

From 7,000 to 700,000:

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

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BACKGROUND

Despite similar graduation rates, rural students attend college at a much lower rate than their urban and suburban counterparts (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). 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:

WHAT DIFFERENCES CAN BE SEEN BETWEEN THE APPLICATIONS OF STUDENTS FROM RURAL COMMUNITIES AND STUDENTS FROM NON-RURAL COMMUNITIES?

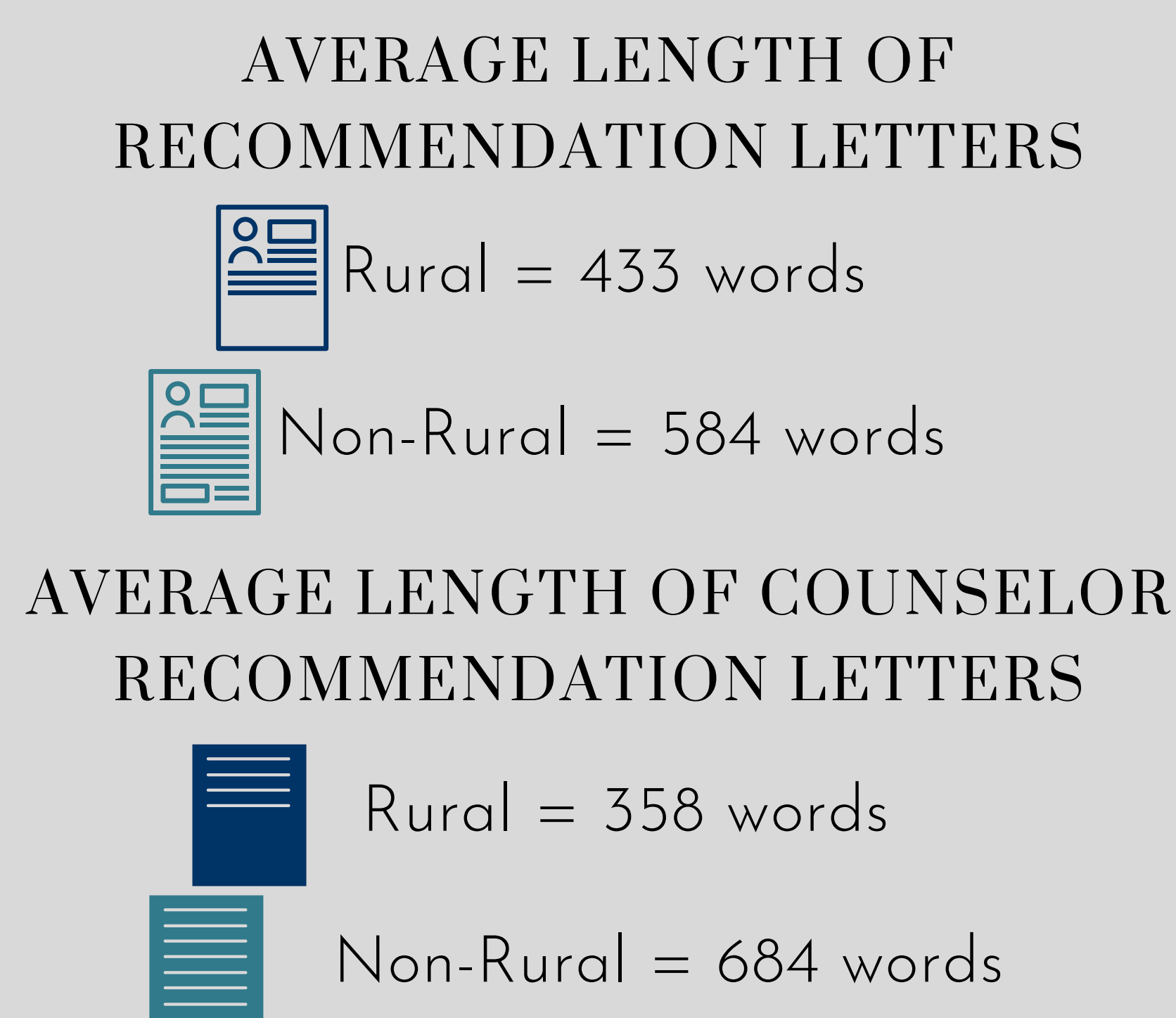
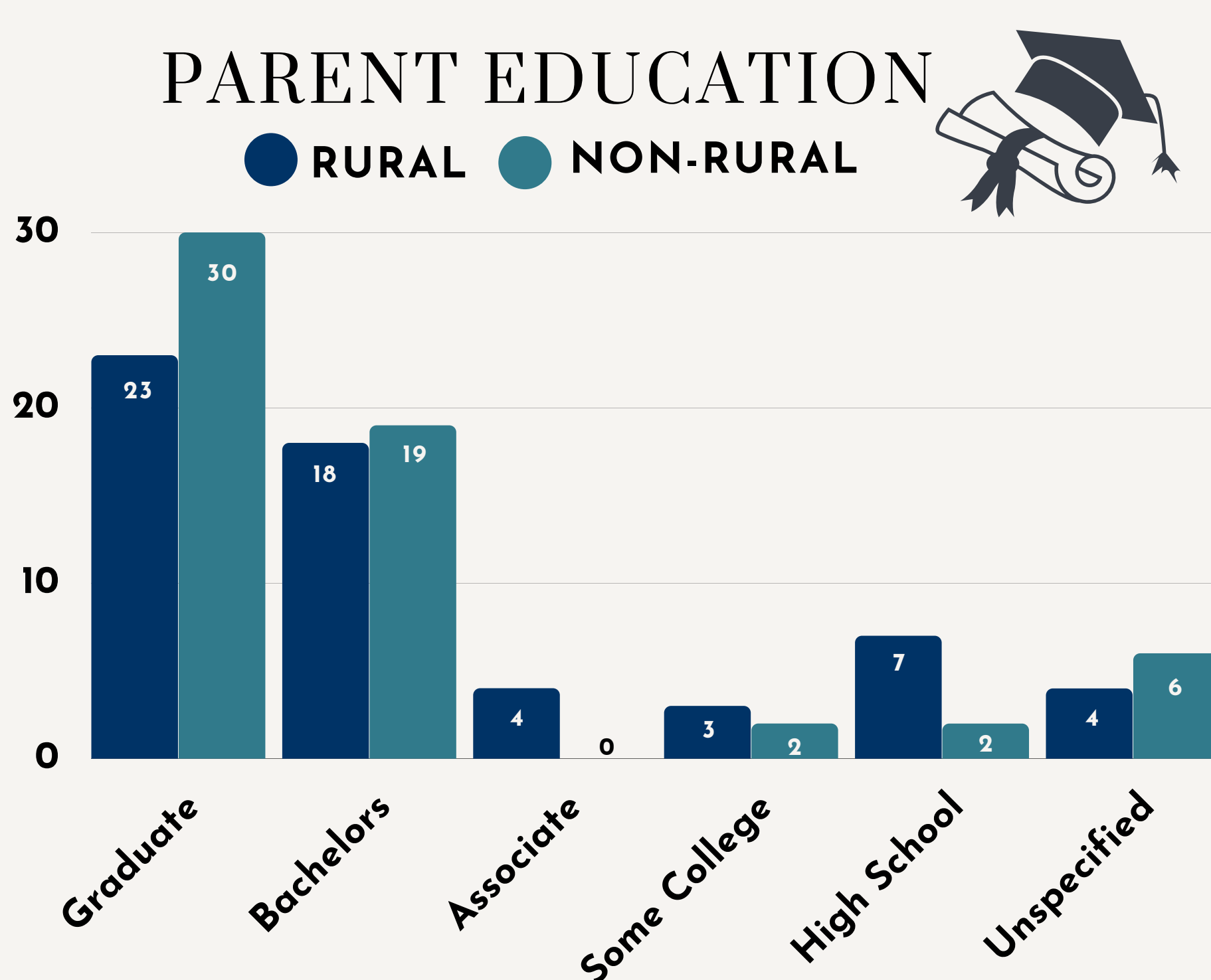
