Social Constructions of Rurality: A Case Study in Institutional Policy Design

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Data on postsecondary degree attainment show persistent equity gaps between rural and nonrural student demographics. Accordingly, colleges and universities throughout the United States are now recognizing the need for more explicit support of rural stakeholders. These efforts are spurred by political shifts that have foregrounded the concerns of rural peoples in the United States and drawn rural spaces into the center of policy discourse. Policymakers seeking to further support rural demographics often face challenges, particularly in operationalizing rurality as a policy construct. This case study analyzes the development of a rural equity initiative—the Engage Program—at pseudonymous Southern State University, a public land-grant university in the Southeastern United States. By applying Schneider and Ingram's policy design lens, the author explores the ways in which campus administrators wrestle with and help to produce—or reproduce—social constructions of rurality. The results suggest that rural equity initiatives may serve to introduce rurality into mainstream conversations about campus diversity, helping to further crystallize rural identities on college campuses and, by extension, within society at large.

For decades, scholars have documented persistent inequities related to college access and degree completion among rural stakeholders in the United States. Such findings include limited physical access to postsecondary institutions (Hillman, 2016; Turley, 2009), differing sociocultural perspectives regarding the value of a college degree (Corbett, 2007; Fouriezos, 2022c), and lower levels of college enrollment overall (Koricich et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2019). National data on rural college-going illustrate a complicated picture, with recent analyses by Wells and colleagues (2019) showing that college enrollment and degree completion rates increased for rural high school graduates from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2021) found that gaps in college degree attainment among all adults aged 25 and older appeared to be widening between rural and urban communities, with nearly 35% of urban residents now holding a college degree vs. only 21% of rural residents. These trends highlight the complexity of the educational landscape in the rural United States—a complexity further substantiated by the considerable diversity of the physical, demographic, and economic landscape of rural settings (C. Bailey et al., 2014). Although rural America is far from monolithic, data suggest distinct differences in educational opportunity structures in rural settings that further reproduce inequities in human capital development for rural residents (McNamee, 2019; Parsons, 2022). Although postsecondary institutions are making gains in supporting rural students, analyses consistently show that college degree attainment in rural settings generally lags behind that of nonrural settings.

Efforts to serve rural students face unique complications, including the fact that many rural students find themselves torn between the pursuit of higher education and the seemingly more pragmatic pathway of joining the local workforce immediately after high school (Burnell, 2003; Corbett, 2007). Rural student identities may also undergo considerable change throughout college (Christiaens, 2015), and the departure from intimate small-town settings can be a jarring experience for some (Maltzan, 2006). In one analysis, Maltzan (2006) described how participants in her study languished during the transition to college as their core sense of self was disrupted upon departure

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from the "rural gaze" of their small hometown in Ohio. Other researchers have documented the experiences of rural college students who struggled to adjust to their new community and/or academic environments (Dees, 2006; Schultz, 2004). Negative stereotypes associated with rurality (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014) can also present challenges, and scholars have found that rural students may encounter barriers to belonging on campus or outright hostility based on characteristics commonly associated with rurality—such as having a "country accent" (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016).

Since the U.S. presidential election of 2016, the movement to enhance college access for rural students has gained significant traction, with numerous institutions adding targeted programs to facilitate rural student degree attainment (Kowalski, 2017; Pappano, 2017). Such efforts may partially be a response to a rising populist movement—a political worldview grounded in anti-elitist and anti-establishment ideologies (Molloy, 2018) and frequently associated with rural and/or working-class voters (Munis & Jacobs, 2022; O'Connor, 2020; Waller et al., 2017). Indeed, recent polls have indicated a growing mistrust in postsecondary education, with 56% of adults indicating that a four-year degree was "not worth the cost" compared to 40% of adults a decade ago (Meyer, 2023). Given these dynamics, and an increasing media focus on the barriers to college degree attainment for rural students (Blumenstyk, 2020; Fouriezos, 2022a, 2022c; Pappano, 2017), postsecondary institutions are considering strategies to enhance outreach to rural communities and cultivate a more welcoming campus climate for rural students. Notable examples have included new access and/or support programs for rural students at Texas A&M University, the University of Michigan, and the University of North Carolina (Luna-Torres, 2021; Nadworny, 2018; University of North Carolina System, 2017) and collaborative multi-institutional initiatives such as the Small Town and Rural Students (STARS) College Network (Greenberg, 2023). These targeted programs, collectively referred to in this study as *rural equity initiatives*, are often executed alongside an array of other identity-based campus programs such as those for first-generation students or racially minoritized students.

In addition to institutional programs aimed at enhancing college access for rural students, there are also significant national policy efforts to bolster rural institutions themselves. Perhaps one of the most significant recent policy developments is the dramatic expansion of place-based economic development (Feldman, 2022) through the landmark CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. According to the Biden administration, this landmark bill will "ensure the future is made in ALL of America, and unlock opportunities in science and technology for those who have been historically left out" (White House, 2022). For postsecondary institutions, a key element of the CHIPS and Science Act is the establishment of the Regional Innovation Engines program within the National Science Foundation (NSF). As the name implies, the NSF Engines program is intended to bolster the nation's economic competitiveness through inclusive economic growth within "regions that have not fully participated in the technology boom of the past few decades" (NSF, n.d.) including diverse geographies throughout the United States as well as expanded access for small businesses, two-year colleges, and minority-serving institutions. Together, alongside other place-based policy initiatives and infrastructure investments (Buscaglia & Chapman, 2023)—such as the push to expand broadband access throughout the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022)—the CHIPS and Science Act epitomizes a growing focus on rural Americans within the national policy landscape.

Another significant example is the work of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC; Koricich et al., 2022), which recently proposed an evidence-based framework for defining rural-serving postsecondary institutions (RSIs). Highlighting the important role that such institutions serve in supporting the "educational opportunity, social development, and well-being of rural communities" (Koricich et al., 2022, p. 5), the ARRC research team employed a combination of metrics such as the rurality of the surrounding region, adjacency to a metropolitan area, and the percentage of credentials awarded in fields of "unique rural importance" (Koricich et al., 2022, p. 10)—such as agriculture or natural resource management—to create RSI scores for over 2,500 two- and four-year institutions. The resulting metric was used to identify 1,087 RSIs—with 505 institutions being classified as "High RSIs"—to enable further discourse on research, policy, practice, and philanthropy related to this subsector of higher education. As the ARRC report highlights, more than two thirds of postsecondary institutions in persistent poverty counties are RSIs, and such institutions are often uniquely reliant on state appropriations. The ARRC research team also found that RSIs enrolled disproportionately greater shares of Pell grant recipients as well as Native American or Alaska Native students (Koricich et al., 2022). The RSI framework offers an important extension to existing rural education research, which largely focuses upon rural students and communities and not on higher education institutions themselves.

