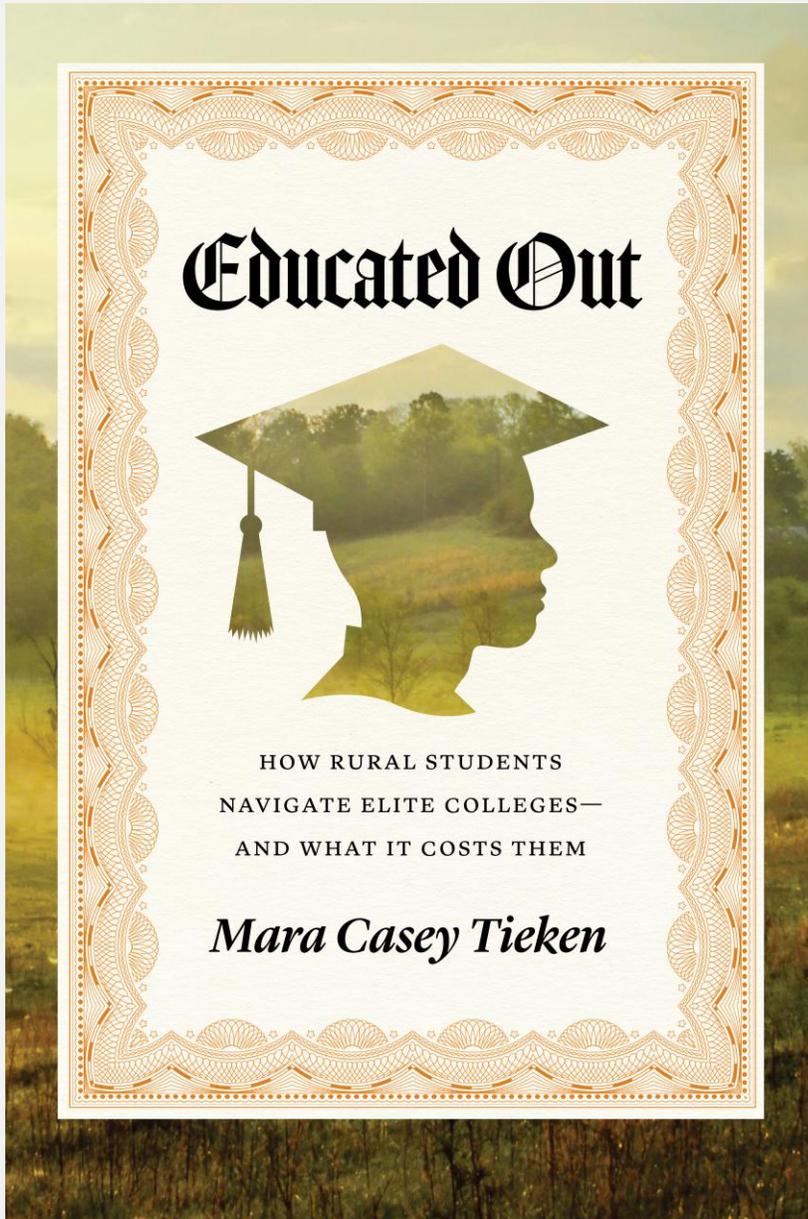


**EDUCATED OUT:
STORIES OF COLLEGE, PLACE,
AND NEW POSSIBILITY**

MARA CASEY TIEKEN
MARCH 17, 2026
LAUNCH NW



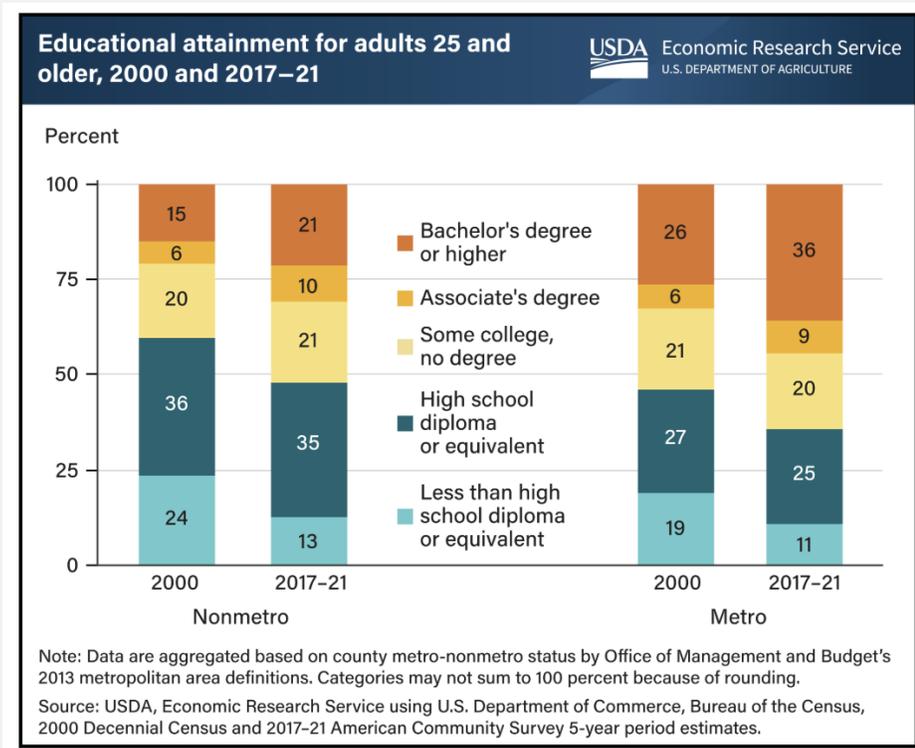
My first class of third graders, Vanleer Elementary School, 2002



More than elite colleges!

This research was supported by a generous grant from the Spencer Foundation.

