

RURAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT SELECTIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES:
PATHWAYS TO PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Amy M. Sikes

January 2018

RURAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT SELECTIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES:
PATHWAYS TO PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS

by

Amy M. Sikes

Approved January 30, 2018 by

Eddie. R. Cole, Ph. D.
Co-chairperson of Doctoral Committee

James P. Barber, Ph. D.
Co-chairperson of Doctoral Committee

Monica Griffin, Ph.D.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents, Olen and Mary Montague Sikes, for their unwavering faith and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi
List of Tables	ix
Abstract	x
Half Title Page	1
Chapter 1 – Rural Students’ Experiences at Selective 4-Year Colleges	2
Purpose of the Study	3
Research Questions	4
Conceptual Framework	4
Cultural and social capital	5
Academic capital	6
Funds of knowledge	7
Significance of the Study	8
Definition of Key Terms	10
Personal Statement	12
Organization of the Study	13
Summary	14
Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature	15
Overview	15
Traditional Focus on Higher Education Access Issues	15
First-generation student issues	16
Ameliorating influences on student success	18
Traditional Focus on Financial Aid and Overall Financing of College	20
FAFSA issues	22
Technology issues	23
Personal and support issues	24
Budgetary issues	25
Traditional Focus on Race and Exclusion of Class	26
The income gap	28
Issues with cultural and academic capital	29
Research on class	30
Traditional Focus on Overcoming Barriers	31
The importance of institutional agents	31
The importance of engagement	32
Living-learning communities	35
Summer bridge programs	36
Levels of persistence and success	36
Intersectionality	39
Lack of Focus on Rural Students	40
Summary	43
Chapter 3 – Methodology	44
Overview	44
Research Approach	45
Qualitative research	45

Phenomenology	45
Theoretical Framework	47
Theoretical lens	47
Conceptual framework	48
Participant Selection	48
Instrumentation	50
Data Generation	50
Personal interviews	50
Data Analysis	52
Trustworthiness	54
Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions	56
Limitations	56
Delimitations	57
Assumptions	58
Ethical Considerations	58
Privacy and confidentiality	58
Summary of confidentiality language	58
Summary	59
Chapter 4 – Participant Profiles	60
Overview	60
Coastal College	63
Beth	64
Fran	64
George	65
Jack	66
Jon	67
Lucas	67
Milo	68
Rebecca	68
Rob	69
Shelly	70
Midlands College	71
Alice	72
Amelia	72
Edward	73
Kegan	74
Marilyn	75
Maureen	76
Monique	78
Summary	79
Chapter 5 – Findings	79
Overview	79
High Schools Challenges	81
Being “too smart”	83
Lack of STEM preparation	87
Poor overall high school preparation	90

Social outcasts	94
College Challenges	95
Transition issues	96
Academic	97
Social	102
Importance of community/religion	102
Importance of college transition assistance	108
Capital issues	109
Microaggressions	112
Code-switching	114
Solo status	116
Stereotype threat	117
Political environment	119
Home area and family influences	121
High level of independence	121
Feelings of disconnectedness	122
Lack of desire to return home	123
Identification as a “rural student”	124
Summary	130
Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusion	131
Overview of the Study	132
Discussion	132
Importance of institutional agents	132
Importance of fictive kin	135
Importance of resilience	137
An invisible population	138
Rural brain-drain	139
Implications	141
K-12 practice	141
Community colleges	144
Faculty/staff	145
Admission offices	146
First-Year Experiences/extended orientation programs	148
Future Research	149
Institutional agents	149
Intersectionality	150
Academic capital in rural areas	150
Final Thoughts	151
Appendix A – Email to potential participants	153
Appendix B – Student demographic questionnaire	154
Appendix C – Consent form	155
Appendix D – Interview protocol	158
References	160
Vita	176

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, first and foremost. The encouragement they have given me throughout the PhD process has been amazing. They always understood when I needed to put coursework or dissertation ahead of everything else – my parents even let me work on interview transcriptions while we were on vacation in Key West! My sisters also always offered their support.

My dissertation committee gave me wonderful ideas to consider along with additional suggestions regarding the text. Dr. Eddie Cole was enthusiastic from the beginning about my topic; as a former rural student himself, he understands acutely the need for more study on the issue. Dr. Monica Griffin provided insights that would not have occurred to me otherwise, including the suggestion that I change my original title – which likely would have raised questions and created discussion that I did not intend and that could have taken away from my purpose in studying the topic. Dr. Jim Barber also served as my advisor throughout my time as a Ph.D. student, and he guided me through sometimes stormy waters. Without his help, I'm not sure I would have completed my Ph.D. residency requirement of full-time coursework for a year (while I also remained employed full-time), bringing my quest for a Ph.D. to an end. I am deeply grateful to all three of these amazing scholars for their invaluable assistance in completing this project. All the faculty with whom I have worked at William & Mary's School of Education. These fabulous folks want nothing more than the success of their students, and they do their best to help students navigate roadblocks and learn all they can. I will be forever in debt to them, as I use the things I learned every day.

Even though it will make me appear to be the epitome of a crazy cat lady, I would like to thank my cats. Somehow, they always knew when I really needed to work on my dissertation, and they left me alone to do it rather than walking across the laptop or batting at me for attention. Casey and Simon would curl up on my feet and purr away as I worked. Squeaker always knew when I needed extra encouragement and would come chirping over to me and give me purr-filled head-bunts. Vivi kept me amused by snoring so loudly I could hear her on the other side of the house. Zanzibar kept his caterwauling to a minimum. And Lucky and Gracie simply disappeared – to watch birds or just nap in the sun.

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Participant Demographics	62
2	Research Questions and Emergent Themes/Subthemes	81

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of rural students at two selective four-year colleges. Using the framework of cultural, social, and academic capital, I explored aspects of 17 rural college students' experiences that show how they are able to attain success at college in spite of their potentially disadvantaged backgrounds. Data were collected by interview; the participants were college students who mostly were seniors at the time of the interviews. Two major themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) the challenges students encountered in their rural high schools and 2) the challenges students encountered once they matriculated at college. Subthemes support the theory that rural students should be considered as part of the underserved student population, including microaggressions, code-switching, solo status, and stereotype threat. Other subthemes indicate that rural students are able to use knowledge gained from overcoming challenging situations they encountered in high school to also overcome challenges at college. The study indicates that resilient, resourceful, intelligent rural students can forge their own pathways to persistence and success in college.

Keywords: college success, rural students, resilience, underserved students

RURAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT SELECTIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES:
PATHWAYS TO PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS

CHAPTER 1

Rural Students' Experiences at Selective Four-Year Colleges

Assisting students who might not otherwise consider attending college, or to find pathways to the colleges of their choice, has gone a long way toward narrowing the college access gap between Whites and racial minorities (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gammell, 2008; St. John et al., 2011). However, there remains a college completion gap (Abdul-Alim, 2015). Once minority and other underserved students attain entrance to college, they often lack the staying power to earn their degrees (Bowen & Bok, 1998; St. John et al., 2011). College access has increased, but college success has not (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In short, accessing college does not guarantee graduation or post-graduation success.

Research indicates that, at least in some cases, the lack of proper support for underserved students causes them to become frustrated with college and, consequently, to drop out (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Engle & Tinto, 2008; St. John et al., 2011). These students will then have no bachelor's degree to show for their time at college, but they are likely to have student loans. This can create further economic hardship.

The majority of research on this topic focuses on underserved students who come from urban, low-income backgrounds. While there is little debate that this population of students deserves examination, students from rural locations are often left out of the

discussion. For example, college students from a rural community may have difficulty in fitting into “normal” culture or even understanding how to relate to their professors and those administrators with whom they must have contact (Dunstan, 2013). They also may experience challenges interacting with students from more urban environments. It is possible that such a situation could cause students to drop out in frustration, without ever asking for the help they should have. Rural students also could find the climate at a college intimidating and frustrating (Dunstan, 2013; Guyton, 2011). How can these students utilize their unique backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to create successful college experiences for themselves? Do the experiences of rural students show that they are treated differently from other underserved students in institutions of higher education? In other words, is this population’s status as underserved ignored by colleges? This is a critical area of diversity study that has gone mainly unrecognized in scholarly research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of rural students at selective four-year institutions and how they attain success at those institutions. The study examines, via the use of phenomenology, rural students’ lived experiences using the research questions stated below, with the goal of distilling the essence of those lived experiences and developing a general picture of what it is like to be a rural student at a selective four-year college. I chose selective four-year institutions as the background for my study because I am most familiar with those types of institutions and the students who attend them. Selective colleges are those that reject at least 25% of their applicants (CollegeData, 2018). I also had easy access to the student populations at two selective

four-year institutions. In addition, college access for those students from underserved populations, including rural students, has begun a downward trend after many years of heading upward (Ruiz & Perna, 2017), making a study of rural student experiences at two selective institutions even more important. The challenges facing rural students are likely similar at most four-year institutions, which provides the opportunity for additional, later studies on a cross-section of the population.

Research Questions

This study was informed by the overarching question: What do the lived experiences of rural students at selective four-year colleges demonstrate in terms of how they are able to attain success? That is, do the students themselves feel that they have achieved their college goals, and if so, what do they believe accounts for that college success? Sub-questions that fleshed out these lived experiences were the following:

1. What factors in the backgrounds of rural students provide them with the ability to transition successfully into a selective four-year institutional environment?
2. What factors do rural students identify that support their ability to transition successfully into a selective four-year college environment?
3. In what ways do rural students self-identify? Specifically, do they think of themselves as “rural students,” or is their internal identity something different?

Conceptual Framework

I used the concepts of cultural, social, and academic capital to frame my study. These three concepts speak to a lack of certain kinds of knowledge and connections that may impede a student’s success at college. Although this is, by definition, a deficit framework, my study did not examine rural students as though they are missing

something—that is, as “deficient” students. Instead, I used this framework to understand how such students might maximize their academic success via their lived experiences and how their backgrounds can support this success. In every case, the participants—without being prompted—framed their overall college experiences positively. That is, even though they all identified certain challenges inherent in being rural students at selective four-year institutions, they all saw the challenges merely as things to be overcome on their way to success. As is illustrated in my findings (Chapter 5), they all developed a certain level of resiliency growing up in rural locations that translated into a positive outlook when tackling potentially overwhelming issues once at college. Even though the participants demonstrably lacked the cultural, social, and academic capital of their more urban peers, their enthusiasm for attending college, learning, and growing allowed them to overcome the challenges they faced, creating overall successful college careers and poising themselves for post-graduation success.

Cultural and social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), academic success is related to the level of a student’s cultural and social capital within his or her family. *Cultural capital* refers to such things as understanding how to apply for college, how to apply for financial aid, what makes a college student successful, and how to relate to faculty and staff members. *Social capital* can be best thought of in terms of networking and group membership (Bourdieu, 1986). Because the development of both cultural and social capital relies upon economic capital (wealth) and rural students often come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds or locations that lack resources, they tend to arrive at college with low cultural and social capital (Gammell, 2008; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). This means that they begin college with a distinct disadvantage in comparison to other

students and, therefore, must learn how to transform the knowledge they do have into something that will support their success at college, something the participants all demonstrated. Like students from other disadvantaged backgrounds, rural students often lack the cultural and social capital students from more advantaged backgrounds have, leading them to need to work harder to attain college success.

In addition to other factors related to cultural capital, rural students may be first-generation college students, meaning that their families might not have the social and cultural knowledge (capital) to effectively assist them in their journeys through college (Bowen & Bok, 1998; St. John et al., 2011). Unlike students whose families have gone through the college experience and can give them a certain level of support, first-generation students are generally on their own along their pathways to and through college; their families simply do not know how to help them (Bowen & Bok, 1998; St. John et al., 2011). These issues can cause such students to feel marginalized (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). It can turn college into a struggle beyond academics and add whole layers to the experience that students must figure out how to overcome (St. John et al., 2011). And as the participants showed, even if rural students come from families with parents who attended college, they still may lack the needed capital to understand how to navigate college successfully. How can rural students at selective four-year institutions capitalize on the knowledge that they do have so that the goal – graduating from college and obtaining success following college – becomes attainable?

Academic capital. There is also the concept of *academic capital*, as raised by St. John et al. (2011). Similar to Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social and cultural capital, academic capital is made up of "the social processes that underlie family knowledge of

educational options, strategies to pursue them, and career goals that require a college education” (St. John et al., 2011, p. xiii). Increasing a student’s academic capital helps to create social uplift just as much as increased social and cultural capital do. Academic capital formation can not only increase college-going knowledge and social uplift for the student, but it can also create family uplift (St. John et al., 2011). Rural and other underserved students must understand how to maximize their backgrounds and become empowered students rather than simply assimilating in order to achieve success (St. John et al., 2011). If rural and other underserved students can develop the tools needed to increase their social, cultural, and academic capital, we will all benefit as a society.

Funds of knowledge. Some research also indicates the existence of “funds of knowledge” (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011), which is specialized information that is shared within a community for the benefit of all. While funds of knowledge are not the same as social, cultural, and academic capital, they all share many similarities and can assist underserved students, including rural students, in developing the various forms of capital. The use of funds of knowledge could help students from underserved populations achieve success at college (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Indeed, a number of the participants made specific mention of using funds of knowledge imparted to them by other rural students or students in groups they felt comfortable joining; some indicated that having access to these funds of knowledge was crucial to their success at college.

Because rural students at selective institutions are often White, they may appear to fit the majority model. However, many arrive at college with a set of skills and knowledge that does not permit them to feel comfortable in a college setting—even their

accents and native dialects can put them at risk of being ostracized (Dunstan, 2013). Because these students' social class is often invisible on campus—or perhaps because their race is visible—they can have trouble in making their peers, faculty, and staff understand their need for assistance (Martin, 2012). Many rural students do not wish to be considered as low-income, nor do they feel as if they fall into that category. However, their interactions with their higher-income peers can cause income disparities to become painfully obvious, thus creating more negativity and feelings of not belonging (Martin, 2012). Several of Martin's (2012) participants spoke of the frustration and anger they felt when being confronted by the fiscal realities of their more-privileged peers. Students from rural areas not only need help as much as other underserved students do, they also may require assistance in acknowledging that they need this help (Dunstan, 2013; Martin, 2012). The participants indicated both that they sometimes felt uncomfortable around their “more sophisticated peers” (Milo, student interview) and that they did not think they could turn to anyone other than their fellow rural students to address the issue.

Significance of the Study

The overarching problem is highly complex and involves a number of issues that rural students may encounter on a daily basis—things that people from other backgrounds may understand instinctively or take for granted. These problems include financial issues, understanding how to interact properly with others (based on the mainstream culture), and knowing how best to utilize college resources (Bowen & Bok, 1998; St. John et al., 2011; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Possessing knowledge that does not fit the typical definition of cultural capital leads to a high level of frustration and a feeling of not belonging—two issues that could eventually cause a rural student to give up and drop out

of college altogether. This difference in cultural, social, and academic capital can also lead to issues with college success for rural students. However, as my participant sample indicated, these issues can be overcome by students who possess the determination to do so.

There is a distinct lack of literature that is focused on rural students and on the development of capital in rural students attending four-year institutions of higher education. Much of the relevant literature examines issues in the K-12 setting or at community colleges (e.g., Cox, 2004; Knottnerus, 1987; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007). There have been some studies on rural students in higher education, but they all focus on a specific sub-section of the population or a particular kind of action taken by rural students, such as students from Appalachia, Black Millennials, or rural students pursuing college degrees (e.g., Dunstan, 2013; Guyton, 2011; Lehman, 2014; Strawn, 2014; Yoder, 2007). A study that examines the lived experiences of rural students regardless of class or ethnicity will make a significant contribution to the literature on how students from rural areas can create success in college through graduation and into post-graduation jobs or education.

By focusing on rural students, I am expanding the term “underserved” beyond the way in which it is generally used. A major area of focus in higher education research is on urban students from low socioeconomic backgrounds – students who are typically considered underserved (e.g., Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007; Rubin, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Many students from traditionally underserved populations experience access and transitional challenges from high school to college; however, numerous colleges now have programs and advising in place to assist these students.

Rural students may also experience these challenges, but they tend to be left out of research regarding academic assistance for underserved students and thus also out of the programming intended to help underserved students achieve success. This study examined the lived experiences of students from rural populations in a way that has rarely been undertaken to this point and has uncovered commonalities in the rural student experience at selective four-year institutions that might also exist at other, similar institutions.

Definition of Key Terms

Academic capital – “The social processes that underlie family knowledge of educational options, strategies to pursue them, and career goals that require a college education” (St. John et al., 2011, p. xiii). Distinctive from cultural capital in that academic capital focuses specifically on knowledge that helps create success in a college environment.

Cultural capital – An understanding of how to use resources and interact with others based on mainstream society (Bourdieu, 1986). Distinctive from academic capital in that cultural capital runs the gamut from knowing which fork to use at a dinner to understanding how to interact with people from various backgrounds; cultural capital is not specific to the college environment.

Fictive kin – A group of like-minded individuals who help each other by sharing information and working together in an educational setting (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). This group is not necessarily made up of friends, just of people with a common goal who are willing to work together. Fictive kin groups can be key in disseminating funds of knowledge.

Funds of knowledge – Specialized information that is shared within a community for the benefit of all (Rios-Aguilar, et al, 2011). Distinctive from the various forms of capital in that this knowledge is not limited to particular groups of people with a level of privilege that allows them to pre-possess certain knowledge. Funds of knowledge grow out of community and the needs of the people within the community and are shared easily and equally to everyone, regardless of level of privilege. They also allow people to develop levels of academic, cultural, and social capital that can promote and support persistence and success at college.

Phenomenology – Offers explanations of the meaning for multiple individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon or a concept by focusing on their commonalities (Creswell, 2013; Vagle, 2014).

Rural student – A student who self-identifies as coming from a rural area, but who also hails from an area with a minimum 70% rural population, as defined by census data obtained via ProximityOne, a website dedicated to collecting and providing current demographic information for the United States (ProximityOne, 2017).

Selective Four-Year Institution – An institution that accepts 35% or less of the students who apply for admission (U.S. News & World Report, 2015).

Social capital – Having a network of friends, family, and others who understand how to work within the mainstream system (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social uplift – The process whereby a person is able to lift themselves and potentially their family and community up to a “higher” level in society by virtue of building their academic, social, and cultural capital, leading to greater economic capital (Peterson, 2009).

Personal Statement

My own experience transitioning from my small rural high school in southeastern Virginia to a four-year university in a large city displays how a rural student can attain college success. My graduating high school class held 48 students, and most of my subject classes were made up of 15-20 students. Attending large college lecture courses of 80-100 students where the professors never knew me as an individual was an extreme adjustment for me, which my friends from larger schools did not find to be problematic. However, I was able to capitalize on the knowledge base that I did have and develop social networks that helped me with my transition. I attained the Dean's List six out of the eight semesters I attended. I also was fortunate that my participation in a small honors college within the large state university at which I matriculated permitted me to maintain a semblance of the atmosphere at my high school. That additional support structure, which increased my cultural, social, and academic capital, assisted me in completing a successful transition from a rural high school to a four-year college and a demanding honors program.

As a former rural student, I bring an understanding of the topic to this study that other researchers might lack. I was able to connect with the participants on a deeper level that helped build the trust needed for a strong study. Sharing my own stories of transition and success appeared to provide the participants with an additional level of comfort and trust, permitting them to relax and relate things they might otherwise not have mentioned. I also was surprised to realize how similar the rural student story still is to what I experienced as a high school and college student. Even though my time transitioning to college is decades past, the stories of many of the participants could have been my stories

or those of some of my peers. While I am glad to hear tales of resilience and success, it was also disheartening to know that rural schools still experience many of the same challenges mine did—for example, I had to take calculus via television, and a number of the participants could only access calculus courses online. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (generally referred to as STEM) classes are still not a priority in many rural districts, just as they were not when I was in high school, likely indicative of a lack of resources as well as teachers who are able to undertake the instruction of modern science lab courses. It was, conversely, heartening to learn that many of the participants chose to pursue STEM fields in college even though their preparation for them was poor, causing the students to have even more hurdles to leap on their way to college success. And yet, leap they did, several to resounding success, and all to personal satisfaction with their college performance.

My personal interest and investment in this topic is clear. Understanding my biases assisted me in managing subjectivities while undertaking this study. My personal experience as a rural student transitioning to a large university with about 25,000 students has informed my conceptualization of this topic as one that needs to be researched.

Organization of the Study

This study is made up of six chapters. As you have read, this chapter provided an overview of the study and its importance, while Chapter 2 will explore the existing literature around the topic and delineates further the importance of my study. Chapter 3 explains why I used a phenomenological approach as an avenue to meet this study's purpose of understanding the lived experiences of rural students at selective four-year institutions and how they attain success at those institutions. The chapter also outlines in

detail the steps I took to perform the study. Chapter 4 provides descriptions of the two institutions I selected for my study and of each participant in the study. Chapter 5 gives the findings of the study. Chapter 6 presents my overall conclusions based on the study's findings.

Summary

Assisting underserved students to persistence and success is an important continuing topic in higher education research. However, the subset of rural students is typically left out of such research, in spite of the fact that they are also underserved. This study of rural students' lived experiences at two selective four-year institutions uncovered how they succeed in spite of a lack of focus on them as underserved students at the institutional level.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Overview

This chapter presents an overview of the literature and theories related to underserved students in general, including those few studies that have examined rural students in particular. I spend the majority of the review outlining the various traditional foci of literature and theories surrounding underserved student populations. I also show how my study is situated within the broader literature related to success in higher education, in general, and to rural students' experiences, more specifically, leading to the conclusion that more research studies that examine a cross-section of the entire rural population are needed to build the level of knowledge required to understand how these students create success and how to best support them at institutions of higher education.

Traditional Focus on Higher Education Access Issues

There frequently is a focus in the literature solely on access issues for underserved students (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Choy, 2001; Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, & Lang, 2010), but the research does not explicitly include rural students. This research examines the myriad issues affecting the level of enrollment by students from underserved populations, particularly those from racial and ethnic minorities, in institutions of higher education. Such issues range from students from low-socioeconomic status (low-SES) backgrounds underestimating their potential

earnings once attaining an undergraduate degree (Betts, 1996) to their not knowing how to fund their college journey (Bowen & Bok, 1998). This is necessary research to continue, as the access gap—while narrower—persists (Walpole, 2003) in spite of scholars' examining the access gap for decades. The access gap has even been referred to as “the new inequality” (Paulson & St. John, 2002, p. xviii).

There is some research (e.g., Guyton, 2011; Strawn, 2014) that shows that the access gap exists for rural students as well as for those who fall into the traditional definition of “underserved” (e.g., first-generation students, students of color, low-income students). Rural populations have access gaps that are as large as those for other rural populations: only 22% of people in rural populations held bachelor's degrees as of 2015 (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). As Ruiz and Perna state, and as my study reiterates, rural students are at a structural disadvantage when it comes to obtaining admission to and being successful in college due to their poorly resourced local schools and lack of AP or other advanced courses being offered. We need to study rural students as closely as we have students from other underserved populations and understand how they are able to forge pathways to success at college—or how they attain admission in the first place when so few rural students are specifically recruited by college admission deans and when they are often actively discouraged to apply to four-year colleges by their guidance counselors (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). We also need additional research on how two-year colleges might act as bridges to four-year colleges, especially for rural students.

