SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS: A RURALITY-FOCUSED COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN THE UNITED STATES AND COLOMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural examinations in the academic sector are important for developing a comprehensive understanding of the functionality of higher education (HE) and promoting an open-minded, student-focused approach to pedagogy. The purpose of this literature review is to compare HE landscapes in the United States (US) and Colombia, emphasizing socioeconomic status (SES) and rurality as a barrier to student success in both countries. A major focus of this review is the relationship between rurality as a component of SES and student success in HE. A discussion follows of approaches to increase rural education attainment in the US and Colombia that support suggestions for future research in the educational field.

Keywords: *United States (US); Colombia; higher educational institution (HEI); socioeconomic status (SES); rural student attainment*

INTRODUCTION

The United States (US) strives for a high quality of education. Within Higher Education (HE), this goal peaked in 2016 through advances implemented under the Obama Administration (White House Archives, n.d.). However, HE growth in the US has stalled since then. In 2020 the total student population (18-24 years old) enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) was 40% of the eligible population. This statistic reflects the first downward trend in enrollment rates in HEIs since the early 1900s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Comparatively, over the last two decades, there has been a 30.8% increase in HE student enrollment in the Latin American country of Colombia. This growth rate makes the country the second-fastest growing HE landscape in Latin America, surpassed only by Brazil. With an average of 55.3% of the young adult population (18-24) enrolled in an HEI (Valenzuela & Yáñez, 2022), this growth is significant in any social sector. This is particularly true for Colombia, which in 2016, pledged to become Latin America's most-educated country by 2025 (MEN, 2016). Since then, Colombia has made educational advances in the governmental sector and private institutions. However, like many countries in the Latin American region, Colombia is marred by deep socioeconomic inequalities that inhibit the country's long-term educational goals and create social barriers to equitable student academic achievement (Lozano et al., 2021; Valenzuela & Yáñez, 2022)

In a rapidly interconnecting society, supporting student success in the international environment is crucial to the continuing relevance of the

HEI. Comparing Socioeconomic Status (SES) and HE achievements between countries is particularly important. Both the US and Colombia express similar outlooks on educational development, and both have similar socioeconomic barriers that potential student bodies must overcome. Further, country-specific comparisons like this are few and far between. Comparison documents that do exist speak on a range of topics, but rarely on education. Providing documents like the following organizes information for academic and institutional purposes in both countries and globally.

SES is the number one predictor of student entrance and success in HE (Liu et al., 2020). Geographical location plays a large role in developing it, particularly when looking at differences between rural (non-city) and urban (city) living. Across the world, this distinction plays a major function in the success of individuals at primary and secondary levels of schooling (Clark et al., 2022; Flores-Mendoza et al., 2021), in HE (Wells et al., 2019), as well as within professional fields (Slack & Jensen, 2020). Overall, rural students and professionals are less likely to experience upward social mobility than their urban-dwelling peers. This is due to a myriad of factors including a lack of resources, governmental funding, and social capital/values.

In deference to these factors, a discussion is provided to enhance the understanding of this topic across three major components of HE and rural attainment. This will take place from a comparative lens of SES inequalities between the US and Colombia. The components discussed are the educational landscapes of each country, the components of rurality that may act as encouragements and barriers to student success in HE, and some current responses that seek to decrease the disparity between rural and urban educational attainment. Recommendations for future research will be provided.

HE LANDSCAPES: THE US

HE in the US is standardized at the state level and supported by the US government (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Curriculum and course requirements for HEIs are also decided at the state level, a process requiring institutional accreditation. This is external and exists to ensure HEI quality. Accreditation is granted as a Title IV certification and is received from one of seven regional accreditation agencies across the US that standardize the quality of academics and specific programs. Organized under the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (CHEA, n.d.), institutions offer a relatively standardized quality of education based on academic qualities, how the HEI serves its students and the public, and the overall value structure of the academics.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2021, there were 5916 post-secondary, Title IV institutions in the US (NCES, 2021). Of these institutions, 2637 were 4-year colleges and 1294 were 2-year colleges. This massive number of options creates an intimidating choice for potential HE students and does not necessarily encourage high levels of college enrollment. Overall, college completion has stalled in the US, with 62.3% of students completing college in the country in 2016, only a .1% increase from the previous year (Causey et al., 2022).