As highlighted by the work of the ARRC research team—and many prior rural education scholars (see Manly et al., 2019)—the highly subjective nature of defining rurality often makes it challenging to operationalize in scholarly discourse as well as policy analysis. To cite one example, the Center on Rural Innovation (2019) identified more than 10 working definitions of rurality employed by federal agencies and rural policy organizations across the United States. These

range from the four-part locale coding (e.g., rural, town, suburb, city) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which categorizes rural locales as those outside of urbanized areas of 2,500 residents or more (NCES, n.d.), to the broader metropolitan-nonmetropolitan distinction of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which distinguishes between metropolitan core-based statistical areas, micropolitan counties with small urbanized areas, and completely nonmetropolitan counties (Cromartie & Vilorio, 2019). Within rural education research, defining rurality can be even more subjective—with a substantial number of researchers allowing participants to self-identify as rural or using more parochial state/local definitions of rurality to organize their studies (Sowl & Crain, 2021). Given the growing focus on rural students, researchers are continuing to assess the policy implications of these various definitions (Manly et al., 2019). Aside from understanding how various policy constructs impact key outcomes—such as postsecondary enrollment or degree attainment—it is also important to consider how such policies shape the lived experiences of constituents. A more focused application of policy theory, for instance, may shed light on the interplay between policy development/implementation and constituent engagement with the policy landscape, as well as how such policies shape social perceptions of rural Americans themselves.

To further explore these dynamics, this article presents results from a case study of a rural equity initiative pseudonymously referred to as the Engage Program at Southern State University. The findings within this article are drawn from a larger comparative case study of two rural equity initiatives at public land-grant universities in the Southeastern United States. By applying Schneider and Ingram's (1997) policy design lens to this case study, the author explores the ways in which campus administrators leading rural equity initiatives wrestle with and help to produce—or reproduce—social constructions of rurality. This approach provides a unique contribution to existing scholarly literature, as the use of policy design theory allows researchers to methodically assess the policymaking process itself. This work examines not only the social constructions of rurality, but also the institutional context and the rationales employed by institutional practitioners—whom policy researchers might refer to as "street-level bureaucrats" (Hupe, 2019)—all of which play an important role in policymaking systems. A critical aspect of the present study's research design is the conceptualization of *institutional programs* as a form of *public policy*—that is to say, rural equity initiatives serve as a means by which societal resources (e.g., postsecondary education at a public university) are delivered to a particular target population (e.g., rural students). Key research questions driving this study are:

- How and why is rurality operationalized as a policy target demographic at Southern State University?
- How are social constructions of rurality reproduced through the policy design process?
- What is the value of policy design theory in understanding rural equity initiatives?

The results of this study suggest that rural equity initiatives, like other identity-based programs, may serve to introduce rurality into mainstream conversations about campus diversity, helping to further crystallize rural identities on college campuses and—by extension—within society at large. However, there are important risks and challenges that must also be considered when leveraging social constructions of rurality to implement new policy designs targeting rural constituents. The systematic policy analysis presented within this study is also timely given the recent decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to disallow race-based admissions practices in higher education (Ax, 2023). Although the present study was completed prior to this ruling, readers may consider how policy analyses at the campus level may be useful in further understanding the evolving discourse on campus diversity and identity-based college access programs, including those for rural students.

Background: Public Policy and Rural Educational Inequities

The background for this study includes a growing body of literature on the barriers to college degree attainment for rural students, and a clear lack of research on the role of public policy in this arena. For decades—and arguably beginning with the Morrill Land Grant Act in 1862—policymakers have been exploring ways to bolster college degree attainment among rural stakeholders. Periodically this discourse has occupied a central role on the national stage (L. H. Bailey, 1915), while at other times the issue of rural educational equity has been championed predominantly by state policymakers or grassroots organizers (DeYoung, 1987). In the present moment, interest in rural educational reform is enjoying a resurgence, and the movement has become closely intertwined with the U.S. political landscape after the ascendance of President Donald Trump and the years following the U.S. presidential election of 2016 (O'Connor, 2020; Waller et al., 2017). The Trump political regime has frequently been framed—accurately or not—as a movement grounded in rural ideologies (McGreal, 2020; Van Dam, 2018), and educational attainment has also increasingly been explored as a growing point of demarcation for political ideology in the United States (Fouriezos, 2022b; Pew Research Center, 2016). Further

connecting these threads is an increasing focus on K–12 and higher education as a political battleground among elected officials, including prominent issues such as college access and affordability; student debt; diversity, equity, and inclusion practices; and the politicization of educational curriculum (Lu, 2023; Potts, 2022; Sherman, 2021; Sprunt, 2021).

These issues are foregrounded by persistent and longstanding gaps in college degree attainment among rural stakeholders. An analysis of national longitudinal data by Koricich and colleagues (2018) found that rural youth were only 86% as likely as nonrural youth to enroll in postsecondary education after high school. Furthermore, rural youth were disproportionately underrepresented within certain postsecondary settings, such as research universities. Other researchers have found similar evidence, showing that rural high school graduates were disproportionately overrepresented in community college settings (Byun et al., 2017). These trends in postsecondary enrollment are supported by a number of analyses showing that rural students' educational aspirations may be dramatically shaped by local community context, attachment to place, parental education levels, or demographic traits such as race, ethnicity, and gender (Agger et al., 2018; Cabrera et al., 2012; Howley, 2006; Means, 2019; Petrin et al., 2014). Some researchers have indicated that the persistent stratification between rural and nonrural college degree attainment may be caused by the physical distribution of college campuses across the United States—making it logistically more difficult for many rural students to explore or enroll in postsecondary institutions that are based in urban or suburban locales (Hillman, 2016; Klasik et al., 2018; Turley, 2009).