First-generation student issues. Of those students who make up the subset of underserved students, first-generation students appear to be particularly at risk of not attending college, because their parents have no college experiences themselves (Chen,

2005). First-generation students are not necessarily from low-income families, so their parents may be able to afford college; however, these students may be unaware of how to make a college choice or how important attaining a post-secondary degree can be (Tierney, 2009). Knowing that first-generation students who attain their undergraduate degrees have the same employment potential as later-generation students may help first-generation students desire to attain access to higher education (Choy, 2002). Rural students—who are often first-generation students—also may not realize that they have a college choice, as shown by Strawn (2014), but little research has yet been done on the issue of college choice for rural students beyond Strawn’s 2014 study.

First-generation students are more likely to leave college without attaining a degree than their later-generation colleagues (Choy, 2001). Only 47% of first-generation students persist to graduation at all four-year colleges, as compared to a 78% graduation rate for students who had at least one parent graduate from a four-year college (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2013). Dropping out comes with psychological implications as well as financial ones, as students may leave college with loan debt but no degree (Choy, 2001). Rural students have lower graduation rates than do urban students regardless of institution type (Ruiz & Perna, 2017; Virginia Foundation for Community College Education, 2015), but little research has been done on why or how to increase the rates. Additionally, the research that has been done focuses on rural students at community colleges, not those at four-year institutions.

Many underserved students, including rural students (Guyton, 2011), are first-generation college students, and as such, their families do not have the social and cultural knowledge (capital) to effectively assist them in their journeys into or through college

(Bowen & Bok, 1998; St. John et al., 2011). Unlike later-generation students, whose families have gone through the college experience and can give them a certain level of support, first-generation students are generally on their own along their pathways to and through college; their families simply do not know how to help them (Bowen & Bok, 1998; St. John et al., 2011). According to Spradlin et al. (2010), the majority of student drop-out decisions are based on factors other than academics. Financial and psychological issues, along with issues the students may have with the institution, are the leading causes of dropping out, curtailing a student's access to higher education. If a student feels that he fits into a campus culture, that student is more likely to stay. This can be effected via greater engagement, which is discussed later in this chapter. However, if a student perceives the college's environment as hostile, he may decide to drop out (Baird, 2000). Unfortunately, underserved students—including rural students—who do not generally fit the majority model, may feel out of place at college, leading to beliefs that the overall environment is hostile (Martin, 2012). This causes these students to become (or at least feel) marginalized (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Work such as Guyton (2011) demonstrates that rural students can also be first-generation students, meaning that they might also have these issues while at college.

Ameliorating influences on student success. Feeling out of place may be ameliorated if the student develops social and/or cultural capital that is more in line with the “mainstream” population. According to Bourdieu (1986), academic success is related to the level of a student's cultural and social capital. Cultural capital refers to such things as understanding how to apply for college, how to apply for financial aid, what makes a college student successful, and how to relate to faculty and staff members. Social capital

can be best thought of in terms of networking and group membership (Bourdieu, 1986). Because both cultural and social capital rely upon access to economic capital (wealth) and underserved students often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds or locations that lack resources, these students tend to arrive at college with low cultural and social capital (Gammell, 2008; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). This means that they begin college with a distinct disadvantage in comparison to other students. However, as Bourdieu (1986) indicates, both cultural and social capital can be developed; they do not need to be inherited. Thus, students from underserved populations have the opportunity to gain capital, which will support their achievement at college and beyond.

There is also the concept of academic capital, as developed by St. John et al. (2011). Similar to Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social and cultural capital, academic capital is made up of "the social processes that underlie family knowledge of educational options, strategies to pursue them, and career goals that require a college education" (St. John et al., 2011, p. xiii). Increasing a student's academic capital helps to create social uplift just as much as increased social and cultural capital do. Academic capital formation can not only increase college-going knowledge and social uplift for the student, it can also create family uplift (St. John et al., 2011). If underserved students, including rural students, are given the tools to increase their social, cultural, and academic capital, we will all benefit as a society. However, the lack of focus on rural students as part of the underserved student population means that they often also are unable to acquire the tools necessary for success; they are not seen as needing this sort of intervention.

Some research indicates the existence of “funds of knowledge” (see Rios-Aguilar, et al., 2011), which is specialized information that is shared within a community for the benefit of all. While funds of knowledge are not the same as social, cultural, and academic capital, they share many similarities and can assist underserved students, including rural students, in better developing the various forms of capital. This development of capital could help students from underserved populations achieve success at college, as long as the power dynamic at the institution does not undermine the students’ success (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011).

Access to higher education is a requirement if students from all the various underserved populations are to create change in their own lives and potentially in their communities. However, focusing solely on access issues leaves out the importance of the many other barriers to college completion and success that face underserved students, including rural students. One of those additional barriers is higher education funding and financial aid.

Traditional Focus on Financial Aid and Overall Financing of College

Financial issues also are culpable in the low levels of student retention among students from underserved populations, including rural students. Often, students and their families do not understand how much it will cost to attend college for one year, let alone for all the years it takes to earn the degree (Spradlin et al., 2010). Even though some cost figures are easily accessed, they are not necessarily easily understood by families with limited academic and cultural capital, and many of the additional costs, such as books, supplies, personal expenses, and travel, are often not listed on the colleges’ websites. Funds of knowledge, unfortunately, generally do not encompass this

information (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). A student can arrive at college and suddenly realize that he does not have the means to pay for additional expenses (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). If the financial aid office has not provided a full accounting of costs in a way the family can understand, the student may be forced to leave after one semester due to lack of funds. This points to the need for systemic changes to ensure that all students accept admission to a college with the full knowledge of how much it will cost. It is troubling to recognize that underserved students may incur debt, sometimes a great deal of it, and leave school without attaining a degree (Choy, 2001).

Financial aid, or the lack thereof, is a critical barrier to college success. If students do not receive enough funding or if they perceive that they will not be eligible for financial aid, they may choose not to attend college. In 2009, 56% of students admitted to higher education declined to attend because of cost (Poynton, Lapan, & Marcotte, 2014). The financial aid process is frequently perceived as difficult by many students and parents, especially those from low-income families, those who are first-generation students, those from rural populations, and/or those who are non-traditionally aged students (Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2014; Guyton, 2011). Both the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)—the form required by most U.S. schools to gain access to financial aid—and subsequent required verification processes can be roadblocks to students trying to fund their college educations (Tierney, 2009; Venegas, 2006a). The punitive nature of financial aid processes makes this a necessary hurdle to jump, but students frequently lack the knowledge or tools to do it on their own (Poynton et al., 2014). This lack speaks also to the linkage between social capital and access to college. If students are unable to complete the process that provides them with access to

financial aid, they may fail to enroll and thus fail to create the individual and family uplift needed to improve their situation.

As is consistent with sections above, most studies available speak only to those students who are traditionally considered “underserved.” There is little focus on how or whether similar issues affect rural students, who often attend high schools with low funding and the concomitant lack of resources and academic capital. Leaping the financial aid hurdles is likely to be as difficult for rural students as it is for inner city ones.

FAFSA issues. The FAFSA is required by all colleges in the United States for access to financial aid, but many families find it difficult to understand how to complete the FAFSA. The application’s numerous questions (almost 130 as of the 2017-18 academic year) may seem overwhelming, especially to families who have never attended college. Estimates of how many eligible students fail to complete the FAFSA each year come close to two million (Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2014). Even if families are willing to undertake the FAFSA application process, they may lack the technological ability to do so. Particularly in rural areas, students may not have access to the internet or even a library where they can go online to access college and financial aid information. Many rural students own smartphones, but it is challenging to complete the FAFSA on such devices.

Completing the FAFSA requires that students or their guardians have access to a computer with a stable internet connection, email addresses, all their current tax and other earning information, and the knowledge of how to access and complete the FAFSA itself. A paper FAFSA is available, but only if the person wanting it has access to an internet-

connected computer on which to find it and request that a copy be mailed to them. The Department of Education stopped providing copies of the paper FAFSA to schools in 2010. It could be argued that the move to the online FAFSA and financial aid systems that require internet access for form completion has made it harder for low-income and rural families to apply for financial aid than it was when only a paper FAFSA application was available.

Technology issues. The technological barriers in place around the FAFSA may be insurmountable for low-income families who either lack the required technology and knowledge or who prefer face-to-face interaction (Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2014). This is also true for rural students; many rural high schools lack the technology or teachers with the necessary knowledge to help (Guyton, 2011). There may also be language barriers that make it difficult for parents to understand what is required of them, as the FAFSA is available only in English and Spanish. The digital divide in this instance presents a true division of people and communities into haves and have-nots, as computers, internet access, and the ability to use both are integral to the financial aid process (Venegas, 2006a). The “digital divide” indicates that people can be divided into those who have access to technology and those who do not. As Deil-Amen and Rios-Aguilar (2014) pointed out, those students with access to the proper technology can also access financial aid, while those who lack access to technology are potentially missing out on financial aid. Students from low-income or rural families may not have computers at home, and those who do possess computers may not have internet access or may have limited/unstable internet access. If their schools or communities have computers, the computers may not work or may not have internet access (Venegas, 2006a). The students

with the greatest need for financial aid are the ones most at risk for not being able to get it, simply because they are unable to complete the FAFSA.

Personal and support issues. In general, there is a lack of trained high school counselors available who can effectively help students and their parents complete the FAFSA properly (Venegas, 2006a). Personal assistance programs, where someone can sit down with parents and walk them through the FAFSA, have shown a significant increase in FAFSA completion numbers (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012). However, many rural schools may not have counselors on staff. Further, available high school counselors may lack the necessary knowledge (including internet skills) to help effectively (Castleman, 2013; Venegas, 2006a), and this lack of knowledge may influence students not to complete the FAFSA or to attempt to complete it only on paper (Venegas, 2006b). Completing the paper FAFSA not only delays the process by six to eight weeks, but it also increases the possibility of data-entry errors. Without access to adequate knowledge or computers with internet connections, those students from low-income or rural families who most need financial aid are unlikely to get it. Thus, they are also less likely to pursue higher education possibilities and will miss out on the possibility of increasing their social and academic capital and creating social uplift for themselves and in their communities.

Even if students and their parents are able to complete the FAFSA successfully, they often then must jump numerous additional hurdles in order to complete their financial aid application process. Financial aid offices often undertake either the federal verification or quality assurance process in order to ensure the accuracy of students' FAFSA data. As part of these processes, students must turn in additional documents

and/or use the online IRS Data Retrieval Tool via the FAFSA in order to access financial aid. These processes can be confusing, particularly for students from low-income or rural families, those who are first-generation students, and/or those who are independent students. Often, students are unable to find or get answers to their questions regarding the process, leaving them at risk of not receiving financial aid. The punitive nature of financial aid means that students who do not complete the process to the satisfaction of the financial aid office and/or federal regulations lose out (Campbell, Deil-Amen, & Rios-Aguilar, 2015). Those students are at greater risk of dropping out (Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2014).

Budgetary issues. Once students and their parents successfully complete the FAFSA and navigate all the additional hurdles, students may encounter issues in knowing how to budget their funds throughout the school year. Providing courses in financial literacy can help students budget and understand how to manage their funds (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This knowledge can also help students feel empowered over their future, leading to the positive perceptions needed for persistence (Pascarella et al., 2004). It can be difficult to get students to attend financial literacy sessions, even when they agree the sessions would be helpful, so colleges should consider offering them co-curricularly (Kezar & Yang, 2011). Not only does this remove the stigma of having such sessions targeted at low-income students, it allows all students to receive course credit for attending the sessions. Including financial literacy as part of the curriculum can be a hard sell for administrators, however, as many think financial literacy is inappropriate for the higher education sphere—often, they believe that students have learned this at home or in high school (Kezar & Yang, 2011). All students can

benefit from financial literacy training, so if a college can implement such a program, it would see definite results.

Some colleges, such as William & Mary, have seen success offering financial literacy courses online (CashCourse, 2014). Once students are on campus, they have access to computers and the internet, regardless of their backgrounds. Offering courses in this way could create an easy solution to the financial literacy dilemma.

Being able to fund a college education is critical to student access, persistence, and success. However, as scholars have noted, acquiring the needed funding and knowledge of how best to use it can be challenging for underserved students. It can also be challenging for students who come from low-income or rural families to know where to turn for help; many institutions and research focus on students' race rather than their class.

Traditional Focus on Race and Exclusion of Class

Much research in the latter part of the 1990s and early part of the 2000s focused on race and gender to the exclusion of class (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Carter, 2006; Cooper, 2008; Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003; Swail, 2003). Bowen and Bok (1998) and Massey et al. (2003) examined in depth how race issues have affected higher education in the United States, in particular the deeply embedded institutional racism that may prevent the success of people of color and social factors that also contribute to the college completion gap. Even if students of color graduated from a predominately White institution at a high rate, they still performed less well academically than did White students at that institution. However, Carter (2006) has shown that minority students receive greater benefits from college degrees than do White students: The amount of

uplift students of color attain from college tends to be larger than that gained by White students. In spite of this, minority students attending college still tend to believe that they are seen as being lesser than Whites (Cooper, 2008). This indicates the need for inclusive, welcoming college environments that help students of color engage and persist. The same can be said for rural students, who experience many of the same challenges as racial minorities, making them a logical population to add to similar studies—but there has been little research done on this topic.

Students of color have been shown to experience challenges making connections with other students, including students from their own races (Davis et al., 2004). Making connections to faculty and staff is also problematic, as is participation in extracurricular activities and campus employment. Students of color may be afraid to ask for assistance, because they do not feel that White students, faculty, or staff will help. The findings of Davis et al. (2004) indicated that students of color felt different from other students and that college was mostly a negative experience that made them feel frustrated and isolated. These findings were consistent with those of Fleming (1984) in highlighting the negative feelings that students of color experience. Rural students might also feel the same way, undermining their ability to attain success at college.

Swail (2003) noted that students of color, who make up a smaller percentage of the student body than do Whites, often have their experiences and needs go undetected. He indicated a necessity for institution-wide programs to support students of color in college and enable them to graduate at higher rates. Since that time, much research has been done on students of color and how to enable their success, causing them and their needs to become more visible on campuses. The same cannot be said for low-income or

rural students. Rural students might not feel able to utilize programs intended for students of color; the majority of rural students at colleges are White, making them feel, by definition, that they are not “diverse enough.” Rurality has mainly been ignored as a factor in student success, even though rural students encounter many of the same challenges as do students from racial minorities.

Some recent research has started to examine the importance of social class in college persistence and success, which might also have a bearing on rural student success, as they are generally from lower, “blue collar” social classes. Kezar (2011) pointed out that researchers tend to focus on race and gender to the detriment of class; she wrote, “Working-class students [also] often need help transitioning [to college] and learning the unwritten rules” (p. 22). This help is generally not forthcoming. Research is needed to provide a class-based distinction that will reveal the additional disadvantage that rural students—particularly White rural students—may experience at institutions of higher education.

The income gap. While the race gap and the income gap in college access remain large, the income gap is larger (Casselman, 2014). Why, then, do we see such a focus on race instead of income/class in research on college access, persistence, and success? It could be because discussion of class is still frequently considered to be taboo (Kahlenberg, 2013), while race is more readily apparent. Alternatively, it could be that race issues are supported by organized advocacy whereas economic class is not. Regardless of the reason, low-income students often feel out of place and can feel shame that they do not understand the references of their higher-class colleagues (Kahlenberg, 2013; Martin, 2012). However, what this previous scholarship does not consider is that

rural students also experience an income gap; many of their families earn less than families from more urban areas, leading to the kind of income and values discrepancies pointed out by Martin (2012) that can create distress and discomfort in students from rural areas. Further study on how rural students perceive the income gap and their peers will help inform our understanding of the rural student college experience.

Issues with cultural and academic capital. Administrators at traditional higher education institutions may not realize the difficulties facing students from low-income and rural families regardless of race or place of origin. Such students may not be able to get into or stay in particular majors because of a lack of understanding of the rules and/or additional expenses involved (Walpole, 2011). For example, at “Coastal College,” business majors must pay an additional \$3,000 fee per academic year. Students must first understand the financial implications of declaring a business major and then must figure out how to pay for it. If they know how to request grant funding from the financial aid office to cover the fee, it will be covered for them, but this is not an automatic process. If students are unaware of the possibility of this grant funding, they must either figure out how to come up with the extra money—a significant sum—or choose a different, less expensive major. Little thought of the financial impact on students from certain backgrounds is given when colleges make decisions of this nature. Additional study is also needed here, not just on rural students encountering such issues, but students from all underserved populations. This would help administrators at selective and highly selective institutions, who are used to dealing with a majority affluent population, to understand how such decisions might affect other students.

Processes such as the one outlined above may cause low-income students to feel worse about their situation instead of empowering them (Walpole, 2011) or create feelings of marginalization (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). If institutions could develop some kind of funding application process for those students in financial need, it could go a long way toward preventing students from dropping out before degree completion. This is just one example of an invisible obstacle that students from low-income and rural families must face on a daily basis. In theory, students from low-income and rural families who attend highly selective institutions should be upwardly mobile, but they generally remain disadvantaged because of these invisible privileges (Walpole, 2011). Many underserved students, including those from rural areas, do not arrive at college possessing the various kinds of capital that allow them to assume that they can succeed in college, unlike their counterparts from the majority culture (Tierney, 2009). Systematic changes at institutions could be made that would empower underserved students rather than continuing to consider them as lacking something (St. John et al., 2011) or forcing them to overcome additional obstacle on the way to success. Research specific to understanding these challenges for rural and other underserved students could help create a process that takes the needs of the entire student body into account rather than just those of the affluent majority.

Research on class. There are few research studies that have focused on White students from low-income backgrounds; two exceptions are Martin (2012) and Dunstan (2013). Both authors indicated that class is often invisible on campus, particularly if a student appears to be from the majority (middle-to-upper class White) culture. This position of White, rural students as invisible to faculty and administrators may prevent

them from obtaining the assistance and support they need (Martin, 2012). The frustration that is experienced by these individuals causes social isolation (Martin, 2012; Stuber, 2011), which in turn can lead to lack of persistence. As Martin (2012) indicated, such students, like those from minority backgrounds, need to be offered resources and spaces that allow them to feel safe and comfortable in expressing themselves and their needs. Clearly, there is a need to include class as well as race in research on access to and persistence in higher education. Rural students should also be included in this research.

Traditional Focus on Overcoming Barriers

The importance of institutional agents. Recent research has shown that institutional agents may be able to assist students from underserved populations succeed (e.g., Hernandez & Sikes, 2015; Pendakur, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Stanton-Salazar (1997) described institutional agents as people who “have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities” (p. 6). Stanton-Salazar (2010) updated his theory to include the concept that an institutional agent is someone who holds both a hierarchical position of some authority and high status. In other words, institutional agents are members of the higher education community who understand how to manage the intricacies of a dominant-class educational system, how to navigate relationships within that system, and what the various rules for behavior are. Students from underserved populations, including rural students, benefit from relationships with individuals who can help them learn how to navigate the pathways of the dominant culture and make the various connections that can help them persist and succeed during and after college.

Hernandez and Sikes (2015) found that institutional agents working at institutions that primarily serve rural students had a positive effect on the educational lives of their students. In some cases, students who were struggling and seemed unlikely to graduate were able to make the necessary connections with people or programs on campus that allowed them to turn their academic situation around entirely. The institutional agents at those colleges were instrumental in making crucial connections between students and people or programs. This research showed the importance of including rural students in studies; they share numerous similarities with other disadvantaged students. Understanding what interventions help rural students persist in college is paramount to their success. More research similar to the 2015 Hernandez and Sikes study should be conducted to uncover further evidence of methods that promote persistence and success for rural students at four-year colleges.

Pendakur (2010) took Stanton-Salazar's (2010) institutional agent framework further and expanded his nascent concept of the empowerment agent. Empowerment agents "leverage their social capital network to offer institutional support to low-status students while helping the students clarify and construct an action-oriented, social justice-centered, critically conscious worldview" (p. vii). This action allows empowerment agents to give underserved students the tools they need to develop their social, cultural, and educational capital, all items that may contribute to student persistence and success, as described above. Both institutional agents and empowerment agents are instrumental in engaging students with the institution and ensuring their eventual success.

The importance of engagement. Underserved students, including rural students, show a distinct lack of knowledge of various college processes, such as how to interact

appropriately and successfully with faculty and staff (Pascarella et al., 2004). According to Dolan (2008), underserved students experience isolation from peers and family when they first arrive at college, and it is necessary for faculty, staff, and administrators to recognize this and help students realize that they are not alone. These students' success rates in college could increase with appropriate support, access to campus programs that address issues predominant with students from underserved populations, and faculty engagement to ensure that they are being motivated to continue their college success—all of which are aspects of developing social and cultural capital (Kirby, 2007; Norton, 2010).

Forming attachments at college helps improve academic performance, especially if the attachments are made between students and professors, as these attachments increase the student's social and cultural capital (Fischer, 2007). Other forms of interaction are also predictive of college persistence, such as tutoring and group studying (Fischer, 2007; Huang & Chang, 2004). Creating college engagement opportunities for underserved students are key to their college success: "After controlling for all factors that contribute to or impede student success...the one factor that contributes most to academic success is student engagement" (McGlynn, 2009, p. 45). Rural students share this need for engagement in order to succeed, as my study underscores, and more research is required to examine this.

Faculty engagement is often a factor in underserved students' academic success (Fischer, 2007; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Slavin Miller, 2007; McGlynn, 2009). Kim and Sax (2009) discovered that when students interact with faculty, their motivation increases. Kim and Sax also found that students who interact more frequently

with faculty perform better than students who are not given the same attention.

Successful college students know how to communicate appropriately with faculty, staff, and administrators, which can be beneficial, as these people often serve as change agents on campuses (Lundberg et al., 2007; Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). This engagement with faculty and staff and its associated increase in social and cultural capital is another key piece for underserved student success (Fischer, 2007; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Wang, 2009). Engagement could also be the most important item when it comes to success following college (Ray & Kafka, 2014).

However, “engagement” may not be the neutral process it is frequently perceived to be; failure to engage is generally considered the student’s fault, not the institution’s (Stuber, 2011). If college administrations can acknowledge that invisible privilege¹ often informs the way students are expected to engage, they may be able to make meaningful changes that place the onus on the institution rather than the student. College is often seen as a level playing field, “although players...may be excluded *at the outset* if they do not have the right skills or talents” (Stuber, 2011, p. 12, emphasis added). If underserved students, including rural students, can be provided with opportunities to learn the needed skills rather than being excluded outright for not having them, this will give them another path to gaining the social and academic capital needed for college persistence and success (Stuber, 2011).

A strong positive effect on persistence and success will result from institutions’ successfully assisting underserved students, including rural students, with increasing their

¹ For an in-depth discussion of invisible privilege, see McIntosh (2004), *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 6, 188-192.

engagement. Engagement provides increased feelings of control over academic success; involvement with students from higher economic backgrounds can provide increases to academic and social capital (Pascarella et al., 2004). Engagement has a positive effect on persistence to students' second years. It has an even greater effect on GPA for less-prepared students than for others; institutions must implement policies to create supportive cultures (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). First-year transition programs can be an important tool in maintaining this engagement and persistence to the second year as well as creating GPA improvements (Baird, 2000).