Even when students enter an HEI, completion rates are bleak, particularly for bachelor's attainment. The most recent data from 2016 shows that only 36% of young adults 25-29 years of age have a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2016). However, this recent decrease in attainment does not reflect overall trends. From 2003-2014, the country saw an increase in attainment across the HE spectrum. Associate degree attainment increased by 51%, bachelor's and master's by 34%, and doctoral degrees by 41%. Data like this suggests that HEIs remain relevant across the US. This further justifies the need to make tertiary education highly accessible to all US citizens.

PRE-COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

The education system in the US consists of optional preprimary education (preschool/kindergarten) and mandatory primary and secondary education (Irwin et al., 2022). This spans fourteen years, from preprimary (pre-k/kindergarten), elementary school (1^{st} – 5^{th}/6^{th} grade), middle/junior high school (6^{th}-8^{th} grade), and high school/secondary education (9^{th}- 12^{th} grade). Following this, students may pursue vocational training or HE (Irwin et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND UNDERGRADUATE OPTIONS

Vocational training includes one to two years of studying in a trade-oriented program (NCES,

n.d.). This is designed for students who are seeking immediate, job-specific employment post-graduation. Vocational fields include professions like welding, electrical, and plumbing (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), and agriculture, trade, and industry (NCES, n.d.). Students who attend vocational training may do so not only at an expedited rate compared to traditional HEIs but also receive training according to their immediate interests through on-the-job training. This prepares students for smooth school-to-work entry equipped with directly applicable skills. Components like this make vocational programs highly attractive to the 'nontraditional student' especially since these programs may be pursued at both secondary and postsecondary levels.

HEIs are another educational option for students post-graduation. HE is formatted as either a two-year or four-year program and offers students various degree options (Irwin et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Two-year HE programs offer students the opportunity to earn what is known as an associate degree, while those who attend four-year universities earn bachelor's degrees. Regardless of the length, students enrolled in HEIs pursue a 'major.' This is a concentration that acts as the focus of their studies. However, unlike in vocational schools, students will expect to receive coursework in various subjects that may not necessarily coincide, particularly during their first year. Alongside majors, students can add minors into their coursework, further specifying classes to their interests.

MASTER'S AND DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

Following a bachelor's program, students may pursue a graduate/master's degree. Only students who complete the educational equivalents of a 4-year program may apply (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Master's degrees take one to two years to complete and further specialize students in a field, often related to an individual's undergraduate major. At the end of the coursework, these degrees typically culminate in completing a large, research-based essay (known as a thesis) or an academically related project. Important to note as well is the option of the 4 and 1 bachelor's and master's program, which when offered by an HEI, allows the student to complete their master's equivalent in five years rather than the traditional six (bachelor's then master's).

The highest degree level available in the US is the doctoral degree. This can be pursued after a bachelor's degree but typically follows a master's program (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Doctoral instruction is tailored specifically to aid students with research or to prepare them for specialized fields like engineering and medicine. Doctoral programs are highly competitive and consist of three to five years of classroom instruction. During this time students work alongside a faculty member on a research project known as a dissertation, which must be completed and defended before a panel of experts to graduate.

SES AND HE ATTAINMENT IN THE US

Academic achievement at every level is influenced by the SES of the family, through which students gain access to social and financial resources (Gerra et al., 2020; Irwin et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Von Stumm et al. 2019). Diversity factors, including race, ethnicity, and geographic location impact SES itself. According to Irwin et al. (2022), in 2020 around 16% of children under 18 in the US lived under the poverty line. Of that percentage, a significant amount of them came from families of racial diversity. This has implications for future HE enrollment, with statistics indicating that those from historically marginalized SES do not matriculate into the postsecondary level at as high a rate as those from more privileged classes (Bastedo et al., 2018).

College attainment has a positive relationship with an elevated SES (Twenge & Cooper, 2020). Tertiary graduation provides higher gains in income and social mobility through the formation of social capital. Social mobility is a component of social capital theory and is directly associated with outcomes across all educational contexts. Social capital theory suggests that interpersonal relationships provide individuals with distinct advantages like interpersonal resource networks (Bourdieu, 1986). These networks can be accessed to further one's social standing (social mobility) and gain significant financial and social means to success. Social capital development occurs in family and educational settings through sociocultural and school factors (Oyefuga & Shakeshaft, 2023). Geography also acts as a mediator to social capi-

tal development, specifically for the family. This is because family relationships are influenced by the geographical social context in which they exist, and further, influence students' resources in school.