Scholars have also explored at length other potential causes of reduced participation rates in postsecondary education among rural students, with a particular emphasis on economic, academic, and social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; McNamee, 2019) as well as the opportunity structures within rural communities themselves (Parsons, 2022). One ethnographic study of a rural fishing village in Canada found that rural students often felt alienated by formal education systems designed to funnel them away from their community (Corbett, 2007). Similarly, Carr and Kafalas (2009) found that community members in rural Iowa were often guilty of self-sabotaging their town by helping to "launch" promising rural youth toward college and career opportunities further afield. In many instances, researchers have highlighted push-and-pull tensions between opportunities within the local workforce and postsecondary educational pathways that often require students to move away from their established social networks (Burnell, 2003; Petrin et al., 2014). Conversely, rural students who do wish to pursue postsecondary education may be hampered not only by physical distance from a college campus, but also by limited college-preparatory curricular offerings; forms of cultural capital that are misaligned with the types of capital needed to navigate college pathways; or social networks that are limited in terms of their ability to support postsecondary aspirations, enrollment, and persistence (Ardoin, 2018; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; McNamee, 2019; Means et al., 2016). A study by Tieken (2020), for example, found that rural parents often struggled to support their students through the process of enrolling in a private, selective college. However, parents were able to provide valuable forms of emotional support and serve as partners throughout the college search—demonstrating the complex and sometimes hidden nature of social capital for rural students.

Land-grant universities are a particularly significant location for examining the issue of college access for rural students, as such institutions were founded with a distinctive charge to disseminate research to the public and provide training in applied agricultural and industrial career fields (Sorber, 2018). To achieve this aim, land-grant universities deploy a unique cooperative extension service that extends their functions of teaching, research, and service to numerous locations throughout their respective states (McDowell, 2001). Although such universities are often conceptualized as serving a broad constituency—including both rural and urban stakeholders—land-grant universities in recent years have become increasingly selective and more difficult to access (Burd, 2017; Douglass & Thomson, 2012). At the same time, such universities have been empirically demonstrated to be key sites for upward social mobility and the provision of "good value" postsecondary educational experiences (Taylor & Cantwell, 2018). The present study extends discourse on the land-grant mission through its focus on institutional stakeholders vs. centering accountability for postsecondary educational outcomes solely on rural students themselves.

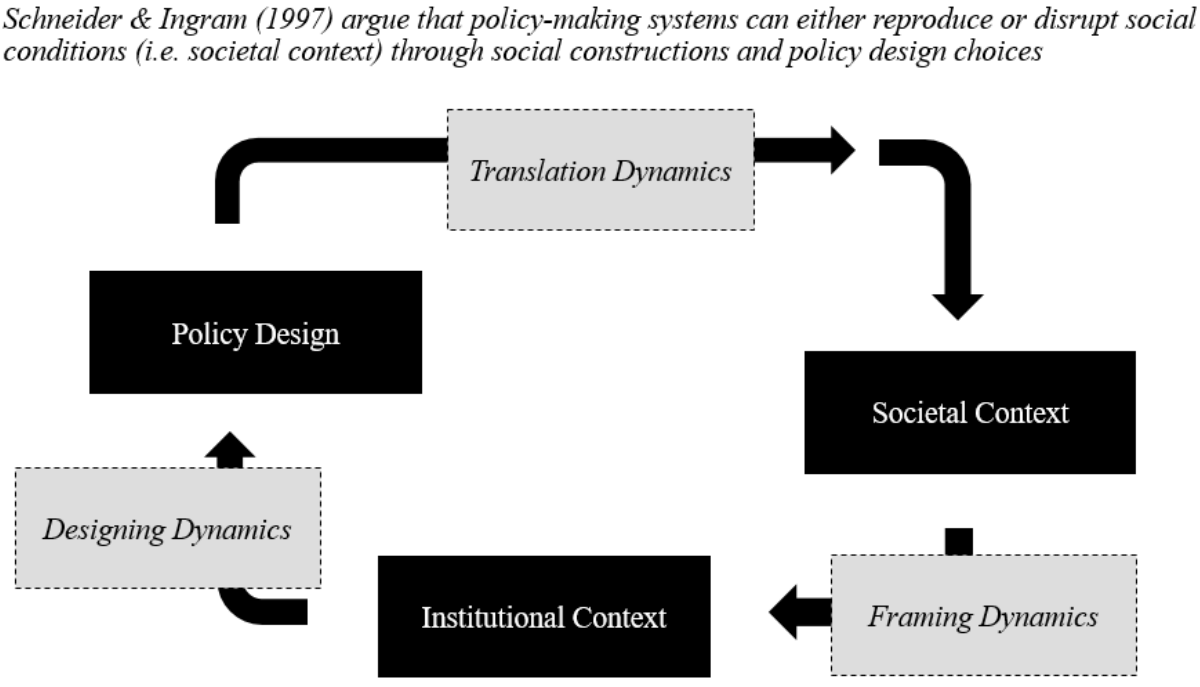
Finally, it is important to note the dearth of scholarly research on rural education policy, and particularly on college access for rural students. A recent systematic review of peer-reviewed research from the years 2000–2020 found that most studies on college access for rural students focused on rural students or rural communities themselves, often failing to interrogate the role of postsecondary institutions and/or public policies (Sowl & Crain, 2021). The authors also found that existing research often failed to connect rural college access findings to policy discourse, and that many relevant questions—such as rural student experiences with admissions or financial aid policies—remained relatively unexplored. A notable exception to this trend is the work of Long and colleagues (2010), who examined whether automatic admission policies in the state of Texas enhanced access to public flagship universities. Other researchers have

examined the impacts of a particular policy on rural students, such as changes to state higher education funding (Koh et al., 2019) or No Child Left Behind (Farmer et al., 2006; Jimerson, 2005). In another notable example, Rosenkoetter and colleagues (2010) examined the impact of a policy change that elevated minimum education requirements for Head Start educators in rural Native American communities. Most often, however, rural education researchers do not center policy questions directly but seek to extrapolate policy implications within the discussion sections of their studies (Ardoin, 2018; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Means et al., 2016). Additional research that centers rural students within policy discourse would be immensely valuable to understanding how public policy mitigates—or deepens—longstanding inequities within rural education. The present study seeks to partially bridge this divide by assessing an institution-level rural equity initiative through the lens of policy design theory.

Theoretical Framework

The core theoretical framework for this study is Schneider and Ingram's (1997) policy design theory. Schneider and Ingram's theory is based upon a social constructionist ontology which seeks to understand how policy designs emerge from a particular social context and, in turn, serve to alter or reproduce this context through complex policymaking systems. As shown in Figure 1, public policy challenges emerging from societal context are first operationalized through leveraging particular narratives about the target demographics (*framing dynamics*) and evaluating the political risks and benefits of various policy design choices (*designing dynamics*). The institutional context—in this case, a land-grant university in the Southeastern United States—further shapes the discourse between these framing and designing dynamics. Once a policy design is ultimately identified and implemented,

Figure 1
Conceptual Elements of Policymaking Systems



there is also the potential to explore the downstream effects (*translation dynamics*) of the policy. For instance, does the policy disrupt existing narratives about its target demographic(s)? Does it reduce inequity? Or does the policy reproduce these conditions in some way? Each of these aspects of the policymaking system may be examined more closely by using the conceptual tools of policy design theory.