Many underserved students, including rural students, are leaving cultures that have been familiar to them, whether it is their family or another institution. Transitioning to college culture can be seen as entering a foreign culture (St. John et al., 2011; Tierney, 2009). Students need to develop a level of comfort and trust with peers, faculty, and staff before they can complete a successful transition. Living-learning communities are one way to facilitate this.

Living-learning communities. Living-learning communities are on-campus residence halls that are often built around a theme and include faculty and staff involvement as well as peer involvement (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, Brown, & Leonard, 2007). The use of structured activities and development of peer groups along with the participation of faculty mentors can ease the transition for underserved students; having people they can turn to in times of stress or difficulty gives them a built-in support structure (Inkelas et al., 2007). It also provides a form of engagement in college that the students might not otherwise be able to take advantage of. Overall, it can provide a positive perception of the college, and first-year perceptions are important in student

retention (Baird, 2000). A positive environment creates a desire to stay, while a negative one can cause a student to give up and drop out (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Summer bridge programs. Many institutions use summer bridge programs to assist underserved students in making a successful transition to college. While such programs address perceived academic shortcomings and give students a small taste of college life, they also operate on a deficit model (Colyar, 2011). The students in the bridge programs may enter college life already feeling as if something is wrong with them - that they are lacking in some way and may never fit in (Colyar, 2011). The perception of higher income and/or majority student outcomes as traditional or normative can undermine the intent of bridge programs. This underscores an overarching issue of all programs aimed at assisting underserved students: they ascribe privilege to the majority culture and require that others become assimilated into that culture (Walpole, 2003). Underserved students may have trouble understanding the rules of the majority culture and therefore have a negative experience, leading them to drop out (Walpole, 2003). If they can receive the guidance they need to build their academic and cultural capital, their possibilities for success are likely to increase. This is as true for rural students—again left out of a facet of research—as for other students from underserved backgrounds.

Levels of persistence and success. As shown above, engagement is one of the most important facets of persistence. Research indicates that colleges can implement numerous programs to create engagement for underserved students (e.g., Fischer, 2007; Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2009; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Among these are such things as offering special seminars and advisors for underserved students, special support

for remedial learning, special events to encourage socialization, and encouraging faculty and staff to become involved academically with students. While such programs do not remove the issue of invisible privilege, they do provide support and potential for engagement for underserved students. These programs would also be helpful for the rural students included in my expanded definition of “underserved.”

Academic engagement is paramount for underserved student college success, but extracurricular engagement is also essential (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003). It is important that college officials consider how extracurricular activities are offered. According to Martin Lohfink and Paulsen (2009), underserved students tended to work more hours than did other students, which limited their ability to become engaged with extracurricular activities. Changing the structure of activity schedules could create more opportunity for underserved student engagement (Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2009). Some underserved students with heavy employment loads suggested that colleges consider implementing clustered classes or night classes for undergraduates, which would allow them to work without slowing coursework progression (Martin, 2012). It also potentially would allow time for attendance at social activities, as the students could work during the day and engage in college activities at night.

Another method of creating student engagement is by increasing their social and cultural capital via the development of fictive kin groups (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Fictive kin is a group of like-minded individuals who help each other by sharing information and working together in an educational setting. Because underserved students often do not have actual kin who can help them navigate the college world, a fictive kin group at college can be highly beneficial. This group is not necessarily made

up of friends, just of people with a common goal who are willing to work together. Tierney and Venegas (2006) also note that underserved students enter college greatly lacking in social and cultural capital; fictive kin is one way to develop both kinds of capital and put underserved students on the road to a successful college career and eventual social uplift.

Social relationships in general can be a means to empower underserved students (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Developing social networks can also help underserved students, including rural students, learn how to effectively navigate new environments populated with new people (Kuh et al., 2006). Most colleges recognize the need for programs specifically tailored to these students to help them transition from their home environments to diverse campus settings without feeling isolated, but few colleges have implemented such programs (Booth, Travis, Borzumato-Gainey, & Degges-White, 2013).

Collaboration between students and faculty is a critical component to student success, particularly for underserved students (Patton, Flowers, & Bridges, 2011). Colleges that have implemented programs such as offering specific faculty support to underserved students have seen an increase in underserved student persistence to graduation (McGlynn, 2009). The College of William & Mary has implemented the William & Mary Scholars Undergraduate Research Experience (WMSURE), which includes underserved student engagement as part of its focus. WMSURE's administrators have seen an increase in both student engagement and persistence (A. Charity Hudley, personal communication, September 14, 2012). If other colleges work to implement similar programs, then they are likely to see similar results.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a critical race theory and framework, describes the way in which multiple marginalized roles—for example, race, gender, class—overlap “in ways that can’t be understood without looking at the whole than the parts” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). While intersectionality has most frequently been used to examine the marginalization of Black women, this is a framework that could be used equally as well to examine the plight of rural students, who often come from low-income backgrounds. The intersection of rural and low-income backgrounds can create additional layers of subordination for such students. It is also possible to use intersectional analysis to “identify and emphasize commonalities and create solidarity,” (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013, p. 305), something rural students need as much as do students with other intersectional identities.

Intersectionality neatly describes the challenge of rural students that this literature review describes: Rural students, who generally have multiple identities, are often invisible on college campuses, as are other minorities. As Crenshaw (2016) stated in a TED talk, “There are no frames for us to see them....Policymakers don’t think about them” The overlapping of social justice issues for rural students do not disappear simply because no one can see them—it is “injustice squared” (Crenshaw, 2016). These additional layers of discrimination still exist, even if faculty, administrators, and other students are not able to name or see the problem. Institutional policies that, like the majority of research, leave rural students out of programs and planning have a detrimental affect on students dealing with multiple intersection identities such as first-generation, low-income, and rural. Use of to examine the experiences of rural students

at selective four-year institutions is likely to uncover numerous additional challenges encountered by this population and provide the opportunity to discuss ways of ameliorating the situation. While it might be challenging to capture the realities of students' intersecting identities (C. E. Harper, 2011), it would be worth the effort to try; a great deal could be discovered about the additional issues facing rural students due to intersectionality. Such understanding could be of considerable use in providing rural students with the environment and help they need to create success for their college careers and beyond.

Intersectionality might even account for the lack of diversity I encountered in my participant sample (all but one student being White, middle-class, and not first-generation). Admission policies at many selective institutions tend to focus on more urban, wealthy populations, and few selective colleges take the time to recruit at rural high schools (Grimes, Haskins, & Paisley, 2013). If students know that they are not welcome, or at least, not invited to attend, at selective colleges, they are less likely to apply for admission, let alone enroll at such institutions. The participants in my study clearly felt they were in an extreme minority, though they simultaneously believed they were "not diverse enough" to receive the kind of help and support other students in minority or underserved populations are generally offered.

The rural students in my study themselves, while they feel the problem, seem to have no ability to name it themselves until prompted, as my study shows. While I did not use the term "intersectionality" or bring up the concept, many participants made comments that shed light on the true intersectional nature of the rural student and the inability of selective institutions currently to support rural students properly. Much more

research needs to be undertaken on rural students at college to help uncover, name, and address the problems they routinely encounter.

Lack of Focus on Rural Students

Throughout the above sections, the lack of focus on rural students, or even including them as part of the “underserved” subset, is evident. However, several recent dissertations have focused on the importance of understanding rural students, their experiences, and how their appearance as rural students—minorities at their institutions—might stigmatize them in higher education (e.g., Dunstan, 2013; Guyton, 2011). In spite of this, none has examined the lived experiences of a general cross-section of rural students at a selective four-year institution of higher education. Guyton (2011) studied the lived experiences of rural students in higher education, but he focused on a subsection of Black Millennial rural students. While it is important to understand how Black rural students might differ from Black urban students, it is equally important to understand how the full cross-section of rural students perceives their experiences at college. Guyton (2011) offered findings that are relevant to rural student college success, although they are situated in a secondary school environment rather than a post-secondary one. For instance, he discovered that the students who attended programs such as Upward Bound were more likely to overcome the lack of a college-going culture that is prevalent in rural locations than are students who only attend typical high school courses. The absence of college recruitment activity in rural areas that Guyton uncovered is troubling and calls for additional research into how colleges can best reach out to rural students. His findings also speak to the general lack of academic capital in rural areas,

additional support for the importance of research into the lived experiences of a broad cross-section of rural students.

Yoder (2007) explored the topic of rural students' access to and success in higher education. While this is an important topic, the bulk of Yoder's work examined college preparation (or lack thereof) in rural high schools and not their experiences in higher education per se. He also examined the linkage between college completion and poverty and unemployment rates in rural areas. His findings that the lack of college preparation in rural areas link to a paucity of college degrees and thus fewer employment opportunities in rural areas are a crucial area for additional study, but he did not create much clarity on how rural students succeed or fail once they do gain admission to college.

Three other researchers have examined rural students in higher education, but they also looked at specific subgroups or subtopics. Dunstan (2013) studied how the dialect of students from Appalachia causes them to be stigmatized at institutions of higher education. Strawn (2014) examined the influences on rural students' college choices. Tieken (2016) also studied rural students' college-going trends and the ways in which teachers and guidance counselors did or did not support college attendance. Lehman (2014) surveyed rural college students' experiences in understanding college costs and financial aid. While these are all important topics, the studies leave out an overall examination of rural students' lived experiences that can help us understand how such students need to be supported at institutions of higher education. It is heartening, however, to see that there is a trend starting in research on rural students in higher education, regardless of the specific topic being examined.

Summary

Although much research has been completed on higher education and underserved student populations, we need additional and more far-reaching study on rural students. Social uplift of individuals via the development of increased social, cultural, and academic capital will lead to the social uplift of the community, and this includes rural students and their communities. Without additional research on the full cross-section of the rural population, these students will remain unnoticed on campuses and have much greater difficulty in improving their lives, the lives of their families, and their communities. While the resilience of rural students borne of coming from their rural, underserved, low-income, and poorly infrastructure areas often gives them the tools to forge their own paths to persistence and success at selective four-year institutions, their time at college can be made easier with better support from those institutions. We need to understand how rural students are succeeding in spite of all the obstacles they encounter at college. My study brings crucial clarity to the issue.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of rural students at selective four-year institutions and how they attain success at those institutions. The study examined rural students' lived experiences using the research questions stated below with the goal of distilling the essences of those lived experiences and developing a general picture of what it is like to be a rural student at a selective four-year college.

The study was informed by the overarching question: What do the lived experiences of rural students at selective four-year colleges show in terms of how they are able to attain success? Sub-questions that went toward fleshing out these lived experiences are the following:

1. What factors in the backgrounds of rural students provide them with the ability to transition successfully into a selective four-year institutional environment?
2. What factors do rural students identify that support their ability to transition successfully into a selective four-year college environment?
3. In what ways do rural students self-identify? Specifically, do they think of themselves as "rural students," or is their internal identity something different?

Research Approach

Qualitative research. This study took a qualitative research approach, which should be used when exploring an issue and/or context that needs better understanding (Creswell, 2013), as was the case with this study. Rural students are not generally understood to be underserved students, nor are they offered the assistance that those students who are traditionally considered underserved are (Guyton, 2011). A qualitative research study allowed me to collect data to establish patterns that are emblematic of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). My findings include the distinctive voices of the study's participants (Creswell, 2013). I also performed reflexivity throughout the research process; I understand that I have biases toward this topic that required me to constantly uncover and understand them in order to prevent them from coloring my findings (Creswell, 2013). By "bracketing" my own experiences and understandings as a rural student and ensuring that I continued to recognize my biases and remained aware of their influence on the study (a field journal assisted with this), I allowed the phenomenon and its related themes to emerge on their own (Crotty, 1998).

Phenomenology. I used a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology allows researchers to derive common meaning from the lived experiences of multiple individuals. Researchers can then tentatively suggest how their findings might apply to other people who are similar to the participants in the study. I looked for the essence of the lived experiences of rural students in two research programs at selective four-year institutions, a study that was best examined via use of phenomenology.

Phenomenology also allows researchers to delve into the “what” and “how” of the participants’ lived experiences. By using data gathered via interviews, researchers can “develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p. 58). Phenomenology relies on the concept that humans are constantly constructing meaning for their experiences (Crotty, 1998); thus, the study’s participants conveyed the meaning they have made of their lived experiences at four-year colleges, and I in turn constructed meaning of their experiences in an effort to distill the essence of those experiences. This allowed me to determine if rural students, in general, perceive college and the means of their college successes in the same way.

In particular, I used hermeneutic phenomenology (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). This kind of phenomenology places a special focus on how events are lived versus how we may conceptualize those events. A researcher using hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to discern what are “the underlying phenomenological meanings [of experiences] as we live them” (Vagle, 2014, p. 59). In this case, I undertook to discover how the lived experiences of rural students at selective four-year institutions reflect their ability to attain college success. The composite description that I was able to build using data collected from interviews allowed me to create a general understanding of the situation.

Hermeneutic phenomenology resists the use of *a priori* codes (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). I did not use *a priori* codes with my study, as I believed that doing so might prejudice my analysis of the data. I was interested in seeing what themes emerged naturally. This kind of phenomenology also does not intend to problem-solve as part of the study; researchers look only for the meaning and significance of lived experiences

from the point of view of the participants. While I do plan to use my findings at a later time to attempt to implement institutional change, my study itself is intended only to understand the lived experiences of rural students at a selective four-year institution and how they are able to create success. Rural students and those around them do not go through their days considering their specific experiences and how those experiences affect them as they go through their daily lives, although my study's participants indicated that they had considered the impact of being rural students at their colleges at least once prior to participating in the study. The interviews allowed me to encourage rural students to think deeply about the meaning they have given to their daily experiences and to myself perform "deep and thoughtful engagement through data gathering" (Vagle, 2014, p. 60). Both actions are part of what makes up a hermeneutic phenomenological study.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical lens. My study used the interpretivist/social constructivist research framework. This framework allows researchers to "seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). It also tells us that "all knowledge...is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). My study examined this kind of interaction and students' perception of these interactions. Additionally, the interpretivist/social constructivist framework relies on the interpretation of participants' views and my interpretations of their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998).

These interpretations, as well as the participants' and researcher's perceptions and biases, had the potential to affect the study's outcomes. In order to develop my understanding of how the lived experiences of rural students inform their time at college, I relied on the participants' descriptions of those experiences, regardless of their subjectivity. My interviews with rural students yielded the descriptive richness and complexity of views that form an integral part of interpretivist/social constructivist research (Creswell, 2013).

Conceptual framework. I used the conceptual framework of social, cultural, and academic capital as described in Chapter 1. Bourdieu (1986) and St. John et al. (2011) explained the importance of various types of capital to student success at college. Rural students seem not to possess as much of these kinds of capital as do urban students, and this affected their lived experiences while at college. However, rural students were able to maximize their academic success via their backgrounds and lived experiences, which reflected their resiliency and a general "can-do" spirit and determination to overcome any and all challenges in their paths—both in high school and at college. I changed what is normally a deficit lens into one that allowed me to uncover the positive experiences of rural students at selective four-year institutions, using S. R. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit framework. Harper's framework encourages researchers to transform traditional deficit questions into positive ones. That is, instead of considering what causes rural students to fail in college, I attempted to uncover what tools they are using to attain success.

Participant Selection

I used a purposeful sample that was also a convenience sample and that included some snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to

be specific in whom she chooses to be part of the participant pool; convenience sampling indicates that the participant pool was easy for the researcher to access (Creswell, 2013). In the case of my study, I chose two selective four-year institutions with which I have a personal relationship. I obtained lists of potential rural students from the institutional research departments at both institutions. Next, I invited, via email (see Appendix A), a selection of students to respond as potential participants in the study. I had participants at each college in my study suggest that I invite an additional person, which increased my participant size by one at each institution, thus creating a snowball sample. Snowball sampling allows people who know about the study to suggest or invite additional participants (Creswell, 2013). From these sampling steps, I was hoping to include in the participant sample students of all races and socioeconomic statuses in attendance at those programs; however, 16 of the 17 students who responded were White, and 16 of the 17 respondents labeled themselves as being middle-class (with some variations of “lower-middle” and “upper-middle”). I planned to have a minimum of 10 to 14 students in my participant pool, with 5 to 7 coming from each institution; my response rate allowed me to exceed this number at one college and meet it at the other (N=10 for Coastal College, N=7 for Midlands College).

Each participant received a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) and an informed consent document (see Appendix C) either via email prior to their initial interview or at the beginning of the interview itself. In both cases, the participants read, signed, and returned the forms before they began their participation in the study. The demographic questionnaire lent additional depth to my data analysis by providing me with more detail about each student and his/her background.

Instrumentation

For the interviews, I used a set of semi-structured interview questions based on my research questions and validated by a field-test of the full set of questions on a set of three volunteers from a rural area who also attend a selective four-year college. I then refined and adjusted them as needed. See Appendix D for the interview protocol.

Data Generation

Personal interviews. Interviews allow the researcher to gain an understanding of the world via the experiences and perspectives of the study's participants (Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I followed the "traveler" metaphor for an interviewer, as suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009): I walked along with the participants and encouraged them to share the stories of their lived experiences, using semi-structured questions and conveying my own stories as a former rural student to guide them and inspire trust and comfort. Each time I shared a personal story, the participant responded with a similar story of their own, lending additional depth to their interviews.

Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to begin with a set list of questions that speak to the research problem but then deviate to follow other promising paths sparked by the actual interviews (Creswell, 2013). However, all questions and topics subsequently pursued were closely related to the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I scheduled one semi-structured interview of approximately one hour per participant. In practice, the interview lengths ranged from 35 minutes to 90 minutes, with an average interview time of 62 minutes and a total interview time across all participants of 17 and a half hours. According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), data saturation is gained after 12 interviews. Thus, with 17 participants, I achieved an

appropriate level of data saturation. Even though the length of the interviews varies considerably, I believe that each participant answered all questions fully and provided the amount of detail he or she was comfortable sharing. The longer interviews were with students who were willing to share many anecdotes, which provided additional depth to their stories and their actions. Even those participants who had shorter interviews provided a great deal of detail but usually only shared one anecdote per question rather than multiple stories.

During the interviews, I both made digital recordings (using two different devices—a hand-held digital recorder and an iPhone) of the conversations and took hand-written notes, as recommended by Creswell (2013) to increase reliability of data. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in private rooms or via telephone to preserve confidentiality and to increase the likelihood of open and honest answers from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The personal interviews took place on campus, while the telephone interviews permitted the participants to choose a location most comfortable for them, to allow for them to occur in the participants' natural setting, as required for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

Participants were given the option of having a follow-up interview at a later date, in case the initial conversation caused them to reflect on their lived experiences further. This provided participants with the chance to clarify or expand on their thoughts from the initial interview and/or to talk about things they forgot to mention. They also had the option of emailing the researcher with these thoughts if they preferred that to undertaking a second interview. No students chose to take these options, likely because we covered the topic so thoroughly during the interviews. I reserved the right to contact them with

follow-up questions if my data analysis warranted it and in fact did send two follow-up questions with the transcripts for member-checking. The follow-up questions emerged as potential data points as I proceeded through the interviews; they are included at the end of the interview protocol (Appendix D).

Data Analysis

I transcribed my own interviews as a means of further immersing myself in the data. Vocal inflections, pauses, and other parts of the interviews needed to be captured in the transcripts. I submitted my transcription to each participant for member-checking, a means of ensuring that researchers have captured the true statements and perceptions of the participants, which speaks to the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2013).

After completion of the member-check process, I began coding the data by using the whole-part-whole process that is often used with phenomenological studies (Vagle, 2014). In this process, the researcher undertakes a first read-through of all transcripts to develop further familiarity of the material. A second read-through allows for developing the general themes that appear in the interviews. During this process, I noted any follow-up questions that appeared to be appropriate. I also attempted to “read between the lines” to uncover themes that were not immediately apparent (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I reviewed the transcripts multiple times to ensure I fully analyzed the data.

Data coding was a recursive process in which I broke the data down into groups (codes), then reorganized the data via themes that had emerged—that is, multiple students referenced these themes in some way. I originally intended to use the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose to assist in my coding as I completed my detailed line-by-line analysis of each interview; however, I quickly discovered that, while Dedoose is useful

for research done in partnership, it impeded my personal discovery of codes and themes. Thus, I opted to use sticky notes upon which I wrote each code and theme. I placed the notes on a wall in my home, where I was able to rearrange them and add or subtract codes and themes as needed. Having this large visual representation of the data allowed me to think and rethink each item and determine where each item belonged and its level of importance in the analysis. I took a digital photo of my sticky note array at the end of each session to ensure I lost no organization if a note or notes fell off the wall. I repeated this thematic uncovering process numerous times in order to develop a holistic picture of the lived experiences of the participants, using a constant comparative approach to pull out emerging themes from the data. In an effort to reflect only the essence of those experiences, I focused on bringing out themes and patterns that appeared to be most relevant to the research problem, as opposed to telling a narrative of each student's life. I was then able to visualize the most important items that emerged from the data analysis and began to work with them to develop my findings.

In accordance with the purpose of a phenomenological study, I did not use any *a priori* codes for my analysis and instead allowed codes and themes to emerge naturally from the data. The willingness of the participants to respond to each of my questions in a thoughtful and holistic way provided a great deal of rich data to mine for themes and patterns. I appreciated that the students were willing to think deeply about each question, sometimes taking several minutes before they began speaking—a tendency that I believe reflects their overall desire to learn from all interactions, a trend that most of the participants remarked explicitly upon during the interviews.

Trustworthiness

I established the quality and rigor of my study by addressing the various validity, reliability, credibility, and quality criteria delineated by Creswell (2013), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Shenton (2004). Creswell (2013) views this process as “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (pp. 249-250). Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data and investigators, among other things, when building coherent and justifiable themes (Creswell, 2013; Shenton, 2004). I interviewed 17 participants from two colleges to generate my data. I also used member-checking of my generated data by providing interview transcripts to the participants. This gave each participant a chance to review this portion of the data and inform me of its accuracy and validity or lack thereof. Member-checking increases the credibility of my study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

My methods followed those used in previous, similar studies, which speaks to the credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). My interview process of explaining my motivation for undertaking a study of rural students’ experiences and relaying tales of my own experiences as a rural student developed trust between me and the participants, which encouraged them to be honest with me when answering questions (Shenton, 2004). It also helped them to freely divulge information that went beyond the interview questions.

I used rich, thick description when writing up my study’s results, as recommended by Creswell (2013) and Shenton (2004). I provided a description of the participants and the setting in which they are studying. This will allow readers to conceptualize whether

or not they will be able to transfer their understanding of my results to their own institutions or if my findings “ring true” to them (Shenton, 2004, p. 69).