RURALITY AND HE ATTAINMENT

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2020, 46 million US residents lived in rural areas. They made up 14% of the entire population in the country, while urban residents made up the majority 86% (Dobis et al., 2021). Among these 46 million people, poverty was and is a reported problem (Clark et al., 2022, Cromartie et al., 2020; Monnat & Brown, 2017). It is estimated that around 15.3% of rural residents lived in poverty in 2019 (Ratledge et al., 2020). Comparing this to the 11.9% of impoverished urban residents reported in the same year (Dobis et al., 2021), it highlights the disparity in poverty between urban and rural citizens.

There is also a significant difference in HE attainment between rural and urban students. For example, in 2020, 28% of rural-living adults had attained a college degree compared to 41% in urban areas (Ratledge et al., 2020). One explanation for this is the difference in the landscape of HE options in rural areas from those in urban sectors (Koricich et al., 2018). Overall, there are significantly fewer HEIs in rural areas than in urban ones, with even fewer offering their students adequate resources for success. These resources include internet access, relevant coursework, adequate staff, and funding, all of which students need to attend and succeed in tertiary education (Ratledge et al., 2020). Interestingly, many rural HEIs operate from an overall lower SES (Byun et al., 2012; Koricich et al., 2018) and must account for SES components like family income (Wells et al., 2019), racial and cultural diversity (Ratledge et al, 2020) and differences in social values (social capital) founded in students from rural populations (Clark et al., 2022). These institutions often lack the structure to support student flourishing in light of these components, leading to high dropout rates and decreased HE relevancy.

Rural students are statistically less likely to enroll in HE than urban and suburban students (Wells et al., 2019). Those who do enroll also tend to choose institutions closer to their homes, as a sense of community and familial belonging is important to many rural communities (Clark et al., 2022; Ratledge et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2019). Family belonging is a social capital that emphasizes religion, conservative beliefs, and family involvement (Byun et al., 2012). This is important to note because HEIs generally tend to support entirely different characteristics like cultural urbanism, liberal political beliefs, and independence. As such, even when rural students attend urban institutions, they may struggle to align their social capital with that of HEIs, which leads to a lower graduation rate from HEIs in this population.

The fact that rural students attend HEIs close to home is not inherently counterintuitive to educational success. However, it does present them with an additional barrier, as HEIs are not as prevalent in rural areas, which acts as a deterrent to rural students matriculating into tertiary education. Rural students may more often attend vocational training and/or pursue associate degrees (Wells et al., 2019) whereas their urban counterparts tend to pursue four-year degrees (Miranda & Rodriguez, 2022). Vocational and associate-type programs are likely to be offered close to the rural student's home or in an online format that is flexible, less expensive than bachelor's programs, and may cater to previously developed social capitals within the students. This choice pattern can be understood from an aspiration standpoint, in which rural students or those from traditionally lower SES aspire to and strive towards different goals based on their family's accepted and reflected educational pathways (Oyefuga & Shakeshaft, 2023)

As stated priorly, the family plays a key role in HE attainment. Specifically, parental HE attainment significantly predicts student HEI matriculation in rural areas (Wells et al., 2019). This relationship highlights the importance of social capital formation as crucial to student success in these areas of the country. Various studies support this, suggesting that students whose parents attended college prior were more likely to seek college attendance, encouraged by their parents, which is the opposite in those who did not have the same support system (Assari et al., 2020; Byun et al., 2020; Gerra et al., 2020; Oyefuga & Shakeshaft, 2023; Wells et al., 2019). Another significant predictor of college attendance in rural students is community resources for HE success (Clark et al., 2022). These resources can include religious involvement, academic preparation at the second-

ary level, digital infrastructure, adequate faculty support (Clark et al., 2022; Ratledge et al., 2020), and social pressures to participate in HE (Wells et al., 2019).

HE LANDSCAPES IN COLOMBIA

Education in Colombia is developed and monitored by the Colombian government's Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) (MEN, 2009). The MEN retains all licensure privileges and quality assurance checks for educational institutions, produces standardizing requirements, grants authorization, and processes educational registration. Within HEIs specifically, the MEN provides quality evaluations supported by another governmental department, Comisión Nacional Intersectorial de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (CONACES) (MEN, 2019). Further, as there is not a countrywide standard of education, each of Colombia's 32 departments/states has Certified Territorial Entities (CTE), which exist to oversee educational policies, funding, and staffing for that geographic area.