The underlying premise of the policy design theoretical approach is that traditional political science theories—such as pluralism—do not account for the importance of social constructions within political discourse or acknowledge the power that such narratives hold (Smith, 2020). In fact, Schneider and Ingram (1997) contended that negative social constructs about certain demographics—and the policy designs that reinforce them—may lead to *degenerative policy contexts* in which these constructs are internalized and cause target demographics to disengage from the public sphere altogether. One might argue that this dynamic is evidenced by the lagging participation rates of rural students in higher education and the underrepresentation of rural students in certain educational venues (e.g., research universities; Koricich et al., 2018) which may be internalized as "not for them."

Schneider and Ingram (1997) employed a four-part typology (see Figure 2) to characterize how target demographics are positioned according to policymaking narratives. These characterizations are developed through consideration of each demographics' degree of political power and their perceived level of deservedness for policy benefits—narratives which may change depending on shifting worldviews or ideologies of the political party that currently holds power. In this study, land-grant universities are conceptualized as key venues in which policy designs are created to allocate public resources toward rural constituents. In terms of educational equity, the long-term goal of such policy designs is to enhance support to rural stakeholders who are viewed as deserving of additional investment toward completion of postsecondary degrees.

Policy design theory also contemplates the role of policymaking *rationales* within policymaking systems. As defined by Schneider and Ingram (1997),

> Rationales are the explanations, justifications, or legitimations for the [policy] design itself or for some specific part of the design, such as the choice of target population, tools, rules, goals, or implementation structure. Assumptions are the underlying logic that ties the elements together. (p. 99)

One example of this concept is utilitarian rationales, which may emphasize measurable outcomes or clearly identifiable frameworks such as cost-benefit analyses. Policy design rationales vary widely and may be grounded in scientific progress, social justice, political ideology, due process, or serving the public interest. For policy designs that are intended to reproduce inequality, alternate rationales are often presented as a means of providing political cover. Policy rationales also link a policy design concept to its larger context, reflecting the operational norms of the institutions from which they emerge—akin to Bourdieu's

Figure 2
Policy Stakeholders Within the Policy Design Framework

Contenders (High Power, Low Deservedness) *Environmental Activists, Social Justice Advocates, Leftist Urban Enclaves (i.e., "Sanctuary Cities"), Moderate and Leftist National Media*	**Advantaged** (High Power, High Deservedness) *Veterans, Financial Elites, Far-Right Conservative Groups (i.e., Gun Owners, Anti-Abortion Activists), Right-wing Media*
Deviants (Low Power, Low Deservedness) *Prisoners, Immigrants*	**Dependents** (Low Power, High Deservedness) *Middle Class Families, Rural Americans, Blue-collar workers*

Note. Examples in this chart may be interpreted from the perspective of 2016–2020 U.S. political leadership (i.e., the Republican party) and the policy discourse adopted by this group. Rural stakeholders may alternately be conceptualized by Republicans as Dependents or Advantaged stakeholders, a reflection of their shifting status within society.

(1990) concept of the "logic of practice." Schneider and Ingram (1997) contended that "Rationales send messages to target populations and others about the values of society and the worth of various social groups in relation to such values" (p. 99). These concepts will be brought to bear in the present study, as the author explores not only the social constructions of rurality within one policymaking system but also the rationales which underpin the policy design process.

Data and Methods

The single case study analysis presented here is part of a larger comparative case study (Stake, 2006) featuring rural equity initiatives at two land-grant universities in the American Southeast. This study focuses on findings from one of these cases, pseudonymously referred to as the Engage Program at Southern State University, in order to fully elucidate the policy design mechanisms at play within this single case. Southern State University is a large, predominantly White land-grant research university within the southeastern town of Pinehurst. With an enrollment of over 30,000 students, Southern is home to an active community of traditionally aged undergraduate students and a diverse masters and doctoral student population. Culturally, the university is dominated by undergraduate student interests and is home to a substantial fraternity and sorority community and numerous other student organizations. Southern State University is also home to a nationally respected collegiate athletics program, with a particular emphasis on football. In recent years, the institution has become increasingly selective in terms of undergraduate admissions and at the time of this study boasted an incoming freshman class with a high school grade point average above 4.0. Pinehurst is situated within the rolling landscape of what is often called the Upland South. While the areas immediately surrounding the town are generally rural, the campus is located within a few hours of a major metropolitan center, and a large percentage of the student body is drawn from the affluent suburbs of this city.

With roughly 17% of the state's population living in rural settings (defined here using the OMB county-level definition for nonmetropolitan locales), approximately 15% of Southern State University's undergraduate student body hails from rural locales. A significant amount of the university's research activity is dedicated to supporting the state's agriculture sector, with growing research profiles in other domains such as the life sciences and engineering. Despite having relatively strong representation from rural communities among the student body, data from the institutional research office showed that rural students held significantly lower retention and graduation rates. For instance, incoming cohorts of rural students during the years 2008–2010 held four- and five-year graduation rates that were more than 6% lower than those of their urban counterparts. Rural minority students fared far worse during these same years, holding four-year graduation rates that were roughly 18% lower than those of urban White students. The case study presented here focuses specifically on the Engage Program, a new initiative developed several years ago to address institutional concerns about rural student recruitment and retention. Data presented within this study were collected during the second year of the Engage Program, at a time when the initiative was still being actively developed. Structured simultaneously as a recruitment tool, a scholarship program, and a broader community-building initiative for rural students at Southern State University, the Engage Program case included many stakeholder groups that ranged from rural students themselves to affiliated staff and administrators across the university.

