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## Farmwomen in the academy: rurality and leadership in higher education

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## **Farmwomen in the academy: Rurality and leadership in higher education**

Using collective biography, this paper examines the ways that rural identity mediates the leadership of two women working as administrators in higher education in the United States. We, the authors, examine our own leadership, as college administrators raised in rural environments, and seek to describe how the notion of rurality manifests in our administrative roles. Our collective biography reveals that rural identity influences our definitions of home, fear of irrelevancy, relationships with others, and work ethic. At the same time, our interesting identities as rural, women leaders are fluid and constantly shifting, manifesting themselves in both implicit and explicit ways. As women from rural America, we find our own geographic identities under-researched and under-theorized within our own field. This research bridges the gap between the intellectual work we do, the identities we hold, and the physical spaces we inhabit, addressing a void in current higher education research and providing an opportunity to weave our scholarship with practice for leaders in higher education.

Keywords: leadership; rural; biography; higher education; qualitative

Word count: 8,215

### **Introduction**

Across the United States, institutions of higher education are striving to be more inclusive of students, faculty and staff from all identities and backgrounds in order to bolster enrollment and better serve the public good. While conversations about diversity and inclusion are common on many college campuses, the focus tends to be on certain aspects of identity over others: socioeconomic diversity, racial and ethnic diversity, and diversity of gender identity. Other identities that affect student, faculty and staff experiences in higher education, such as geographic identity (and more specifically, a rural identity) are less often studied.

The 2016 U.S. presidential election illustrated the importance of geographic identity by highlighting the divide between rural and urban communities in the United States. Rhetoric and voting results indicated a real difference between rural and urban voters (with rural voters expressing a more conservative viewpoint, on balance), and between rural and urban identity and consciousness. According to Katherine J. Cramer, the result is not just a simple divide between the values of rural and urban residents, but a deep divide characterized by the fact that those who live in rural communities ‘prefer lifestyles that differ fundamentally from those of city people’ (2016, p. 89). Her book *The Politics of Resentment* describes a sense of place-based resentment in rural areas, rooted in three elements:

- 1) a belief that rural areas are ignored by decision makers, including policy makers,
- 2) a perception that rural areas do not get their fair share of resources, and 3) a sense that rural folks have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by city folks (Cramer, 2016, p. 12)

This bifurcation results in an outright resentment of the other. Issues of race and social class are interwoven into this divide, as are political beliefs and beliefs about fairness and justice.

Academia, in general, falls on the urban side of this bifurcation. Nearly 90 percent of U.S. college students go to college in metropolitan areas with more than 100,000 people, and more than half go to college in the 52 metros with more than one million inhabitants (Florida, 2016). And, in general, higher education institutions are seen as politically liberal places, with six in ten faculty members at all baccalaureate institutions in the United States characterizing their own political views as ‘far left’ or ‘liberal’ (Eagan et al., 2014). In contrast, less than 13 percent of faculty members described their political views as ‘far right’ or ‘conservative.’

It is in this climate that we examine our own leadership as college administrators raised in rural environments. This paper explores geographic identity as it mediates the enactment of leadership by two women college administrators. University leaders play a key role in cultivating inclusive environments on campuses, often guiding community conversations and supporting initiatives, but the geographic diversity (and associated values and experiences) among the ranks of such university leaders is rarely studied.

We acknowledge that identity is deeply personal, and this study intentionally employs a qualitative method that recognizes this. We use collective biography to investigate our own rural identity as women leaders, focusing on two main research areas:

- (1) How does the notion of rurality manifest in my leadership role in higher education? In what ways do I embody rurality in the workplace? Is that embodiment explicit or implicit?
- (2) How do I shift among intersecting identities within my roles in higher education? How does this shifting affect my role as a leader?

We find the collective biography method compelling because it avoids othering rural people as subjects of research. Within the study, we are not describing a phenomenon as outsiders; instead, we are writing as insiders, sharing our lived experiences.