HEIs in Colombia retain privileges to determine quality conditions and level of academics per institution, not per state-wide requirements (Lozano et al., 2021). However, due to concerns about accreditation and education standards, the Colombian government recently legally implemented a country-wide quality assurance system for HEIs (Lozano et al., 2021). While not assuring accreditation, laws enacted under this system ensure that qualified HEIs are granted educational and pedagogical records that guarantee the program and institutional quality. To earn these records, interested HEIs must pass an evaluation process based on pre-existing conditions for both the institution and program competency. If the institution passes the evaluation checks, it can seek accreditation through the National Accreditation Council (abbreviated as CAN in the original Spanish translation) (CAN, 2020).

PRE-COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

Like the US, schooling in Colombia is split into elementary/basic and secondary education. Compulsory school consists of a pre-elementary year, basic education (1st-5th grade), and lower-secondary education (6th-9th grade) (MEN, 2018; Radinger et al., 2018; U.S. Department of State, 2020). Upper-secondary education (10th-11th grade) is optional. However, it is swiftly becoming mandatory across the country (MEN, 2022). It is useful, as it grants students a bachelor's or technical degree upon completion and access to HE (Radinger et al., 2018). Students who receive a secondary education diploma may apply to HE. Alongside this basic requirement, interested students must also take standardized tests moderated by the Colombian Institute for Educational Evaluation known as the *Saber 11* (IFCES, 2023). This test is often required for admissions to HEIs and may need to be supplemented with additional testing (García-González & Skrita, 2019).

TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (TVET)

TVET options are available to Colombian students who complete secondary education through 9th grade before admission (Radinger et al., 2018). They typically offer students certification opportunities rather than degrees. These programs last one to three years and include a blend of practical training, apprenticeships, and theoretical training regarding a specific occupation. This blended learning style is built to assist students with future on-the-job efficacy. Following the completion of these programs, students often apply for relevant jobs but can also apply their TVET certification to their college admissions if they seek further education.

HE

Undergraduate Education

In Colombia, there are four major types of HEIs: universities, university institutions/technical schools, technological institutes (TI), and technical training institutes (TTI) (U.S. Department of State, 2020). In all, 316 HEI in the country offer a wide range of degree programs (Fulbright, 2020). Universities are often heavily research-oriented and generally specialize in a specific area. These institutions comprise 28% of the overall Colombian HE landscape. Universities offer bachelor's degrees through doctoral-level educational programs. University institutions/technological schools are similar to universities and compose 44% of the HEI in Colombia. Different from universities, they are highly specialized and exist to provide students with an education geared toward specific disciplines at an undergraduate level. These HEIs offer technical degrees like those in STEM-related concentrations.

The third type of HEI in Colombia is the TI. This bridges secondary and tertiary education by

preparing secondary students post-graduation for entrance into HE (Fulbright, 2020). Currently, 17% of Colombia's HEI identify as TI. Finally, TTIs are best understood as a blend between an HEI and TVET and make up the country's remaining 11% of HEI distribution. Unlike other HEI options in Colombia, these institutions offer primarily short-term training on a specific job focus, including internships and program specialization.

Master's and Doctoral Programs

HE graduates programs include master's and doctoral programs. They are specialized and can be pursued after undergraduate or specialist degree programs. Both master's and doctoral programs are offered solely by universities and entrance into each are based on various specificities. Master's programs in the country last 1.5-2 years and include required coursework as well as a thesis or project preparation to graduate.

Doctoral degrees are attained through intensive schooling and research, last three to four years, and often require that candidates have English proficiency before starting the program. These programs include coursework and the preparation and defense of a dissertation. Students may opt to apply for a doctoral program following undergraduate, but the program will tend to last longer than if they apply after completing graduate school. Both master's and doctoral program options are sparse in the country, as hardly any students attain this level of education. Only 0.1% of all Colombian citizens report attaining a doctoral degree (OECD, 2019).

SES AND HE ATTAINMENT IN COLOMBIA

A higher SES is linked to achieving greater academic outcomes in Colombia (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018; García-González & Skrita, 2019; Lozano et al., 2021). It also acts as a predictor of which students can access HE (García-González & Skrita, 2019). This occurs because of various factors, however, particularly because of family background and geographic location. The parental expectation to attend HE is one significant predictor of student matriculation into HE in Colombia (Flores-Mendoza et al., 2021; García-González & Skrita, 2019). These expectations are often built from the academic positions of older family members (namely mothers). They act as social pressures for students to achieve, particularly in secondary education (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018).