THE URBAN-RURAL ATTAINMENT GAP



COMMON EXPLANATIONS

Rural youth and adults don't know how important college is

Families aren't willing to pay for college

Rural youth want to enter trades

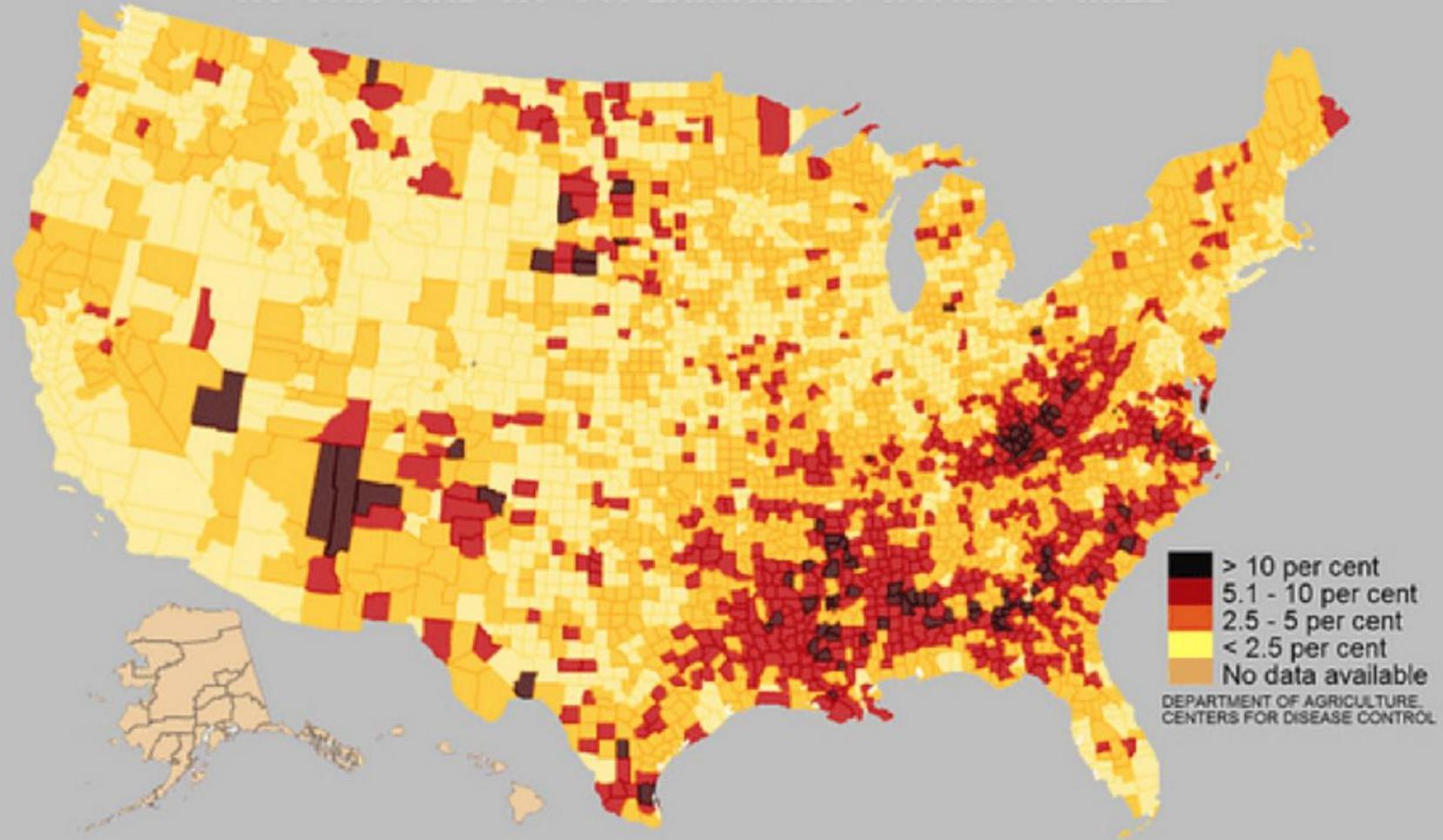
Parents don't want them to go

Rural communities have an anti-elite, anti-college attitude

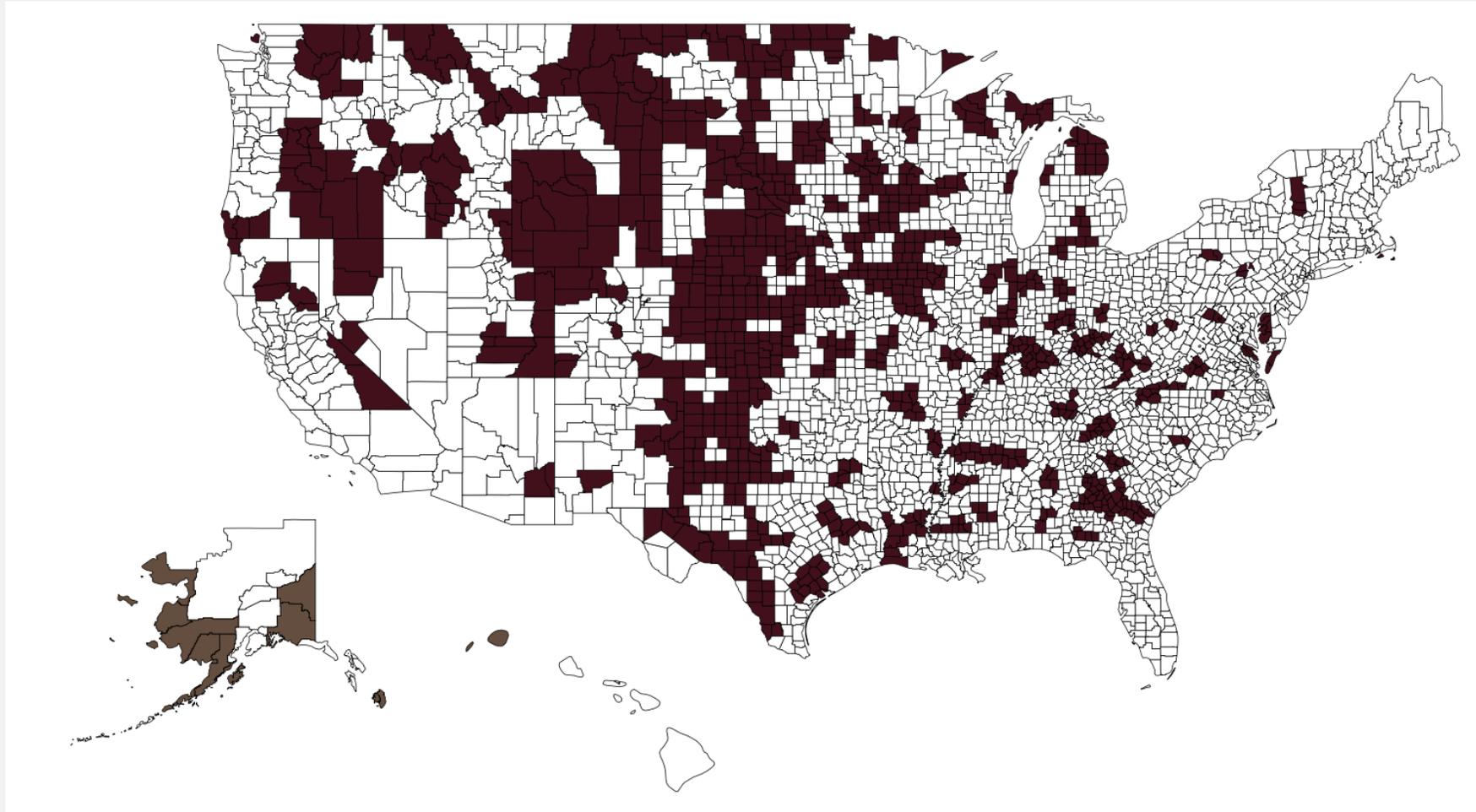
POPULAR NARRATIVES FAULT
“RURAL CULTURE”...