### **Literature review**

Grounded in research that suggests that place matters as a social identity (Little & Panelli, 2003; Woods, 2009), this study explores the complexities of the intersection of gender and rurality as identities mediating leadership. We begin with three premises: (1) that rural identity differs from urban identity, (2) that gendered systems of privilege and

oppression operate within higher education leadership; and (3) that moving between rural and urban spaces is a transformative experience requiring identity work.

### ***Rural identity and place-conscious research***

We take as evidence for the first premise the stark differences in rural and urban life in the United States: the political views referenced above are just one example of this. A recent study within this journal found that variation in voting choices are linked to rural residents' differing social status, sociocultural values and beliefs, and attitudes toward domestic social issues (Kelly & Lobao, 2018). In addition, the rates of poverty and persistent poverty in the United States are higher in rural counties than in metropolitan counties; concentrated poverty contributes to health, housing, crime, educational, and employment challenges; and the college completion gap between rural and urban populations continues to grow (USDA Economic Research Service, 2015). At the same time, research finds that low income children raised in rural areas (particularly in the Midwest) are more likely to move into the middle class than low income children from urban areas, citing pressure to work hard, social networks that cross socioeconomic boundaries, and social capital as contributors to their success (Chetty & Hendren as cited in Belz, 2016). J. D. Vance (2016) in his popular memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* similarly reflected on the ways that social capital, the knowledge of how to navigate within one's social network, served to propel classmates from his mountain Appalachian town in the rural U.S. into the middle class. In a review of Vance's widely read book, Paul Theobald reflected that 'it represents a clear example of the distance that this country, and particular its universities, have moved from earlier connections to the U.S. rural experience' (2017, p. 1).

Nespor (2008) has critiqued the overall lack of attention to systems of privilege and oppression (for example, gender discrimination) within place-conscious research.

While there has been a recent interest in exploring the relationship between social identities, place, and education (Manchester & Bragg, 2013; Walkerdine, 2013; Youngblood Jackson, 2013), as well as rural women's self-perception generally (Smyth, Swendener, & Kazyak, 2018), little scholarship has sought to research and theorize the ways in which place and identities matter among university leaders. Research at the K-12 level has shown that gender disparities in educational leadership are more pronounced in rural areas than in urban contexts. Schools in rural areas were less likely than urban and suburban schools to employ women in the principalship (Fuller, LaMay & Pendola, 2018) and to have women in school board positions (Hess, 2002). Similarly, white males serving in the superintendent position were more likely to achieve 'insider status' within rural school districts than women or people of color (McFadden & Smith, 2004).

The term rurality refers to the study of how 'practice, behavior, decision-making and performance are contextualized and influenced by the social and cultural meaning attached to rural places' (Cloke, 2009, p. 19). While attention to rurality has lagged within the field of higher education in the United States (Woods, 2009), research in other disciplines and in other countries has shown that place matters (Little & Panelli, 2003; Richardson, 1997; Somerville, 2013). Still, Anderson, Adey and Bevan argue that the spatial contexts in which research is carried out remain 'largely excluded from any theorization of the social construction of knowledge' (2003, p. 306). Our work draws on the work conducted in other disciplines and countries and expands the notion of rurality and rural identity within the United States.

### ***Women as leaders in higher education***

Existing research on women in leadership – coming from various geographies and disciplines including business, psychology, sociology, and education – is vast. It is well

documented that women are underrepresented in senior-level leadership roles within many sectors, including higher education (Hartley, Eckel, & King, 2009; King & Gomez, 2008). While 64% of all higher education administrators are women, senior level leaders remain predominantly male (Hartley, Eckel, & King, 2009), and women still face significant barriers to advancement to senior level leadership posts (Chliwniak, 1997; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Gender has been used to organize society in subtle and systemic ways that advantage men and disadvantage women (Bem, 1993), including in ascension to leadership positions. Like other institutions, institutions of higher education often perpetuate “gendered processes,” whereby “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (Acker, 1990, p. 146). Women leaders face particular challenges within gendered higher education environments, and their ascension to public leadership roles has been stymied by assumptions about women and their leadership potential. Among those assumptions are views about women’s leadership styles, their interactions with others, and the power they hold in those interactions.