Data Collection

The primary mode of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews with college administrators (3), college staff members (10), and students (4) who were connected to the Engage Program. One high school admissions counselor was also interviewed to explore external perspectives on the Engage Program and barriers to college access for rural students. Altogether, interviews were conducted with 18 participants, several of which were conducted as small focus groups of 2–3 participants. Participant sampling began with the director of the program and expanded organically via a snowball sampling approach until saturation had been achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Study participants were recruited because they were directly involved with the Engage Program (e.g., a program coordinator, task force member, or rural student participant) or in a closely intertwined functional area (e.g., admissions). The latter group was included because a key focus of the Engage Program is to signal to external stakeholders the institution's commitment to recruiting rural students. Aside from one African American staff member and one African American student participant, all other participants in the study were White. Many of the administrator and staff participants (7 out of 13) self-identified as having a rural background. The author used an external transcription service to process each interview and subsequently reviewed each transcript 2–3 times while completing the analysis. All data were organized and coded with the MaxQDA software package.

Aside from interview data, the use of observations and document analyses further enhanced the exploration of the case. An initial review of publicly available documents assisted in developing an early understanding of the case, and further documentary evidence was collected concurrent

to participant interviews. In total, 15 documents were reviewed as part of the Engage Program analysis, including program task force memos and PowerPoint presentations, website content, marketing collateral, assessment reports, and related materials (e.g., curriculum maps). Both participant and nonparticipant observations were conducted, including attendance at program planning meetings and informal interactions with rural students. Observations and documentary evidence helped contextualize findings within the case study or uncover new information that could be further explored during participant interviews (Simons, 2009).

Analytical Plan

The findings presented within this study were derived using a within-case descriptive analyses and a multiple-stage coding process for the Engage Program case (Stake, 2006). The dataset for the Engage Program was reviewed using first-round descriptive coding protocols, with subsequent thematic coding to distill the initial findings into cogent patterns (Miles et al., 2014). For example, initial coding themes may have included descriptive groupings such as "defining rural students" from a policy perspective or "experiences transitioning to college" for the rural students themselves. Thematic codes ultimately included more abstract notations within the data such as themes related to social or cultural capital or the translational dynamics of the Engage Program as an institutional policy. Memo writing, conducted throughout the data collection and coding process, was a vital exercise for tracking emergent themes within the case. The combination of data sources used in this study played an important role in the triangulation of research findings throughout the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Other validity mechanisms, such as member-checking and consideration of negative evidence (Simons, 2009), supported effective data collection and analysis. For example, at one point the researcher noticed that very few staff/administrator participants had mentioned racial dynamics related to the Engage Program's policy design, despite a key institutional report that highlighted disparities for rural students of color. The deployment of measures such as member-checking and follow-up interviews ultimately enriched the analysis within the study and enhanced the credibility of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Limitations

While the case study presented herein provides a comprehensive overview of the Engage Program and its emergence as an institutional policy design, the researcher acknowledges several key limitations. First and foremost, the nature of case study research is to produce a nuanced, yet context-specific analysis of a particular phenomenon (Simons, 2009). The present study highlights findings from one rural equity initiative at one land-grant university within one geographic context. These results are not intended to be broadly generalizable, and any extrapolations made from this study must bear this caveat in mind. Qualitative inquiry is also itself an exercise in social constructionism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, the findings presented herein are necessarily shaped by the researcher's positionality as a middle-aged, White, cisgender man who has lived experience in several rural contexts within the Southeastern and the Midwestern United States. The author also has only had firsthand experience with several public university settings throughout his life. Each of these factors shape the lens through which the research presented herein has been approached and should be held in consideration as the reader navigates the findings presented below.

Findings

Below is a summary of key findings from the case study of the Engage Program at Southern State University. Themes from the analysis are generally organized according to the conceptual elements of the policymaking system (Schneider & Ingram, 1997), including societal and institutional context, framing dynamics, designing dynamics, and translation dynamics. The analysis also explores the role of policymaking rationales exhibited by institutional actors as they navigated the Engage Program policymaking system.

Societal and Institutional Context

Interviews with students and staff highlighted tensions related to rural identity and rural student pathways through Southern State University. Many participants relayed challenges that appear in previous studies, including general anxiety about navigating a large campus environment and feeling unprepared for college coursework (Goldman, 2019). At times these experiences were quite hostile, such as when a student was told by a professor that she should "lose the accent" in order to be taken seriously—an expression of the popular imaginary often categorizing rurality as backwards or deviant (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014). Such challenges were increased by pressures from home, as student participants recounted conversations with parents who worried about their exposure to liberal ideologies or community members who told them that they were unlikely to be successful at Southern. Some of the biggest obstacles, however, were related to social connectivity. As related by Michelle, a Black student from a rural community, building a network upon arrival to the university was challenging:

> When I went to Southern, I think there were two people from my hometown already there…but they were two years ahead of me. So when I went into Southern, I knew probably four people there. And how many students are at Southern, like 30,000? That's a big jump. You go from knowing everybody in your hometown to knowing nobody at all. And you have the question, how do you form relationships?

Michelle's example and similar stories from other students highlight a unique disconnect in social capital for rural students, who often find it challenging to transition from settings with a relatively prescribed social network to one in which they must build their own networks (McNamee, 2019).

Conversations with Southern State University admissions staff and a rural high school counselor also surfaced themes highlighted in previous research on recruiting rural students. Such challenges include the need for both students and recruiters to negotiate greater physical distances to exchange information about college (Klasik et al., 2018), pressures on rural teens to enter the local workforce after high school graduation (Burnell, 2003), and cultural aversion toward postsecondary education (Corbett, 2007). Lorie, a high school counselor from a rural community several hours from Pinehurst, indicated that structural issues such as internet access, transportation, or access to AP coursework often shaped college-going decisions for her students. Referencing the challenge of transportation, Lorie pointed out that "[With] us being in a rural area, there's no public transportation that gets them to the places that have the colleges. If you can't walk, they don't go." Given these limitations, students exploring postsecondary options were often dependent on outreach from colleges to cultivate their aspirations and learn more about degree pathways:

> And just using [nearby technical college] as an example, they are very helpful because they will actually come to the school. They will make themselves available for students to schedule one-on-one sit-down meetings with them here at the school because transportation is a problem. They really kind of go out of the way, but they are the only ones that go out of the way. (Lorie)

With a growing understanding of these challenges, Southern State University has redoubled its efforts to reach out to rural high schools in the state. The university also offers a wide range of resources related to college access, student success, and/or diversity and inclusion. The latter programs include initiatives related to diversifying the undergraduate STEM pipeline and dedicated recruitment initiatives for Hispanic and African American students, all of which are based within Southern State University's diversity office. In a separate area of the university—the Academic Excellence Center—a growing number of scholarship programs provide targeted support for low-income students and first-generation students. The Academic Excellence Center is also home to various academic support services which include peer tutoring, summer bridge programs, and other educational outreach programs (e.g., TRIO). It is within this area of the university that Southern has recently created a new initiative—known as the Engage Program—to focus explicitly on rural students.