... BUT, IN REALITY, THE GAP IS MOSTLY ABOUT
UNEQUAL RESOURCES

NO CAR AND NO SUPERMARKET WITHIN A MILE



Source: Food forests 101 at medium.com



Education deserts across the United States

Source: Education deserts: The continued significance of “place” in the twenty-first century (Hillman & Weichman)

SPATIAL INJUSTICE

- Where you live determines your opportunities
- Rural areas have:
 - Fewer colleges.
 - Fewer adults with college degrees.
 - Less access to school counselors.
 - Fewer advanced placement classes
 - Fewer jobs that use a college degree.



Image from Immo Wegmann on Unsplash

BUT SOME RURAL STUDENTS DO GO TO
COLLEGE, EVEN ELITE SCHOOLS.

THE STUDY

- Followed 9 rural students at Hilltop, an elite liberal arts college
- 140 interviews, with students and parents
- Observed college events, like admissions sessions and graduation





THE STUDENTS

- 7 men and 2 women, all first-generation and on financial aid
- 7 White, 1 Latina, 1 bi-racial (Asian and White)
- 7 from New England, 2 from western U.S.
- High schools: local rural public, larger urban public, private



Hometowns: few jobs for college-educated workers.

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

College is just like the military.
“You are going to come back
and it is not going to be the
same.””

- Henry’s mother, before his first year



COLLEGE DREAMS

- College was always a goal:
 - "Go to college" for a "good job"
 - Afraid of "getting stuck" in their hometowns
- The pull of Hilltop: reputation, "connections," location, diversity, "communal feel," and financial aid



CHALLENGES

- But many barriers, especially those at rural public high schools
 - Few advanced classes and extracurriculars
 - College admissions officials didn't visit their high schools
- Strong parental support, but “we don't know how to do this”
- Low expectations: “coming from a rural background, I guess I'm not expected to necessarily go on and exceed”



“When one of my math teachers found out I got into Hilltop, she chuckled. She couldn't believe it. ... That stuck with me. I was like, ‘I’ll prove you all wrong.’”