Historical literature tended to focus on women’s leadership styles or characteristic ways of behaving (often in comparison to men’s styles or ways of behaving; see, for example, Adler, 2002; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). These studies of women’s leadership often included only White, middle-class, heterosexual women and did not consider how the intersection of these women’s racial/ethnic, class, and sexual identities may affect their leadership. Generalizations about women’s leadership styles tended to promote an essentialized

view of women's leadership, normalizing a universal standard of women (Kezar & Lester, 2010; Lyman, Ashby, & Tripses, 2005).

As feminist scholars have noted that gender is a complex category and a problematic analytical frame (Tarule, Applegate, Earley, & Blackwell, 2009), more studies of intersecting identities and leadership styles have illuminated the ways that intersecting identities affect women's leadership within education. Studies with women of color (e.g., AhNee-Benham, 2003; Parker, 2006; Warner, 2006; Woo & Khoo 2006), and gay men and lesbians (e.g., Blount, 2003; Denton, 2009; Ragins, Cornwell, & Miller, 2003; Tooms & McGlothlin, 2007) find that other identities intersect with gender to impact leadership.

Even as explorations of intersecting and overlapping identities like gender, race, sexuality, and class have informed leadership and educational research, few studies have considered other identities, such as geographic background, along with gender (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Multiple identities affect an individual's position in relation to place, and in certain contexts, some identities become more salient than others (Billett & Somerville, 2004). A more comprehensive understanding of women and leadership in higher education is needed to contribute to fuller understandings of what leadership is in this context and how it is enacted by various people with a variety of intersecting identities. Our research begins to fill this gap in the otherwise robust leadership literature.

All people have intersecting identities that they carry with them in all situations. We understand identity as 'a self-concept, in part self- and in part socially constructed, always in response to the limitations of what is acceptable' (Lumby, 2009, p. 29). Lumby suggests that the multiple identities that affect women's leadership are broader than the 'usual' categories (gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and age). She



concluded that the impact of gender on leadership ‘cannot be understood fully without taking account of the metamorphosis of gender as it collides with, permeates and transmutes in the presence of other identities’ (p. 37). Our paper, therefore, adds to existing literature by considering how rurality acts as a social identity that intersects with other more ‘usual’ identities more commonly found in the research. It seeks to answer the call for critical place-consciousness leadership theory (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018).

### ***Rural identity and higher education***

The third premise of this paper, that moving between rural and urban spaces is a transformative experience requiring identity work, is explored within the context of higher education, using our own stories as evidence. At the outset of this study, we observed that the core values, skills and norms of our rural upbringing were not always applicable within higher education contexts. For example, Rhoades, Kiyama, McCormick, and Quiroz note that mobility in a national market is a norm of the academic profession: ‘to be an academic professional means to be oriented to national norms and reference groups more than local ones’ (2008, p. 211). Rural identity, though, is related inherently to a specific local geography, related to generations of land ownership and community building. Adapting to a national reference group can be challenging and alien.

In a second example, researchers note the definition and value of hard work in rural communities. Cramer notes that ‘One key value that rural residents emphasized as they contrasted their communities with city life was the value of hard work’ (2016, p. 72). While the American ethos leads many to value hard work (McClosky & Zaller, 1984), our sense is that hard work is defined differently within rural geographies, and

that it translates into positive outcomes for those from rural environments who have relocated (Belz, 2016).

Our study is useful as we reflect on the ways that leaders in higher education can support students from rural communities who attend college and undergo a similar transformational experience. While rural students are not an often-mentioned underrepresented population in college, students from rural areas are less likely to attend college, and less likely to attend highly selective institutions, than their peers from urban environments (Koricich, 2014; Prins & Kassab, 2017). As administrators in higher education, we encounter rural students in our own leadership roles and seek to support them through leadership, scholarship, and practice.