I followed the reliability criteria that are outlined by Creswell (2013). I made detailed field notes during the interviews to augment my high-quality (digital) recordings of interviews. When I transcribed the interviews, I used proper transcription techniques, including making note of where pauses or hesitations occurred. I had a peer debriefer who was familiar with my topic review 10 of my 17 interview transcripts (five from each college) along with my coding to ensure consistency and content (Shenton, 2004). I reanalyzed my data to uncover codes and themes that that added additional depth to my analysis. These actions ensured that my procedures were consistent throughout the data generation and analysis processes. By detailing my methods in my study report, I will allow other researchers the opportunity to replicate this study in other locations (Shenton, 2004). These methodological details also create confirmability for my study (Shenton, 2004).

My ability to share my own stories as a former rural student often seemed to help the students open up further and provide even more detail regarding their own experiences and created a bond of trust between interviewer and participant, adding to the level of trustworthiness of their responses. Most students thanked me both at the beginning and the end of the interviews for allowing them to participate in the study—some even thanked me again when responding to member-checking. They seemed appreciative that someone was interested in studying the phenomenon of the rural student experience; they often appeared to have thought about being rural students in an urban-influenced environment but had not gotten the opportunity to consider what that meant

for them personally as students and for other rural students at their colleges prior to their participation in the study. They liked that the study gave them an opportunity to do so. The fact that the participants had thought about the issue during their time at college may explain the rapidity with which they responded to my email inviting them to the study: within two hours of sending it, I had more than enough respondents. The participants' own commitment to the study's topic, like their willingness to speak honestly and openly, increased the trustworthiness of the responses.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

Limitations. This research study is only as strong as the data gathered. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the participants may affect the outcomes; however, I have no reason to believe that any of the participants was less than honest with me. The data analysis may also be informed by my biases and background. I used a reflexive journal to uncover and correct for this whenever possible (Creswell, 2013). Maintaining field notes and a reflexive journal helped me examine my biases and recognize and manage them.

The data were limited by the number of participants I was able to obtain and the amount of time I was able to spend interviewing them. However, my total participant pool of 17 students is larger than many similar studies, providing my study with a depth of data that is often unmatched. I believe that it will be likely that readers will determine that my findings can indeed be transferred to the rural student population at similar post-secondary institutions. The major limiting factors in my sample are race, grade level, and socioeconomic status, as I had mostly White, middle-income students all of whom were seniors or beyond in my participant group. Having participants from two subgroups that

come from different research programs might also have had implications for my findings, but the results indicated that rural students attending similar college have similar experiences. Further study with different participant pools will be needed to determine overall generalizability of results. My male to female split of 8:9 reflects the general ratio of males to females attending college and thus likely is not a limiting factor.

The data were also affected by the divisive political situation surrounding the 2016 elections. This was an unexpected facet to my data collection. Although none of my questions directly addressed the political environment, most of the participants mentioned it in their responses. It is possible that the moves “off-script” affected the amount of data I was able to obtain that directly related to my research questions; however, it also opened up a treasure-trove of rural vs. urban people and environments, as least as they were perceived by the participants.

Delimitations. This study focused only on rural students attending two selective colleges in the American Southeast. There is an issue with determining what “rural” means. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the US Census Bureau use different definitions, though both use definitions of “rural” that actually mean “not urban” (USDA ERS, 2013). To simplify my development of a sample pool that reflects a reasonable definition of “rural,” I chose to utilize data showing what counties in the two states involved have at least 70% rural populations. I created spreadsheets with the ZIP codes for those localities and submitted them to the colleges’ institutional research departments with a request to provide lists of students who came from those places. In the case of Midlands College, the students also had to be enrolled at Midlands and not just the larger university of which it is a part. I then allowed the contacted students to

determine if they were “rural.” I had some discussion with three of my respondents regarding the definition of “rural”; all ultimately chose to self-identify as rural and participated in the study.

I also only looked at the positive side of the situation, though the interviews revealed the negatives as well.

Assumptions. I assumed the participants were honest in their responses. I also assumed that rural students have a different college experience than students from more urban areas.

Ethical Considerations

Privacy and confidentiality. I have protected the confidentiality of all participants; any personally identifying information was altered to mask the identity of the participants in both interview transcripts and research publications or presentations. I gave the participants the opportunity to choose a pseudonym; if they opted not to select one, I created one for them. I will destroy all notes and audio recordings two years after the completion of the study.

Summary of confidentiality language from consent form. I ensured that the participants understood that the accuracy and honesty of their responses were an important and integral part of the successful outcome for my research study and that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers, only their answers. They had the right to refuse to answer any question(s) during the interview, and there was no penalty for choosing not to answer a question. Their participation in the study was completely voluntary, and all of the information collected remains confidential. Their real names will not appear on any material associated with this project.

Summary

In this qualitative study, I used a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of rural students at two selective four-year colleges and how those students attained success at those institutions. The sample for this study was acquired via a purposeful sample that was also a convenience sample. The overall sample also contained a small snowball sample.

Individuals were asked to sign an informed consent document prior to participating in the study along with completing an initial demographic questionnaire. I interviewed the participants using semi-structured interview questions and captured their responses using two digital recorders. I personally transcribed the interviews verbatim.

To analyze the data, I undertook a first read-through of all transcripts to create further familiarity of the material. A second read-through allowed me to develop the general themes that emerged from the interviews. Further read-throughs allowed more detailed analytics. Data coding was a recursive process that I ultimately used to create descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon studied. The data were triangulated through member-checking and use of multiple participants from two programs.

CHAPTER 4

Participant Profiles

Overview

I interviewed a total of 17 students who were attending two selective four-year colleges at the time of the study. Ten attended Coastal College, and seven came from Midlands College; all are from two states in the Southeastern United States. None came from the same locality as any other participant. This chapter summarizes both the participants' backgrounds and the two colleges they attended; all names have been altered to protect confidentiality.

Sixteen participants were seniors at the time of their interviews, and one was in the first year of graduate school at the same institution she attended as an undergraduate; thus, all have now graduated. While students from all college class levels at the institutions were invited to participate, only seniors responded—possibly because they felt they had the time to do so, given that their college careers were winding down at that point; the interviews were scheduled for the spring semester between midterms and finals. Indeed, several participants made just that comment: “I’m not all that worried about classes or exams now, since I’m almost done” (Monique). Being at the end of their time at college, the participants had the ability to reflect back over all their years in higher education, allowing them to make deeper connections than might have been possible earlier in their college careers and providing additional depth to the study’s

results. This also provided me with a mostly homogeneous sample, which may have limited some of my data. It did make the data easier to analyze, however, as I was comparing students who had spent similar amounts of time in their programs and who all began at college in the same year.

The participants' demographics are listed in Table 1; their majors have also been anonymized into "physical sciences" (PS) and "social sciences" (SS), as the small populations of the colleges could allow for unmasking of some participants due to their specific majors in combination with other demographics. The chart shows the mostly homogenous makeup of my sample: 16 of 17 were White, not first-generation, and graduating seniors, while all came from what they considered to be middle-class families.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Population of home area	Ethnic makeup of area	High school size	Participant's Ethnicity	Major	First gen.	Socio-economic class
Coastal College							
Beth	14,000	White/Black	180	White	PS	No	Middle
Fran	1,500	White/Black	500	White	PS	No	Middle
George	8,500	White/Black	1,000	White	PS	Yes	Middle
Jack	7,000	White	1,000	White	PS	No	Middle
Jon	1,300	White	500	White	SS	No	Middle
Lucas	15,000	White	2,200	White	PS	No	Middle
Milo	30,000	White/Black	100	White	PS/SS	No	Middle
Rebecca	42,000	White/Black	600	White	SS	No	Middle
Rob	1,100	White/Black	500	White	PS	No	Middle
Shelly	3,000	White/Black	250	White	PS	No	Middle
Midlands College							
Alice	2,500	White/Black	100	White	PS	No	Middle
Amelia	5,000	White/Black	500	White	SS	No	Middle
Edward	2,000	White/Black	600	Black	PS	No	Middle
Kegan	11,000	White	200	White	PS	No	Middle
Marilyn	3,000	White/Black	200	White	PS	No	Middle
Maureen	10,000	White	350	White	SS	No	Middle
Monique	3,500	White/Black	300	White	SS	No	Middle

The participants all expressed their enthusiasm toward the topic and their willingness to think deeply about something that—while it clearly informed their time at

college—many had never considered before. Many of them also explicitly expressed the desire to receive a copy of my completed dissertation; being involved in the project gave them an interest in knowing what my findings would be. Their interviews displayed many similarities in their college experiences, even while their high school backgrounds differed greatly in some cases. I will draw out the emergent themes in Chapter 5, but I could tell even as I was conducting the interviews that there is indeed something that can be described as the phenomenon of “the rural student experience at selective four-year colleges” and that rural students in such institutions are able use their backgrounds to navigate their ways to persistence and success.

Coastal College

Coastal College is a medium-sized public four-year liberal arts institution located in a small city in the coastal area of a southeastern state. Coastal has a focus on research in both the hard and social sciences and prides itself on its small faculty-to-student ratio, which allows—in theory—closer attention to each student and gives students a better opportunity to excel in their chosen majors. Coastal’s student population is somewhat diverse, but it is primarily White, urban, and wealthy. Coastal’s admission policies classify it as “most selective,” thus ensuring that all students who are admitted meet very high standards; it is highly ranked nationally. Some students in my study expressed their surprise and delight at having been able to achieve admission to Coastal, given that they knew their high schools had not adequately prepared them for college. Several also mentioned that, historically, students from their high schools were not admitted to Coastal, which carries additional implications for those students’ support structures while at Coastal, as they were often the only students from their hometowns (or even home

regions) at Coastal. Many students also mentioned that they finally felt at home once arriving at Coastal in spite of the lack of hometown compatriots; they had felt out of place at home and now suddenly had a sense of finding “their people” —others with the same desire to learn and excel and who were “weird” like they were (Shelly).

Beth. Beth came to Coastal from a town in the far southern portion of her state that once was the home of numerous textile and furniture mills. The majority of those mills have now closed, leaving the town impoverished and the schools with few resources. Beth got the opportunity to attend a small private high school that offered an International Baccalaureate program, which she credits with her ability to transition easily academically to Coastal. The IB program gave Beth the groundwork for participating in classroom discussions and a wide breadth of classes to choose from, including psychology and film studies—courses rarely found in a rural high school’s curriculum. While, unlike most of the other participants in my study, Beth found the academic transition easy, she—like most of the others—faced challenges in her social transition. She found the communication aspect of living constantly with strangers to be the most difficult part of transitioning to college, but once she was able to seek out like-minded people at Coastal, she found her ability to deal with this challenge growing quickly. Beth is planning to take a job in a neighboring state following graduation, but it is not far from her home area, and it is a town with a similar makeup to her hometown. It is likely that if her professional life could take Beth back to her hometown, she would be happy to return, feeling that she is a “small town person” at heart.

Fran. Fran is from a large, majority White rural county in the central part of her state. While the county is mostly made up of farmland and some historical tourist

attractions, it does have three larger population centers, one of which contains Fran's home. Fran is majoring in a physical science and intends to go on to obtain her teaching license. While her future is still uncertain, she holds a desire to return home to teach and to get involved in the local community. As a high school student, she was active in civics and maintains an interest in what things are happening in her hometown politically. Of all the students in the study, Fran seems to be the one with the deepest ties to her hometown, and she is the only one with an explicit desire to return. This could be because of the poor education she saw most of her fellow students receiving. As the "rock star of high school," Fran was able to attend a magnet school and take honors and AP classes at her high school, but she knows that most other students got a substandard education. In spite of thinking she received a solid education, Fran arrived at college missing a great deal of academic knowledge, which she struggled to make up during her first two years. She appreciated having support from professors and getting research opportunities, but she thinks she missed out on many things because she simply did not know they existed and did not know how to ask about them.

George. George hails from a rural county in the central part of his state. The county is made up of low-income White farmers, while the one town in the county holds a majority population of low-income Blacks. George chose to be homeschooled due to the poor education available in the county high school. Because he did not know if a four-year college environment would be right for him following homeschooling, George attended a local community college first. This provided him with the opportunity to take science lab courses and gave him the confidence to become a physical science major. He believes that community colleges create a necessary bridge between high school and

four-year colleges and provide necessary vocational and nursing programs for local areas. This is clearly true for his local community, where most people have never left the county and have no desire to do so. Being able to attend a local community college provides them with the education they need for trades or other skilled-work professions without forcing them to leave the area. Even though George found his time at community college to be very helpful, his transition to Coastal was still challenging, as he felt that the professors and administrators here thought he was “not good enough” and that he was perceived as a “dumb hick.” He felt very out of place at Coastal until he finally found a group of people with similar backgrounds and interests. Once he found people who could support him, he finally was able to transition successfully. While he does not have particular negative feelings toward his home area, he is unlikely to return, unless he finds a local work opportunity that dovetails with his professional aspirations.

Jack. Jack comes from the western mountains of his state and is double-majoring in the physical sciences. The area has a dichotomous population: the largest town in the county is home to two colleges, and the people there tend to be liberal and highly educated, while the people who live in the county tend to be more conservative and less interested in education. The local high school seems to have catered to the latter group by attaching a vocational school where students who do not want to go to college can take classes leading to certifications. However, the courses offered by the high school are generally of poor quality. Athletics take top ranking at the school, and academics are something of an afterthought. Jack had the opportunity to take a limited number of AP classes, and he thinks those did help him academically at Coastal. He especially appreciates not having to take calculus at Coastal, which he describes as “needlessly

hard.” Overall, Jack seems frustrated by the educational system in general; he did not enjoy high school or college and seems to feel somewhat betrayed by those institutions, though he is pleased with his ability to graduate successfully in spite of all the barriers to doing so that he perceived. He is unlikely to return home following graduation due his family situation more than because of a dislike of the area.

Jon. Jon is from a rural county that is adjacent to a significant metropolitan area and that serves as a bedroom community to that area. He thinks this population makeup has caused the area to be overall more liberal than the average rural community, which he says helped him feel less isolated (as a liberal himself) than many other rural students do while living at home. Regardless, “the school system was pretty bad,” and Jon decided to leave high school in favor of homeschooling. While he thinks that being homeschooled satisfied his need to simply learn things—his approach was to complete numerous independent research studies on topics in which he was interested—he realized that it left him unprepared for college in general and classroom discussions in particular. Jon recognized these limitations prior to applying for college, and so he chose to attend the local community college for two years in an effort to address them. While he was not pleased with the quality of most of his courses there, his experience at community college gave him more structure and let him have an idea of what a college workload would be. He found the subsequent transition to Coastal to be fairly easy. Jon does not feel an attachment to his home area and is unlikely to return following graduation.

Lucas. Lucas, a physical science major, hails from a rural, majority White county. The county, located on the water (both a river and a bay), has only one sizeable town. Lucas lives in this town and calls it “pretty country.” Though he seems to

appreciate his hometown, he is adamant that he does not want to return to there. He feels that he does not fit into the local culture of “very Southern rednecks,” and he prefers to move on to someplace where he can use his intellectual skills and interest in scientific research. He also feels acutely that his local high school did not prepare him for college, especially when compared to people from more urban areas. Further, he believes that education is not valued in his home county because of the poor education he received from poorly prepared teachers and the fact that the county’s residents refused to vote for a .02 tax-rate hike to fund the schools. Because of the inadequate funding, the county’s school schedule had to be cut by 20 days per school year for the next two years. His overall experience in his home county versus his experience at Coastal College makes him reluctant to return to an environment where the things he values highly are minimized.

Milo. Milo is a double major—one in social science and one in physical science. He comes from a sprawling rural county that has no large population centers and a great deal of farmland. He says his family “[doesn’t] have much land, maybe five or six acres,” an amount of land that people from urban areas are likely to find large and possibly excessive. Milo appreciates the amount of space he could roam while growing up, and the sensation of isolation for him is a pleasant one. Retreating to nature when he is stressed out is helpful to him. His rural high school had limited academic offerings, so Milo asked if he could attend a small private high school in the next county. He felt bad about leaving the rural school, but he recognized that he would be unable to receive the kind of academic challenge there that he craved. The private high school offered AP and advanced classes that Milo believes helped him prepare for college far better than the

rural high school could have. He experienced fewer of the challenges transitioning academically to Coastal than did most of the study's participants, but he still had some issues with the social transition, as did the majority of the participants. Milo is unsure of what he will do following graduation, as the career path he had originally planned on is turning out to be not what he wants to do. He has not ruled out returning home to work for his father's business for a time while he reassesses his situation and future.

Rebecca. Rebecca is from a large town in a rural county in the southern portion of her state. The population is roughly half White and half Black with a scattering of other minorities, particularly Hispanic. While Rebecca does not have any complaints about her high school (other than its lack of resources), she was given the opportunity to attend a magnet school in the mornings, which provided her with advanced and coenrollment courses. In addition, she was able to take classes online for things she was interested in but that were not offered through either school. Being able to take such courses helped prepare her well for college, though still not as well as Rebecca would have liked when compared to students from more urban places. She enjoyed her transition to college even while having to relearn how to study her first semester at Coastal. Regardless, she recalls feeling different from other people on her freshman hall because no one else came from a rural place, and she was concerned that she was being judged harshly for being a rural student. While Rebecca does not hold negative feelings toward her home town, she is unlikely to return following graduation.

Rob. Rob is from the highly rural southwestern part of his state; his particular home area has been hard-hit by unemployment as local mills were shut down. A physical sciences major, Rob struggled a great deal his first year at Coastal because of the poor

math and science education he received at his high school. Most of his fellow high school students had no interest in continuing on to college, so they were unmotivated, which appears to have led to the teachers' also being unmotivated. Rob took calculus in high school but decided to take it again in college, which he describes as "a rude awakening." He used his first year at Coastal to develop the study skills he needed to succeed, overcoming the challenge of not having to study in order to do well in high school. He is now ready to go on to medical school; he will not be returning to his home area to practice once he receives his license.

Shelly. Shelly comes from a mill town in a rural county that is on the water. The population is mixed: approximately 60% White, 35% Black, and 5% other ethnicities (including Vietnamese). The town is the only large population center in the county, which is mainly comprised of farmland. A physical sciences major, Shelly credits her high-ranking local high school for providing her with the tools for success in college. This school is an outlier in rural schools; it has frequently been ranked as the top small school division in the state, and people from surrounding counties pay tuition to send their children there (the division has a waiting list for tuition students). The local mill has provided the school with supplemental funding and technology for years, giving it a leg up on other rural schools. Before many colleges had computer labs available for students, this high school had a classroom filled with TRS-80s (early personal computers) and was teaching students to code in BASIC (a kind of computer coding). That trend has continued to the present day. In spite of this, Shelly feels that students coming from more urban areas still had better science educations heading into college than she did, possibly because their proximity to research institutions provided them with the opportunities to

perform research that a school located in a rural area simply cannot offer. Shelly's high school did provide coenrollment courses with the local community college, but those classes did not offer high-level research experiences. Shelly also felt frustration with the lack of ambition shown by her high school classmates, many of whom did not continue on to four-year colleges. A large portion of those students from Shelly's school who begin community college do not complete it, preferring to go to work at the local mill or on family farms instead. An overachiever, Shelly took as many coenrollment courses as she could and earned her associate's degree while still in high school. She did still feel that she needed to retake many of the classes once at Coastal and so is graduating in three years rather than in two. She now finds her hometown to be "less relevant" to her and her future and does not intend to return.

Midlands College

Midlands College is a small, highly selective honors and research college that is located within a large state university in the southeastern United States. The university lies in a large city in the central portion of the state and has a highly diverse student population. Midlands requires a separate application from those interested in attending the college; all applicants must have already been accepted to the state university, which is classified as a more selective institution. Midlands prides itself on offering research opportunities along with small-sized unusual and advanced courses that are not available to the general student population. The college has its own support staff, who are dedicated to Midlands students, along with advisors who assist students in planning their coursework within Midlands. Students still need to seek advising in their major fields from professors outside the program, however. Midlands College offers the benefits of a

small private college coupled with the resources of a large public university. Midlands, like Coastal, is highly ranked nationally.

Alice. Alice is from a town in a largely rural county in the eastern part of her state—or as she describes it, “the middle of nowhere.” The county is mostly made up of farmland and has only one large population center (a town of 2,500 people). In spite of the numerous challenges she described regarding her local high school and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) preparation, Alice is still majoring in a physical science. She had no opportunity to take any advanced courses in high school, and the remote location of the school made it impossible for the provision of coenrollment courses at a local community college, such as many rural high school students are able to access. She was offered the chance to take online courses, but the internet connections both at school and at home were so unreliable as to make taking the classes an effort in futility and frustration. Alice found the transition to college overall very challenging, as she felt quite far behind her classmates in terms of previously learned material and also felt isolated from her dorm-mates—she perceived herself as the only rural student in the entire dorm, though she now recognizes that this was likely untrue. While Alice still feels connected to her hometown, she cannot imagine going back there following graduation. There are no opportunities there for someone with her degree and interests.

Amelia. Amelia is a social sciences major from an extremely rural, isolated, majority White part of her state. While her county is large in area, the entire population totals only about 5,000 people scattered across mountain valleys. Travel time from one valley to the next is at least a half hour, adding an additional level of hardship to

attending high school at an impoverished, low-resourced rural facility. It took some students an hour and a half to get to school each day—three hours round trip. Amelia seems proud and ashamed of her home area at the same time. She is clearly proud that the locals work hard to overcome adversity, but she also appears ashamed at the overall poverty and lack of education there. She does not want to tell people where she is from, because she fears the assumptions they will make about her and her level of intelligence. In her high school, Amelia hated being pigeonholed as “the very intelligent kid who did well in all her classes.” She also hated that this status caused her to be put into a lot of online, advanced classes; she disliked being alone in a room taking a course from someone hundreds of miles away with whom she had no connection. While she does not think her high school education prepared her for college at Midlands, she was deeply attached to her local teachers and thinks of them fondly. She believes that the lack of interest most local students had in education affected the level of teaching provided, especially in math and the sciences. Though she disliked taking the online courses, she appreciates the fact that she was able to do so, as she thinks those classes were the only ones that helped prepare her for college. The level of writing involved with them was not dissimilar to what she encountered at Midlands. Amelia remains unsure of her future path and is one of the few students in the study who shows a willingness to return home, either to work on her family’s farm or in some other capacity, though she is still unsure of her future work path. She seems to have an even deeper connection to her rural roots than most of the participants.

Edward. Edward is the sole person of color in my participant group. Regardless, his experience at college mirrors that of the White rural students, lending some support to

my theory that there is a general “rural student experience” at selective four-year institutions. Edward comes from a small town in a large rural county with a fairly even White/Black split and a smaller Hispanic population. He is majoring in a physical science at the insistence of his parents, even though his true love clearly lies in a social science. He is looking for a way to combine both what he loves and what he is expected to do; culturally, he is unable to diverge from the path laid out for him (and his siblings) by his parents. In Edward’s opinion, the teaching at his rural high school “really sucked” and left him not knowing “how to do school.” He did enter a magnet school during his last two years of high school, but he still found the classes unchallenging and never learned how to study properly. When he arrived at Midlands, he felt that he carried nothing valuable from high school and that he was academically behind people who came from larger urban areas. He especially regrets not having the opportunity in high school to take AP classes or undertake research opportunities. He did not even know such things existed when he was in high school; he feels he was given a very narrow view of the world and his possibilities. Edward worked extremely hard to overcome these challenges, and he now feels that he “can go in and do anything.” He feels very prepared for graduate or medical school. Edward does not intend to return home following graduation, but that seems mainly related to family expectations, not a particular dislike of the area or reluctance to return.

