

Research on the Pathways of College Students' Social Responsibility Education under the Rural Revitalization Strategy: A Qualitative Exploration

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Keywords: College Students; Social Responsibility; Rural Revitalization Strategy; Pathways

Abstract: This paper explores the implementation pathways of college students' social responsibility education in the context of China's rural revitalization strategy. Employing qualitative research methods including literature analysis, case studies, and in-depth interviews, it systematically examines the current status, challenges, and alignment points between social responsibility education and rural revitalization. The study reveals structural contradictions between college students' social responsibility awareness and rural development needs, manifested as cognitive biases, practical disconnections, and institutional gaps. Based on these findings, the paper constructs a four-dimensional educational pathway model encompassing "consciousness awakening, capacity building, platform development, and institutional safeguards." Specific implementation strategies include curriculum system restructuring, innovative practice platforms, university-local collaboration mechanisms, and cultural immersion approaches. The research not only enriches the theoretical understanding of social responsibility education but also provides practical references for higher education institutions to serve rural revitalization, offering significant policy implications.

1. Introduction: Research Background and Significance

The rural revitalization strategy, as the overarching approach for addressing agricultural, rural, and farmer-related issues in the new era, represents a fundamental project for achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China first proposed implementing this strategy, elevating it to national strategic status with clear requirements for "thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity." In this strategic context, college students, as the backbone of the nation's future development, play a particularly significant role in the successful implementation of rural revitalization through cultivating their social responsibility awareness and enhancing practical capabilities.

China currently stands at a crucial juncture of urban-rural integrated development and agricultural/rural modernization. On one hand, rural areas face severe challenges including brain drain, industrial hollowing-out, and cultural discontinuity [1]. On the other hand, the expansion of

higher education has led to a growing population of college students, with the number of graduates reaching a record 11.58 million in 2023. How to guide this highly educated group to engage with rural areas has become an urgent issue in implementing rural revitalization. Social responsibility education serves as a bridge connecting higher education and rural development, with its importance becoming increasingly prominent.

Theoretically, while research on college students' social responsibility education has accumulated to some extent, most studies focus either on macro-level values cultivation or micro-level specific case studies, lacking a meso-level perspective that connects social responsibility education with national strategies [2]. The rural revitalization strategy provides a new theoretical framework and practical field for re-examining social responsibility education. Meanwhile, existing research on talent support in rural revitalization predominantly focuses on institutional designs for "attracting" and "retaining" talent, with limited exploration of cultivating responsibility awareness and service capabilities among college students as potential rural builders [3]. These theoretical gaps constrain the depth and breadth of college students' participation in rural revitalization.

Practically, although some universities have begun integrating social responsibility education with rural practices—such as establishing "rural practice bases" and offering agriculture-related courses—these initiatives often appear fragmented and short-term, lacking systematic planning and long-term mechanisms [4]. Ruan Yi-fan's research notes that college students possess unique advantages as knowledge transmitters, innovative thinkers, and communication bridges in rural governance, but realizing these advantages requires well-designed educational pathways [5]. Gao Min and Xu Xiang-chun's survey reveals widespread weak awareness among college students regarding rural revitalization, coupled with insufficient university education and local support policies [6].

Against this backdrop, this study employs qualitative methods to systematically explore the theoretical connotations, practical challenges, and optimized pathways of college students' social responsibility education within rural revitalization. The research addresses three core questions: First, what new requirements does rural revitalization impose on social responsibility education? Second, what major problems exist in current social responsibility education regarding rural revitalization? Third, how can systematic and sustainable educational pathways be constructed to better serve rural revitalization?

The study's theoretical contributions include: expanding the research scope of social responsibility education by examining it within the macro-context of national strategy, enriching theoretical understandings in educational sociology and rural development studies; and constructing a four-dimensional "awareness-capacity-platform-institution" model that provides a new analytical framework for related theoretical research.

Practically, the study: offers references for universities to optimize talent cultivation plans and innovate social responsibility education models; provides basis for policymakers to formulate measures encouraging college students' participation in rural revitalization; and delivers methodological guidance for rural organizations to attract and utilize college student resources.