### **Method: Collective biography as a research strategy**

Collective biography is a form of qualitative narrative research that seeks to build on the strengths of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004), a method that takes one's own experiences as data, and memory work (Haug et al., 1987), an explicitly feminist approach where writing and analysis of remembered stories from the researchers serve as data.

Collective biography is situated within poststructuralism and allows researchers to examine thoughts and practices that are often taken for granted (Davies & Gannon, 2006). As Kezar, Carducci and Contreras-McGavin note: 'Few studies have been conducted from a critical or postmodern perspective, which remains an important area of needed focus in the higher education leadership literature' (2006, p. 102), providing an opportunity to use this method to explore the formation and practice of rural identity.

There are three primary advantages to collective biography as a method (Davies & Gannon, 2006). First, as researchers we are not dependent on subjects that may or may not be able to describe what is being studied. Second, we can interrogate the data until we feel we have sufficient detail. And finally, it is not relevant whether the story or

memory is reliable, because it is about creating the knowledge; each time the stories are remembered they are re-made and become the subject.

Data for this study consists of the biography of each author as well as the questions, reactions, and interrogations of each biography made by the other. By retelling and reimagining the stories, we create our own documentary materials for examination. Knowledge then emerges out of the data as well as out of the interaction between the data and the researchers (Davies & Gannon, 2006). We followed a six-step process outlined by Davies and Gannon to ensure sound methodology, which began with (1) the identification of the team to work on the project and (2) the theoretical topic to examine: the intersection of rural identity and leadership within higher education. We (3) structured a series of workshops and meetings in which we engaged in what Davies and Gannon (2006) refer to as (4) “memory-telling.” During memory-telling, the researchers shared memories in response to the research questions (prompts) and the other listened carefully, probing for details. This process is followed by (5) “memory-writing” and the (6) reading of the stories in which each researcher created her biography and the other researcher interrogated the personal story, clarifying details to help imagine and make sense of the stories. We each continued to further develop the analysis of our stories and noted any additional details that arose from the interrogation of the data. The initial biographies, subsequent responses, and final reactions to the responses all encompass the data for this study.

Data analysis was conducted through an iterative method that drew from grounded theory and constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 1998), which allowed us to refine ideas and concepts in a reflective way. We used open coding to determine and create major thematic categories, and the data were analyzed to help explore the intersection between rural identity and the practice of leadership (see Table 1) [Table 1

about here]. We were particularly attentive to the ways our stories overlapped and became ‘collective.’ Analysis of the data interrogated our lived experiences as administrators and provided insight into how we engage with the academic world.

### ***Considerations of validity and reliability***

Collective biography is in a family of qualitative methodologies that can be considered “messy text” (Denzin, 1997). The validity of this study is increased by telling the memories in such a way that they are ‘vividly imaginable by others...[and] others can extend their own imaginable experience of being in the world through knowing the particularity of another’ (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 12). Like the use of ‘rich and thick descriptions’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 211) in case study research, this level of description allows others to then decipher the extent to which the experience can apply to their own lives.

In poststructuralist research, Davies and Gannon (2006) remind us that “there are no secure foundations” (p. 90). As collective biography, it is important to note that the memories are not considered ‘reliable’ in that they are infallible, but rather that memories enable us to produce a truth in the ‘moment as it was lived’ (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 3). Collective biography allows us as researchers to be explicit in the fact that we are insiders. Vance’s (2016) memoir illustrated the power in telling individual stories. Collective biography offers a similar opportunity to examine the research questions in a compelling way that avoids othering.

### ***Context and positionality statements***

As women who grew up on family farms in rural Midwestern America, we find our experiences and geographic identities under-researched and under-theorized within our own field of higher education. This work seeks to explore the ways in which our roles

as leaders shift as we move among contexts. Our collective biography is that of two women within a particular geographic region of the United States. We acknowledge that this geographic identity also has roots that are intertwined with other intersecting identities, including that of ethnicity (our rural communities are dominated by the ancestors of German and Norwegian immigrants, which have their own specific rural cultures) and race. We anticipate the manifestations of leadership that are mediated by our rural upbringing may differ from that experienced by other women leaders, particularly those with roots in rural areas in other parts of the United States or in other countries.