Framing Dynamics

The narratives used to shape policy discourse are referred to by Schneider and Ingram (1997) as framing dynamics, and these mechanisms are the means by which new social constructions are developed or existing social constructions are brought into play within policy discourse. When interviewed regarding their motivations for creating the Engage Program, starting approximately two years prior to this study, administrators at Southern highlighted emerging national discourse on rural America and the growing political importance of facilitating access for rural constituents in the state. As one administrator said, "[T]hose are our roots, you know … our roots are that everyone came to Southern." Rather than becoming an urban-serving university, "[W]e want to still stay the land-grant and the flagship university of the state." Particularly in light of Southern's increasingly selective admissions profile, administrators expressed concern that rural stakeholders across the state—stakeholders who represented an increasingly powerful political base—were feeling alienated by the university.

Given these concerns, as well as institutional norms at Southern State University concerning active engagement with national trends, campus leaders quickly subscribed to the idea of enhancing support for rural students. In fact, many members of the program task force used phrases such as "the stars aligned" or "the dominoes fell" to characterize the process by which the program rapidly coalesced. Several leading administrators convened a working group to develop a proposal for the Engage Program, and the idea was explored further by reviewing data on rural student outcomes at Southern. Descriptive statistics showed that rural students—and particularly rural students of color—held significantly worse graduation and withdrawal rates than students from urban locales. This process reflected a shared professional-utilitarian rationale (Schneider & Ingram, 1997) and a mutual understanding among institutional elites about the necessary path forward for program development. Larger framing dynamics such as the

institution's land-grant mission, national discourse on rural student success, and growing political tensions within the state were thus aligned with institutional norms surrounding the deployment of student success programming and historical data on inequitable outcomes for rural students—paving the way for the adoption of this new policy design.

These early conversations around the development of the Engage Program ultimately yielded a prototype for the new rural equity initiative—one based largely around existing models for identity-based student success programs at the institution. Southern State University administrators settled upon a broad county-level definition of rurality from the American Community Survey (Ratcliffe et al., 2016) (i.e., students from rural or mostly rural counties). Several rural undergraduate students from each incoming class would be offered need-based Engage Program scholarships and dedicated supports such as shared living arrangements, shared first-year seminar courses, and regular interactions with the program's staff coordinator. Engage Program scholars would also be encouraged to attend one of several summer bridge programs prior to their first semester. Scholarship recipients would be selected from the pool of incoming first-year students from rural areas of the state (as defined above) who have demonstrated financial need, with all first-year students who complete the FAFSA being screened for eligibility. In a significant departure from existing student success program models at Southern, all other undergraduate students matching the Engage Program's definition of rurality (roughly 4,000 students overall) would also be invited to participate in general academic support and community-building programs. However, despite the agreement upon a target population and a strong consensus about the need for a rural equity initiative at Southern State University, the continued negotiation of specific framing elements proved challenging, including the risks and benefits of operationalizing rurality as a policy construct.

Designing Dynamics

Schneider and Ingram (1997) characterized designing dynamics as the process by which particular policy design elements are selected by weighing the potential risks and benefits (including political risks and benefits) of each option. One major concern at Southern State University was whether the explicit use of the word "rural" may lead to the stigmatization of Engage Program participants, particularly in a program where students did not self-identify but were invited to participate by virtue of their high school locale. Given that rurality is commonly associated with being poor, uncultured, or uneducated (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014), members of the planning committee debated the significance of this term at length. Robert, a campus administrator and Engage Program task force member who hailed from a rural area himself, discussed his concerns:

> I had very strong feelings about it. Not positive or negative, but one of them was the stigma. Are we theoretically creating a stigma around these students that is either internalized or makes them feel like they aren't part of the--? Even though we're trying to include them, we're trying to address their needs from that angle. But are we creating a stigma that makes it harder to overcome?

Ultimately, the Engage Program task force decided that there was value in the explicit usage of the term "rural" in marketing the program. Employing the word rural seemed important as a signal to external stakeholders and for promoting awareness of rural identities within Southern's campus community. One campus leader compared the burgeoning Engage Program to earlier work with first-generation students, arguing that the latter term had been relatively unknown until recently but was now actively embraced as an identity by many students. Early trends suggest this may indeed be the case, as Engage Program assessment data from year one showed that rurality was a salient identity for less than 29% of rural students prior to attending Southern, but it had become salient for 40% of respondents after their first year on campus. As evidenced by Natalie, a leading administrator involved with the launch of the Engage Program, the intentional deployment of the word "rural" was also beneficial in building discourse on rurality across campus:

> I think a really big benefit of the Engage Program is we're also able to talk to faculty and administrators a lot more about rural students. I just had a faculty member come up to me the other day, at another campus event completely unrelated, and say, "I've gotten really interested in how to support rural students. Can I connect with the Engage Program?" So there's, I think, the student side of it, but I also think there's the faculty/staff/administrator side that this program is helping raise awareness with some of those folks about, "How can I support students in my classroom who are from rural backgrounds?"

Thus, the initial design of the Engage Program signaled a more inclusive institutional stance toward rural identities, even while both students and administrators continued to debate the appropriate vehicles for providing support. Stated goals of the Engage Program included better serving

the rural citizens of the state, delivering targeted support to rural students, fostering a more diverse and inclusive campus, and empowering students to find belonging at Southern through curricular and cocurricular experiences. Many of the Engage Program's marketing materials emphasize the development of a "network of resources" dedicated to rural students at Southern State University. In these respects, the Engage Program is modeled closely after existing access programs at Southern, including scholarship programs within the Academic Excellence Center aimed at first-generation students and/or low-income students. Aside from financial aid, these programs typically provide curated support in the form of advising and mentoring, academic success courses, and other targeted programs. For instance, most scholarship recipients are invited to attend periodic student success workshops that feature topics such as study skills, time management, note-taking, writing skills, or study abroad. Because the Academic Excellence Center houses relevant services such as academic tutoring and summer bridge programs, the department is seen as well positioned to facilitate the transition of incoming students to Southern State University and support their progress toward degree completion.