Kegan. Kegan came to Midlands from a majority White small town in a county on the water along the eastern side of his state. Most people there make their living as watermen. The time Kegan spent as a sailor at home sparked his interest in majoring in a physical science, which was somewhat supported by his attendance at a private high

school. Even though Kegan felt the school prepared him well for college, he still thought his skills in math and the sciences were not up to the levels of students who came from more urban areas. Like most of the students in my study, Kegan felt relieved to arrive at college to discover people who were as interested in learning and the world outside “home” as he was. He did not fit in in his hometown, but he made many friends quickly and easily at Midlands. Unfortunately, Kegan did not develop good study skills his first year at college because he found the academics less challenging than he had expected. Thus, his second year, when he began taking harder courses, was a rude awakening for him, and he had to undertake the academic transition he had skipped his freshman year. If Kegan could find the right employment opportunity in his home area, he would return.

Marilyn. Marilyn is from a small water town in the southeastern part of her state. Most of the inhabitants make their living on the water; the remainder of the county is farmland. She is embarrassed to be from this town and does not want anyone to know where she is from. She has probably the deepest negative feelings toward her town and high school of all the participants. The challenges of her high school seemed to have flowed over into her college experience in a way that others’ did not; even though she is clearly highly intelligent and is doing exceptionally well in her physical science courses, she still calls herself “stupid” —a stigma that seems to have arisen from the extensive bullying she received in high school (ironically, because she was the smartest person in the school). She had no opportunity to take advanced or coenrollment courses, though her high school math and science teachers often asked her to teach classes for them—possibly one factor that led to the bullying. It also speaks to the poor preparation teachers had in science and math instruction, that they were willing to let a student (however smart

and capable) teach the courses. While Marilyn seems overall exasperated by her educational environments, she is also appreciative of the opportunity to attend Midlands and go on to graduate school in a physical science. She felt out of place in her hometown and was pleased to be able to meet other “NASA Nerds” when she arrived at college. She absolutely has no intention to return home after graduation and only goes back over breaks because of her parents’ insistence.

Maureen. Maureen is from a small town in a rural county. The town is a tourist destination of sorts for people who want to visit the river upon which the town is located and the historical sites around the region. The remainder of the county is mostly farmland and is majority White. She was able to attend a magnet school in conjunction with her local high school, which she describes as not having a lot of resources. She sought out the opportunity to attend the magnet school because the local high school was unable to offer AP classes; they discontinued offering the courses when they encountered a low rate of AP test passage and were unable to justify keeping the courses in the curriculum. The magnet school offered advanced courses as well as coenrollment in the local community college, providing Maureen with the academic challenge she was looking for. Maureen does not think the classes she took at the high school prepared her for college, and she only felt adequate at Midlands at all because of the magnet school courses. She finds it unfortunate that she was only able to take science and math classes at the magnet school, as she knows her writing skills were substandard when she arrived at Midlands. Because she chose to major in a social science, Maureen felt the lack of writing skills acutely, especially in her first year at Midlands. Maureen is uncomfortable returning to her hometown now, as she thinks everyone there finds her to be “weird.”

She was happy to get to Midlands and meet “a bunch of people who are just as weird as [she is].” She is unlikely to return home after college.

Monique. Monique is from a small paper mill town located in an otherwise rural county. She is now majoring in a social science, but she began as a physical science major with the intention of continuing to medical school. She thinks the very poor preparation she received in most STEM disciplines during high school is a key factor in her decision to switch majors. Ironically, it was a challenging biology class research paper assignment that she undertook in ninth grade that sparked her interest in medical research, which was underscored by the AP Biology course she was able to take in 11th grade. Unfortunately, the rest of her science and math courses (and teachers) were not up to the level of the biology classes and teacher. Monique experienced extreme challenges in both chemistry and calculus her first year of college, and her fear of continuing to do poorly in organic chemistry caused her to change paths at the end of her freshman year. She expressed her concern that not being able to get her grades up would cause her to lose her scholarship, which she managed to keep—but just barely—following her freshman year. Monique also seemed somewhat relieved to have an excuse to change majors; her parents were the ones who pushed her onto the pre-med path (though she admits she was herself interested in medicine), and she appears to be happy with her final choice in major. She will be continuing on to graduate school in that major. Like many of the other participants in the study, she expressed happiness and relief at “finding [her] people” at Midlands. She felt “weird” and out of place in her local high school—she was always interested in world affairs and politics, while her fellow students were more concerned with hunting, fishing, and discussing the most recent episodes of popular TV

shows (Monique does not watch TV, preferring to read books in her free time instead). Entering a community of similarly politically-minded people—with liberal leanings—was a real relief to her and helped her to understand that she was completely normal, if perhaps a poor fit for her town. Monique has no negative feelings toward her hometown, but she does not intend to return there.

Summary

All 17 study participants show numerous similarities across both their high school and college experiences, whether they attended public or private high schools and whether they matriculated at Coastal College or Midlands College. They all also had individual experiences that informed how they perceived their college experience but that often fall into thematic categories with other students' experiences. Taken all together, the lived experiences of my study participants offer patterns that allowed me to draw a set of themes and conclusions from the data. I describe those themes in Chapter 5 and present my conclusions in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5

Findings

Overview

This chapter presents this study's findings by a thematic analysis of interviews and follow-up emails of 17 rural students attending selective four-year institutions. To answer the study's research questions, Chapter 5 presents themes addressed under two broad categories: 1) the challenges students encountered in their rural high schools and 2) the challenges students encountered once they matriculated at college. Though this study intended to examine rural students' experiences at college, the interviews with the participants indicated a pattern of importance to their backgrounds that spilled over into how they perceived college, their peers, their professors, and the overall college environment. This made the high school challenges they encountered extremely important to their general college experience. Thus, I have included those crucial high school experiences as the first part of this chapter. The bulk of the chapter focuses on the variety of challenges the participants encountered and overcame in college. These challenges are similar to those encountered by other students from underserved populations, thus underscoring my including rural students as part of the underserved population and belief that rural students and their experiences at college should be studied in more detail.

There are numerous subthemes within each overarching theme. Each is identified as a subheading within each section. While I have pulled out a number of discrete subthemes, many of them intertwine with each other, making it impossible to strictly isolate each them. I have used the most pertinent examples of each subtheme within that subheading, indicating where they overlap.

All the participants were enthusiastic about their interviews, which is reflected in the depth of their responses. Because students from both Coastal College and Midlands College showed similar themes/subthemes, I am including them all together rather than separating them out. It seems likely that the nature of each college—small, research-oriented, and committed to each student individually—creates similar atmospheres that produce similar student lived experiences. While this eliminates the possibility of a true cross-case analysis, it does lend support for my theory that there is a generalized “rural student experience” at selective four-year colleges.

Table 2 summarizes my research questions and the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Though some of the themes/subthemes may appear as though they support the use of a deficit lens, the student actions they encompass all lent support to creating college success for the rural students in my study.

Table 2

Research Questions and Emergent Subthemes

Research Question	Emergent Subthemes
What factors in the backgrounds of rural students provide them with the ability to transition successfully into a selective four-year institutional environment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being “too smart” Lack of STEM preparation in high school Poor overall high school preparation Wanting to learn/succeed Importance of religion/community Importance of nature Being social outcasts in high school
What factors do rural students identify that support their ability to transition successfully into a selective four-year college environment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overcoming academic challenges Overcoming social challenges Overcoming challenges of capital Independence from parents/family Disconnectedness from hometown Lack of desire to return home
In what ways do rural students self-identify? Specifically, do they think of themselves as “rural students,” or is their internal identity something different?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiencing microaggressions Using code-switching Experiencing solo status Experiencing stereotype threat More liberal than most rural people

High School Challenges

The participants, while coming from multiple locations, had similar overall high school experiences, though the specifics differed. In the participants’ opinions, their schools had poor resources, from teachers with limited instructional skills to few advanced placement (AP) or advanced course offerings to poor school infrastructures. The high schools held student populations who for the most part were disinterested in learning and who did not intend to continue on to four-year colleges. A premium was generally placed on athletics over academics. Most of the schools, however, did offer the opportunity to take online courses (sometimes presenting additional challenges when the school’s internet connection was poor) or for high-achieving students to apply to attend

local magnet schools that offered higher-level coursework and/or co-enrollment classes with local community colleges. The states that both selective colleges are in have magnet schools scattered around the state in similar fashion to their community colleges; many magnet schools, in fact, offer co-enrollment courses with their nearest community college. The students who had access to magnet schools thus derived a certain level of privilege and education not available to all rural students, though the participants who attended magnet schools did not feel they attained a high school education that prepared them well for attendance at a selective four-year college. Overall, coping with the high school challenges the participants encountered appears to have created resilience in the students and a willingness to do whatever is needed for them to succeed.

All participants experienced specific challenges in high school that created additional layers of struggle for them, from being “too smart” (Monique) to having social interactions that left them feeling “kinda miserable” (Alice) to experiencing “pretty sucky” educations (Edward). Two students even attended high schools that were not accredited. While these challenges presented obstacles with the potential to derail the students’ post-high school plans, all participants rose above these roadblocks and did their best to craft pathways to admission at highly selective colleges, often in spite of being told that no one from their high school ever got into those colleges. In their answers to the interview questions, these students demonstrated great levels of resiliency, determination, and a general “can-do” spirit that likely accounted for their ability to overcome the challenges they faced because of their rural backgrounds. Jack neatly encapsulated the overall sense that I got from the participants: Their backgrounds led to their becoming people who are “not necessarily fearless, but who are willing to overcome

that fear, taking that step into the unknown, whatever that might be.” This ability served them all well, both in helping them know that college was an option, even if it was a huge step into the unknown, and in overcoming barriers that they encountered once they matriculated at college.

Being “too smart.” Many of the students mentioned that they were considered to be the smartest people in their high schools. While this enabled the majority of them to take advanced courses, which they frequently pointed to as having helped them succeed in their academic transitions to college, it also caused them frustration in high school. Only a few (Edward, Marilyn, Meghan, and Monique) mentioned actually being bullied, but they all commented on how unhappy they were with the level of academic challenge and/or education provided by their rural high schools. Jon even decided to move to homeschooling because “the school system was pretty bad,” indicating a certain amount of academic capital in that Jon recognized the possibility and opportunity for home schooling.

Those whose academic capital led them to know they could attend private or magnet schools also commented that they felt inadequately prepared for college compared to their more urban peers; those students appreciated the more advanced curricula or the private and magnet schools, but most spoke of wishing they could have had lab experiences “like the people from [large urban area] got to do” (Milo). This desire and the inability of the rural schools – public, private, or magnet – speaks to the generally limited amount of resources available to them. Even when there were financial resources available, there were rarely teachers in the schools with the knowledge, training, or interest to engage in laboratory classes. As Edward said, “The teachers just

wanted to meet that lowest common denominator, teach to the test, hit the bare minimum.”

Other participants, such as Beth, appreciated being put “in the ‘smart kid’ box,” which enabled her to attend a private school that offered an International Baccalaureate diploma. She is one of the few students who felt that her high school experience prepared her well for college – and even then, she questioned her math skills and chose to retake a course at college that she had already taken in high school. This speaks to rural students’ fear of not being able to perform up to standard (addressed further below in the discussion on stereotype threat). Rebecca was glad to be “the smart one,” because that gave her the opportunity to apply for the local magnet school. She took dual-enrollment courses at the community college through the magnet school, as did several other participants (Maureen, Monique, Shelly). The classes at the magnet school were also more free-form, allowing Rebecca the latitude to be more creative in her coursework. Rebecca credits this creative coursework with her ability to be flexible once she arrived at college and to handle the different college course structure, which also tends to be more free-form than high school courses. Rebecca is something of an outlier in that she found little to criticize in her high school experience; she did, however, still develop the kind of skills that supported a level of resilience once she reached college and helped to contribute to her success.

Rob thought he had received a decent high school education until he arrived at college. He also appreciated being labeled as a “smart kid.” That was, he said, one of the only things that motivated him in high school. Otherwise, he would have been like his classmates and remained uninterested in academics. Being invited to take AP classes his

junior year sparked his interest in learning and made him move away from the “maybe this whole school thing isn’t for me” attitude he had had previously. He felt he was suddenly around people who “pushed [him] to do better” and got him interested in going to college, unlike most of his classmates. Like Beth and Rob, Maureen appreciated being labeled “smart,” which provided her with the opportunity to attend her local magnet school. Her attendance there was the only thing that allowed her to take advanced courses of any kind. Maureen’s school lacked both financial resources and able (or interested) students:

We didn’t offer any AP classes because—I think they used to try and offer them, and then the rumor I heard was that they couldn’t get enough people to pass the AP tests to justify keeping AP classes. ... Ummm...our school didn’t really have a lot of resources, so I got to take more advanced class because I went to kind of like a magnet school, [Local] School. But, um, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to take any AP classes. We did classes through the local community college for some students, but most students—they didn’t cater toward any really high-achieving students.

This high school environment, and many of the others attended by the participants, is not unlike many inner-city public schools that create populations of graduates who lack the academic, social, and cultural capital to succeed at college—or even know they can attend college. The similarities between rural schools and inner-city schools are striking, again showing that students from rural populations should be examined as members of underserved populations.

Some participants, such as Amelia, felt that taking advanced courses online failed to prepare them for in-class discussions at college. She hated that being “the very intelligent kid who did well in all her classes” meant that she was put into numerous online classes, though she did appreciate that the online courses gave her the chance to take classes not otherwise available to her. Amelia still believed that she was in a bad learning environment, however. Rebecca thought her learning environment was good, but she realized when she arrived at college that her magnet school had not prepared her as well as other students’ high schools had. The unfortunate reality of high school for the participants is that, even when they believed they were getting the best possible education, the schools and their instruction fell far short of what these students needed to be successful out of the gate at college. Instead, they had additional barriers to overcome, in some cases creating essentially a remedial situation at institutions that do not believe any of their students require (or should require) remediation. Once at college, most of the participants felt isolated and worked to overcome these additional challenges on their own, ultimately forging their own pathways to persistence and success.

In spite of the challenges of high school, these students all did what they could to pursue as many advanced course opportunities during high school as possible, understanding that this was the only way they could try to prepare themselves properly for the kind of four-year institution they wanted to attend or have a chance at attaining admission there. Having to do this in high school—and often on their own—likely prepared them for tackling the challenges they would encounter in college with a positive attitude and the determination to succeed.

Lack of STEM preparation. Almost every participant criticized the level of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education they received. The lone exception was Shelly, whose high school focuses on STEM classes—in fact, she said that many local people are critical of that focus, as they feel it comes at the expense of the arts. Both criticisms speak to a lack of resources in rural schools, whether financial or of trained teachers. No subject should be focused on at the expense of another, a situation that is prevalent at rural schools; in some cases, academics are limited because of a focus on athletics, at least as perceived by a number of the participants. Kegan said that he got decent writing and critical thinking skills from his private high school, but that his skills in math and science were “not as sharp” as those of others in his college classes. Beth also singled math out as lacking at her private school: “The math programs were not good at my school.... I took pre-calculus my senior year and wound up kinda too scared to take calculus in college, so I took pre-calculus again at college before taking calculus.”

Beth was not the only one who repeated classes taken in high school or community college. Shelly, George, Milo, Jon, and Edward all stated that they were required to repeat classes or felt that they needed to re-take certain courses in order to create success in their chosen majors. All the repeated courses fall into STEM fields; no one mentioned needing to retake social studies or humanities courses at college. Most students mentioned that they did feel fairly well prepared by their high schools in those fields, and it was just the STEM classes that were lacking, sometimes exceptionally so. Many students also mentioned feeling that they missed the deep laboratory or research experience evidenced by some students from more urban areas. Rob mentioned that he

felt like students from an area known for providing high school students with good lab research experiences were laughing at him, mocking him, and/or talking down to him when he was in the lab with them. Though this undermined his confidence somewhat, it also galvanized his resolve to do well in the lab and create an outstanding science experience for himself at college.

Amelia felt completely unprepared for STEM courses at college and struggled with completing required courses:

When I did my math and my science requirements, that was completely different from my high school. They were a lot harder. With my high school math and science, it would be like “memorize this bit of information about science, and we’ll go over it 10 times so we’re sure you know what that is” and then regurgitate it on the test. We didn’t really get into the complexities behind it, which I did here in my science classes, so it was a lot harder. It also moved a lot faster in college.

Based on comments from the majority of participants, most rural students experience similar situations as did Amelia in high school STEM classes, with rote memorization and no laboratory experiences being the norm. Every student interviewed commented on their lack of STEM preparation in high school, including those students who went on to major in the physical sciences. Even Rebecca, who attended a STEM magnet school, said that her STEM preparation in high school was lacking and that the school did not have as many resources, such as laboratory equipment, as the schools of her more urban college student counterparts did. She commented that even the textbooks were old,

making it hard for her teachers to provide quality STEM instruction. Kegan attended a small private boarding school, but he still felt he lacked STEM skills, particularly math.

Shelly also said that she still felt unprepared once she arrived at college, even though her high school specifically focused on STEM preparation for college-bound students. She had all the credits she needed to place out of introductory science classes and move straight into advanced courses. However, Shelly “wasn’t confident enough in what [she] knew to go on to advanced-level courses in biology and chemistry. So [she] ended up retaking some courses [her] first year.” She felt that people coming from more urban areas had gotten better backgrounds from their schools and felt like she was undereducated in comparison. “[She] just didn’t feel like [she] was on par with everyone else for sure.” However, her better-than-average (for a rural high school) STEM preparation did put Shelly in the position of being able to take lighter loads her freshman year credit-wise, and her understanding of the material—as unconfident as she was in it—allowed her some easier courses to take as she transitioned into college, setting her up for success and graduation in three years.

The lack of STEM preparation is another hurdle many of my study’s participants overcame; 12 of the 17 chose to major in STEM fields at college, in spite of knowing that they would need to work even harder to overcome their backgrounds. A thirteenth (Monique) originally intended to major in STEM but changed her mind at the end of her freshman year because she feared continued poor grades would cause her to lose her scholarship. She seemed happier with her final social sciences major than she did with her STEM one, so the decision likely was also one of fit as much as preparation.

The lack of resources at rural high schools devoted to STEM fields led to a remedial situation for many of the participants and also to a kind of stereotype threat that caused them to retake classes rather than show their lack of preparation for college (discussed further below). Again, low resources leading to poor academic preparation in rural schools mirrors that evident in many inner-city schools; both create students who are marginalized and at a disadvantage when they arrive at college, if they are able to make it into college at all.

Poor overall high school preparation. Unsurprisingly, given the lack of resources in their rural high schools, most of the participants indicated that they generally felt unprepared academically for college by their high schools—again reflecting a similar situation in inner-city urban high schools and their underserved students. Many participants said that they thought their teachers “tried their hardest” (Lucas), but that they often were underqualified or simply were unable to handle classes in which most of the students were acting up because they did not want to be there. Rob stated that his teachers “definitely did their best, but they kind of had some unmotivated students to work with.” Jack’s school, while it attracted some high-level teachers, had a majority of teachers who “just did not know how to teach.” Many of them attempted to make up for their poor teaching skills by developing friendly relationships with the students, which caused the classroom atmosphere to deteriorate even further. Athletes were prized above academics, which created a frustrating situation for Jack and his friends, who really wanted to learn things. Milo found his school system so lacking that he asked his parents to send him to private school:

And my parents offered—or I think I might have suggested as well that there might be a better place to do this if we had the option, because I could see at that point how bad the education system was, and just—there was a lot of kids just not wanting to participating in classes. They just would not do homework. Teachers would ask, “Where’s your project?” and they would just say, “I didn’t do it,” and just blatantly not caring that they were failing, so at the age of 12 or 13 I was starting to recognize that I was in a bad school system.

Once Milo began at the private school, he felt he was in a generally better academic environment, but he still felt unprepared for college as a whole. In spite of having the academic and cultural capital to recognize that he had the option of attending private school, Milo was unable to attain a level of high school education that prepared him properly for college.

Two participants, George and Jon, were homeschooled. George was homeschooled in the midst of a Mennonite community where all the other students were also being homeschooled. He recalls that the materials were bad—including some that argued for creationism over evolution, which George acknowledges as ironic, given his eventual major of biology. He did take advantage of the homeschooling system to read a great deal, but the program gave him no opportunity to have science lab experiences. George attended community college because he was aware he could not make the large leap from homeschooling to a four-year college. In addition, he was not yet sure he even wanted to attend a four-year college, as that was outside the cultural norm for his area; many rural students are unaware that they have numerous post-secondary options,

including beginning at a community college and then transferring to a four-year institution.

Using the community college as a bridge allowed George to become more familiar with what was required for success in a college setting and also made him aware that he did want to continue his education. As a first-generation college student, George also ran into many of the challenges typically encountered by first-generation students on top of those created by coming from a rural background, giving him two sets of hurdles to leap. Students like George are prime to be studied via the lens of intersectionality (discussed further in Chapter 6).

Jon asked to be homeschooled because he was dissatisfied with his high school. He said that he perceived his high school as one that only tried to do the “bare minimum” of educating students so that they would perform well on the standardized tests and show high grades. There was no emphasis on learning:

It was just annoying, because I really wanted to learn stuff, I wanted to find out more about things, but it just wasn't like a—it wasn't an environment where that sort of thing was a shared passion or goal. It was mostly just about the grades.

Jon took the opportunity offered by homeschooling to do deep research on topics he found interesting—which excluded STEM fields—though he recognized that this process did not prepare him properly for entrance directly into a four-year college. To rectify this issue, Jon chose to attend his local community college for two years before transferring to Coastal, which allowed him to get a better grounding in general topics, including STEM, and to get used to a more structured learning environment. Both George and Jon understood the limitations of their high school education and took steps to create a better

chance of success at a four-year college for themselves. None of the other participants recognized the community college as a viable option to making the leap straight from small rural high schools to selective four-year colleges. The need to ensure that all students (whether rural or not, but particularly rural students and those from other underserved backgrounds) know all their possible post-secondary options is addressed further in Chapter 6.

Many of my other participants, like Jon, often felt they got the bare minimum education required to pass standardized tests whenever they had to take regular high school courses. Even those who were able to take advanced or coenrollment classes realized that they were unprepared once they arrived at Coastal or Midlands—Monique in particular voiced an opinion that the advanced classes not only failed to prepare her, but they gave her a false sense of college preparation, leading to “a very rude awakening in Honors Chem and Calc.” Maureen, who attended a magnet school for gifted students, said that she had the perception that she was not properly prepared for college and was ready for a massive challenge when she arrived at Coastal. While it turned out not to be as bad as she had anticipated, Maureen still felt like she had to give herself a kind of remedial education, especially in writing.

It is disturbing for me, as a former rural student, to learn how little has changed in the decades since I attended my rural high school. One would imagine that these issues would be part of the national conversation on high school student success, access to college, and overall pathways to success for all student, but they have not gained enough attention for governments and non-profit agencies to make them priorities. A rare exception is the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which recently began providing grants to

colleges that promote rural student matriculation (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2017). I discuss the need to address these challenges further in Chapter 6. Currently, rural students must find their own fixes to these problems and forge their own pathways to persistence and success—which they clearly are more than capable of doing.