Both authors currently have administrative leadership roles in higher education, with some teaching responsibilities as well. Author one is Chief of Staff and Lead Title IX Coordinator at a residential private liberal arts college for women in rural Central Minnesota. In this role, she ensures effective execution of presidential priorities and initiatives in support of the mission and strategic directions of the college, and she oversees policies, practices, and training related to sexual misconduct and sex discrimination. Author two is Assistant Provost at a large public university located in the heart of North Carolina's largest metropolitan region. In this role, she is responsible for the development and oversight of academic policy, faculty governance, and curriculum development, and she teaches courses in educational leadership. We grew up on working farms located only about 110 kilometers apart in West Central Minnesota, where each of our families have lived and farmed for generations since our ancestors homesteaded the land after immigrating to the United States from Europe in the late 1800s. Farming is our families' primary source of income. The towns in which we went to elementary and high school have populations of 1,500 and 2,500 people and are the largest towns in each county. We met in graduate school at the state's flagship

university, a research institution of over 50,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Though we now work in very different geographic and educational contexts, we continue to find shared experiences as women from rural backgrounds working as leaders in higher education. As administrators who are charting a course for the future of our institutions, examination of our own identities provides a better understanding of our leadership. For others leading within higher education, sharing our various experiences of women leaders in higher education can lead to a broader understanding of the diversity of women's leadership and how these experiences can translate to our diverse student bodies.

### **Summary of findings: Revelations of our collective biography**

Our collective biography illustrates complex ways that our rural and gender identities mediate our leadership within academia through what we identify as: (1) Manifestations of Rurality, and (2) Complexities of Identity.

#### ***Manifestations of rurality***

Our collective biography reveals that rurality manifests itself in our everyday leadership roles in our definition of home, our fear of irrelevancy, our relationships with others, and our work ethic. It is through these manifestations of 'the rural' that we see our rural lives reflected in our roles as leaders.

#### ***On defining home***

As the authors and subjects in this study, we reflect that many from rural environments are tied to a geographic 'home,' evidenced in a sense of grounding and deep roots in an area. One of us described these roots and this strong sense of 'home:'

For my parents, location continues to play an important role as they recently moved from the farm into the town, 2 miles away. Despite the fact that my brother

and his wife have moved on to the family farm site, the transition for my father is bittersweet. He reflected on his connection to the farm and to the land when he told me: 'I built every building and planted every tree on that farm.' This transition of the farm from one generation to the next is a transition that my ancestors have been making for generations, yet it places a particular sense of importance on location, on the connection to the land, and where one calls 'home.'

Farms are maintained by generations of family, and the physical space is an intertwining of land and vocation. This connection to a geographic location can limit our ability to move within a national market as the profession requires (Rhoades, Kiyama, McCormick, & Quiroz, 2008). As one of us reflected:

In the modern technologically and globally connected world, this tie to a geographical home is perhaps anachronistic. Nearly five years into a local (and, thankfully, a relevant) job, and it is undoubtedly time for me to move on, move up. But, I find myself unable to move away...When I want to see my family, we all meet at the farm. They could drive to me, but they don't. We all drive to this location surrounded by our cows and our fields, even though it's been quite a while since I could claim ownership to any of this...The adage says that 'home is where the heart is.' But, in a rural environment, home is also where generations of my family have sown and harvested. Your heart moves with you on a cross-country relocation; but the land is immovable.

The result of this tie to a geographic home is a deep sense of generational and lifelong responsibility, a responsibility that feels un-actionable and largely irrelevant now that we occupy leadership roles in academia. As leaders, we struggle to establish a new home within our higher education communities that approximate the pull of our rural homes. We feel keen and lasting responsibility as leaders to do good within our intellectual homes.