- John, fall of first year

“LIKE A DUCK TO WATER”

- At first, I only hear stories of the things they love: “amazing” first-year trips, great roommates, “really, really interesting” classes
- They remain close to home, calling/texting and visiting often



“FLOUNDERING”

- But then, I begin to see how difficult the transition is:
 - Academically unprepared, “stressed 95% of the time”
 - Can’t find a “useful” major
 - “Parties just smell like beer and desperation at this point”
 - “Maybe I don’t fit in here”
- Hard to acknowledge the challenges—and the possibility of failure: “I don’t want to doubt that this was the right place”



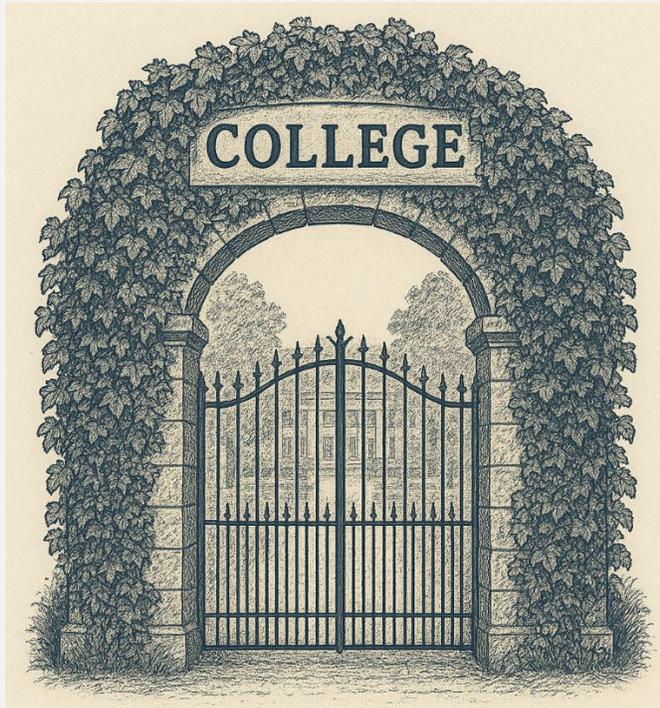
Ethan: “I think a lot of people here are similar, and I think there might be a ‘Hilltop person,’ like a type of person that goes here, and I don’t know if I’m that person yet. Maybe they’re like that because they go here, and it’s just, that’s the way you turn into, but I like those people so I wouldn’t necessarily mind becoming that way.”

Mara: “What would you say a ‘Hilltop person’ is like?”

Ethan: “I don’t know. A lot of it is aesthetic, which I feel is maybe a little superficial, but a lot of people look, not like their face-wise in the looks, but the way people carry themselves, the way people talk and the way people dress is kind of homogeneous in a lot of cases.”

- Ethan, fall of his first year

“OUTSIDER”



- They are academically and socially successful.
- But, in many ways, they don't have full access to a Hilltop education.

“DIFFERENT WORLDS”

- There’s also a growing distance between Hilltop and home and, increasingly, between them and home
- At the same time, they also resent the political and cultural “group-think” of Hilltop