Social outcasts. Most participants expressed that they had not been popular in high school. They felt out of place or “weird” (Maureen). Maureen added that “it was not fun to be a smart person” at her high school. Edward confessed to having been bullied until he joined the football team (underscoring a subtheme of the importance of athletics over academics in rural high schools). Alice described her time in high school as “kinda miserable” because the other students in her high school did not like smart kids and went out of their way to make life difficult for students like Alice. Monique had a similar experience at her high school and said she only managed to tolerate her rural high school by maintaining close and ongoing correspondence with students she met at “brain camp” (summer camp for gifted students held on college campuses and teaching college-level courses), with whom she had much more in common. She felt prepared for the social transition she would make when arriving at college because of her time at “brain camp” interacting with other students who were like her: smart, driven, and determined to succeed. While Kegan is unlikely to describe himself as a social outcast, he did not have friends in either of the two dominant groups at his private boarding school (rural students/redneck and international students). He preferred the company of people who, like him, were highly academically oriented and driven to excel.

Even those students who seemed most connected to their rural roots (Amelia, Beth, Fran, and Milo) made statements of not feeling like they really belonged in their

high schools, especially if they had liberal-leaning political tendencies in conservative-leaning areas. This sense of social awkwardness made them ready to leave their home areas for the brighter possibilities of college. However, it also gave them additional hurdles to leap in terms of learning how to interact with others on a social level (see below).

Overall, the participants described high school environments that were less than optimal for producing college-ready students. Regardless, they all persisted in applying to four-year institutions and, ultimately, matriculated in two of the more selective colleges in the country. Their efforts at creating the most academically challenging high school programs for themselves gave them practice in overcoming hurdles and expanded their academic and cultural capital in ways likely not available to other rural students. While their transitions to college were on the whole more difficult than they had anticipated, the participants' practice in navigating obstacles and creating personal successes served them well and helped them forge paths to persistence and success at their chosen institutions.

College Challenges

All participants expressed pleasure or delight at getting to leave home for college, though for some, that pleasure turned into disappointment or struggle after arrival. However, they all felt a great sense of achievement at overcoming any and all obstacles and graduating successfully from their colleges. Almost all are poised to go on to careers or graduate school, and all are proud of their achievements as rural students at selective four-year colleges. The participants all experienced myriad challenges at college, from academic and social transitions to microaggressions to experiencing a heated political

environment. As they expressed through their interviews, they were able to utilize experience gained from their challenging high school and rural backgrounds to create successful college careers and persist to graduation. All are going on to new jobs or graduate school immediately following graduation, which is how they judge success for themselves.

Transition issues. All students mentioned challenges with transitioning to college. For some, the issue was their academic transition, for others, the issue was their social transition, and for a few, both the academic and the social transition were issues. In all cases, the participants felt their backgrounds as rural students played into the transition issues, both positively and negatively. They were all looking back at their transitions through the lens of at least two years at college—most of them from four years out. All mentioned some transition challenges that have now been addressed by each institution's implementation of a First-Year Experience program: a sort of extended orientation process that helps ease students' transitions into college that goes well beyond the typical weekend orientation the participants received. Two participants have younger siblings attending the same institution, and they both mentioned feeling jealous at the extra assistance provided to those siblings. Some of the things their siblings learned about and shared were new to them, which they found irritating, because their institutions had not provided the same level of information to them, though they needed it just as much as their siblings did. This indicates that, while rural students are still not seen as part of the underserved population at colleges, they may still benefit from programs implemented with the intention of creating a smooth transition process for all students. It would be interesting to complete a study with rural students at the same institutions who

had the benefit of going through the First Year Experience programs and compare those results to the results from this current study.

Academic. Academically, many students mentioned that their poor high school preparation significantly affected their academic transition to college. Most had never learned how to study, even those in advanced programs. Lucas, who took numerous AP classes, explained:

I never studied in high school. Maybe, you know, a couple days before the AP exams or the [standardized test]. ... My first year at [college], I didn't really know how to study, so that was something I had to learn, and so my first semester grades were not that great. And if I had done better, my GPA would be way up.

Like Lucas, most participants found that once they arrived at college, the level of studying required increased; some spent their first semester or two learning how to study as well as catching up academically. Rob said:

I was under the impression that my high school—this was where I was going to school and it would prepare me very well for college life, and first semester here was a bit of a struggle because I hadn't developed study skills, and I'm a chemistry major and so it's very math-intensive and I—our math program was NOT strong.

Rob also had some additional issues working with technology while in college, as some of his classes required skills in computer programs such as Excel, which Rob had never heard of before arriving at college:

And I would say that just like we were just talking about, using technology was a bit different. In that chemistry lab, for example, everyone saw that as a really

easy lab to do, and I just thought, “Excel? What is this?” For sciences I definitely struggled. It was really hard for me to decide to be a chemistry major. I really love it now, but at the time—But I stuck with it and I’ve done—I’ve raised my grades. I’m doing well now, but...I decided to just push through it. I knew it would be really painful, but that it would work out in the end. The biggest obstacle was learning to study and getting over the technology and STEM deficits.

In Rob’s case, not having to study in high school combined with poor high school STEM and technology preparation to create challenges during his first semester that he overcame by utilizing the college’s resources, such as the library, and displaying a resilience common in rural students—though he also displayed a level of academic and cultural capital not evidenced in most of the participants. His understanding that his hard work would eventually “work out” shows that he learned in high school that persisting at tasks would produce the results he wanted, even if the path there might be challenging.

Rebecca spoke of the shock of realizing that she was not the outstanding student in college that she had been in high school:

I guess because for my area [the magnet school] was the hardest thing we had to offer, and I took that plus taking AP classes, so I think I thought that I would be like—as since I was like top-notch in all of those, I think I thought that going into college that I would still be just as top-notch, and then I realized that I really—I wasn’t. Like, I did well at [Coastal], but I was by no means the smartest person at all. And I thought, I really thought I would be going in, just because I did the hardest things I could do in my area.

That kind of academic culture shock was not limited just to Rebecca. Several other participants also experienced it and talked about how it added a layer of difficulty to their transition to college. Monique recognized that she probably would have experienced the same issue, had she not attended “brain camp” during the summers in high school. Instead, she went through that shock at “brain camp,” suddenly recognizing that she was not the smartest person in the room. This prepared her for what she would encounter at Midlands and gave her an additional means of resilience during her academic transition to college. While the other participants did not have the benefit of attending “brain camp” to help with this facet of their academic transition, they did all show their resilience as well by not giving up, even when faced with what seemed like impossible academic challenges during their first semester or first year at college.

Other participants also experienced transition issues that have their roots in the students’ rural backgrounds but that they eventually overcame. Edward did not know how to study or “how to do school” in general. He felt completely lost his first semester at college. Maureen, who was able to attend a magnet high school part-time, felt that she was unprepared to do college-level writing. She spent a lot of time her first year working on “getting [her] writing up to scratch.” Rob stated that he never developed study skills in high school, so his first semester in college “was a bit of a struggle.” Rebecca also mentioned that she needed to relearn how to study well, given the differences between high school and college. All looked back on those struggles in a positive light, feeling that overcoming the issues caused by poor high school preparation made them stronger college students as time went on.

Several participants indicated feeling like an imposter in class. They assumed that, because of their backgrounds, “everyone had a baseline level of knowledge that was higher” (Alice). Rob’s lack of science and math education caused him challenges in the classroom, where he felt he had to pretend to know what everyone was talking about. For instance, he had never heard of Excel before his first chemistry lab, and when the professor suggested that everyone use Excel to make the lab easier, he acted as if he understood completely. He went to the library later to find out what Excel was and how to use it—an example of academic capital (knowing where to go for help) that others in the study did not display (Maureen, for example, did not know that Midlands offers a writing center and free tutoring for students struggling with writing assignments, nor did she know to ask a professor for help). Fran felt that she was missing a lot of academic knowledge, in spite of having attended a magnet school and taken every advanced course she could find. When she arrived at Coastal, she did not know what a syllabus was or what “office hours” meant—or how to utilize either one strategically. These examples all underscore the general lack of academic, cultural, and social capital experienced by rural students, even those who excelled in high school and whose parents also attended college. Many students at Coastal and Midlands would find their lack of knowledge shocking and perhaps even amusing, but this is the norm for students from rural and other underserved backgrounds. Stories such as these continue to underscore the necessity to study rural students in college environments in light of their being part of the underserved student population.

Some of the students (Alice, Amelia, Fran, Marilyn, Maureen, Monique, Rob, Shelly) participated in faculty-mentored research and found that it helped them complete

their transition to college. The close relationships they formed with their mentors helped them feel able to ask more questions and do more than they originally thought they would be able to, based on their perceptions of being less prepared than their more urban counterparts. Shelly credits her undergraduate biochemistry research with her successful application to a biochemistry graduate program. Marilyn does the same for her chemistry research and faculty mentor. Even some students who did not participate in faculty-mentored research mentioned the importance of finding good professors for creating a positive college experience. As Jack said, “If you can find a good professor, then it’s just a wonderful experience.” This argues for the importance of engagement, particularly with a faculty mentor, as indicated by Fischer (2007), Kirby (2007), and Norton (2010). Having access to someone who is willing to answer your questions and support your transition not just to college but into research has the potential to create a remarkable level of success for all students, not just those from underserved backgrounds—but it holds the potential to make enormous positive change in the college careers of rural and other underserved students.

A number of the participants stated that they wished their professors—especially during their first year—had somehow known of their rural student status, people who “might have gotten a very different education that some of [their] classmates did,” to quote Maureen. These participants thought professors should be on the lookout for students in their position who might need additional assistance in transitioning to college. Several (Milo, Monique, Shelly) stated their opinion that larger classes—typically enrolling mainly freshman students—were “weed-out classes” and that this tendency probably leads the professors to be less than helpful to all students, which penalizes rural

and other underserved students unfairly for coming in with less academic capital than students from other populations. Better training for professors in how to identify, approach, and communicate with rural students would help lessen this issue.

The academic transition for all the participants was challenging, whether those challenges presented themselves during their first semester or later. However, the participants' backgrounds as rural students gave them tools and experiences that gave them resilience and the determination to keep pushing ahead, even if their pathways to success sometimes seemed impossible to create.

Social. Socially, many participants had an easier time transitioning; they had the sensation of finally being with “[their] people” (Monique) or “other really weird people who are also really passionate about things” (Maureen). The majority of the participants have liberal political leanings, which made them feel out of place in their conservative-leaning home areas. They also found people at college who prized education and learning as much as they did or who had similar “weird” interests. For example, Kegan was excited to be in a place where he could take for granted that everyone was as interested in learning as he was, and he found it much easier to make friends at Midlands than he had in high school. Jon also was happy to have entered a place with many like-minded people: “It’s cool to see people interested in something, even if it’s not necessarily what I find myself to be as passionate about.”

Importance of community/religion. One item mentioned by a number of the participants in terms of their social transition was the importance of finding the right community at college. While several students found that community in their colleges at large (Monique, Shelly) because they had a sense of “coming home” upon arrival at

orientation, others (Alice, Beth, George, Jack, Lucas, Milo, Rob) spoke of feeling somewhat lost until they connected with a group or groups or individuals—usually other rural students—with whom they could forge connections. Beth was able to find a group and individual connections almost immediately:

It was just a matter of finding the friends that I valued. I did specifically seek out a Christian fellowship here. That was maybe my first or second week of college... So that was a very exciting moment for me. One of the people [I met] is still one of my best friends, and I'm excited that we'll be just an hour apart next year. So yeah, I think in some ways it comes back to how I sought out things that I knew would be support structures.

Beth's ability to recognize that she need to find people to connect to early on helped ease her social transition to college.

Finding a set of like-minded people was incredibly liberating and supportive for the participants and for some, it changed their entire college experience for the better. This underscores the concept of fictive kin (Tierney & Venegas, 2006) and its importance to those with limited social and cultural capital, described well by Beth above. Milo also mentioned that being able to find two rural people to bond with was a large help during his freshman year. They went on to become roommates through the rest of college. They felt comfortable around each other and did not have to keep facing surprises when they were in each other's company. People from more urban areas frequently mentioned things that they clearly expected Milo and his friends to be familiar with, when they had never heard of them at all—something Milo and his friends found distressing. He thinks that finding new friends from rural areas was “key in helping [him] acclimate.”

Maintaining those friends as fictive kin was also important both to him and to them in successfully navigating all the challenges they encountered in college.

Being able to cultivate fictive kin clearly helped many of the participants navigate college, including some of the academic challenges they faced. Knowing they had a support systems of like-minded individuals increased their resilience and ability to overcome all hurdles placed in their paths. Some of their more experienced friends were also able to provide information about where to go for assistance, such as a particular counselor in the financial aid office who would be sympathetic and helpful (typically acting as an institutional agent). Having this network to support them was invaluable to the participants, whose families had little of the cultural or academic capital necessary to help the students navigate college.

Rebecca also spoke of the importance of having college friends who came from rural areas. She and a friend from an area near her hometown connected on levels that they felt they could not reach with people from other places and that they understood each other in a way that other people would not be able to because of their shared rural background. She credits having rural friends with helping her integrate her rural identity with who she became while at Coastal.

However, others mentioned the challenges of arriving here without any friends from home, such as Lucas: “There were only four people who came here from my class, and I wasn’t really friends with those people.” He felt that added an extra layer to his transition, though Lucas’s four fellow students from high school outweighs all my other participants, none of whom had anyone from their high school class enter college with them. All needed to work to build new fictive kin cohorts; all felt much better about

being in college once they did so. George's experience highlights this perfectly: until he found a cohort of people who played bluegrass music like him, he did not want to be at Coastal. Meeting like-minded people who had had similar experiences completely reversed this for George. He went from hating Coastal to loving it:

My first two semesters here were *awful*. I cried a lot. I felt completely out of place.... But I hung on, and there was a point at which where I met other people with similar experiences, and I think that—that is *so* important! I signed up for Appalachian Music Ensemble...and every Monday night that was like my refuge. Because I would go in there, and there would be people who would be from the country. Very few of them were from my area, but they were from maybe like [nearby] County or [nearby city] or [other nearby] County, or somewhere else where they knew what it was like, right? And also I met people who would question those things and had been thrown into the same environment, and we bonded, and that was how I got through—we bonded.

This experience caused George to state that “rural students [at Coastal] really need to find a community” and pointed out that the “urban majority” tended to be judgmental and ostracizing towards rural students. As he said: “Everyone deserves a place.” George is appreciative of the support Coastal gives to the various student organizations so that they can do effective outreach and help all students know that there is a place for them on campus. This is important for all students, not just those from underserved backgrounds.

Rob also indicated how important developing a fictive kin group was for him:

I was kinda awkward first semester. I didn't have a lot of friends and it was really slow for me to make friends. But when I did, I started performing better. ... But I found a pretty good group of friends and it's worked out well since then.

Rob also credits finding a group of like-minded friends with helping him become more outgoing and generally being more willing to get to know strangers. The importance of fictive kin flowed through all the interviews at this point. This is something that colleges should understand and recognize as key to creating success for rural and other underserved students. Finding faculty mentors and knowing the right offices to go to for help is important, but developing a local support structure is crucial, especially for those who have little to no support structure at home because their families lack the academic, cultural, and social capital to assist properly with college issues.

For some students, suddenly having to adapt to living with others 24 hours a day, seven days a week and living within a city—or a college campus that to rural students can feel like a city—were real challenges. Shelly said that “it was a shock coming into a school that was larger than [her] entire town.” She also had some trouble transitioning to dorm living, coming from a place where most homes were built on at least an acre of property to “everyone being basically in an apartment building on top of each other.” But she added, “having more options was great, too,” and she found herself enjoying the possibilities of a larger community. Like many of the other participants, she “found a niche in a group, and the world became a little smaller again, and [she] got a lot more comfortable.” Shelly and several other students (Alice, Beth, George, Marilyn, Milo, Monique) made comments about relative size and how doing things, such as finding fictive kin groups, created the perception of being in a smaller space rather than the

overwhelming largeness of a college campus inside a city. George mentioned the stress of living within a city, not being able to see the stars at night and having to endure a constant barrage of noise, even in the middle of the night, which he found unsettling.

These are all challenges that are likely endemic to rural students in particular and less likely to be experienced by students from other underserved populations.

Unfortunately, these are also issues that simply must be experienced by the students and they will either adapt or they will not; the institutions cannot do much to change this situation. However, again, fictive kin groups made up of people who understand the particular issues rural students are encountering in their new environment can ameliorate the discomfort they experience simply by sharing and understanding it in a way that urban students cannot.

Amelia was another participant who found it extremely hard to cope with the size of the college and dorm life, and though she said she finally got used to it, her body language while she answered the question indicated that she still finds it to be difficult. She stated that having more rural students to talk with about the situation during her first semester would have been helpful, but that she did not meet any until her second year, underscoring the need to develop fictive kin networks as a coping mechanism. Amelia would have appreciated an effort by the college to connect her to other rural students, rather than having to seek them out on her own. She found the academic and social transition difficult enough without adding that responsibility to it. Amelia mentioned that it felt weird to talk about creating a group of/for rural students, though, “because it’s not a protected group like gay students, it’s just ‘kids from the country’.” This was a common

feeling among the participants—that rural students are “not diverse enough” to warrant special assistance (see further discussion below).

Shelly talked about having a “size comfort zone in terms of what [she could] tolerate in the number of people around [her].” While other participants did not use the phrase “size comfort zone,” most of them made mention of similar lack of comfort within the campus or city and needing to retreat to a more rural area such as the woods or a park to regain balance. Monique spoke of the city as feeling “oppressive” and hated that she could not walk around safely by herself at night, a concept she had never encountered personally before arriving at Midlands (located in the center of a city with a fairly high crime rate).

All the challenges listed above were ameliorated at least somewhat by finding small groups with whom the participants felt comfortable, easing their transition to college. For some, the assistance came late enough that they began feeling distressed about being in an urban setting, but all eventually found ways to support their rural spirits via relationships with fictive kin. The importance of this fictive kin was underscored repeatedly by the participants.

Importance (or lack thereof) of college transition assistance. A number of the participants mentioned that they did not rely on their colleges for transitional support, instead relying on themselves—as they generally had done in high school—and their new fictive kin networks. They are all proud of having stuck it out, catching up academically and making new friends. They overcame numerous challenges while in high school in order to matriculate at highly-selective institutions, and that can-do spirit and ability to figure out how to succeed in spite of their backgrounds helped them forge pathways to

persistence and success in college. As Rob said: “I knew it would be really painful, but that it would work out in the end.” Most who mentioned their future plans also stated that working to overcome challenges at the colleges had helped prepare them for whatever is coming next.

The participants who did mention that they got (and wanted) help from their college mainly attended Midlands, which has a staff that specifically caters to Midlands students and provides them with a level of assistance and privilege not available to the full community of students at the state university of which Midlands is a part. Alice, Kegan, Marilyn, and Monique all expressed in some way that they would have felt lost without help from Midlands staff. Staff registered them for classes (in advance of the general university population), called offices and departments to create a bridge for students, and in other ways acted as institutional agents for Midlands students. Marilyn and Monique explicitly stated that they believed they might not have survived college were it not for the help of Midlands staff, supporting the findings of Hernandez and Sikes (2015) regarding the importance of institutional agents at college, especially for rural students.

Capital issues. Interestingly, only one of the participants was a first-generation student, but all participants indicated issues with low academic, social, or cultural capital once they arrived at college. More than half mentioned not knowing about things that people from larger urban areas took for granted. Amelia, for example, did not know about professor’s office hours when she arrived, so she did not know she could request help from professors. She did not know what majors were available to her, or what professions linked to those majors. Fran did not know what classes she needed to take to

complete a biology major, nor did she even know what “majoring in” something meant or what graduate school is. (She is now continuing on to graduate school.)

Rebecca felt that other students had more connections and general knowledge than she did coming from a rural area; she stated that being shown ways to connect and find resources by her institution would have been helpful. She also mentioned the importance of having a mentor. Jack spoke bitterly of resources being available to people who knew that they existed, and that he had not known of most of Coastal’s resources until his senior year. He felt completely unsupported by his college because no one there reached out to make sure he knew where to go for help. George’s lack of academic and cultural capital made his transition to college “not exactly a kind one.” He was told that he would have to revoke all his science courses from community college and felt that he was perceived as “not good enough for [Coastal].” He did not know where to turn for help with this issue, so his first semester was very difficult for him. He also felt like the message Coastal was sending was that the community college was not good enough for their standards, which he found painful after working hard to ensure he took all the right courses for transferring in and even added a layer of difficulty to those courses by making them into honors classes. It is troubling that staff at a selective four-year institution would find it appropriate to treat an admitted student this way. Even though these students had all found fictive kin who assisted with their transitions and eventual college success, they were unable to help the participants with every aspect of college. Thus, while having fictive kin is immensely helpful, particularly with social transitions, it is not enough to overcome the general lack of academic, cultural, and social capital most rural

students enter college having. It was the persistent and resilience of the participants that got them over the majority of the capital-induced hurdles they encountered.

Jack commented that the cultural differences between rural students and those from more urban areas created a gulf that was hard to bridge and that also made it difficult for rural students to feel like they belonged at Coastal. He would like to see the college start teaching students, staff, and professors that not everyone who matriculates at Coastal arrives with all the same advantages of wealth and culture that many students from more urban areas have.

Only two of the participants would have felt comfortable going to the Center for Student Diversity for assistance. The others felt strongly that, as White, straight, cisgendered people they were “not diverse enough” to be comfortable or welcome there. Jack summed up the general reaction to that question:

Literally the first thing that comes to my mind when someone says diversity is something like religious or cultural or racial bounds, I don't think about something like—because at [Coastal], it's really easy to look around and be like, I am a White person from [state], and it's like—what are you? Oh look, like 30 White people from [same state], that's not a diversity issue! And so it's—no, I don't think I would've ever thought to go to them and be like, hey, how can I become more accepting of the fact that I came from a completely different mindset. Nah—that would've never entered my mind. I just—that—those things are not connected in my brain, not at all.

Two participants were not aware that their colleges had a Center for Student Diversity. When asked if they felt as if they were in a minority, however, all participants

emphatically indicated that they did. It is interesting, then, that they would simultaneously feel “not diverse enough” to request assistance from people whose purpose is to assist students who are from minorities or marginalized groups and that rural students do make up a minority at selective four-year institutions. This is more evidence that rural students should be seen as part of the underserved student population and provided resources and assistance accordingly.

In general, the various transition issues the participants experienced during their first semester or year at college were overcome by their determination to succeed at college, whatever it took. Again, this harkens back to their time in high school when they needed to forge their own paths to academic excellence and ultimately admission to a selective four-year college. Because they came from underserved, often impoverished areas, the participants had—on their own—developed the skills and resilience that they needed to continue forging paths, this time of persistence and success at college. However, the participants still encountered challenges for which their backgrounds did not prepare them and that they found confusing and distressing. Often, only knowing that they had support groups such as fictive kin helped them pull through these challenges, as outlined below.

