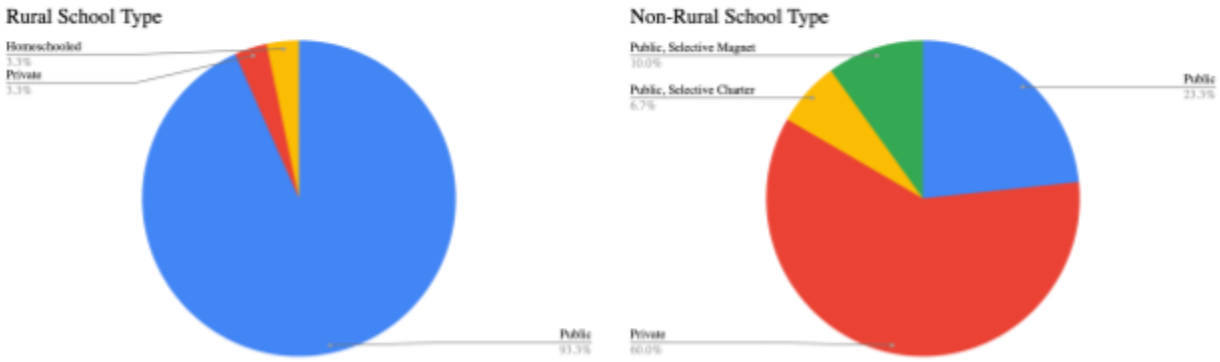

Figure 4: Rural and Non-Rural School Type Data

Considering this data from Georgetown and other elite universities, the relative lack of school choice in rural areas is likely a limiting factor in their elite postsecondary attainment. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that only 11% of all private school students reside in rural areas, despite the fact that 1 in 5 American students attend rural schools (NCES, 2019). For most rural students, the only alternative to their community's public school is homeschooling or virtual schooling (Varre et al., 2010). However, these options are rarely favorable. There is little-to-no evidence suggesting that homeschooled students yield better academic outcomes than traditional students (Bridgeforth et al., 2021). Furthermore, homeschooling isn't a legitimate option for the working-class families that comprise the majority of rural populations (USDA, 2018). On the topic of virtual schooling, research has indicated that cyber charter schools produce lower math scores and eliminate the community-building aspect of rural schools (Mann et al., 2018).

It's important to consider how school choice impacts elite postsecondary attainment. According to Hoxby and Avery (2012), elite universities typically recruit high achieving students in the following

ways: sending mail based on databases of students with high ACT and SAT scores; maintaining close relationships with college counselors at selective public and private high schools; and physically visiting high schools to describe their offerings. However, college staff tend to visit "feeder" schools (i.e. a selective secondary school that sends many or most of their students to elite colleges and universities) and/or schools located in dense metropolitan areas (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Naturally, rural schools are excluded by many of these strategies. Given that America's elite colleges and universities generally focus their recruitment efforts in densely populated areas and/or in communities with school choice, we can reasonably infer that rural students are underrepresented due to the fact that they are largely excluded from these efforts. This, in turn, limits contact that may influence rural postsecondary aspirations.

Legacy Status

Another comparative consideration was that of legacy status. On Georgetown's general undergraduate application, applicants are asked to indicate whether any members of their family had attended Georgetown. They are given the following options: father; mother; brother; sister; other relative(s); and no relatives. Despite lower parental education levels, the rural sample had a greater percentage of students with legacy status (20.0%) when compared to the non-rural sample (3.3%). This rate also surpassed that of Georgetown's general applicant pool for the undergraduate Class of 2026, in which 4% of applicants had legacy status (Constanzi & Kim, 2022).

