

Appalachia:

I have lived and worked in Appalachia for 17 years – but those of you who know Appalachia know that means I cannot say that I am from Appalachia. In fact, even though my son was born here and has lived here his entire life the fact that his “people” are not from Appalachia will forever reduce his connection to this region – that is because true Appalachians are deeply rooted in this region by ties to people and place that span generations – even centuries.

The name, Appalachia, comes from the Appalachee Indians. The Appalachian Region follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi and includes 420 counties in 13 states (including all of West Virginia). It extends more than 1,000 miles and is home to more than 25 million people.

Appalachia has a rich history and possesses tremendous natural resources not limited to its beautiful scenery and abundant wildlife. Forty-two percent of the Region's population is rural, compared with 20 percent of the national population and the geography of the region dictates that dense population of much of the region is simply impossible. Despite these advantages, Appalachia continues to be plagued by many problems including widespread poverty and low educational attainment as well as limited access to the technological advantages that could level the field in these areas for those residents who do not want to leave the region.

We will focus our discussion on Central Appalachia – more specifically Eastern Kentucky – as that is our focus and our responsibility as educators. As Tim will explain in greater detail, students from marginalized populations often experience clashes in the expectations of their home and school environment which hinder their chances for academic and economic success. In order to understand the nature of these clashes, we need to understand the context of life in Appalachia.

Although there have been economic gains in some areas of Appalachia, some of our countries most economically depressed counties are located in Appalachia. You can see on the map in red the number of “Distressed” counties in Appalachia – and in particular in Eastern Kentucky. These counties rank in the worst 10 percent of the nation’s counties. The pink counties are considered “at risk” for economic distress and rank between the worst 10 and 25 percent of the nation’s counties. The white counties are transitioning between strong and weak economies, fall in the middle

between the worst 25 percent and the best 25 percent. The blue counties are considered competitive (lighter blue) and economically strong (dark blue).

While rural regions are often more economically disadvantaged than more heavily populated areas, there is more than simple geography at play here when it comes to economic distress. Appalachians are below the national average when it comes to high school education and these numbers are worse in central and southern Appalachia. In 161 counties fewer than 75% of adults have a high school degree -the greatest concentration of those counties is right here in Eastern Kentucky.

Not unexpectedly the numbers of college graduates are also lower in these regions. The national average is 27.5% or a little better than 1 in 4. But in much of Appalachia fewer than 1 in 5 have a college degree. In 81 counties - more than half in central Appalachia - fewer than 1 in 10 possess a college degree.

Access to technology remains a problem for Appalachia as well. Although nationally 88% of people have access to a high-speed Internet connection, in Appalachia only 63% do. Cell phone coverage is widely available but in reality, as anyone who regularly travels in Eastern Kentucky knows, connections are frequently intermittent. I have students and colleagues without cell phone coverage at home and/or parts of their commute. In fact, when I looked at coverage maps for the region repeatedly I saw blank patches in Eastern Kentucky.

Similarly, the number and age of electronic devices is a problem. Many of my students report problems with their computers or with programs that we use for our classes due to the age of their equipment. We are not a wealthy region and we are not a well educated region which contributes to lower investment in the kinds of technology that can support and increase access to education and ultimately the economy.

And yet there is much that is wonderful about Eastern Kentucky – its land and its people. Kentucky scholar Rodger Cunningham describes a mountain people who have resisted their oppressors for centuries and have an intimate relationship to the land and its seasons, and to places and to extended family. Cunningham argues that these people often envision Southern Appalachia as God’s promised land, a vision intimately connected to the mountainous nature of the land. There is also a bountiful tradition of Appalachian literature that is indeed evocative of the Appalachian experience as well as a rich tradition of music, arts, and craftsmanship.

Anthropologists indicate that the Appalachian value system has evolved into what it is today in part due to geographic isolation of the mountainous region during the early days of settlement and this geographic isolation persists to this day due to the difficulty and expense of physical travel as well as the technological limitations I discussed before. Appalachians are known for: their love of family and place, independence and pride (of heritage rather than person), patriotism, kindness and generosity, and enjoyment of humor, music, and storytelling.

For generations, Appalachians have had three choices when they reach adulthood – they can stay in place (although there is frequently little opportunity), they can move away to pursue education and economic opportunities (thereby sacrificing their Appalachian heritage), or they can move away and hope to return some day (which is quite common). Therein lies one of the greatest problems. The families of our students want a better life for their children but they also worry desperately about losing them and so they constantly pull them back home and warn them about getting above their raisin'. We see education as their ticket out and up but their families see education as a rejection of, or worse, a threat to, the values and beliefs of home, family, community.

Students are often faced with the impossible choice between home and family and their education and future. Without paying attention to the issue of cultural discontinuity we will perpetuate the problem which often leads to student resistance to schooling. How can we help students realize that they do not need to choose, how can we help them protect and preserve their culture and heritage while simultaneously help them foster their personal growth and development.

If we can engage these students and their families in conversations and critical thinking about real world problems connected to their homes, families, and communities then we may find opportunities not only to resolve these conflicts but also to preserve the culture while simultaneously solving problems that really matter including economic, education, and technology challenges.