Microaggressions. Almost all students mentioned interactions with faculty, staff, and other students that I finally recognized as microaggressions. I do not think any of the students are likely to consider them as such, because microaggressions—indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group (DeAngelis, 2009)—are generally seen as being only toward people of racial or other minorities, and rural students do not perceive themselves as being from a racial or other “diverse”

minority. Even though I am studying the topic with an eye to arguing that rural students *should* constitute a minority or marginalized group, it took me until approximately halfway through my analysis process to recognize that what I was seeing were microaggressions directed toward rural students. However, it is clear that the comments received by the participants were meant—perhaps unintentionally—to belittle them and question their presence at two high-level institutions.

Milo mentioned people making jokes about his rural origins. Lucas spoke of the condescension of other science majors toward him because of the poor grounding he received in math at his high school. Rob stated:

I didn't really feel like I fit in because the demographic at this school is predominantly [people from a large metropolitan area], and so the thing I kept getting whenever I talked to anyone was, "Oh, your accent is soooo cuuuuute! Where are you from?" And I had a much stronger accent then—it was "cute" like "Oh, you're adorable, why are you here?"

Rebecca had an almost identical experience to Milo's:

At orientation, I was sitting with some of my hallmates, and I said something to them, and they were all, "Oh, your accent is so cute!" and I just felt really self-conscious then. I mean, I knew I had an accent going in, but I didn't realize how, umm, thick it was, and so that made me really self-conscious, because it was a little demeaning, and it wasn't like, "Oh you sound so intelligent," or "Oh, you sound so refined," it was "Oh, you're so *cute*." Like, umm, and so from that—from comments like that that, or people would always say, "Oh, where are *you* from?" and it's like they're looking down on me 'cause they never heard anyone

talk like that before. And so I just kinda get sick of the way that they—that I can tell what they’re getting at, that they know that I’m from some uneducated hick town, because of the way that I talk.

George experienced similar microaggressions from Coastal’s staff when they told him he needed to revoke his community college science credits:

I remember being not only shocked but also kind of—it was like “That’s cute, you went to this community college, but now revoke all the credits. All the work you put into working really, really hard to get the GPA so you could come here isn’t good enough.” ...It’s like, thanks, you’re high-minded academics, and I’m happy to be here, and you’re like, “You’re not good enough.” But I refused, I said no, and I said, “I don’t care,” and it was a very difficult transition.

These microaggressions were obviously distressing to the participants, most of them remembering clearly things that had happened almost four years prior and still feeling bitter about them and the indication that where they were from caused people from more urban areas to look down on them and even suggest that they did not belong at Coastal or Midlands. Being able to discuss what happened with other rural students helped, but the microaggressions experienced by many of the participants caused some of them to personally connect their rural ways to being inferior, leading to code-switching.

Code-switching. Another theme that slowly emerged was that of a kind of code-switching, in which students trained their accents out of their voices, began dressing differently, or in other ways tried to distance themselves from their rural roots in order to gain acceptance from their peers. It is possible that at least some of the code-switching was driven by microaggressions and the participants’ perceiving themselves as being

“lesser than” fellow students if they did not change the way they spoke or behaved around their “better educated peers” (Milo). Rob said that the whole “your accent is so cute” situation caused him to work on flattening his accent so he no longer was perceived automatically as “lesser” than his more urban peers. Rebecca said, regarding the way she speaks:

So, I’ve been—that’s something, I think, I’m still working through. I don’t really want to change the way I talk on purpose, because it’s part of who I am, but I also understand that it will evolve—I definitely have less of an accent now.

Rebecca does not want to deliberately code-switch, but she finds herself doing it while at Coastal because she does not want people to stereotype her: “I hate that people have preconceived notions that I’m racist or uneducated because of my accent.”

Beth stated that “people hear your accent and they think of you a certain way.” As she continued speaking about this, she talked about how she wondered if her accent had “been weaned out of [her] because [she’s] been in academia so long,” and added that her accent comes out when she speaks to people from her hometown. This is a classic example of code-switching. Several other students made similar comments about the way they were being perceived by others due to their accents, and all also mentioned attempting in some way to change the way they speak in order to minimize the perception. These students are also starting to wonder if they did such things deliberately or unconsciously—but this study caused them to recognize what they were doing (even if they did not have the vocabulary for it) and that they were somehow “deruralizing” themselves in so doing. These are all examples of code-switching and are things that rural students should not feel required to do in order to be successful at college, but

nonetheless, they felt a need to change who they are in order to fit it. Even those with strong fictive kin groups still showed evidence of code-switching as well as feeling solo status in classes.

Solo status. An additional theme normally used with racial and other minorities that emerged was a sense of solo status (Lord & Saenz, 1985) among rural students. Almost every student mentioned feeling for a time as if they were the only rural students at their colleges—or at least in their dorms and classes. They thus felt a burden of not showing rural students in a bad light—leading some to begin to code-switch and otherwise mask their rural status when with students from more urban backgrounds. Amelia stated that she did not meet another person she was sure was a rural student until her second year. She was “over-anxious and eager, trying to impress [people]” when she arrived. “[She] was really scared of failing,” showing a combination of feeling solo status and stereotype threat (discussed further below).

Others specifically sought out fellow rural students, because they felt alone and isolated. Almost all participants mentioned feeling like they were in a minority at college and that they were surrounded by “‘more sophisticated’ peers” (Rob). However, few of them felt as though they were “diverse enough” to approach the Center for Student Diversity. Several felt looked down upon by their professors and thought the professors occasionally tried to use words that rural students would be unfamiliar with in order to make them feel dumb (Amelia, Maureen, Rob).

The evidence of solo status among the participants is more support for considering rural students as minorities on highly selective college campuses. Although they mostly appear to fit the majority model of their campuses, all the participants

possess invisible differences that made persisting and succeeding at college more of a challenge than it needed to be, as did their perceptions of stereotype threat.

Stereotype threat. Along with experiencing microaggressions and solo status and undertaking code-switching, rural students also seem to feel a version of stereotype threat (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn 1999). Stereotype threat occurs when individuals fear that they may be conforming in some way to stereotypes regarding their social group. Again, this is a challenge that is normally ascribed to those in racial or other minorities. Once I recognized the existence of microaggressions, my thought patterns regarding the data switched and allowed me to start seeing other, similar “minority” issues within the rural student population.

Jack was concerned that he would come to Coastal as a rare rural student and fail, lending credence to the concept that rural students do not belong at an upper-tier college. George hated feeling that the “urban majority” was judging him as a redneck and dumb hick and that every time he made a mistake, he was bolstering that stereotype. Maureen also feared acting into a rural student stereotype, especially when everyone else around her appeared to feel exceptionally confident in the classroom. She thought her baseline level of knowledge was lower than everyone else’s and that speaking up in class would solidify that idea in her professors’ and her colleagues’ heads:

Academically, I know that I was very scared of college work, and I felt that I wasn’t as good at it as everyone else, and I definitely have overcome that and I’m on an even keel with everyone else—it just took some work to get here.

Rebecca was concerned that she would be perceived as being poor or not as smart as urban students because of her strong accent. Rob, who had experienced microaggressions because of his accent, said:

It has gotten better. In the beginning, I think—and I don't know how much of my perception of being thought to be lesser because of my background was due to my—I mean, I don't know how much of that was psychological on my part, but it's definitely gotten better. I felt sort of dumb in my classes and so then I felt lesser than people around me.

Jack was concerned that he would leave his rural high school and be a failure:

But it's always in the back of your mind. And I remember distinctly when I came here that that fear wasn't just—it started to go away, but then I remember having a conversation with someone about grades, and I just realized there are so many people at this school that are smarter than me in x, y, or z category that attempting to play like I'm one of these academically superior people is ridiculous.

Jack spent a lot of his time at Coastal being scared that someone would realize how far behind he was academically—even though his other comments make it clear that he was performing at a high level in his college courses.

As with the previous sections on microaggressions, code-switching, and solo status, the experiences the participants had with stereotype threat mark them out as members of a marginalized population that needs additional support to create a positive, low-stress college career. The fact that all the participants successfully navigated pathways to persistence and success in spite of these challenges plus limited support from their institutions again speaks to their remarkable resilience. However, colleges

should be providing helpful, supportive environments for all their students instead of relying on some of the smaller, hidden groups such as rural students to find it for themselves.

Political environment. Even though most students found it to be a relief to enter a more liberal environment than the one in their home areas, many also eventually found this to be a source of frustration to them, especially during the 2016 election cycle. None of my questions directly addressed politics, yet almost all the participants brought it up, usually with frustration. A number of them (Amelia, Beth, Fran, George, Jack, Kegan, Milo, Monique, Shelly) spoke of the closed-minded nature of the hyper-liberal community at their colleges and how upsetting it could be to them. Almost all of the participants mentioned that they were in the challenging situation in which they were able to see each side of the Clinton vs. Trump argument, yet they were unable to bring people on either side closer together. Sometimes, all they managed to do was make everyone angry with them, leaving them to suddenly feel out of place both at home and at college. The participants who are themselves conservative-leaning felt unwelcome on campus; their perception was that they were considered to be “wrong” not just about politics, but about everything, simply because their thoughts did not match those of everyone else around them. Shelly (conservative-leaning) stated that the political situation on Coastal’s campus

made taking Hispanic Studies hard.... The professors thought there were some very correct answers that I thought were not necessarily correct depending on your point of view. And I think they wanted to discredit first-hand experiences and people who hadn’t experienced their point of view.

Shelly's experience turned her off humanities classes, and she took only physical sciences following that experience, keeping her from broadening her worldview as a liberal arts education generally does. She also is now unwilling to consider liberal viewpoints as having any validity. This is a very unfortunate turn of events and speaks to the need for professors to recognize that all students deserve to have a voice, even if the professors do not agree with the opinions stated. If students can support opinions with facts, it is important to give them the opportunity to speak, discuss, and get as broad an education as possible; it is equally important not to make them feel as though their backgrounds render them inferior.

Interestingly, many of the participants who are liberal did not appreciate the liberal political atmosphere that appears to be prevalent on both campuses. Beth (who is liberal-leaning) said, "...there's a climate on campus where if you're not liberal, you're—there's something wrong with you. You're sexist, racist, you know, whatever. ... That kind of combative 'I'm going to cut you out of my life' kind of thing." This attitude caused acute distress for conservative-leaning students—and some of the liberal-leaning ones, as well—not just leading up to the election, but currently.

Kegan (liberal-leaning) bolstered this argument by mentioning the stifling atmosphere he perceives at Midlands; when he encounters these situations, he feels uncomfortable for the people the negativity is addressed toward, but he also does not feel as if he can intervene. His statement that he has "never been bullied by professors" speaks volumes regarding the students who have been bullied in the classroom. Fran, a self-described Social Justice Warrior, spoke derogatorily of the social justice climate at Coastal, stating that she felt there was an "implicit pressure to demonize rural America

and its people,” which she did not appreciate. Amelia, who is conservative-leaning, was visibly upset over the way she feels she is perceived if she lets slip what her views are. She has felt silenced on campus for the past year or so and is only able to express her views freely when she is at home. This is likely a large reason why Amelia is willing to consider returning home following graduation. She said, “I’m happy I was here, but I’m happy to leave.”

Home area and family influences. Most participants, while they feel like who they are has been informed by where they are from, did not evidence much actual connection to their home areas or families. The majority have no desire to return home at any time in the future. Although participation in the study has caused most of them to define themselves as rural students, they will not specifically pursue rural environments for future work or educational environments. They recognize now that much of the tension they felt throughout college came from being rural students among mostly urban students and in an urban environment, but this has not changed what they plan to do. Most also understand that they have succeeded at college without much help from hometown friends or family, and they see no reason for that to change.

High level of independence. Unlike most Millennials, many of the students in my study indicated that their parents were not very involved in their college life, supporting similar results found by Guyton (2011). This does not indicate a lack of interest on their parents’ parts, but rather the exercise of a high level of independence on the part of the students. Anna stated that her parents have always given her a lot of space to make her own decisions, and they have continued that now that she is in college. Monique expressed a similar situation with her parents, though she is expected to call

them once per week to keep them updated on her studies. Milo stated that his parents “are more hands-off than the average ‘parental unit’.” He added, “But I think I kind of thrive on that, and I prefer to be given my own space to work,” which appears to be the norm among the participants. Shelly said that her parents were very supportive of her, but that “they’ve always let [her] come up with [her] own plans and goals, and they’ve always just kinda trusted [her] and gone along with it, and it’s always gone okay.”

Such independence is unsurprising, given that these students have been advocating for their own educations since they were in high school. They are dedicated and driven individuals, and their parents appear to have been getting themselves out of the way of their children’s college careers rather than abandoning them in some way. However, this detachment could also explain the lack of academic capital evident in many of the participants, even though most are not first-generation students.

Feelings of disconnectedness. Most of the participants, while considering themselves to be rural students, did not connect themselves to their rural hometown communities. Jon, for example, stated that he does not make trips home because he misses people—he simply is not connected to anyone at home anymore. Several participants made derogatory statements about “rednecks” and “hillbillies,” even while their urban counterparts are likely to have thought of the participants themselves in those terms. Jon explicitly stated that he “tends not to share the same values or perception of things” as people in his home area. The fact that the students were so much more advanced academically than others from their area seems to have provided them with a sense of superiority over those still in their home areas and an inability to connect with them. This, oddly, contradicts how many of these same participants feel that, politically,

they can understand people from their home areas and should try to act as bridges between them and more liberal people.

Lack of desire to return home. Almost all the participants expressed a lack of desire to return home—some vigorously stated that they would never go back. Like the political atmosphere issue, this did not arise from any of my questions but instead was brought up by the students over and over. It seems clear that, again, while their home areas have clearly shaped the participants and their experiences, the participants wish to remain removed from their rural origins. Maureen said she went home for the summer once after matriculating at Midlands, and her summer job at the local country club showed her “the worst that [county] has to offer, just in terms of treating other people.” That situation caused her to decide that she could never go home to live again. Lucas is so disillusioned by the lack of priority people in his county place on education that he also thinks he could never go home again. Marilyn still harbors deep resentment toward her high school and hometown and actually wishes something horrible would happen to the entire town, sadly. She absolutely will never return there, at any time, for any reason.

Unfortunately, this general level of disconnectedness from rural students’ roots can lead to rural brain-drain. When all of the most capable students leave their rural areas and plan never to return, it can have a detrimental effect on those areas. However, it is unlikely that many rural areas, which lack the kind of jobs people like the participants would want, will ever be able to attract such people back as permanent residents and/or local employees. My hometown, for instance, offers little potential for people with advanced degrees in anything but the pulp and paper industry. The students

who graduate from high school and go on to four-year colleges rarely return. It is hard to know how to reverse such a trend when rural employment options and higher education seem to be oil and water.

Identification as “rural student.” The concept of rurality can be hard to define. On official government sites, such as the USDA’s, rural is typically defined as “not urban” (USDA ERS, 2013), which is not helpful to researchers. I struggled with the definition of “rural,” and after reading numerous websites and research articles, I chose to select as my rural locations areas with a minimum 70% rural population, as defined by census data obtained via ProximityOne (ProximityOne, 2017). This fits both the definition of “not urban” as well as my own sense of what a rural area is.

In terms of identifying as rural students, the participants evidenced characteristics such as lack of knowledge about things people from more urban areas would consider common knowledge (e.g., chain restaurants, buffalo wings, the latest technology), a distinct discomfort with urban environments and population levels, and a need to stay connected with nature. They also seemed to feel like they were somehow a different species from those students who grew up in more urban environments. I have discussed many of these characteristics above as they relate to other subthemes. These characteristics make the rural student population even more compelling to study in terms of their experiences at selective four-year colleges because many selective universities offer student services, amenities, technologies, based on the assumption the all incoming students would know about these items in advance and want to have them available. As seen above, technology in particular may represent a steep learning curve for rural students, especially when it is presented as something everyone clearly understands and

knows how to use. Colleges need to take care to address their assumptions about a baseline level of understanding that might not exist across all student populations.

Almost all the participants said they think of themselves as rural students, though several hesitated before responding affirmatively and/or couched their responses with qualifiers. A number of them said they had not considered themselves as “rural” until they arrived at college and realized the differences in experiences that they had had in high school versus those students coming from more urban areas. In terms of wanting people to know where they are from, the participants varied in their responses from a definitive “Yes!” to being torn between feeling proud that they were successful in spite of their place of origin and feeling afraid that people would judge them for being from their hometown. Amelia in particular encapsulated this reaction:

(In response to if she wants people to know where she is from.) Ummm...(pause). Yes and no. Ummm...(long pause) On first meeting people, no, I usually don't talk about where I'm from, mostly because either they've never heard of it or have assumptions about what am I doing out here because they've never met someone from southwest Virginia before, but as I get to know them better it's usually something interesting to talk about. (In response to whether she considers herself a rural student.) Ummmm...yes (hesitantly). Yeah. When other students go home they go to—I go back to a farm. And I probably always am gonna think of myself as a rural person. That's just what I connect to, I guess.

Milo also had a more ambivalent reaction to telling people where he is from, but his seems more related to what other people expect him to know rather than true embarrassment about his origins:

Umm—I would say yeah, I’m not really embarrassed. I suppose (pause) at times I can feel proud of it, other times maybe somewhat embarrassed or (pause) kind of—when I notice that I’m not as in tune to certain things—like how—I often see restaurants that everyone seems to know about, but I just have never heard about. And it’s kind of odd to come across those.

Rob, on the other hand, was enthusiastic about letting people know where he is from, and he seems to take a kind of pleasure in doing “rural” things and making sure his more urban peers are aware of them:

I mean, there are things that I enjoy that my “more sophisticated” peers do not really share. Like, I like hunting and fishing. And I’m into target shooting and people who are from [a large metropolitan area] are like, “WHAT? You shoot GUNS?” and I tell them it’s very safe if you do it at a range—it’s relaxing. So I think I have some things that are still very much in connection to my hometown. I watch *Duck Dynasty*, it’s my guilty pleasure. And my peers are like, “What are you doing??”

Jon only considers himself a rural student in the context of Coastal College. Until he arrived on campus, he had not thought of himself as rural:

It’s just that I didn’t feel so much as a rural student until I came here. And it’s only in my interactions [with people] who are definitely a lot more urban than I am that I feel that I have a rural identity. For a lot of those people, like rural people, I tend not to share a lot of the same values or perception of things. But while I feel myself a rural student relative to everybody here, that is not an identity that I have independent of this area.

Lucas does not consider himself as a rural student, even though he hails from a rural county with numerous farms and only one large population center. He says it is because when he thinks of a “rural student,” he thinks of “redneck,” and he considers himself to be of a higher class than that; he has never felt “very ‘country’.” It is interesting that, although all his other responses indicate rurality for Lucas, he does not himself identify as rural. Likewise, Kegan would not consider himself rural, though he knows that everyone around him does see him that way. He says:

I don't really think of myself as a—you know, I don't think of myself—I know that everyone else does. ...yeah, I feel like I come from a rural place. When I got here initially I didn't really feel—I didn't have a huge rural identity. But I've noticed that that's how it looks for most people. Like, I carry a pocketknife, a lot people don't carry a pocketknife and are surprised by someone who does. I tend to wear, like, canvas or jeans. Like, you buy it at a Tractor Supply Store. I don't have any really, like, habits or hobbies that I would consider to be especially rural.

So even though Kegan would not himself say he is a rural student, he is well aware that everyone around him would.

Even if some of the participants were reluctant to identify themselves as rural students, they all recognized that their backgrounds differed in numerous ways from those of students from more urban areas. It is clear that they are proud of what they have achieved by graduating from challenge four-year institutions and that they have overcome adversity caused by their backgrounds.

Importance of nature. Several of the participants mentioned a need to get out into nature as a way of resetting or rebalancing themselves while at college, which seems to be an integral part of having a rural background. Many of the students spoke of the oppression of the campus, the city, or the sheer number of people surrounding them. The students who had a means of retreating to nature felt it was important to their well-being to maintain that connection. For instance, Milo said:

I'm a cross-country runner, and I do it probably five or six days a week, because it's just nice—it keeps me in shape, and I can just listen to music. Ever since freshman year, I've been running in the woods around here, because I particularly like the woods—it's a way of escaping from constant interaction with people, so I think that's therapeutic, and probably my attachment to nature is related to where I grew up.

Alice, Marilyn, and Monique, who had little means of escaping the city to nature, all mentioned how challenging it was not to be able to go into the woods or at least to a park. They all also talked about playing in the woods as children and how that was a normal thing for them to do and something they deeply missed being able to do at college. Even though none of them plans to return home after college, they all feel a deep connection to nature and the woods and all want to find (eventually) places to live that will give them space, trees, and a quick escape to nature.

This connection to nature also sometimes created a divide between rural and urban students. Students from more urban areas apparently often expressed to the participants a general fear of nature that rural students like Jack and Milo could not

comprehend. This cultural difference also provided a means by which rural students could bond, however. As Jack said:

My friend actually pointed out that we had all wound up for the most part, like me and my other best friend and people from rural places who could kind of, like, talk to each other—we could go out into nature and not be scared of bugs or whatever. And like—oh, that’s one thing that gets me. It’s very difficult explaining—just like the cultural disconnect of like—what is wrong with you people? For the most part, it doesn’t not make sense—I mean, they come from, like, [large metropolitan area] and it’s suburban and there’s few things that have to do with nature. But it’s like a lot of people I talk to are like—“I can’t go out today because there’s rain or bugs or it’s hot out,” and I’m like—how did you live as a child?! Trying to explain this to someone who has that fear, it’s like—you just don’t understand how stupid I think you are. I understand that that’s a bad thing to say to someone—you should be more understanding, but there is just a level of, like, head-to-desk or facepalm.

Jack’s remarks underscore an element of disconnectedness that came out in all my interviews. The cultural differences between rural students and students from more urban areas run under the entire rural student experience, leading to many of the other items described above, such as microaggressions, stereotype threat, code-switching, and the challenges of having difference forms of knowledge and capital from urban students. This also underlines the general level of independence and resilience displayed by the participants, which clearly comes from their underserved backgrounds as rural students.

Summary

Although the above might make it seem as though my study's participants had a terrible time at their selective four-year institutions, the opposite is true: They all told stories of overcoming numerous obstacles and lack of knowledge, excelling in their chosen majors. Even those who expressed dislike of the institutions themselves appreciated having the opportunity to attend them and felt that they are stronger people and academics now because of their time at college. In every case, these resilient, resourceful, intelligent rural students forged pathways to persistence and success in college.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion and Conclusion

In this final chapter, I discuss the overall implications of my study both in theory and practice. I begin by providing a brief overview of my study and the gaps in research in addressed, followed by a general discussion of my findings' indications and suggestions for further research. Finally, I offer my conclusion.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gather lived experiences of rural students at two selective four-year institutions in order to draw a generalized picture of those experiences and offer insight into how rural students achieve persistence and success that might be expanded to a larger population, including non-rural students. The study also indicates that rural students, with their different ways of viewing college and the world, can bring crucial diversity to campuses. Moving away from the typical deficit lens through which underserved populations are normally viewed, I worked to uncover how rural students used their rural backgrounds and what they learned in high school to attain persistence and success at college and beyond. The study's participants indicated that they felt they attained success in spite of, and often because of, their rural backgrounds. The study indicates a number of ways in which the college policies and programs could be improved to better assist rural students in achieving success rather than relying on the students to forge their own pathways.