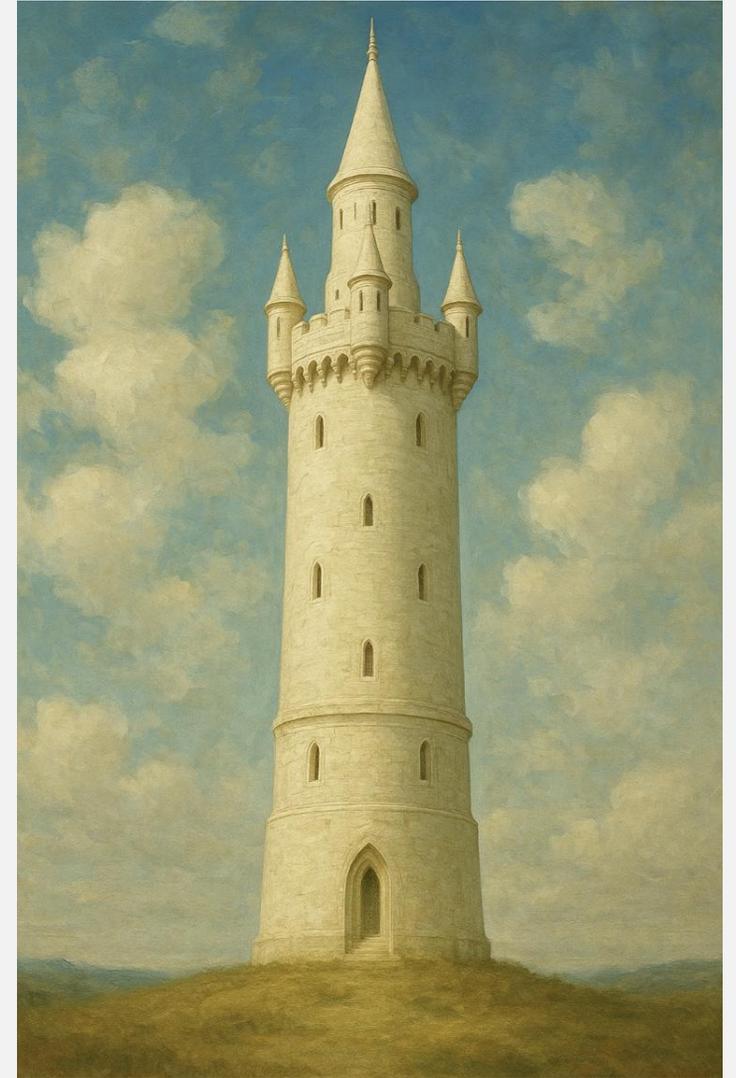


“I was in Developmental Psychology and my professor was very distraught about [the election] and one thing that she said that day that has really stuck with me was how she doesn’t understand how academia could become so disconnected with rural America in general really to allow for a president like Trump to be elected. In my head all I could do was agree. From what I have seen, if you think of a typical Hilltop student or maybe even a faculty member,... they don’t really know what it is like to be from a rural area because that is not where they came from.

...

And I was like, ‘What?’ What do you mean ‘academia let this happen’? Sure, people make uneducated decisions pretty frequently. But is that academia’s job?”

- Henry, junior/senior year



LEAVING



- “Huge pressure” to make their diploma “worth it”
- All either want to leave rural America—or assume they’ll need to
- But they don’t have the networks or resumes, and most have debt

AFTER HILLTOP: PROUD...