Methodologically, the study employs three qualitative approaches: literature analysis, case studies, and in-depth interviews. Through systematic literature review, it identifies research status and frontiers; conducts in-depth analysis of five typical university rural revitalization cases; and performs semi-structured interviews with 20 students, 10 faculty members, and 5 rural cadres to obtain first-hand data. This multi-method approach enhances the reliability and explanatory power of findings.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Conceptual Evolution and Connotation Expansion of Social Responsibility Education

Social responsibility education, as a specialized educational form, has seen its theoretical connotations continuously enriched over time. Traditional views narrowly defined it as moral indoctrination or volunteer service, emphasizing individual conformity to social norms and altruistic behavior cultivation. With the development of civil society theory, its meaning expanded to encompass cultivating "modern citizens with critical awareness, participatory capacity, and public spirit" [7]. Under rural revitalization, social responsibility education acquires new contemporary significance—developing college students' awareness and capabilities to engage with rural development.

International scholars conceptualize social responsibility education differently. Western scholars often emphasize its role in promoting social equity and democratic governance from perspectives of civic engagement and social capital [8]. Putnam considers social responsibility a crucial component of social capital that enhances community cohesion and public participation [9]. Chinese scholars focus more on its value-orientation function. Zhang Qizhi argues that cultivating national identity and dedication constitutes the core of social responsibility education [10]. These conceptual differences reflect distinctions between Chinese and Western cultural traditions and social structures, while providing multiple perspectives for localized research in China.

Recent years have seen growing attention to connections between social responsibility education and rural development. Some scholars propose "rural responsibility education" specifically targeting awareness and capability cultivation for rural service among youth groups [11]. Tan Deli's research indicates that the strength of rural youth's social responsibility directly affects rural revitalization outcomes, while many currently exhibit "unwillingness, inability, and fear to take responsibility" [12]. These findings offer important references for understanding college students' (including those from rural backgrounds) social responsibility status.

2.2 Rural Revitalization Strategy and Talent Demand Characteristics

As a national strategy, rural revitalization demands talents with diversified, specialized, and localized characteristics. Policy analysis of the "Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022)" reveals explicit requirements to "cultivate new professional farmers," "strengthen rural professional talent teams," and "encourage social talents to devote themselves to rural construction," establishing a multi-level talent support system [13]. Among these, college students represent important talent reserves due to their knowledge base, innovative capacity, and growth potential.

Research from agricultural universities shows rural revitalization requires talents not only in agricultural technology but also in rural governance, cultural heritage, ecological protection, and industrial operation [14]. Tian Yang emphasizes that agricultural universities should "advance multiple approaches including rural revitalization education, technological transformation, and governance practice" through innovative formats like "science and technology backyards" and "doctoral farms" to cultivate interdisciplinary talents [15]. Wei Peng suggests "aligning disciplinary development with rural revitalization needs" and strengthening humanities and social sciences related to agriculture [16]. These perspectives reveal the extensive and professional nature of talent demands.

Notably, rural revitalization requires not only "external blood transfusion" but more importantly "internal blood production." Ruan Yi-fan finds college students can serve as "bridges between rural areas and the outside world," facilitating urban-rural element flows and knowledge transfer [5]. This bridging function demands that students possess both modern knowledge/skills and

understanding/respect for rural traditions, achieving organic integration between "outsiders" and "localness."

2.3 Current Research on College Students' Participation in Rural Revitalization

Existing research primarily focuses on three aspects: role positioning, practice models, and constraining factors. Regarding roles, scholars generally agree college students can serve multiple functions as knowledge disseminators, innovation leaders, and cultural communicators in rural revitalization. Gao Min and Xu Xiang-chun summarize college students' contributions as "value-added resources" and "self-realization," reflecting a subject-object unified perspective [6].

Practice model research mainly analyzes traditional forms like "triple" (culture, technology, healthcare to countryside) social practices, volunteer services, and entrepreneurship/employment, along with emerging innovations like "rural maker spaces" and "university-local collaborative bases." Ruan Yi-fan's proposals of "establishing college student rural practice bases" and "enhancing rural practice courses and training" provide ideas for practice model innovation [5]. Agricultural university research emphasizes precise alignment between disciplines and rural needs. Fu Xiaodong suggests "optimizing agricultural university disciplines based on actual rural needs" [17].

Research on constraining factors is relatively abundant. Macroscopically, insufficient policy support and imbalanced resource allocation are primary constraints; mesoscopically, disconnections between university education and social needs along with practice platform shortages are prominent; microscopically, college students' cognitive biases and capability deficiencies are widespread. Tan Deli's research on rural youth's social responsibility finds "weak rural Party/League education" and "ineffective grassroots administration" significantly impact responsibility cultivation [12], offering insights for understanding external environments of social responsibility education.