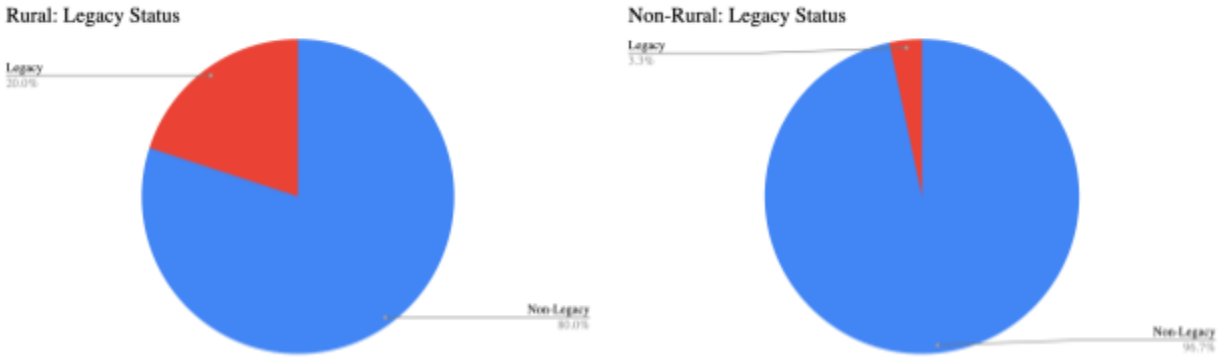

Figure 5: Rural and Non-Rural Legacy Status Data

Naturally, having legacy status increases the likelihood that rural students will apply and be accepted to schools like Georgetown. First of all, these students have a parent or relative who has completed postsecondary education. As previously mentioned, this increases the likelihood that they themselves will enroll in postsecondary education (Dubow et al., 2009). Second, their legacy status gives them some preference in the admissions process. Research has shown that, even after accounting for measurable differences (SAT/ACT scores, gender, race, etc.), legacy applicants are more likely to be admitted than non-legacy applicants (Hurwitz, 2011). However, there are a number of possible confounding factors. It is therefore important to analyze how these student's circumstances, in conjunction with their legacy status, may have impacted their postsecondary aspirations.

It's reasonable to infer that these rural legacies are more likely to apply because they already have exposure to Georgetown. As previously mentioned, rural students are largely excluded from outreach and recruitment efforts made by elite universities (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). If a rural student has a parent or relative who has attended Georgetown, they likely have more exposure to Georgetown than the typical rural student. This proximity may increase the likelihood that they apply. It's important to note, as their elevated rates of legacy status and parental education suggest, that these rural applicants aren't representative of the rural population as a whole. They come from, like the majority of Georgetown's applicant pool, a much more educated subset of the American population.

Letters of Recommendation

A major comparative consideration in this study was length and number of recommendation letters. The Georgetown undergraduate application suggests that students submit at least 3 letters of recommendation: one from a school counselor and two from their teachers. However, there is an additional section in the application where applicants can add any additional recommendation letters they would like the admissions committee to consider. Rural students, on average, submitted 2.97 letters of recommendation, compared to 3.43 for non-rural students. It's important to note that the rural average even falls below the suggested minimum number of letters to submit. In the rural sample, the number of

recommendation letters ranged from 2-4, with 6 applicants submitting 2 letters and 5 applicants submitting 4 letters. In the non-rural sample, the number of recommendation letters ranged from 2-6, with 2 applicants submitting 2 letters and 2 applicants submitting 6 letters.

The Georgetown application does not provide any guidance regarding the preferred length of recommendation letters. There is no maximum or minimum length. Consequently, this length can vary greatly from applicant to applicant. When initially examining the data within the application files, it was apparent that the letters of recommendation within the non-rural sample were significantly longer than those within the rural sample. The average word count of a recommendation letter for a non-rural applicant was 584.42, compared to only 432.80 for rural applicants. This discrepancy is intensified when considering the counselor recommendation letter specifically. The average word count of a counselor recommendation letter for a rural applicant (357.83 words) is around half that of a non-rural applicant (684.33 words). In the rural sample, the word counts for the counselor recommendation letter ranged from 0 (Rural 28 neglected to submit a counselor recommendation) to 673. In the non-rural sample, the word counts for the counselor recommendation letter ranged from 199 to 2,115. These contrasts can serve to significantly inhibit the postsecondary attainment of rural students, given that surveys of college admissions counselors indicate that letters of recommendation are considered to be of similar importance to essays, demonstrated interest, class rank, and extracurricular activities (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017).

