



# Student's Perspective: Is There Room for Us at the Table? Being a College Student in Appalachia

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As a daughter of Appalachia, a rural student, and a journalist, I've spent a lifetime aware of the inequities that those of us in Western Maryland experience. Indeed, while living in one of the richest states in the country, we are often left behind ([U.S. News & World Report, 2019](#)). Allegany County, where I live and raise a family, is the only county that does not have a state-funded COVID-19 testing center. My county, the poorest in Maryland, struggles to fund emergency services and depends heavily on volunteer departments. We are under-represented in our state capitol in Annapolis, and those who represent us seem to be more interested in fighting for fracking and energy extraction than in addressing growing food insecurity and the opioid epidemic. We have one major university and two community colleges in our region.



Despite the few number of institutions of higher education, our community celebrates these campuses, relishing in them as community building centers of culture. At my university, locals attend nearly every live performance that the Department of Theatre and Dance can attract. When guest lecturers visit, they enjoy full crowds of eager intellectuals. Our Division II sports teams look into the crowd to see full bleachers and stadium seats. Allegany and Garrett Colleges are equally beloved and offer quality forestry, dental hygienist, and massage therapy programs. Whatever stereotype you've heard about rural folks rejecting education isn't one that lives here. However, our students face unique inequities that never seem to make it to the headlines.

## Feeling the “Otherness” and Distance

More students that attend my university are from Allegany County than any other county. This is not by accident. Local students often report feelings of anxiety and “otherness” when they consider attending large, urban campuses further downstate. For a population that isn’t served by reliable public transportation, deciphering a bus map can be alienating. Moreover, the cost of a four-year institution is insurmountable for some, especially for first-generation college students.

Also, while academic ability is equally distributed throughout our state, opportunity is not. For me, growing up in this area, I had only one classmate attend the flagship University of Maryland at College Park and he enrolled because he received an athletic scholarship. My partner, an Appalachian transplant who grew up in Germantown, Maryland, says that UMD was the “default” school for his classmates. Do not be fooled into thinking this is mere proxemics at work, however. Rural high school students aren’t recruited by urban campuses, by and large. Traveling down I-68 isn’t cost-effective for recruiters, and with fewer students to meet overall, the equation never seems to balance.

Most of us don’t have any regrets about staying close enough to home to enjoy Sunday dinners with our families. But we can’t help but wonder...what if? What if I had known about the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at College Park where over 12 languages are taught at the undergraduate level, whereas my university doesn’t even employ a full-time Spanish professor? What could I have become if I had been aware of the opportunities available to me?

## Student Involvement in Decision-Making

One of the misconceptions about higher education is that there is an ongoing turmoil of ideas and philosophy, that students and faculty alike share in this struggle as they reach ever closer to enlightenment. Higher ed as I know it is the ceaseless turmoil in pursuit of funding, increased retention rates, and recruitment. As such, top-down leadership dominates our campus. The student government, though a sterling bunch, fights for a seat at the table but often learns of campus decisions in the local newspaper long after they’ve been decided.

While transparency and student engagement in decision-making was always lacking at my university, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this issue. One example of this was the planned reopening of campus in fall 2020. With two months’ notice, and without soliciting a single student opinion, our campus president announced that the semester start would be moved up by two weeks from August 31 to August 17. For low-income students, this spelled disaster. How would they afford a semester at school without the two weeks of income they needed to save from their summer jobs? To add insult to injury, it was announced that 75% of classes would have an in-person component. For students with children who are attending public school virtually for the foreseeable future, the decision was met with frustration and anger. Despite calls for the administration to seek

student input moving forward, just last week a COVID-19 virtual coffee hour with the president was announced with only a day's notice. Even those with an earnest interest in staying informed and participating in the decision-making process are disenfranchised.

I do not doubt that a lack of transparency is an issue experienced elsewhere. Without another university to compete for students in the region, my school and other rural colleges seem emboldened to eschew traditional higher ed norms of inclusivity and consensus. Students are already a vulnerable population. By not including us in decision-making, especially amid a pandemic, the message we are receiving from our administration is: "We need your money; we don't need your consent."

Such exclusivity exacerbates our feelings of disenfranchisement. From the community and family engagement perspective, leaving students, especially non-traditional students, out of decision-making processes reminds us that our perspective matters less than others'. Without asking for our input, faculty and state administrators make decisions on our behalf that affect our ability to care for our families and to improve our educational and economic opportunities.

## **What It Means to Be a Non-Traditional Student at a Rural College**

Approximately 1 in 6 students at my school is considered "non-traditional." This category includes students over 25-years old, veterans, and working parents who are enrolled either full- or part-time. Recognizing that these students are traditionally underserved, a newly formed non-traditional student organization conducted a campus-wide survey in March 2020, in order to better understand the gaps. Of the 47 responses, these were recurring themes:

Non-traditional students need a quiet area to relax and study in between classes as these students don't have dorm rooms to retreat to. One student wrote, "Having this space would make me feel connected to campus because I wouldn't feel out of place. I would know there is a specific area for students like me that I would be able to interact and connect with."

- Greater flexibility in scheduling would be helpful for working parents who struggle to attend classes during the normal workday. Not addressing this issue has resulted in students finding it difficult to finish their degree on time and has decreased overall retention rates.
- Students have requested assistance with connecting to internship programs that admit students over the age of 25. One student wrote, "Every internship I've looked at I've been too old for."
- Meal and drink options that are less expensive is an identified need. Several students remarked that Starbucks is cost-prohibitive; just having access to a coffee pot would be an improvement.

While all of these factors impact non-traditional students, the most pressing need is for child care.

## Missing Out on Child Care, Health Care, Library Services and More

The university once had a University Children's Center which provided high-quality, low-cost care for the children of university students, staff, and faculty. Years ago, due to increases in insurance premiums, the center was closed and subsequently demolished. Child care has not been offered on campus since.



In our rural setting, child care is relegated mostly to daycare centers operated out of an individual's home. While these caregivers, mostly middle-aged to older women, are loving and kind to our kids, they offer limited educational programming and can be expensive. Often local community college and university students are forced to rely on elderly family members or neighbors to care for their children while they take courses. Worse yet, some parents have to take their children with them to class. Lucky for me, when I couldn't find child care during a required class in fall 2019, my professor welcomed my nine year-old daughter to sit in with us every Monday and Wednesday for 15 weeks. What if my professor had turned down my plea? The course I needed to take is only offered in the fall, every other year and my graduation would have been significantly delayed. Had it been a lab course, taking my little sidekick along wouldn't have been an option.

Ultimately, there are more rural equity issues than could possibly fit on these pages. For one, my university student body is diverse, with 48% of students being of a minority demographic, nearly 30% of which are Black students. Meanwhile, our faculty and staff is over 90% White and the university and local police forces are almost entirely White. Rural students in our state do not enjoy the benefits of the labs and libraries that our metro counterparts do, although the university is a member institution of the University System of Maryland. Our students do not have access to adequate health services either, as low-cost clinics do not put up shop in Allegany and Garrett counties. Indeed, these imbalances are just the tip of the iceberg.

We are living through the most difficult time in recent human history: a pandemic, visceral political division, rampant racial inequality, climate change, and the list goes on. As we search for the solutions to these challenges, we'd be well-served to address rural issues. Indeed, the coalition for equity needs every voice to be represented and my Appalachian neighbors and I have a lot to say.

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