Student expectations of success following HE attendance also significantly impact matriculation rates. This is directly tied to SES, as this is a predictor of students' outlook on future mobility (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018). These perceptions contribute to capital formation in students, both by themselves and in their communities. Students from communities of low SES, particularly those from rural areas, may grow up valuing specific types of capital that manifest in the working form of vocational positions. Built on the community's cultural norms, they may end up working following secondary school rather than pursuing HE. This occurs regardless of the information about continuing education available to the students and is linked to a decrease in students' motivation for involvement in HEIs in these areas and incorrect perceptions and expectations about HE involvement.

SES also impacts various other components necessary to succeed in HE in Colombia. These include access to technology and educational resources (García-González & Skrita, 2019), public vs private school attendance (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018), equal opportunities in the home and education (García-González & Skrita, 2019), and overall family environment. Each predicts student success through tertiary education and interacts with individual student characteristics and cultural resources to either promote or inhibit success. One incredibly important one of these components is family income for Colombian families. This is crucial for students to pursue and achieve in education (Lozano et al., 2021). As García-González and Skrita (2019) suggest, it impacts the family environment, parent-child relationships, and geographical location (significantly, the school the student attends and has access to). Urban and rural geographical location also significantly predicts student matriculation and success in HE (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018).

RURALITY AND HE ATTAINMENT

Rural living plays a large part in educational resources offered to students throughout pre, elementary, secondary, and tertiary school systems. Generally, students from urban areas have access to more resources both within and outside HEIs. Various factors contribute to this, including the allocation of private funding, not to mention the

abundance of HEIs present in urban areas. In 2018, 48.8% of rural students in Colombia completed upper secondary education, earning the qualifications necessary to advance into the HE sector should they desire (The World Bank, 2020). This contrasts with the completion rate of urban students at this level, who attained upper secondary achievement at a rate of 78.3% in the same year. Further, only 15.5% of rural students attended an HEI, whereas 72.9% of students from urban areas were registered and attending.

Within rural areas, many of the residents live in poverty. In fact, in 2017, these individuals experienced more than twice the amount of poverty in their communities than those in urban areas of the country (Radinger et al., 2018). This presents a large problem with promoting equal access to education across Colombia. Regional disparities between not only infrastructure and HEIs in rural vs urban areas exist, but there are also few current ways to connect rural and urban living. This essentially isolates each ideology and promotes the separation of class and people based on geographical location.

Because of issues with achieving equal education, in 2016, Colombia saw only 25% of the poorest population attending a university, a stark comparison to 61% of the richest population attending (Valenzuela & Yáñez, 2022). Further, between urban and rural areas, there was a 20% higher net enrollment rate in the former, contributing to systemic inequality. These statistics highlight the country's deep SES inequalities across its incredibly diverse population. Further, in 2018, only 30% of the country's population was accounted for living in a rural area, with between 60-70% of the country's municipalities counting as rural areas. The number of rural-dwelling individuals has rapidly decreased. And in 2021, only 18% of the Colombian population remained rural, despite large geographic capabilities to house rural communities (The World Bank, 2021).

Education holds a special place in the country as Colombia aims to become the most educated Latin American country by 2025 (Ministério de Educación, 2016). This is reflected in cities like the metropolis Medellín, which heavily invests in HE (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018). Due to the city's targeted educational investments, in 2019 Medellín received a Learning City Award from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2019). This recognized the city for its good educational practices, quality education, and opportunities for educational growth on a global scale. Further, the city joined the United Nations (UN) Education 2030 Agenda, Cities and Education 2030, which promotes universal access to education through research and practice (International Institute for Educational Planning, 2021). The inclusion of the Colombian metropolis strengthens its hold in the global educational environment and further backs the country's extreme growth in the same area.

This comes in stark contrast to rural educational attainment across the country. These areas have completely different educational environments. In rural Colombia, any educational institutions may be difficult to find, difficult to fund, and difficult to staff. The lack of these institutions may be due to funding, SES, and geographical segregation that does not impact urban students and those from higher SES, as they can easily garner access to resources pooled by their heavily funded institutions. Those from rural, often poorer areas, are left to overcome many barriers to educating students. Overall, these factors delineate proper operation within a lower level of advantage, thereby offering students fewer social and academic resources for success (Radinger et al., 2018).

