

Listening to Youth: Aligning Aspirations and Opportunities in Maine's Rural

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INTRODUCTION

Rural Youth Voices

Rural communities are in a time of transition and youth are central to the future trajectories of their communities. However, rural development efforts often do not include youth perspectives or voices in data collection, program goals, or rural initiatives. Our Rural Youth Futures project aimed to understand what middle and high schoolers in two forest-dependent regions (Piscataquis and northern Somerset Counties in Maine and Coos County in Oregon) value and want as their rural communities face changes in local economic conditions, demographics, and workforce needs. Throughout our efforts, we sought to listen to rural youth voices.

Our Voices

All three of us grew up in rural areas—Jessica in Alaska, Mindy in Oregon, and Stephany in Maine. All three of us became natural resources educators. This article is motivated by our own experiences growing up and now, and here we share some of the consistent themes we have heard from rural youth in both our research and teaching, focusing on results from the Rural Youth Futures project. The Rural Youth Futures project was a collaborative effort between academic researchers and community partners, funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA) Agriculture and Food Research Initiative's

Agriculture, Economic and Rural Communities program.

METHODS

To ensure our research met the needs of rural communities in Maine, the University of Maine partnered with Helping Hands with Heart, one of the oldest community coalitions in the state and one with representatives from a cross-section of Piscataquis County service organizations. We recruited five schools in Piscataquis County and northern Somerset County to participate: Penquis Valley High School in Milo, SeDoMoCha Middle School in Dover-Foxcroft, Piscataquis Community High School in Guilford, Greenville Consolidated Schools in Greenville, and Forest Hills Consolidated Schools in Jackman. After securing human subjects review board approval, a university representative visited each school between February and May 2019 to administer an anonymous, electronic survey in coordination with school officials. As all schools had a laptop or tablet provided for students along with a school email address, an email with the link was distributed to students during their home-room class period. Participation was voluntary and of the 666 students present on survey days, 578 students completed the survey (87 percent response rate). This was one of the most comprehensive surveys of Piscataquis County and northern Somerset County students to ever be completed.

Recognizing that the experiences of rural youth may have changed during and after the pandemic, in 2024 we elicited the involvement of current (academic year 2024–2025) high school students from the Natural Resources Program at Tri-County Technical Center (TCTC) to review these past results. We also invited these students to help us identify key points to include in this article and they shared their ideas for policy recommendations as well. Below, we summarize survey results—blending our voices, rural youth voices as expressed through the survey, and TCTC youth voices—to inform to policy recommendations.

RESULTS

The survey results for all five schools yielded a comprehensive view of youth perspectives on their community and outdoor attachment and their educational and residential aspirations following high school. Although here we present information from youth at all the schools combined, data summary documents by school for each of the five participating schools are freely available on the University of Maine's Digital Commons website (Crandall et al. 2020).

Youth and Family Profiles

Most students were from the local area; 85 percent of the respondents were born in Piscataquis or northern Somerset Counties. Higher educational attainment among the adults in their lives was similar to national averages; students reported that for at least one parent or guardian, 34 percent had a high school diploma, and another 25 percent had graduated from college. Among parents, 85 percent of them worked for pay and the majority of working parents had a single, full-time

job (66 percent). The most frequent family structure reported was a two-parent biological family unit (53 percent), followed by single mothers (16 percent) and two-parent stepfamily units (14 percent).

Community Attachment

A strong majority of students showed attachment to their communities: 75 percent agreed that they “care about my community” and 59 percent agreed they “feel like I am part of my community.” Additionally, 68 percent agreed that their “community is a good place to grow up.” Students wanted more amenities in their communities. They desired more indoor recreation (63 percent), more shops and retail stores (57 percent), and more restaurants (55 percent). They reported the top problems facing their communities were “people not having enough money” (55 percent), “not enough things to do in town” (55 percent) and “not enough jobs” (50 percent).

Outdoor Attachment

Outdoor recreation was also important to youth, with 73 percent of students agreeing they can be themselves in the outdoors here, and 59 percent feeling safe in the outdoors. The most popular outdoor activities were visiting the beach, camping, and hiking. ATV riding and snowmobile riding were also common. Access to outdoor recreation was a factor for youth and young adult aspirations to either return to their rural community or move to a new rural community after their education (Bernsen et al. 2022a; Davis et al. 2025).

Educational Aspirations

Most students reported aspirations to pursue higher education: 32 percent wanted to complete a four-year degree while 19 percent would like a graduate,

master’s, or law degree, and 14 percent want a Ph.D. or medical degree. However, the top barrier students identified as preventing them from going as far in school as they would like is cost (36 percent). Other top barriers included “I’m not smart enough” (20 percent), “I need to work after school” (17 percent), and “I don’t have good enough grades” (17 percent). Our analysis showed that students who held positive perceptions of school, had higher levels school and community engagement, higher grades, and identified as girls were more likely to hold higher educational aspirations (Bernsen et al. 2022b). But there was an inverse relationship between positive community attachment and perceptions and educational aspirations. Rural youth were aware of the contradictory role that higher education may play for them and a sense that one has to choose between education and families and home.