What makes the Engage Program somewhat unique at Southern are the elements of the program design which extend beyond the established models. Aside from a scholarship cohort that receives high-touch support as described above, the Engage Program staff coordinator also develops programs and resources for the larger rural student population at Southern (approximately 4,000 undergraduates). A curriculum map for the Engage Program serves as a blueprint for these efforts, including not only targeted academic and cocurricular supports (e.g., curated leadership development sessions, rural-focused career planning events) but programs which are purely social in nature. In one interview, the Engage Program staff coordinator, Sophia, discussed the challenges of marketing these resources to the larger rural student community at Southern and pointed to peer outreach as a key strategy:

> I think the challenging pieces are we didn't have really high attendance at a lot of events last year. And then what I'm seeing this year, it's like social events, we can get a pretty decent attendance at—I mean, good, say like 40, 50 when you're giving out barbecue or t-shirts…. But I think that can be higher. I think especially trying to get students to engage in the pieces that were kind of outlined in the proposal that are more serious elements that it's been challenging to get students to want to come to those.

As stated above, Sophia observed higher levels of student interest in community-building aspects of the Engage Program as opposed to the "more serious" program elements which are focused on academic success or personal development. These contrasting goals represent a source of tension for both students and administrators involved with the program, as a core motivation for the Engage Program is addressing equity gaps between rural and nonrural student academic outcomes. While the professional-utilitarian aims of Southern State University administrators emphasize measurable objectives (e.g., improved retention or graduation rates), rural students themselves often pointed to their social needs as the biggest priority for improving their experience at Southern State University.

The challenges of enacting a professional-utilitarian rationale while also considering the needs of individual students was highlighted further in a conversation with Eleanor, an upper-level administrator involved with the development of the Engage Program from the beginning. In our interview, Eleanor commented on her concerns about gauging the program's long-term success:

> And I'm not entirely certain how we define success. It started out as a program to equalize retention and completion rates. But retention and completion rates are often due to factors that are totally outside of our control. So I'm confident that we're going to see improvement. Whether we're going to remove the gap is, I think … given our dependence on data, I worry that that will, by default, become the marker of success. And if, by default, that becomes the marker of success, we may miss something.

Here Eleanor describes the core utilitarian goal of the Engage Program—enhancing retention and graduation outcomes—while acknowledging that this focus may obscure other important outcomes, such as general enhancements to the college experience for rural students at Southern.

James, another leading administrator on the Engage Program launch team, elaborated on this data-driven approach to developing the program as both a source of political risk as well as a means of mitigating risk. In this segment, James points to an integrated approach to assessment and program development as a key strategy for demonstrating impact:

> It wasn't just move forward and then ask questions and try to look back and find out. No, we were asking those questions and framing up a lot of the assessment agenda at the same time that we were

> building the program … you've got to start asking yourself the questions about how are you going to know, "Is the programming needed?" Which is difficult. I mean, that is a political kind of question. If certain folks are saying, "We're going to do X," and you're the person who's going to be faced with doing X, you need to know—at least in my opinion—whether or not X is even necessary. Now, that may not have any bearing on whether or not the program goes or doesn't, but you need to know it.

In sum, the challenges of demonstrating programmatic success presented political risks both within and outside of the institution and were driven by the adoption of a shared policy rationale among institutional leaders. At the time of this study, a primary aim of Engage Program administrators was to promote rural student participation in content-based programming (e.g., academic skill development or leadership training) and rural recruitment initiatives at Southern State University, as these types of experiences could yield more demonstrable outcomes than programs centered purely around social engagement. The Engage Scholars initiative, while comprising a smaller aspect of the program, also supported these aims through a more prescribed array of experiences for the students who received the accompanying financial aid award—with measurable outcomes more readily available by virtue of the higher frequency of interactions with participating scholars.

Translation Dynamics

Translation dynamics were described by Schneider and Ingram (1997) as the long-term democratic implications of a given policy design and the ways in which a policy intervention serves to disrupt social inequities. Schneider and Ingram contended that translation dynamics may manifest as individual experiences with the policy design, messages or interpretations, conceptualizations of the relationship between government and its citizens, or participation patterns. At the completion point of the present study, the Engage Program had been in existence for approximately three years at Southern State University—thereby limiting any in-depth analyses of its long-term translation dynamics. However, several emerging themes related to this concept were documented during the study.

It does appear that the Engage Program has produced a positive effect by introducing rurality into the discourse on campus diversity at Southern State University. Through explicit efforts to serve rural stakeholders, Southern is actively working to reposition the ways in which rural students are perceived as a policy target demographic. Whereas rural students cited experiences on campus that often made them feel like Deviants (low power, low deservedness; see Figure 2), efforts to position rural students as more deserving of policy benefits are shifting how they are viewed on Southern's campus. Study participants variously described rural students as Dependents (low power, high deservedness) or Advantaged (high power, high deservedness) stakeholders—variation that likely reflects their evolving status within the university community (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). In part, Southern is accomplishing these changes by leaning into its land-grant mission and citing a renewed emphasis on providing access to the institution for students outside the state's metropolitan areas. In many respects, these rhetorical commitments exude a significant impact on how rural students are viewed on campus. However, Southern State University has also steadily continued its investment in programs and services for rural constituents. An example of this continued effort is a recent diversity task force report which cited the expansion of internship opportunities for rural students as one of several explicit near-term goals for the institution. These shifts in discourse about rural students—and their deservedness for on-going policy benefits and institutional resources—represent a pivotal change activated in part through the translational dynamics of the Engage Program policy design.

Notable translation dynamics related to race are also associated with the Engage Program. As stated previously, institutional data compiled at the outset of the project revealed significant gaps in rural student degree completion—with a particularly stark difference among rural students of color. One statistic showed that rural students of color held four-year graduation rates that were roughly 18% lower than urban White students. Given the data-driven, professional-utilitarian rationale adopted by Southern State University administrators, it seems obvious that this equity gap would have drawn significant attention during the Engage Program policy design process. However, repeated questioning about this topic yielded no information from any of the administrators who participated in this study (e.g., "I don't recall ever discussing that."), and no other documentation related to rural-racial equity gaps at Southern State University was uncovered. Notably, conversations with Michelle—a rural Black student and prominent campus leader—indicated that her efforts to initiate a new student organization for rural Black students had been stymied by suggestions from campus administrators that she should focus more broadly on all rural students. Given these juxtapositions, it is important to consider the translation dynamics of a rural equity initiative that does not acknowledge race. The state where Southern State University resides, for instance, is part of the American Black Belt, an area where the legacy of slavery is evidenced by a particularly high concentration of African Americans

in many rural communities. Given that the word "rural" is frequently associated with Whiteness within the popular imaginary (Sachs, 2014), a failure to address racial equity gaps in any explicit way—while simultaneously leveraging the terminology of rurality to drive discourse about a new target demographic on campus—suggests that the Engage Program policy design tacitly reinforces these existing social constructs and potentially reproduces the barriers that exist for rural Black students.