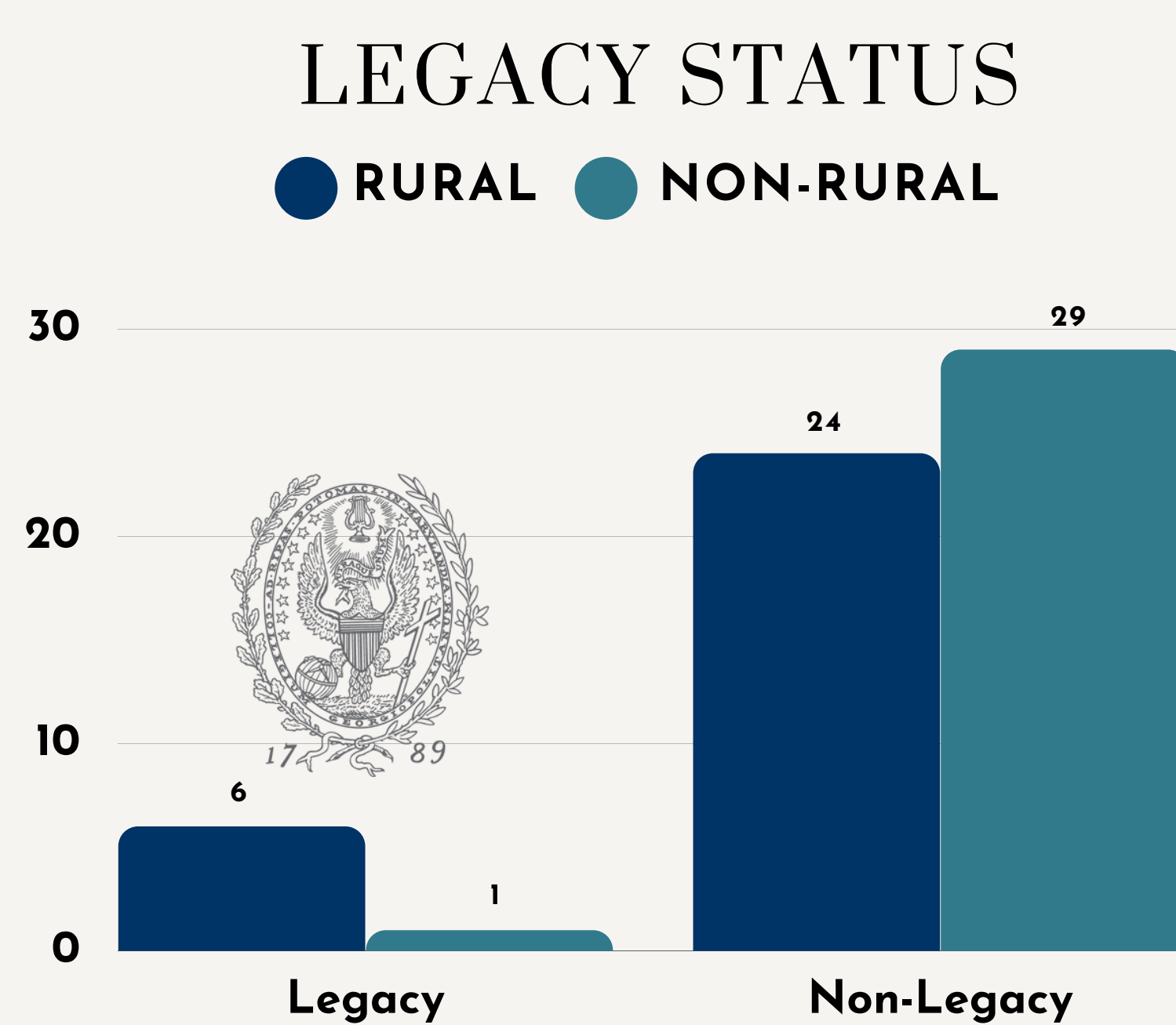
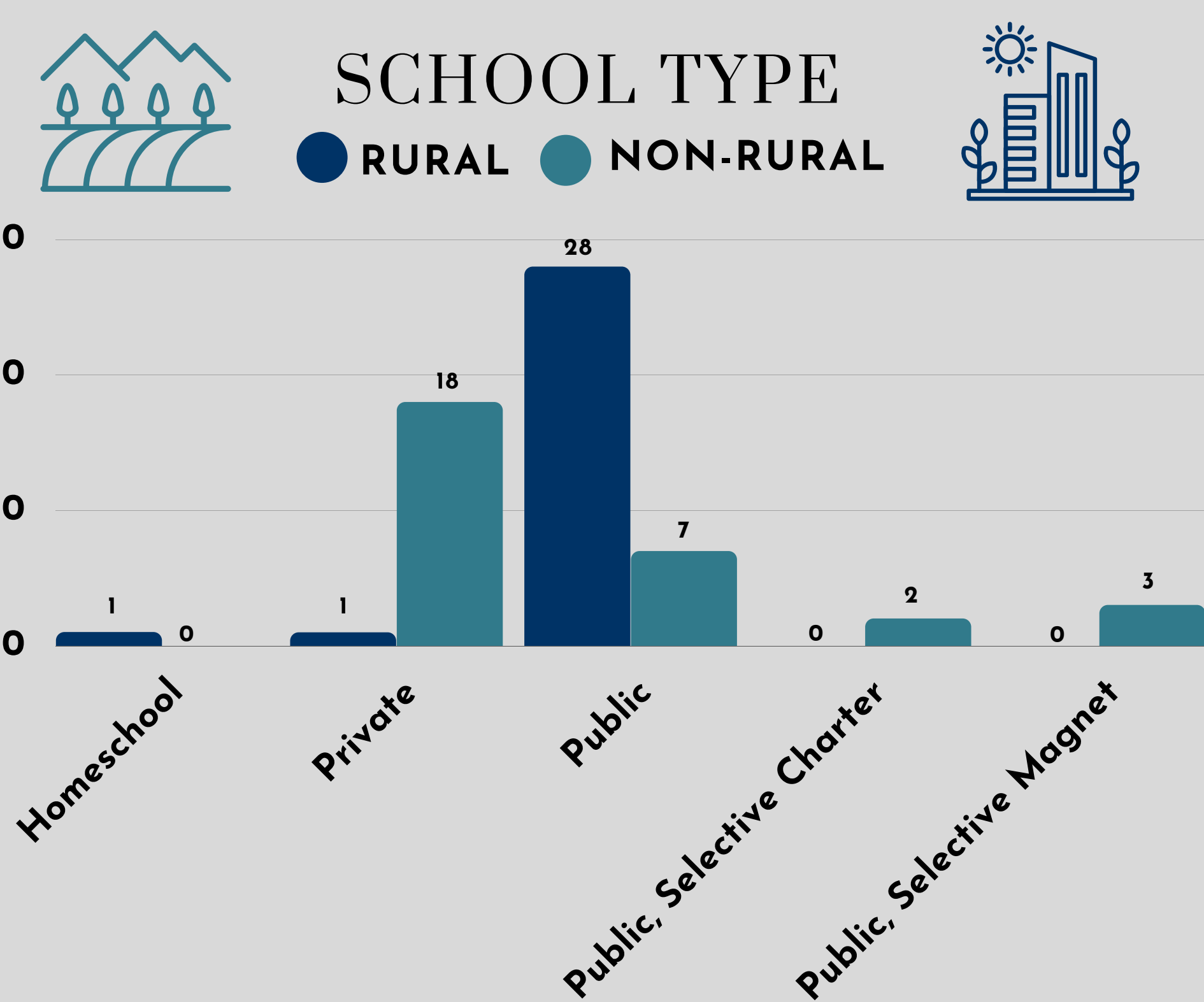
HOW ARE THE DISPARATE CIRCUMSTANCES OF RURAL AND NON-RURAL STUDENTS MANIFESTED IN THEIR APPLICATIONS?

METHODS

After obtaining IRB approval, the complete application files of 30 rural and 30 non-rural accepted applicants to Georgetown University were compared. The following figures were considered: racial/ethnic demographics; parental education; legacy status; secondary school type; average length/number of recommendation letters; and topic of personal statements. This data was provided by the Georgetown University Office of Undergraduate Admissions.



RESULTS



CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

In comparing a sample of rural Georgetown applicants to: non-rural Georgetown applicants; the broader rural population; and the broader American population, I compiled these major findings.

1. Parents of rural applicants overrepresent the college-educated sect of their population by a margin similar to that of non-rural students.
2. Rural applicants are more likely to have legacy status than non-rural applicants.
3. Rural applicants are much more likely to attend a public secondary school, while non-rural applicants are more likely to attend a private secondary school.
4. The letters of recommendation submitted by rural applicants are shorter than those submitted by non-rural applicants.

With these findings 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 Materials" section. 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. Due to Georgetown's need-blind admissions policy, further research is required to examine the complex interplay between socioeconomic status and geographic location.