Further, students from rural areas tend to underestimate the importance of HE in association with economic mobility. They also may simply express interest in different forms of capital, causing them to not be interested in attending HE in the first place (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018). These both lower the overall expectation of academic success in the student and their family and increase the gap between SES in rural and urban areas. As the gap between HEIs grows in rural vs urban areas, as does the educational attainment of students in these areas and further the pursuit of HE and social mobility opportunities.

There is a lack of HEIs and a lack of HE relevancy in rural areas across. Due to issues in the education system, low rates of literacy and English skills (Avendano-Uribe et al., 2022; Benavides, 2021), the presence of diverse populations, and the high cost of education (Salmi & D'Addio, 2020) many students in rural areas struggle to even pass lower-secondary education. As such, funding HEI in these areas without a prominent student body

population is not pertinent. Further, the social capital valued in rural areas may not be aligned with the traditionally taught in HEIs (Gamboa & Rodríguez-Lesmes, 2018). This may cause students from these areas to lack the transferable skills needed for success in HE. Alongside the difficulty with funding institutions, staffing HEI in rural Colombia may prove difficult. Teachers and professors often acknowledge the importance of developing rural education. However, many may not want to move to areas where their social mobility might be halted, and where a lack of training and infrastructure exists to successfully support their role in the student's lives (Salmi & D'Addio, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Both the US and Colombian context of HE has significance in the overall landscape of HE literature and practice. Despite distinct social and educational differences, both countries rely heavily on the growth of HE to remain relevant in the ever-competitive global economy. However, in intense international growth and internal focus, both the US and Colombia must build infrastructure across SES. Namely, this must occur in the development of their rural populations' educational outcomes to better address overlooked problems associated with the urbanization of the countries. It is important to highlight the need for educational focuses that support rural populations, allowing them equal access to education, regardless of their social, cultural, economic, or geographical backgrounds. These backgrounds can act as a barrier to student success in HEI and with lower educational outcomes overall. While this exists for various reasons, its outcomes remain the same: stagnant social mobility and a lack of upward momentum. In turn, this contributes to a class divide spanning borders and the isolation of populations based on components unfair to them.

The overall outlook of HE and rural achievement is notably stalled worldwide. However, the US and Colombia have taken steps to address their rural citizens' need for access to HE. In the US, policies and institutional suggestions are geared towards ensuring the mobility of coursework, making Internet and Wifi available to rural students, connecting the students to Internet resources, and ensuring the sense of community fostered in the rural US is valued in education (Ratledge et al., 2020). These steps can potentially have the potential to create lasting changes not only in the countries but also in the global context.

As the government does not directly monitor HEIs in the country, there are few, if any, federally mandated policies for increasing the quality of rural education. The federal government invests monetarily in the country's HE in the form of grants, like the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation grant, which provides monetary relief to strengthen educational infrastructure. Various regional approaches have also been created to approach the problem (Davis et al., 2019), such as the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (n.d.), and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MRDC) (Ratledge et al., 2020). Both private programs provide suggestions, resources, and successes to and for HEI in the rural US.

Most of the responses to promoting rural education in Colombia are sanctioned by the government. Three of the biggest of these are the Special Rural Education Plan, the Programa Todos a Aprender, and Escuela Nueva. Each approaches rural education from a unique standpoint. The Special Rural Education Plan exists to close gaps between rural and urban educational attainment and is a countrywide commitment (Radinger et al., 2018). The MEN implements the Programa Todos a Aprender and approaches the problem from a teaching standpoint. It develops teachers within rural environments, prepares them professionally, and aims to reduce achievement gaps between rural and urban schools. Finally, Escuela Nueva is one of the country's most well-known educational approaches and is a model of multigrade teaching that supports rural and remote learning from a flexible standpoint.

The US and Colombia have taken significant steps to improve the HE environment in recent years. This is encouraging as both countries have a competitive edge in the global HE landscape and may act as catalysts to elicit educational change in the Americas. Future research on rurality and HE is highly relevant to assisting both countries in educating their populations at the highest levels possible. Further, analyses between the two countries should be continually conducted to ensure the globalization of educational practices and cultural open-mindedness, and to provide fresh ways to support student success for all potential learners.

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