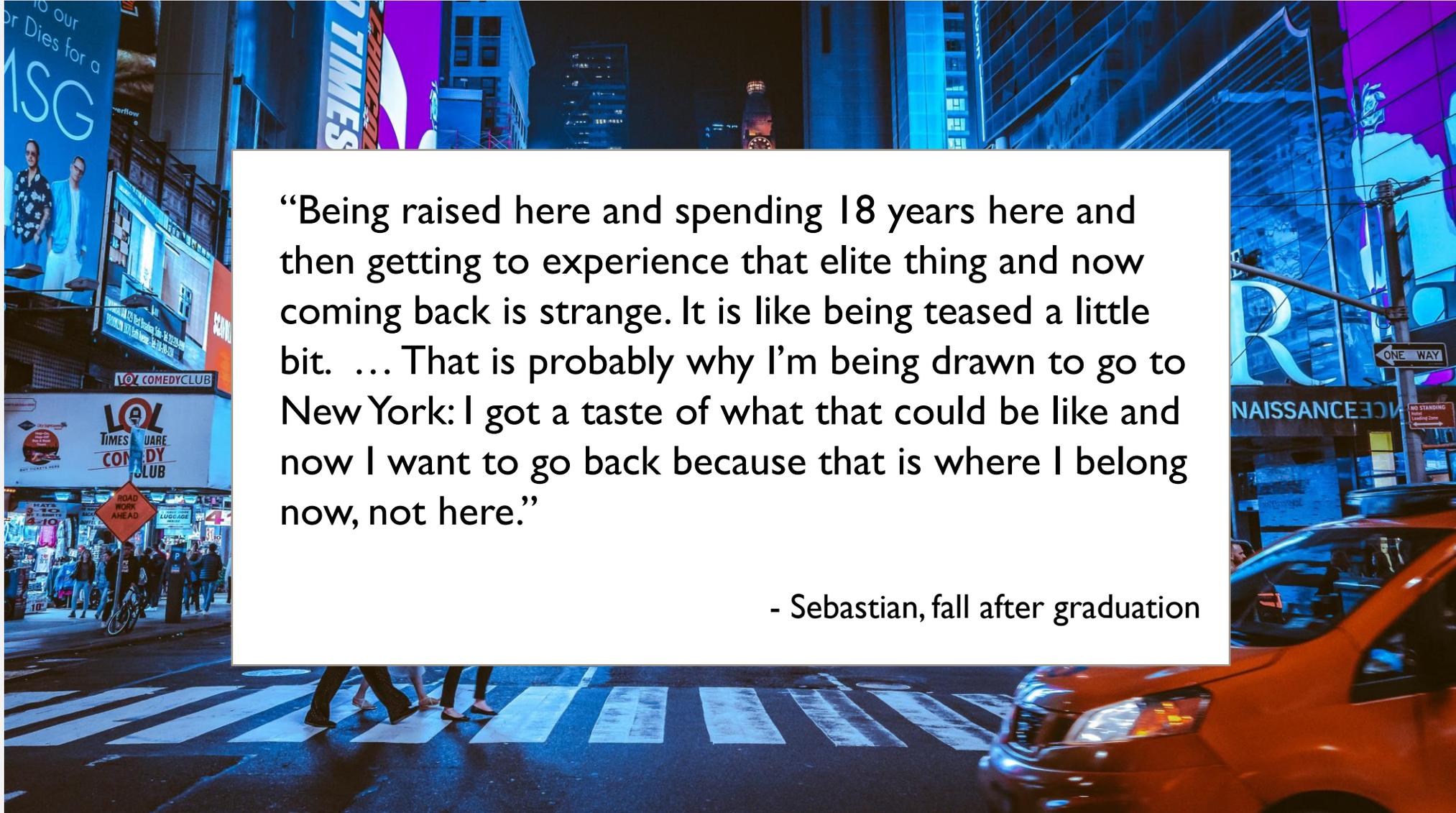
- All graduate—proudly
- They have jobs or are in graduate school.



... BUT “STUCK” OR “FLOATING”