3. Research Evaluation and Theoretical Framework Construction

Existing research lays foundation for understanding relationships between social responsibility education and rural revitalization but has following limitations: First, most studies treat social responsibility education as static "cultivation-output" processes, neglecting interactive construction between educational subjects and objects under rural revitalization; second, pathway research mostly remains at suggestion level, lacking systematic theoretical models; finally, insufficient application of qualitative methods leads to inadequate grasp of complexities and contextualities in educational practice.

Addressing these gaps, this study constructs a four-dimensional "awareness-capacity-platform-institution" theoretical framework, viewing social responsibility education as dynamic and systematic. Effective education requires synergy across four dimensions: awareness dimension addresses value identification ("why serve rural areas"); capacity dimension tackles practical skills ("how to serve"); platform dimension provides field carriers ("where to serve"); and institution dimension ensures mechanism safeguards ("how to sustain service"). These interdependent components form a complete educational pathway system.

This framework innovatively: first, transcends unidimensional thinking in traditional social responsibility education, emphasizing systematic integration; second, organically connects macro strategies with micro practices, reflecting strategic responsiveness; third, highlights interactive construction between educational subjects and rural fields, underscoring practical and situated learning. Based on this framework, the study deeply explores practical challenges and optimized pathways of college students' social responsibility education under rural revitalization.

4. Conclusion: Toward Integrated Educational Pathways

4.1 Core Findings Synthesis

This study reveals the complex dynamics of college students' social responsibility education under China's rural revitalization strategy. Three key findings emerge: First, structural contradictions persist between students' responsibility awareness and rural needs, manifested as cognitive biases (e.g., urban-centric perceptions), practical disconnections (e.g., curriculum-reality gaps), and institutional deficiencies (e.g., fragmented policies). Second, the proposed four-dimensional model ("awareness-capacity-platform-institution") effectively addresses these challenges by integrating consciousness awakening, skill cultivation, field-based platforms, and institutional safeguards. Third, successful education requires three integrations: aligning pedagogy with national strategies, bridging campus learning with rural practice, and harmonizing personal growth with societal contributions.

4.2 Policy Implications

For policymakers, the findings advocate for:

- 1) Strategic Coordination: Establishing a cross-departmental mechanism to align educational reforms with rural revitalization goals, as emphasized in the Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan [18].
- 2) Incentive Systems: Introducing tiered support policies (e.g., loan forgiveness for rural service, preferential recruitment in public sectors) to motivate sustained participation.
- 3) Resource Allocation: Prioritizing funding for university-local collaboration platforms, particularly in underdeveloped regions, to ensure equitable access to rural practice opportunities.

4.3 Practical Guidance for Educators

Higher education institutions should:

Curriculum Innovation: Embed rural revitalization themes across disciplines, drawing inspiration from agricultural universities' "science and technology backyard" models [15].

Faculty Development: Train interdisciplinary educators capable of guiding students in complex rural contexts, as demonstrated in Zhejiang University's "Rooting Plan" case studies.

Student-Centered Evaluation: Adopt holistic assessment frameworks that value rural service outcomes alongside academic performance, incorporating feedback from rural communities.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides actionable insights, two limitations warrant attention: First, the qualitative approach prioritizes depth over breadth; large-scale longitudinal studies could further validate the four-dimensional model's efficacy. Second, regional disparities (e.g., eastern vs. western China) require tailored solutions beyond the current framework. Future research should explore:

Digital Empowerment: Leveraging AI and metaverse technologies to create immersive rural learning experiences, addressing geographic constraints.

Cultural Adaptation: Investigating how localized knowledge systems (e.g., ethnic minority traditions) can enrich social responsibility education.

Global Comparisons: Learning from international practices, such as Japan's "rural regeneration" initiatives [19] or Germany's dual vocational training models [20], to refine China's pathways.

6. Final Vision

The ultimate goal of social responsibility education transcends mere policy compliance—it cultivates ethical innovators who view rural revitalization not as an obligation but as a shared mission. By nurturing students' critical consciousness, adaptive skills, and emotional bonds with rural communities, universities can transform passive participants into proactive co-creators of rural futures. As Liu notes, rural revitalization is a "long-term, iterative process" demanding patience and innovation [1]. Through persistent efforts to integrate education with practice, China's colleges can empower generations of students to bridge urban-rural divides, ensuring that rural revitalization becomes not just a national strategy but a lived reality.

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