Discussion

This case study of the Engage Program at Southern State University provides a useful example of the ways in which social constructions are deployed to shape campus discourse about equity, diversity, and student success. Many of the findings presented above offer direct implications for future policy research and policy design processes related to rural students and other marginalized populations in higher education. Given that the Engage Program was still under development at the time of this study, the author was able to capture the inner workings of the policy design process and assess the ways in which social constructions are leveraged to build consensus around a policy challenge and deploy institutional resources. In this case, the clear alignment of national trends, state political dynamics, and Southern State University's land-grant mission led to the rapid adoption and successful launch of a new rural equity initiative. As a result, rurality has been firmly established as a new focus area within campus diversity discourse, and it is evident that Southern State University is making a concerted effort to address the needs of this target demographic that has grown not only in political power, but also in perceived deservedness for policy benefits.

For some of the Engage Program's stakeholders—such as admissions officers or upper administrators—there is a relatively clear political payoff to these efforts, as outreach to rural communities is readily quantified and also helps to foster general goodwill for Southern throughout the state. However, comments from both rural students and rural staff members at Southern suggest the complicated nature of these social constructs, as many campus community members continue to wrestle with the stigmatizations surrounding rurality. Over time, it remains to be seen whether the policy designs of the Engage Program and initiatives at similar institutions will effectively shift longstanding social constructions of rurality or whether the established, deficit-based framings of rurality will remain in place. If the political power of rural stakeholders once again wanes, then rural students may resume their status as a Dependent or Deviant policy target demographic. There is also evidence at Southern State University that the deployment of the Engage Program and other rural outreach efforts has attracted unexpected scrutiny from legislators within the state. This development may further complicate the evolution of the Engage Program policy design—as one administrator stated, "It can get very political, really, really fast." The interplay between state politics and institutional policy designs may also represent a fruitful area for future research, particularly as legislators in many states pursue an increasingly hands-on approach to managing the daily affairs of public colleges and universities (Ellis, 2021; Stirgus & Bluestein, 2021). With conservative political leaders pushing to eliminate diversity programs and identity-based initiatives in many public university systems (Marijolovic, 2023), the dialogue about rural students is likely to become even more complicated in the coming years.

The present analysis also highlights the importance of policymaking rationales among institutional stakeholders as an aspect of postsecondary program development that is rarely addressed in any direct way within research literature. For example, interviews with a wide range of administrators at Southern State University revealed a shared professional-utilitarian rationale that helped to quickly foster mutual agreement about the need for a rural equity initiative as well as the general format for the Engage Program policy design. The policy community responsible for shaping this new initiative conveyed shared core values in areas such as student access and success, prestige seeking, and data driven decision-making. Conversely, these shared rationales may have also cultivated a sense of groupthink among the policy community and contributed to a program design that was largely mimetic of existing campus initiatives. As Schneider and Ingram (1997) argued, in these instances "the values dear to scientists become everyone's values" (p. 153) and the rapid adoption of comfortable or preferred policy designs may preclude wider systemic changes. One implication of this finding is that future policymakers—whether at the state, federal, or institutional level—must be attuned to the underlying rationales driving their decisions and critically reflect on whether proposed policy changes will disrupt existing inequities.

Professional-utilitarian rationales are also sometimes difficult to translate to external audiences, and there was evidence that dense technical and/or esoteric language remained embedded in the marketing documents used to describe the Engage Program. Such messaging may be difficult for lay readers to parse and could also have the effect of reinforcing elitist perceptions of the university. These topics may be explored more fully through additional research on rural equity initiatives in higher education—examining, for instance, how the adoption of various policymaking rationales relate to different communication strategies and/or stakeholder interpretations of policy designs (i.e., translation dynamics). Future researchers could also explore whether such programs frequently

follow existing models on their campuses and whether such approaches are effective in disrupting rural education inequities. In the case of the Engage Program, which is still in the early stages of deployment, these long-term outcomes remain to be seen.

One notable feature of the Engage Program is the omission of race as a consideration in the program's policy design, despite compelling evidence about institutional equity gaps for rural students of color. By overlooking the racial demographics within the institution's rural surroundings, policy designers at Southern State University have tacitly reproduced the popular imaginary that rurality equates to Whiteness (Sachs, 2014). This dynamic feeds into the larger societal context, where stereotypes about rurality are sustained and often used again in future social constructions of policy target demographics. There are several possible explanations for why these data points may have been disregarded. One possibility is that the rapid adoption of the Engage Program precluded more critical examination of the racial equity gaps among rural students. It is also possible that racial disparities may have been tacitly understood as outside the scope of this project, given the Engage Program's location within the Academic Excellence Center. In the case of Southern State University, for example, several other access and success programs focused explicitly on race are housed in the campus's diversity office. Lastly, we must also consider the possibility that campus administrators wished to purposefully downplay any emphasis on race. If, for example, we accept that a key motivation behind the Engage Program was to address the demands of an increasingly powerful conservative political ideology within the state, it seems likely that developing a program specifically focused on rural minority students would have yielded far fewer political benefits to the institution.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the Engage Program at Southern State University, a newly-developed rural equity initiative at a public land-grant university, this study has conceptualized institutional access and success programs as a form of public policy. As such, it is possible to deploy policy analysis concepts such as Schneider and Ingram's (1997) policy design theory to extend our understanding of the policy design process and the potential long-term democratic implications of such initiatives. In the case of the Engage Program, it seems clear that stakeholders have drawn on existing social constructions of rurality to elevate discourse about the needs of this target demographic on their campus. Through the lens of their shared professional-utilitarian policymaking rationale, Southern State University administrators have expanded their commitment to serving rural students while continuing to wrestle with the challenges of stigmatization that often accompany rural identities. There also remains a need for greater emphasis on the racial dynamics of rural equity, particularly in a state with a high concentration of rural Black constituents.

This study highlights the potential value in deploying policy design theory to the study of college access programs, student success initiatives, or other institution-level policies and programs. Particularly in instances where public resources are being deployed to yield a particular benefit (e.g., college degree attainment) the policy design framework provides useful tools for understanding the social and political dynamics surrounding these processes as well as facilitating critical examination of the long-term effects of institutional policy designs. This theoretical lens represents a promising avenue for future research, particularly in light of the growing politicization surrounding many aspects of postsecondary education across the United States.

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