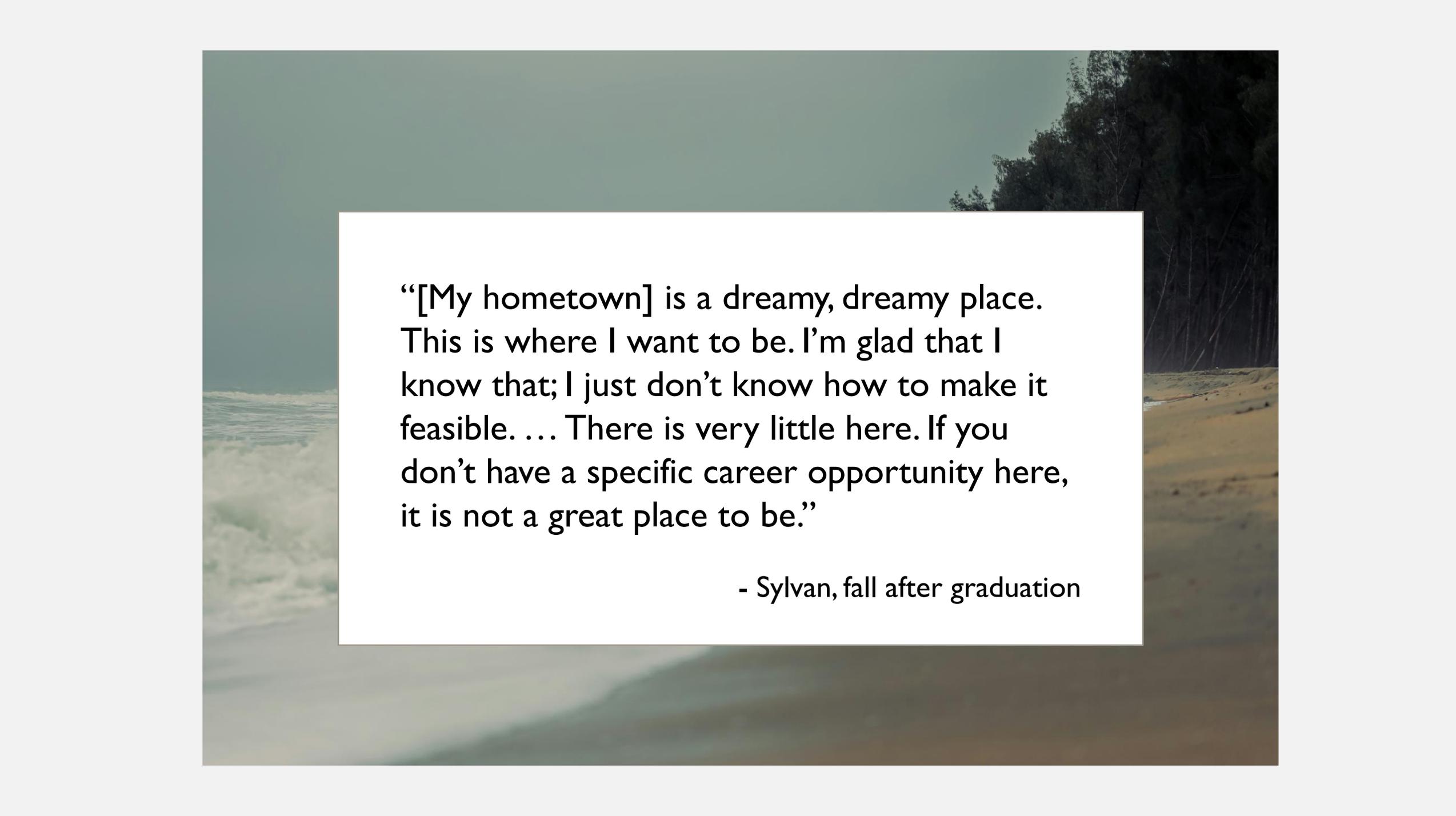


- But they can't get "good jobs"
- The three back home don't want to be back home, but most of the others can't sustain—or now don't want to sustain—life in a city



“Being raised here and spending 18 years here and then getting to experience that elite thing and now coming back is strange. It is like being teased a little bit. ... That is probably why I’m being drawn to go to New York: I got a taste of what that could be like and now I want to go back because that is where I belong now, not here.”

- Sebastian, fall after graduation



“[My hometown] is a dreamy, dreamy place. This is where I want to be. I’m glad that I know that; I just don’t know how to make it feasible. ... There is very little here. If you don’t have a specific career opportunity here, it is not a great place to be.”

- Sylvan, fall after graduation



The students have been “educated out”: they can’t return home. But they’re struggling to be anywhere else either.

THE WRONG QUESTION

Aren't there better investments?

Does a rural kid really need a college degree?

Why should anyone go to college?

Is college worth it?

Should all kids go to college?

Who needs a degree?

Shouldn't we just focus on the trades?

Why spend that much on a degree?

DO ALL YOUTH HAVE **ACCESS** TO COLLEGE?

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Listen closely.

Resist either/or thinking.

Dream big.

Rural community members: Run for office. Use your vote, Mentor rural students. Support college-going and college-returning.

High school staff: Help students know ALL of their options. Make space for *their* hopes and dreams. Hold high expectations and offer strong support.

College administrators: Recruit rural students. Track rural students. Welcome rural families. Address anti-rural bias in curriculum. Support student-led rural affinity groups.

Policymakers: Fund rural schools fairly. Align education and economic policy. Create jobs for college-educated workers.

BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT ACCESS TO
EDUCATION—A GOOD EDUCATION—REQUIRES

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

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