

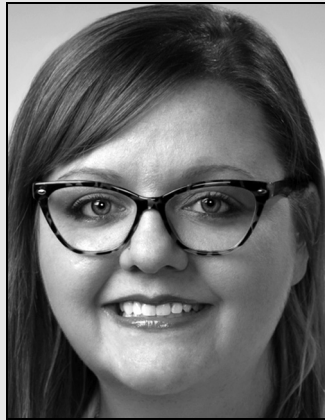
Discovering a Digital Oasis

Rural Education Students and Online Education

Ashley Stone and Natalie B. Milman

Online education is often touted as a way to increase access to higher education for all learners, no matter where they live. For rural students, online education provides the potential for them to earn degrees and specialize in areas that they might not ever be able to, particularly for those who reside in what some describe as education deserts.

According to Hillman and Weichman (2016), education deserts “are places with either of the following two conditions: (1) Zero colleges or universities are located nearby, or (2) One community college is the only public broad-access institution nearby” (p. 4). However, many rural areas are also the location of digital deserts, “area[s] without a single internet service



Ashley Stone,
Assistant Professor of Higher Education,
George Washington University,
2134 G ST, NW, Washington, DC.
Telephone: 202-994-3306.
Email: ashley_stone@gwu.edu



Natalie B. Milman,
Professor of Education Technology,
George Washington University,
2134 G ST, NW, Washington, DC 20052.
Telephone: (202) 994-1884.
Email: nmilman@gwu.edu

provider" (Denson, 2019). For example, the United States Department of Agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.) acknowledged that "80% of the 24 million American households that do not have reliable, affordable high-speed internet are in rural areas" (para. 2). Additionally, "24% of rural adults say access to high-speed internet is a major problem in their local community" (Anderson, 2018, para. 1). Still, if internet infrastructure access challenges can be addressed and digital deserts reduced, the potential to provide access to education and training to those residing in rural communities is an area ripe for growth in the online education market.

While people from rural communities have historically enrolled in higher education at lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts, the percentage of rural students seeking a postsecondary degree is increasing (Legutko, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Furthermore, with high graduation rates, stakeholders in higher education are beginning to recognize the value of recruitment in rural communities to meet enrollment challenges (Texas A&M University Bush School of Government and Public Service, 2014). Moreover, there is a great deal of opportunity for displaced workers when we think of the need for workforce development, particularly considering the need for professional development and training will likely only grow.

WHAT DOES "RURAL" MEAN?

What rural means and how it is defined has evolved over the years and continues to differ across government departments and agencies. Many of these organizations use urban-centric definitions that focus on defining what should be considered urban and labeling everything that falls outside of that definition as rural. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) revised its definition in 2006, creating locale-based categories defined primarily

by the size of the population and distance from urban areas. Furthermore, subcategories for cities and suburbs are based specifically on population size, and the subcategories for towns and rural communities are determined by their distance from the nearest urban area. Some scholars view these definitions as too narrow. For example, MacGregor-Fors and Vázquez (in press) recommended:

a hierarchical, context-dependent, and integrative framework that considers an urban–nonurban dichotomy followed by a trichotomy based on human presence and activities, encompassing all social and ecological systems on Earth.

This approach pushes beyond understanding rural and urban spaces based solely on population size or density and allows for nuance in understanding what it means to be rural from one region to another.

RURAL STUDENTS' AFFORDANCES

Too often, the focus on rural students is on their deficits or the barriers they encounter to education. While rural students are not a monolith, one common characteristic among those from rural spaces is a strong attachment to the place and people of their community (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Longhurst, 2017; Wright, 2012). This attachment can be the result of strong social bonds within rural communities because of tightly-knit social structures where peoples' lives overlap in multiple ways, and "everyone knows everyone" (Stone, 2017; Wright, 2012). Moreover, students from rural areas "have 'a unique perspective.... In terms of diversity, geography is just as important as racial and ethnic'" diversity (AAC&U News, 2017, para. 8). At the same time, higher education plays a strong role in outmigration from rural areas, with many who leave the community to pursue a postsecondary degree not returning (Petrin et al., 2014). With these affordances in mind, online

education offers an opportunity for people from rural communities to pursue a postsecondary degree or the development of knowledge for a changing economy, without having to leave their community.

With the great potential that lies in partnerships between colleges and universities that provide online learning opportunities and rural communities, both parties have a lot to gain by seeking out programs, such as the work being done by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, designed to expand the accessibility of broadband to rural areas to help them overcome the digital desert that currently separates them. By working together to overcome current infrastructure needs, online educators can gain access to an untapped market, and people from rural communities can gain access to knowledge and skills that can help them adapt to an ever-changing economy.