The literature presents a number of possible explanations for this data. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, public schools have much higher pupil to teacher ratios (NCES, 2017). More importantly, as reported by Clinedinst and Koranteng (2017) for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, public school counselors are assigned substantially more students than private school counselors. On average, counselors at public secondary schools serve 437 students each. These counselors have a variety of different responsibilities, in addition to college counseling. As of 2016, only 28% of public schools reported employing at least one counselor (full or part time) whose sole responsibility was providing college counseling, compared to 49% of private schools (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017). Instead, public school counselors spend 25% of their time on personal needs

counseling; 23% on choice and scheduling of high school courses; 13% on academic testing; 7% on occupational counseling; and a combined 11% on teaching and non-guidance responsibilities (NACAC, 2019). These circumstances only allow public school counselors to spend 21% of their time on postsecondary admissions counseling.

This data correlates heavily with postsecondary attainment. Studies have shown that students who work with a counselor are: 7x more likely to complete the FAFSA; 3x more likely to attend postsecondary education; and 2x more likely to attend a four-year college (Velez, 2016). Evidently, access to adept college counseling has the potential to correct the systemic disparities faced by rural students. Given that: public schools have larger teacher/counselor to pupil ratios; that public schools have less counselors whose sole responsibility is college counseling; that college counseling has a major impact on postsecondary attainment; and that rural students primarily attend public schools, we can reasonably conclude that rural students' limited access to adequate college counseling can somewhat account for their diminished letter of recommendation numbers and length, as well as their lower postsecondary attainment.

Personal Statements

The topic and content of the applicants' personal statements were also compared. Georgetown's application for the undergraduate Class of 2026 required 3 essays. The first asks applicants to "briefly discuss the significance of the school or summer activity in which [they] have been most involved." The second asks applicants to "submit a brief essay, either personal or creative, which [they] feel best describes [them]." The third comes in 4 variations based on the undergraduate school the applicant is applying to. The main focus of this section is on the second essay, which is generally referred to as the "personal statement." The personal statements were considered because they provide an individualized background on why each applicant is applying to Georgetown. Although every personal statement is unique, there were some patterns present in the data.

Many rural applicants chose to write about their rural community as the main topic or underlying theme of their personal statement. In fact, 11 of the 30 applicants within the rural sample chose this model. An additional rural applicant did not choose their rural community as the topic of their personal statement, but rather submitted a stand-alone essay in the Additional Materials section focusing solely on the topic of their rural community. 56.7% of all rural applicants within the sample mention their geographic community in their personal statement, compared to only 16.7% of the non-rural sample. In the non-rural sample, 3 applicants centered their personal statement around their geographic community. 2 of these applicants wrote of their struggles as racial, ethnic, and/or religious minorities in predominantly white and/or Christian communities. The other non-rural applicant to write about their geographic community narrated their experiences as someone who grew up in a rural farming community, but attended an urban boarding school.

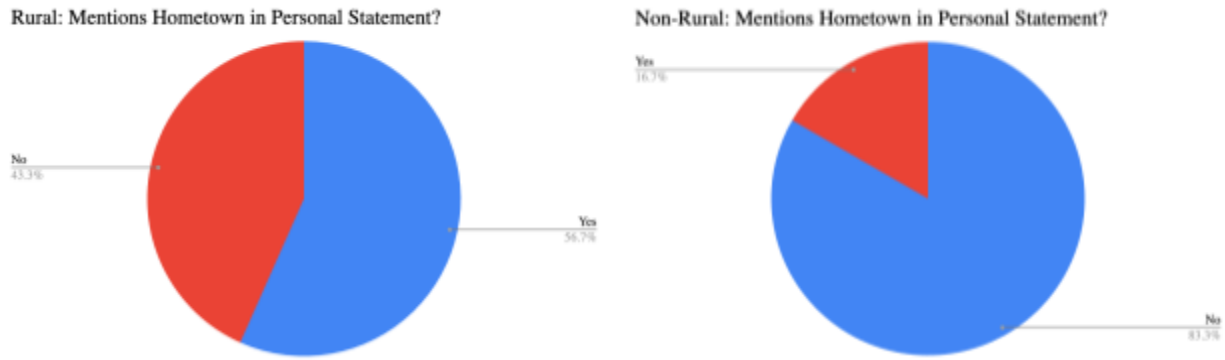

Figure 6: Rural and Non-Rural Data Surrounding Whether or Not the Applicant's Hometown was Mentioned in a Personal Statement

This qualitative data suggests that rural students aren't applying to elite universities in spite of their rural identity, but because of it. As described in detail within the rural sample's personal statements, there are various reasons as to why their rural community inspired them to apply to Georgetown. While some applicants saw pursuing higher education as a means to escape their rural community, others saw it as a way to give back. Despite their differences, the identities of rural applicants are shaped, in some way or another, by their rural geography.