Therefore, our rural identity is reflected in our leadership roles through our desire to create (new) communities to serve. Part of our rural identity is rooted in a

connection to the area and the community. As such, there is a sense that everyone is in this together, and that we each play an important role in the success of the community around us. In a rural community, each person is living, working and doing business with a very small and tight-knit group of individuals. If one does not like another, there is likely no way to avoid that person. That reality results in a deep-seated belief of working together. One of us described an important rural value of being engaged in the community:

My parents and grandparents modelled engagement within the community through their volunteer and elected positions in civic, church, and professional organizations both within the local community and throughout the state and region. Even though my father joked that his elected role as township supervisor (the equivalent of a city mayor who manages the rural township) was a ‘lifetime sentence,’ he continued to run for re-election insisting that ‘someone had to do it.’ The importance of being an involved member of my work and home community has always been a part of my life.

When moving to new institutions, we both have immediately sought out ways to involve ourselves in professional organizations and committees to meet new people and to assimilate into the community. We looked to re-establish our homes in ways that were modelled within our rural communities.

#### *On becoming irrelevant*

The definition of home extends to complications for our careers and personal lives. Due to the way in which home is defined, there can be repercussions for career: ‘I am now trained for a job that is unavailable (and irrelevant) in my home community. It presumes that I do not want to return home.’ Those career choices also mean repercussions for our personal lives. The choice to pursue academe intellectually and physically separates us from our rural community, making our rural identity perpetually one of displacement.



However, this feeling of displacement can also connect us in important ways to the students with whom we work. Because we made that choice ourselves, we can better understand the leap that students are required to make from home to college. It means supporting students through real feelings of loss and separation from their home communities, a loss that we also have experienced.

*On becoming 'not nice'*

Rurality also manifests itself within our work as higher education administrators through the ways in which we relate to others. 'Niceness' is a quality valued in the rural places in which we were born. Conflict is avoided or operates on the margins in this space. But, in academe, varying points of view are valued, lively debate is encouraged, and diversity of thought is expected. The following example demonstrates how niceness impacts our relationships within our leadership roles and within the rural spaces where our families still reside:

As an academic professional and on a personal level, I operate within a global marketplace. I interact with students, scholars, and scholarship from around the world... I purchase goods and services from multi-national and multi-million-dollar companies. I know that my identity as a global citizen has caused me to value inclusion, fairness, equity, and diversity of thought. Recently, though, I also recognized that it has taken a toll on the value I place on kindness, on an individual, one-on-one level.... I am kind, but I am also firm. I unfriend you if you post offensive things online, and I choose another vendor if you don't meet my expectations. (I tell you when I disagree with you.) Operating in a rural economy means working with your friends. It requires a kindness that I no longer have. It requires you to ignore the racial slurs at the gas station, the slow service at the diner.... (It requires silence in disagreement, for the good of the community.)

While high expectations and the ability to operate within global reference groups make us highly successful in our profession, these same skills separate us from the rural

marketplace of our birth. We are no longer ‘nice’ enough to live within such a limited marketplace, putting us at odds with the rural space and becoming perhaps the type of ‘resented’ person Cramer (2016) describes.

At the same time, we are more tolerant of differences and the expression of differences than our families. We have interrupted Christmas dinner by forgetting that open debate is not always encouraged around the family table. We have disagreed pleasantly with our brothers-in-law, only to have our mothers chide us to ‘just get along.’ This security in our own beliefs and our openness toward discussion of differences is necessary in our lives as college administrators. However, this expression is not valued in the rural spaces where we grew up.

And, as leaders, we still feel the pull toward conflict-avoidance, silence, and appeasement. Forthright addressing of conflict can feel alien. As women, this pull may be particularly strong, given global expectations of women leaders as more caring, empathetic, collectively oriented, interpersonally sensitive, and dedicated to the cultivation of cooperative relationships (Adler, 2002).