REFERENCES

- AAC&U News. (2017). *Perspectives—Expanding college opportunities for rural and working-class students*. <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/perspectives-expanding-college-opportunities-rural-and-working-class-students>
- Anderson, M. (2018). *About a quarter of rural Americans say access to high-speed internet is a major problem*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/10/about-a-quarter-of-rural-americans-say-access-to-high-speed-internet-is-a-major-problem/>
- Bryan, E., & Simmons, L. (2009). Family involvement: Impacts on postsecondary educational success for first-generation Appalachian college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(4), 391–406.
- Denson, J. (2019, September 18). *A parched country: Study shows digital deserts exist*. <https://connectednation.org/blog/2019/09/18/a-parched-country-study-shows-digital-deserts-exist/>
- Hillman, N., & Weichman, T. (2016). *Education deserts: The continued significance of “place” in the twenty-first century*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Education-Deserts-The-Continued-Significance-of-Place-in-the-Twenty-First-Century.pdf>
- Legutko, R. S. (2008). A decade’s difference: Research revisited on family influence of rural high school students’ postsecondary decisions. *The Rural Educator, 29*(2), 4–7.
- Longhurst, J. (2017). “To be there is important”: Place-attachment in rural community college students as motivation for staying local. *Texas Education Review, 5*(1), 24–39.
- MacGregor-Fors, I., & Vázquez, L. B. (in press). Revisiting ‘rural.’ *Science of the total environment*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.06.135>
- National Center for Educational Statistics, Department of Education. (n.d.). Rural Education in America—Definitions. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp>
- National Center for Educational Statistics, Department of Education. (2014). Percentage of persons ages 18–29 enrolled in colleges or universities, by age group, locale, and sex: 2012. http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/b.3.b.-1_2012.asp.
- Petrin, R., Schafft, K., & Meece, J. (2014). Educational sorting and residential aspirations among rural high school students: What are the contributions of schools and educators to rural brain drain? *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(2), 294–326.
- Stone, A. N. (2017). *Where no place is home: Understanding rural students in higher education* [Doctoral dissertation]. The University of Texas at Austin. UT Electronic Dissertations and Theses. <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/61547>
- Texas A&M University Bush School of Government and Public Service. (2014). *Post secondary completion in rural Texas: A statewide overview*. http://www.edtx.org/uploads/general/bush_school_final_report.pdf
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *Broadband*. <https://www.usda.gov/broadband>
- Wright, C. J. (2012). Becoming to remain: Community college students and post-secondary pursuits in central Appalachia. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 27*(6), 1–11.

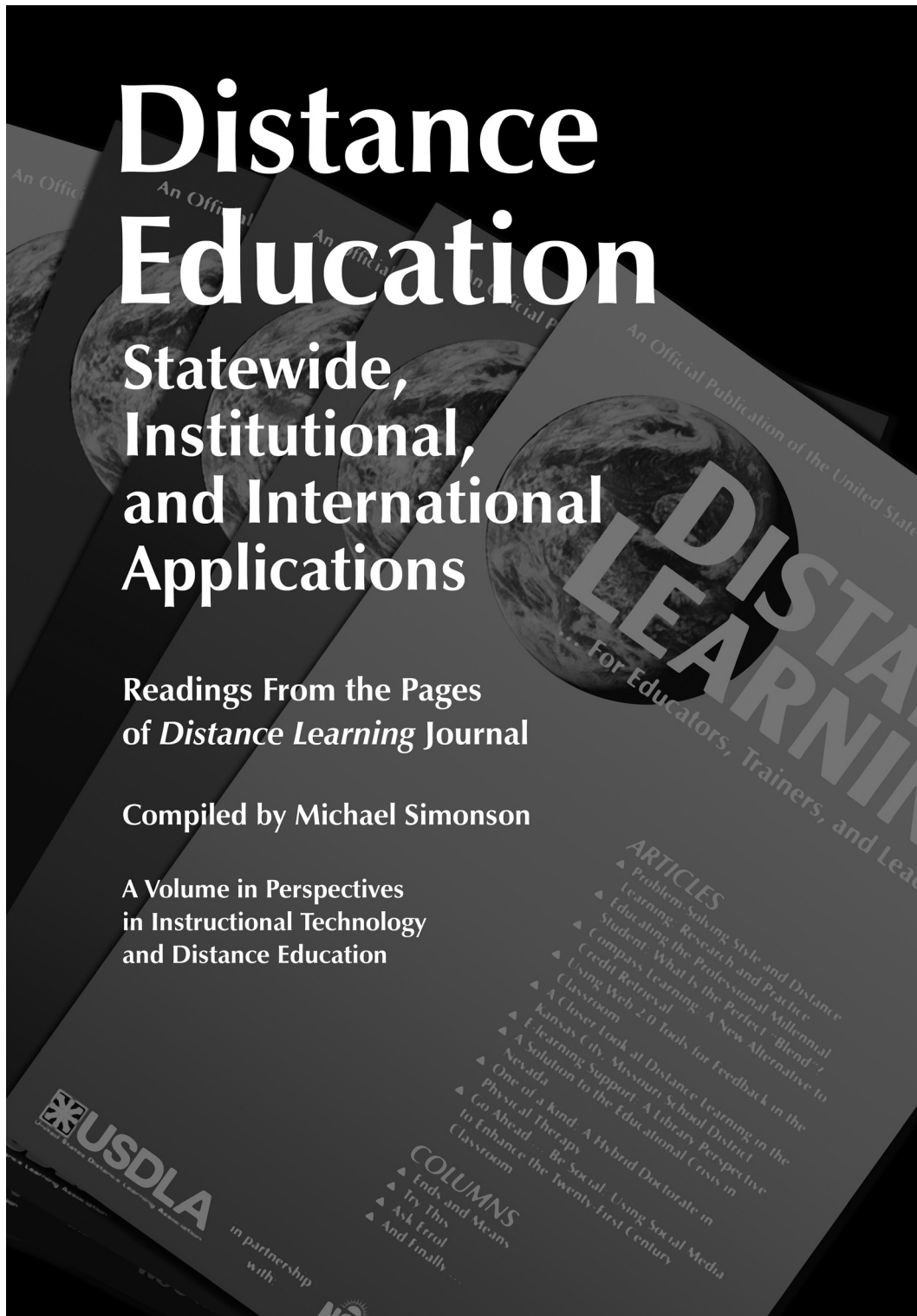
Distance Education

Statewide,
Institutional,
and International
Applications

Readings From the Pages
of *Distance Learning Journal*

Compiled by Michael Simonson

A Volume in Perspectives
in Instructional Technology
and Distance Education



Get Your Copy Today—www.infoagepub.com