Residential and Career Aspirations

Most Maine students (56 percent), across both high school (57 percent) and middle school (55 percent) grades, wanted to live in a rural place in the future. Additional analysis revealed that Maine students with greater outdoor place attachment were even more likely to want to live in a rural place in the future (Bernsen et al. 2022a), highlighting the strong connection that rural youth have with the physical setting of their forest-dependent communities.

Students were asked which industries they would consider working in within their rural community. Thirty-one percent would be interested in working in the medical sector and 26 percent would be willing to work in education. Manufacturing and retail both elicited 19 percent of the surveyed

youth being willing to work in these sectors in Piscataquis or northern Somerset Counties. The top training needs identified were training in hands-on skills (45 percent), education or college advice (40 percent), and job advice (36 percent).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We found that youth in Piscataquis and northern Somerset Counties generally feel connected to their communities and value the outdoor spaces adjacent to their communities, an attachment that represents an opportunity for rural community sustainability if rural places can retain or recruit these young people in the future. However, the survey results also highlight tensions between a strong sense of community belonging and the pragmatic pathways available for youth that encourage leaving their rural communities. They are acutely aware of the economic limitations in some places and perceive a lack of opportunities. Many aspire to higher education of some sort, but face financial barriers and believe that local jobs are not or will not be available when they complete their educational programs. This result was of great interest to us as researchers, as one of the main drivers for the study was rural community stakeholder input that they have jobs available in rural areas and don’t observe local youth applying. This tension between place attachment and limited opportunity, along with the mismatch between youth and employer perceptions, leads us to four major recommendations for rural, forest-dependent places including rural communities in Maine:

1. Develop programs to connect students to local jobs, thus

fostering youth retention. Students had a generally pessimistic view of their local economic opportunities. “People not having enough money” and “not enough jobs” were top problems youth reported for their communities. Where job opportunities do exist, results suggest that there is a lack of information or connections between employers with youth. Combating bottlenecks related to nurturing job skills in youth and raising awareness of opportunities should be a priority.

2. Invest in accessible and relevant education and workforce development and pathways for all students. Cost was the top barrier preventing students from pursuing the education they desire, and students have consistently told us that they believe schools overly “push college” without adequately promoting diverse job pathways for careers available in their communities. They also want training in hands-on skills, education advice, and job advice. Career and technical education (CTE) programs represent an excellent opportunity to provide many of these needs. Granted, our positionality is such that the authors of this article are tied to career and technical education (CTE) efforts (one coauthor is a teacher in such a program, while another is on the advisory board of a CTE program). Still, our perspective is supported by our results. Tri-County Technical Center students wanted programs like logging operations and diesel mechanics in addition to the existing automotive program, showing a desire for more varied training pathways. Students

wished for technical classes in all schools, not just the technical centers, which represents expanded opportunities for hands-on training to all youth. They also wanted more opportunities to get out and experience the jobs in the field. Finally, they recommended that increased capacity be added to meet the demand for CTE programs where they exist—there are more students interested in the natural resources and commercial truck driving program at TCTC than there are available seats, for example—and the expansion of CTE programs across the landscape. The natural resources program at TCTC is the only one in the state, and expansion of programs like these would provide increased pathways for non-college bound students, as well as increased training to support youth transitions to the workforce.

3. Enhance community amenities and play to community strengths. Rural youth are often attached to the outdoors, and also want more shops and retail stores, indoor recreation, and restaurants in their communities. While communities may not be able to directly influence which businesses establish and remain, communities can use comprehensive and long-term planning to build out accessibility and opportunities in the outdoors—a strength in rural Maine. Lack of public transportation was an issue as the distance to travel to amenities was a barrier for youth.
4. Preserve and enhance access to natural resources and outdoor recreation. Students highly valued and feel safe in the outdoors.

Our results and analysis support that outdoor attachment is a part of community attachment, and that community attachment is reflected in the desires of youth to remain rural, even among marginalized populations (Davis et al. 2025). Ensuring continued and equitable access is important. Policymakers should also be mindful of the impact of increasing tourism and amenity migration on rural places, especially in recent years. Tri-County Technical Center students were worried about their ability to access outdoor places, an issue that did not arise in our pre-pandemic research.

The voices of rural youth today echo our own experiences growing up in rural places, wondering if we could preserve our sense of community and hold onto our place attachment while also pursuing our goals for education and employment. Then and now, rural youth are keenly aware of the reality facing them, and rural communities must be strategic in rural development efforts and play to their strengths. Rural youth voices tell us a lot about what they value growing up rural today and provide insights as to what rural communities might consider focusing on in the future. The connections the youth we surveyed and talked to feel for their communities show that there is potential to retain or attract new residents in the future, but creating pathways for all rural youth—for education or employment—is critical to providing choice and opportunities for their futures.

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