#### *On work ethic*

Finally, as leaders we see aspects of our rural identity manifest in the notion of hard work, an important value of our rural homes (Cramer, 2016) that translates into positive outcomes for those from rural environments who have relocated (Belz, 2016). As leaders from rural communities, we constantly translate the work we do for our home communities, explaining its importance and relevance to people that do not define work in the same way. We strive to do this in a way that values both intellectual and physical work. Work styles that are valued in our rural communities, including determination and grit, have generally served us well in our professional lives. While the life of the

mind is not often associated with grit, we find determination to be a key strength in our work as leaders – it makes us hardworking, reliable people who are not afraid to be actively engaged in (literally and figuratively) messy work.

### *Complexities of identity*

Our collective biography also reveals that our rural identity is fluid, intersecting with our identity as women and shifting based on context.

### *Intersecting identities*

We find our rural identity to be inseparable from our other identities – that of White cisgender Catholic farmwomen of a particular age. These layers of identity are present throughout our stories, but they are not always self-evident as we reflect on the ways rurality affects our leadership. Gender and whiteness are primary identities for us, inseparable from our experiences of rurality and difficult to recognize. We know that our experiences as rural people are very different from a migrant Latino farmworker, or a Black farmer in the rural Southern United States.

We found gender to be particularly important within our reflections on rurality and in the ways we practice leadership. As women, we find ourselves socialized to particular ways of leading, and we find that other modes of leadership are unavailable or uncomfortable for us. That socialization, in part, happened in our early years on the farm.

In our rural communities, we adhered to and observed models of relatively strict gender roles – we often spent more time delivering food to the men in the field than working in the fields ourselves. However, those gender roles were not consistent: one of us had a mother who was an active participant in fieldwork when it was needed, whereas the other grew up on a farm where only the men and boys were taught how to

do tasks such as driving vehicles with manual transmission and operating heavy machinery. Notably, we both received messages early on from our families that as women we were expected to lead – one of us was sent to a women’s leadership camp as a teenager, and another was encouraged in her choice of a women’s college for undergraduate education. Notions about women’s appropriate roles simply circumscribed those leadership roles a bit. We have continued to press against these gender roles in our academic study of identity, in our roles as leaders in higher education, and in our personal relationships. And, we have pressed against norms about women’s work and women’s ways of being in the world when we return to our home communities (see, for example, the discussion of ‘niceness’ above).

As noted earlier, work styles that are valued in our rural communities have generally served us well in our professional lives. This however also poses a double-edged sword for us as women leaders – while we are not afraid of doing hard work, women often carry a heavier burden of service activities in academia (Chen, Kim & Liu as cited in Flaherty, 2016; Guarino and Borden, 2016; Misra, Lundquist, Holmes, & Agiomavritis, 2011), which can hinder productivity and the ability to progress in their careers. One of us found herself becoming frustrated by colleagues who thanked her for her ‘yeoman’s work’ on a recent committee. The other is bothered consistently by others’ characterization of her leadership role as a ‘support’ position. While we know the dutiful labor associated with administration can be important, there is also the fear that constantly being the ‘do-er’ will prohibit us from standing out as visionary leaders.

Stereotypical descriptions of steady and physically strong Midwestern farmwomen are common in literature and popular culture. In the academy, where a rural identity is unexpected, we are sometimes called upon to represent all rural people, to confront the ways in which rural women are popularly portrayed within the United

States, and to interrogate notions of strength, work, knowledge, worth, and expertise as conceptualized within gendered rural environments. Our identities as White women leaders seem particularly important in these instances, as our racial identities afford us privilege and experiences that are not transferable to all academics from rural geographies and alert us to the unfair ways in which students at our institutions may be asked unfairly to represent their communities.