V. Conclusion

In comparing a sample of rural Georgetown applicants to: non-rural Georgetown applicants; general Georgetown applicants; the broader rural population; and the broader American population, I compiled the following findings. Rural applicants are much more likely to be White than non-rural applicants. Rural applicants overrepresent the White and Asian rural population, while underrepresenting the Black and Hispanic rural population. Rural applicants are more likely to be non-binary than non-rural applicants. Rural applicants overrepresent both the female and non-binary rural population. Parents of rural applicants overrepresent the college-educated sect of their population by a margin similar to that of non-rural students. Rural applicants are more likely to have legacy status than non-rural applicants. The letters of recommendation submitted by rural applicants are shorter than those submitted by non-rural applicants. Rural applicants are more likely than non-rural applicants to choose their geographic community as the topic or underlying theme of their personal essay.

Given that these findings are descriptive, not causal, various literature was used to draw causal inferences. Black and Hispanic students are likely underrepresented in the rural sample due to the fact that racial and ethnic minorities have lower postsecondary attainment rates than Whites in rural communities (USDA, 2018). It's possible that rural non-binary applicants are overrepresented due to push factors in their rural communities, such as a comparative lack of public support for LGBTQ+ individuals and policies that would support them (MAP, 2019). Female applicants are likely overrepresented in the rural applicant pool due to their increased postsecondary attainment rates when compared to rural men (USDA, 2017). A reason for this could be that rural women generally have diminished capital in rural communities, many of which are centered around male-dominated trades (Gillon, 2015). It's possible that the parents of rural applicants overrepresent the college-educated sect of the rural population due to findings that suggest parental education levels are directly correlated with academic achievement (Dubow et al., 2009; Assari & Caldwell, 2019). It's likely that rural applicants disproportionately attend public schools when compared to non-rural applicants due to the fact that rural students have relatively lower rates of school choice (NCES, 2019; Varre et al., 2010). The general lack of rural applicants in

Georgetown's broader applicant pool could be caused by the fact that recruitment efforts generally exclude students residing in rural areas (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Consequently, the finding that rural applicants are more likely to be legacies could be explained by the fact that these students already have exposure to Georgetown even though they have been left out of this recruitment process. Rural applicants likely have shorter teacher/counselor recommendation letters because they primarily attend public schools, which have much higher teacher/counselor to pupil ratios (Clinedinst and Koranteng, 2017; NCES, 2017). Additionally, public schools are much less likely to employ counselors whose sole responsibility is college counseling, thus limiting the time spent on writing letters of recommendation (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017).

With these findings and inferences in mind, I recommend that the Georgetown Undergraduate Admissions Office waive the counselor recommendation requirement. This recommendation is not to say that Georgetown should remove this section entirely. Rather, counselor recommendations should be integrated into the optional "Additional Recommendations" section of the application. Given the decreased length of the rural counselor recommendation, combined with the fact that one rural applicant neglected to submit a counselor recommendation entirely, it's very possible that this requirement presents a barrier for rural students that could discourage them from applying. If they chose to do so, Georgetown would not be the first elite institution to somewhat abandon recommendation letters. The University of California system has waived recommendation letters entirely (UC Admissions, 2022). The University of California-Los Angeles has a longstanding policy that goes a step further, as it *prohibits* applicants from submitting letters of recommendation (Jaschik, 2022). This policy decision comes in response to data suggesting that the use of letters of recommendation in college admissions reinforces historical inequities (NACAC & NASFAA, 2022).

There are a number of factors influencing rural postsecondary aspirations and attainment that could not be fully examined due to the nature of this study. Further research is required to sufficiently examine the complex interplay between socioeconomic status and geographic location. Due to Georgetown's need-blind admissions policy, I was unable to investigate patterns regarding rural

applicant's parent income. Additionally, given the limited selection of literature surrounding personal statements written for college applications, further research is required to investigate what personal statements can indicate about an applicant's demographic, academic, and/or geographic background.

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