

The Missing College Fair: College-Readiness Resource Inequality in North Carolina High Schools

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Resource inequality in schools has been identified as a serious issue in education for decades. A 1964 report on the inequality of Development in Appalachia as compared to the rest of the United States expounded upon education disparities, among others. “It [the Appalachian region] has not provided a sufficient corps of educated persons in the past – it lacks the tax base to provide an adequate education effort in the future,” (Appalachian Regional Commission 1964). The Appalachia Report demonstrates the analytic of Development at a smaller scale, but this ethnographic essay aims to focus on an even more localized area in a more specialized topic: two North Carolina high schools’ efforts to prepare potential first generation college students for higher education. Through my research, I identified the likelihood that schools with more funding and greater access to resources in their surrounding areas are able to provide more college-readiness resources for their rising first generation college students.

Hamilton High School in Orange County and Taylor’s Creek High School in Cumberland County seem as different as night and day at first glance. As an alumna of Taylor’s Creek myself, my first visit to Hamilton High for fieldwork was eye-opening. The neighborhoods surrounding the high school oozed wealth and luxury. Lush, well-kept lawns separated by sturdy wrought-iron fences dotted the street full of large and impressive homes. I counted thirteen gleaming windows on the façade of one of the houses. I realized I was finally approaching the school when I saw the sign labelled “Student Parking.” My own alma mater, Taylor’s Creek, was moderately small, with a modest 130 spaces or so in its parking lot nestled between a grassy field used for overflow parking and a small patch of woods. Hamilton High’s student parking lot seemed comparable to the local mall in Taylor’s Creek with row upon row of glittering cars stretching into the distance.

The inside of Hamilton High proved just as impressive. After several long minutes searching for the entrance, as I had mistakenly approached the school from the wrong direction (encountering building D first), I finally admitted myself into the expansive building. This initial foray to Hamilton served the purpose of introducing me to the media coordinator there, Mrs. Danielle Foster. Mrs. Foster itemized the surplus of college-readiness resources the school offered. A later meeting at Hamilton with the director of the Career Information Center, Ms. Sam Morris, only lengthened that massive list. The students of Hamilton High have access to more resources than one person could ever use. The CIC and the media center provide books, pamphlets, flyers, websites, and more about North Carolina colleges and universities, the benefits of community college, financial aid, scholarships, college applications, resume building and writing, study abroad, internships, standardized testing preparation, and learning styles. The CIC, guidance office, media center, and the administration work together to publicize events that allow students to take advantage and continually utilize the resources

provided by Hamilton High School.

On the contrary, Taylor's Creek High School, confined to one building with a media center approximately half the size of Hamilton High's, cannot even host a real college fair anymore, according to assistant principal, Mrs. Adrienne Mitchell. Two local universities and a technical college try to send a representative during the school year. I had the opportunity to speak to Mrs. Peggy Miller, the media coordinator, Mrs. Jennifer Caldwell, the AIG (Academically Intellectually Gifted) coordinator, and Mrs. Mitchell. The three women agreed that more needed to be done for students intending to pursue a higher education, let alone first generation college students. Mrs. Caldwell identified herself as a potentially untapped resource for non-AIG students seeking information about college. However, there is only so much she can do for the students of Taylor's Creek. Mrs. Caldwell splits her time between Taylor's Creek and another local high school. Additionally, some of the resources she provides, including field trips to North Carolina colleges and universities, are only available to students identified as AIG.

Philip McMichael describes "three large obstacles to overcome... within the current global development model": inequality, uneven development, and economism (McMichael 2008). While he uses these terms in a broader global context, they are necessary analytics for this small slice of local education. The concepts of inequality and unevenness of development are obvious when the two schools are compared. The most current report from the North Carolina Department of Commerce ranks Orange County as the third least economically distressed county in the state, while Cumberland County is the twenty-seventh most distressed (NC Department of Commerce 2015). The funding disparities are evident when comparing the resources provided by each school, and even the schools themselves. Mrs. Miller, the media coordinator at Taylor's Creek High School, lamented her inability to do more for the rising first generation college students attending Taylor's Creek. "I'm working with one third of the funding I used to have. One third." This lack of funding makes remaining up to date with the ever-changing information pertaining to standardized testing and scholarships nearly impossible, as she must also maintain the remainder of the collection. Alternatively, Mrs. Foster and Ms. Morris at Hamilton High School spoke freely about being able to provide current resources with few concerns of funding issues.

Individual schools, while pieces of a larger state, national, and global object "education," act as infrastructure spaces, a concept introduced by Keller Easterling in her book *Extrastatecraft*. "Infrastructure space has become a medium of information... Infrastructure space is doing something," (Easterling 2014). Framing schools as mediums of information is not a stretch. Schools facilitate the exchange of information, currently through concept formation and standardized tests. Schools are "doing something" by creating the spaces necessary to assist their students to move beyond the education provided to them. However, the inequality and unevenness of Development even within North Carolina produce unequal and irregular infrastructure spaces, namely Hamilton High School and

Taylor’s Creek High School. Even within these highly localized areas, broad global concepts can be applied to explain situational phenomena.

Development fosters Infrastructure, as is apparent by the vastly different infrastructure spaces created by Hamilton and Taylor’s Creek. Hamilton, in the more developed, less economically distressed county, is able to generate a more-involved college-readiness space because its resources are not spread as thinly as Taylor’s Creek’s. The unevenness of Development, and therefore Infrastructure, within North Carolina can be traced back over fifty years to the Appalachia Report and still farther to Segregation. This infrastructure space facilitates the agency of its own students to take control of their educational futures. Across the world, regions are separated by their ability to provide education opportunities. “Developed” nations serve as blueprints for education infrastructure spaces, but funding disparities further distance the areas from each other. These infrastructure spaces facilitate the agency of their own students to take control of their educational futures.

Bibliography

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