### *Shifting identities*

As leaders in higher education, rurality is only one of our identities, and it is not always at the forefront of our minds, our practice of leadership, or our interactions with others. It is highly dependent on context, and we generally are allowed to choose when we share this identity with others (unlike other more visible identities, as white women of a certain generation). We have both encountered colleagues stating, 'I never would have guessed you grew up on a farm,' and at times we have both felt proud (and somewhat guilty) that we 'passed' in the world of academe, that we had not let our 'humble beginnings' show and cloud everyone's understandings of us. As one of us reflected: 'in my pride in passing, I was tacitly agreeing ... that rural people are not articulate, successful, educated, fashionable – all of those good things that I wanted to be.' This feeling results in a conflict between our shifting identities as rural women (often in a non-rural context) and the idea of whether we 'pass' in one context or another.

Our geographic identity can unwittingly be revealed through using regional verbiage (like popular Minnesota words such as 'hotdish' or 'uff-da') or by referencing knowledge particular to rural communities (such as picking rocks or butchering chickens). And, our rural identity can consciously be revealed as a strength (one of us used her rural identity and sense of hard work as a selling point in a job interview), as a point of connection to others, or as an educational tool about the power of identity. It

seems fitting that a rural identity is more at the forefront when living in rural communities. However, that rural identity does not go away, and may be even more important when revealed in urban and suburban academic contexts. It is in these contexts that our rural identity connects us to others in ways that allow us to forge new communities. For example, one of us revealed her rural identity as a pedagogical tool:

Teaching a course recently, I led the students in an exercise to identify and describe our identities and the ways in which they contribute to our view of the world. I spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on my identity as a rural woman and noted that it is an identity that has become more salient for me in recent years, particularly as I have physically relocated further from that environment. I described to my class that my rural identity is rooted in a connection to the area, community, and land. When every generation since arriving to this country has engaged in this occupation and life, part of it is always with you.

As noted earlier, students from rural areas are less likely to attend college or other highly selective institutions than their peers from urban environments (Koricich, 2014). Disclosing our rural identity can be important in our teaching and mentoring relationships with current students from rural environments navigating their own identities in higher education.

## **Discussion**

Our collective biography contributes to the dearth of research on the understudied identities of women leaders in higher education. Our discoveries relate directly to the practice of leadership on university campuses, to the education and mentorship of individual students, and to contributions campus-wide on diversity and inclusion across a variety of intersecting identities. First, identifying and interrogating the manifestations of rurality within our own leadership practices underscores the importance of a variety of identities in shaping the professional selves of university leaders. Existing research

tends to focus on racial or ethnic identity and gender identity, but a consideration of geographic identity and its intersection with these other identities reveals that it is the comprehensive identity that shapes the lived experiences of university leaders.

Second, engaging the intersections of our own identities helps us to relate more authentically with students engaging in this work themselves, even when their identities are very different from ours. We know very little about rural populations and what they bring to our college campuses. What we do know, however, is that all students bring with them a variety of intersecting identities; and, through an understanding and acknowledgement of the identities of institutional leaders, we are better able to understand the experiences of our students as they navigate the higher education landscape.

Finally, thoughtfully reflecting on the multitude of identities that oppress and privilege students within higher education, too often in invisible ways, informs our leadership in shaping more inclusive university communities. Lacking in the current research is an examination of diversity among the ranks of university leaders who are guiding diversity and inclusion efforts on college campuses. This study helps to inform the daily work of university leaders considering diversity and inclusion efforts on campuses globally.

### **Conclusion and opportunities for future research**

As we consider the additional opportunities for research in this realm, our collective biography leads us to a cadre of remaining questions: What does it mean that we have prospered by moving out of rural geographies? How do we contribute to our new and old communities in appropriate ways? How do we translate our success for our family and friends in rural geographies? How do we translate our rural values for our colleagues in academia? How do we navigate the urban/rural political divide playing

out across America? How do we better access and share our experiences to support and advise students facing similar struggles of geographic identity?

As women from rural America, we find our own geographic identities under-researched and under-theorized within our own field. This research bridges the gap between the intellectual work we do, the identities we hold, and the physical spaces we inhabit or have inhabited, and addresses a void in current higher education research by providing an opportunity to weave our scholarship with practice for leaders in higher education.

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