The extant literature on supporting underserved students to persistence and success lacks examination of rural students as underserved, a gap this study starts to address. This study and the few others (e.g., Dunstan, 2013; Guyton, 2011; Lehman, 2014; Strawn, 2014; Yoder, 2007) shine a light on rural students and encourages college administrators to start thinking about rural students in a different way. Much further study must be done, however, before we can fully understand the rural student experience across the post-secondary spectrum. This study should serve as only the beginning in understanding how rural students can be successful at college and in employment post-graduation.

Discussion

Overall, my findings indicate that there may be a generalizable “rural student experience at selective four-year colleges.” I spoke with 17 students, and they all indicated similar challenges in high school and in transitioning to college, showing that there could be similar situations at other selective colleges. Further study of the phenomenon could indicate if this is a trend across the United States. All the students in my study said that they were glad someone was studying rural students: they felt in some ways marginalized at college and less educated compared to their peers from more urban areas. Though they had not often thought of their situation as stemming primarily from their rural origins, their responses to my questions showed a population of students who felt stigmatized by their backgrounds.

Importance of institutional agents. Students’ responses to my questions on transitioning to college and how their institutions had supported them in this transition underscore the importance of institutional agents for students who come from “other”

backgrounds, particularly at institutions where they represent a minority or marginalized population. Stanton-Salazar (1997) described institutional agents as people who “have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities” (p. 6). My rural student participants mentioned not knowing what resources were available to them, not understanding basic college concepts, and needing someone to connect them to offices or other resources on campus, even though almost all came from households where at least one parent had attended college. They also mentioned the importance of mentors (a type of institutional agent) in helping them forge pathways through college.

These responses support the findings of Hernandez and Sikes (2015), who studied institutional agents at several institutions, including two that primarily support rural students. Even though rural students were not in the minority at those colleges, they still displayed a need for the additional support and guidance provided by people who could make connections to the right staff in the right offices for the students’ needs. Rural students who are in the minority at their schools need this support even more. A similar study that focused on African American men at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs; Brown, 2015) had findings that are also supported by my study. Institutional agents provided key linkages and support to Black men that helped them complete their college degrees despite the challenges they encountered. Hernandez (2017) also found that institutional agents made a positive difference in the lives of their students, increasing confidence and ensuring persistence to graduation.

Colleges and universities should make it a priority to engage faculty and staff as institutional agents, regardless of whether their positions are traditionally considered

student-service oriented ones (Bensimon, 2007; Jimenez, 2012). Everyone working on a college campus has the potential to act as an institutional agent, providing important connections for students who are at a disadvantage in knowing how to find the services or people they need for a successful college career (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Too often, only people in the offices of deans of students, first-year experiences or other orientation programs, or career services are expected to act as institutional agents, if even then. I have personal experience with personnel who should have been working to provide crucial connections for students who instead fobbed the students off to other offices, causing the students to waste their time running around campus trying to find the answer to their issue and connecting them to the right person or place. The relief and anger that students expressed to me when I did finally sit them down in my office, as a financial aid administrator, and work to find them what they needed was palpable. When a student is already experiencing a high level of stress and/or anxiety, adding to that creates a negative situation. Colleges need to develop a sensitivity to this and create a similar sensitivity in all faculty and staff.

Midlands College does employ staff in a central location that help with numerous aspects of college transition and college life in general. It was hard to determine from my interviews with participants if the Midlands staff truly acted as institutional agents or not. An institutional agent is not merely someone who is helpful and kind; institutional agents regularly go above and beyond to provide connection assistance to students who are struggling. It seems as though Midlands staff does perform this function at least some of the time, and this assistance eased the transition for Midlands students who sought it out.

This also underscores the importance of institutional agents in helping underserved students persist and success at college.

Importance of fictive kin. While only one of my participants arrived at college already knowing someone there, they all developed fictive kin. Fictive kin is a group of like-minded individuals who help each other by sharing information and working together in an educational setting (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Because underserved students often do not have actual kin who can help them navigate the college world, a fictive kin group at college can be highly beneficial. This group is not necessarily made up of friends, just of people with a common goal who are willing to work together. Tierney and Venegas (2006) also note that underserved students enter college greatly lacking in social and cultural capital; fictive kin is one way to develop both kinds of capital and put underserved students on the road to a successful college career and eventual social uplift.

The study participants displayed the importance of fictive kin to their comfort levels and successes at college. While some students took longer than others to find their fictive kin, suffering additional challenges along the way because of their isolation, they all did eventually find such groups. All made explicit connections to how developing fictive kin improved their college experience and contributed to their success, whether it was via transference of capital or funds of knowledge or simply having people around who could understand their experiences as rural students. Without developing fictive kin and in the absence of any other support structure able to offer academic advice, it is likely that the participants would have experienced college in a less successful and more frustrating way.

Most of the participants found their own fictive kin by exploring student activity groups that matched their interests, but the more introverted students had a harder time making these connections. One stated that she wished her college had made the connections for her. While this can be problematic at the institutional level (few colleges have the personnel to make individual connections to activity groups for all students), it again displays the importance of institutional agents. People who are willing to take the time to get to know the students and help them find their way to relevant groups can be instrumental in the development of fictive kin for underserved students. It could even be possible to make student activity groups part of the conversation with advisers and adding a more comprehensive section on which groups do what to orientation/first-year experience programs. Most orientation programs do not directly connect students to groups but rather place the onus on the students to seek out groups they might want to join by having a series of tables available during orientation. Not all groups can or do take advantage of this option, so students are left without a comprehensive overview of what might be available.

Some participants were fortunate to find like-minded students in their dorms or classes and did not have to join a group in order to develop their fictive kin. This was the exception rather than the norm, however, and tended to result in smaller circles of friends than when students sought out membership in groups that reflected their interests and backgrounds. Oddly, none mentioned joining a fraternity or sorority, a facet that might warrant additional study. Is it a trait or tendency of rural students not to join Greek societies, and if so, why? Such societies can offer a massive amount of academic, cultural, and social cultural transfer, which could be of great benefit to rural students.

Overall, it is clear that developing fictive kin at college is a key indicator for persistence and success at college for underserved students. College administrators should remain cognizant of this issue and do their best to create connections between underserved students and groups or people who might be able to serve as fictive kin. Expecting students who arrive at college without the academic or cultural capital needed to understand how to find fictive kin is setting them up to fail; creating an environment where students can easily find such groups and people is crucial.

Importance of resilience. Resilience is often seen as being important for student success (Colyar, 2011; Dolan, 2008; St. John et al., 2011), and it was definitely the case for the students in my study. They overcame much adversity stemming from their rural backgrounds, often emerging stronger after struggling through the transition to college than they were prior to matriculation. Although the participants never used the word “resilience” —often using “adapted” instead—their stories reflect great strength and flexibility in approaching new things and overcoming barriers many of them had never anticipated at college, such as the mental and emotional strain of being surrounded by other people and urban landscape all day every day. It seems many of them drew on their reserves of resilience built from years of living in rural areas, where resources are often scarce and people learn how to “make do.” This characteristic served them well during their college years.

This ties back to the importance of institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2010). While the participants were able to utilize resilience to overcome numerous challenges and forge pathways to persistence and success on their own, they should not have needed to go it alone (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Some were fortunate enough to

find mentors in faculty members, and that assisted them in creating college success. However, these mentorships did not begin until their sophomore years at the earliest, and for most they began in their junior years—and faculty frequently are ill-equipped to serve as true institutional agents unless they have received proper training. This left the participants to struggle and persist on their own during their initial transition to college and to continue to have to work on their own to make connections that fell outside their faculty mentors' fields of expertise. Having people in place to act as institutional agents for students beginning upon their arrival at college could make an enormous difference in the level of stress and struggle rural and other underserved students must cope with. Midlands students did generally express less overall stress in their first year because of the additional support they received from Midlands staff than did Coastal students, who often felt as though it was only their fictive kin and other college groups that helped them work through their transitional challenges.

In general, though, minus the assistance provided by institutional agents or other helpful faculty and staff, the participants relied on their own resilience and recognition that they could figure things out on their own. They also tapped into the knowledge of their fictive kin. They worked hard and refused to give up because their history told them they could forge pathways to success on their own and with hard work. They recognized that it would be difficult, but all of them created their own pathways through high school to successful matriculation at selective four-year colleges; all knew absolutely that they could do the same thing at college.

An invisible population. Rural students clearly constitute an invisible population at the two institutions attended by the participants; there is likely to be a similar situation

at similar institutions. Often White and middle-class, rural students blend into the background, whether by choice or because no one is able to see them except as brief sources of diversion or amusement (Martin, 2012). They are unwilling to seek out help as members of a diverse population because they generally do not see themselves as such, even while most also explicitly acknowledge that they are a minority on campus and could use assistance, especially from institutional agents, in transitioning to college. It is clear that most rural students do not *need* this assistance, as they are used to forging their own pathways and can do so on their own; however, having such assistance could make their transitions to college much easier and grant them earlier access to resources, including mentorship, that could make a real difference to them both during and after college. Institutions should begin to recognize rural students as a marginalized group and enact measures to help support them similar to those for other diverse populations. Similar to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, who are also understudied and overlooked (Museus & Kiang, 2009), rural students must not be ignored if they are to have college support systems that will help them persist and succeed. Further research on this issue utilizing intersectionality as a framework (see below) could help administrations understand the issues rural students have as an invisible population and that they tend to have challenges that cut across several typical ones (e.g., rural and low-income, rural and Black, rural and first-generation).

Rural brain-drain. The fact that most of the participants have no intention of returning home is an indicator of the continuation of rural brain-drain (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Ruiz & Perna, 2017). It is a complex problem with no easy solution, given that many rural areas have stagnant or slumping economies (Drum, 2017). So few high-

performing students have any desire to return home that those areas experience a consistent loss of people who could become boosters to the local education systems or economies, assuming there are appropriate positions available for them in or near the area. Research shows that the highest-performing students have a tendency to leave and never return; indeed, they feel it is their fate to do so (Petrin et al., 2014).

As another rural student who did not want to return home after college, I recognize now what a loss people like me are to our hometowns, even though there frequently are no jobs available that would suit our training and interests. The lack of such jobs could be mere perception rather than reality (Petrin et al., 2014). For example, there are a highly ranked four-year college and several community colleges within a 45-minute drive of my hometown, yet I have never considered moving back there to live while working at one of the nearby institutions of higher education.

Choosing alternate paths, such as Fran might in returning home as a teacher, could offer high-performing rural students the chance to provide something to students like them that they believe they did not get: well-trained, motivated high school teachers (Horvath, Goodell, & Kostea, 2018). The participants may feel similar regrets later on, as well, as they begin to understand the enormity of what happens to rural areas as highly talented individuals leave never to return. It is a difficult challenge to overcome, but perhaps if rural localities put into place incentives to draw those people back, especially to teach in high schools, it could lessen rural brain-drain. This includes not simply financial incentives, but a discussion with potential employees about the benefits of living in a rural area, such as close-knit neighborhoods and less expensive housing (Overture Institute, 2017).

Implications

K-12 practice. There has been a great deal of focus on the plight of under-resourced urban schools (e.g., Dowrick et al., 2001; Gerkhe, 2005; Rollert, 2015). We now need to shine further light on under-resourced rural schools and not assume that all who attend them have no interest in going on to four-year colleges (Grimes et al., 2013). My study indicates that students' opinions can be changed from "education isn't for me" to having the drive and desire to attend a top-tier school just by providing them with good classes and fellow students who have a drive to learn and succeed. Estimates indicate that more than half of rural high school graduates do not go on to college (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). If this number could be increased, even by having more students attend vocational or community college, the whole country could see economic uplift; even more meaningfully, impoverished rural communities might have a chance at recovery.

The poor STEM education received by most of the participants is an alarming trend. We are likely missing many students in college who have the capacity to continue on in STEM fields, but who are completely alienated by poor STEM education in high school. Though many of the participants who majored in STEM fields chose to work hard to overcome their deficits, not all rural students have that drive or ambition. The desire to work in STEM can be sparked by outstanding K-12 teachers and intriguing STEM courses similar to those taught by some of the schools in the more urban areas colleges like Coastal and Midlands draw from. Good laboratory courses are of paramount importance to ensure that rural students arrive at college with a least some laboratory skills and that they do not feel left behind by the urban peers from day one. High schools, such as the one Shelley attended, demonstrate that this can be provided in

rural high schools, as long as the school is willing to put resources into STEM rather than, for example, athletics.

Poor STEM education is symptomatic of another issue made clear by the participants: Rural high schools have a preponderance of poorly trained and/or inadequate teachers, particularly in STEM fields (Horvath, Goodell, & Kosteas, 2018). Whether this is emblematic of rural brain-drain or simply that it is hard to attract outstanding teachers to areas that are resource-poor, it is an issue that needs to be addressed in order to improve the chances of highly capable students to matriculate and succeed at selective colleges. If rural school divisions are able to focus on hiring properly qualified teachers and also on providing those teachers with the incentive to stay, the result should be better prepared high school graduates who face fewer struggles in transitioning to college or the work force. Teacher quality, development, and retention in rural areas have been identified as key factors in creating student success (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). It is marvelous that rural students develop a level of resilience that will likely assist them throughout their lives, but having less stress when moving into college or work is likely to help them create higher levels of success and enjoyment in whatever they are doing.

Guidance counselors also need to be aware of the needs of high-performing students and support rather than squelch their desires to attend selective colleges. Telling students that no one from their high school has ever been admitted to their top-choice institutions crushes aspirations before they even have a chance to flower. There are numerous selective colleges that would want to admit students from rural areas simply because of the challenges they have overcome and the diversity they represent. Rural

high school guidance counselors should be advising students to reach for their dreams while also applying to “safety” schools, just as guidance counselors at urban high schools advise their students to do.

Currently, many guidance counselors advocate higher education only as a means of obtaining a job within their local economies (Tieken, 2016). Rural students should not be limited in their post-high school options merely because of where their home area is. If necessary, guidance counselors should help students with aspirations to attend four-year colleges but who are unsure that they will succeed there map out a path through the local community college. This would also provide a low-cost option for the first two years of college for those students whose families cannot afford a four-year residential college and who also are unable to obtain the financial aid necessary to make up the gap between family means and college costs. Research on high school guidance counselors indicate that they, like rural teachers, may suffer from limited resources and knowledge of what is available to students in terms of college opportunities along with general isolation, among other challenges (Grimes et al., 2013). Like rural college students, however, rural high school students have been inadequately researched, as have rural teachers and guidance counselors (Grimes, et al., 2013; Ruiz & Perna, 2017; Tieken, 2016). Additional research on these subjects is likely to shine light not only on rural high school students and their situations but how those situations go on to affect rural students following high school graduation.

The low-level of resources available to many urban high schools has been a source of study for years (e.g., Achinstein, Curry, Ogawa, & Athanases, 2016; Fine, 1991; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003); it is time to add

examination of rural schools' resources to our research. While research cannot change the fact that many rural areas are as impoverished as our inner cities, it can make indications where school boards might consider changes in funding priorities. As many of the study's participants noted, athletics tends to be held in much higher esteem than are academics in rural high schools. For the participants, who were high-performing students with little interest in athletic pursuits, this was a point of frustration. When schools deprioritize academics, they are, in essence, letting themselves and their communities down. Students who do not see the need to attend even community colleges or vocational schools ultimately wind up becoming a drain on the community. Rural high schools that elevate academics have a better chance of encouraging students to graduate and continue on to further education. Four-year colleges do not need to be the goal for all high school graduates. Two-year college and vocational schools provide education and training that can be crucial to producing people with the interest to stay and work in the community. Rural high school administrations need to keep the longer view in mind as they are determining their priorities.

Community colleges. As stated above, the initial goal for rural high school graduates need not be a four-year college. Beyond providing training for certain professions, community colleges can act as bridges between a lackluster rural high school education and a four-year college degree, for those students who are interested in continuing on (Ruiz & Perna, 2017; Wang, 2009). Students should not be dissuaded from enrolling in a community college; these are not "lesser" educational institutions, and they can provide much-needed remedial work that will prepare rural students for four-year colleges. As two of the participants indicated, their local community colleges were

what permitted them to go on to four-year colleges. One even was unsure if he wanted to go to a four-year college until he began attending community college. Both acknowledged that the community colleges they attended were the bridges they needed to get into college and succeed there.

When unprepared rural high school students make the leap to a four-year college – and, unlike the participants, lack the background and resiliency to forge pathways to persistence and success – they may find themselves dropping out, often with student loans to pay off and nothing to show for them. Particularly in states such as Virginia, which has a community college articulation agreement with all public four-year colleges, the two-year college should be viewed as an inexpensive bridge between high school and college, not as a “lesser” choice. Community colleges can create the potential for great success at four-year colleges, especially for rural students who have been poorly prepared for college success (Virginia Foundation for Community College Education, 2015). Given that community colleges generally exist even in some of the most rural areas, more thought should be given and more research conducted on how rural high school students can utilize them to best effect.

Faculty/staff. Faculty and staff should be trained to recognize discomfort in their students, including those who appear to match the majority population (Kirby, 2007). They especially need to learn how to recognize microaggressions, both in themselves and from others, and how to put a stop to them. Providing safe spaces is also important. Marginalized students can be easily derailed if they feel like they are not valued by the institution (Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). While most of the participants were able

to shake off feelings of being looked down upon by faculty members, at least one began making course decisions based on the way she was treated by a professor.

It can be challenging for faculty and staff to recognize how their words can affect their students. I know this from personal experience as a former professor, when an offhanded remark I made outside class greatly upset a student who was standing nearby. Fortunately, she knew she could mention this to me and gave me a chance not only to apologize to her but to begin considering the power of my words as a professor. From my conversations with the participants, it is clear that many of their professors either have not received a similar opportunity or did not take advantage of it. None of the participants was willing to approach their professors about comments they considered passive-aggressive or simply aggressive. Nothing in their backgrounds told them that this could be permissible, and few faculty or staff have received training that will help them perceive discomfort among their students. Self-awareness and situational awareness are both crucial skills that should be cultivated in all faculty and staff, particularly in institutions where they will be working with minority and other marginalized groups, such as rural students.

If faculty and staff are well-trained in spotting students who may be experiencing some level of discomfort at college, they can attempt to intervene and create a more positive experience for the students. More allies at college are key for creating success and a general sense of connection to college culture, rather than allowing marginalized students to feel isolated and unwanted. Happy, connected students are more likely to persist even through adversity (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), ensuring the development of a more diverse student body and a better learning environment for all students. This

practice should not be supported, necessarily, by faculty incentives but by a cultural imperative underscoring the need for all faculty and staff to be mindful of their total student population, not just the majority population, and their needs.

Admission offices. None of the participants mentioned being specifically recruited by college admission deans, something also uncovered by Guyton (2011). Several received recruitment scholarships after they had been admitted to college, but their schools are not on high school tour loops. These students felt like they were taking big risks by applying to selective colleges, especially when their teachers and guidance counselors were cautioning them that no one from their high schools had ever attained admission to those colleges. Having admission deans approach rural high schools would allay these concerns.

Rural high schools clearly have talent to offer. High schools might be prompted to step up their education game a bit if they know it could help their students be recruited by top-tier schools; admission offices, even of highly selective four-year institutions, should actively seek out and recruit high-performing rural students. Most colleges are attempting to increase the diversity of their student bodies. Recruiting students from rural areas, generally underrepresented at selective colleges, would help add to campus diversity. This kind of recruiting could also help correct the current issue of the unfulfilled potential of highly capable rural students, many of whom do not receive the proper encouragement to attend college. Creating liaisons with local high schools and their guidance counselors would give colleges a means to connect with students and provide them, their guardians, and their guidance counselors with the proper information

on the admission and financial aid processes – both items that can be enormous hurdles for rural students.

First-Year Experiences/extended orientation programs. Providing First-Year Experiences or other extended orientation programs can give all students, not just those from underserved backgrounds, the information and support they need to ensure a successful college transition (Araújo et al., 2014). Such programs do tend to focus on filling gaps that underserved students arrive at college with, however, so they are particularly useful to students from those situations. When students arrive at college with limited academic, cultural, and social capital, anything that increases their capital has a disproportionately positive impact of those students than it does on students from more advantaged backgrounds. It is critical to consider rural students as part of the overall underserved population and ensure that they have the tools they need for persistence and success at college.

These programs can also provide sensitivity training for all students, helping them understand how not to use microaggressions, including toward those displaying linguistic diversity. Students who speak with accents or using a different dialect may not appear from the outset to be members of protected groups, and thus it would be seen as acceptable to say things such as, “Oh, your accent is *so cute!*” without realizing the impact on the person. Likewise, differences in dressing can give rise to unintentional microaggressions. People should never be marginalized, and this includes those with “different” speech, clothing, habits, etc. Having the opportunity to attend year-long orientation sessions could provide students with the opportunity to learn how to accept and embrace all aspects of diversity, even those emanating from people who are typically

considered as “not diverse.” This could also have the effect of providing more safe spaces for rural students at college.

Future Research

I recommend that this study be replicated using more diverse participant pools. Though many college-going rural students are White, there are also rural students from racial minority groups and likely also from more “other” groups as well. A wider swath of diversity is needed to know if my results truly represent a “rural student college experience.” In addition, I recommend that a similar study be done that includes both faculty and staff to determine if their perceptions in any way match the students’. This is a critical piece of information to have before attempting to determine what changes should be made at the institutional level. Rural students need to be studied via multiple lenses and in as wide a cross-section as possible in many more studies similar to mine, particularly in rural and non-selective college settings.

Institutional agents. My study touches on the importance of institutional agents for rural students who are minorities at their institutions. In particular, more research should be done on this topic to see more specifically how institutional agents can and are supporting rural students at colleges, whether they are in a minority or not. As an earlier study (Hernandez & Sikes, 2015) shows, even rural students who attend institutions where they are in the majority have transitional issues and challenges similar to the participants in my current study. For some students at the rural colleges in the 2015 study, an institutional agent meant the difference between college success and dropping out. Having a cohort of trained institutional agents at colleges with rural populations of any size could have a positive effect on rural students. Further research into the topic of

institutional agents and their role in assisting rural students to succeed will indicate if this trend holds across additional institutions and studies.

Intersectionality. Studies utilizing critical theory to examine the phenomenon of rural students at selective four-year colleges could uncover significant information on how the challenge of persistence and success for this population can be met institutionally. One such critical theory with particular implications for rural students is intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Used as a framework to develop new rural student studies, intersectionality will be able to help us capture the issues that affect the group cross-sectionally. Intersectionality indicates how multiple identities in one underserved group can increase the marginalization of the people in that group. For example, rural students who are also first-generation students are likely to experience the challenges created both by being a rural student and by being a first-generation student, as did George in this study. When those issues are not properly addressed by college administrations, a student who experiences the intersection of rurality and first-generationhood simultaneously risks becoming so marginalized that it will be hard to attain persistence and success at college. Studies utilizing intersectionality as their framework will be able to shed much-needed light on this critical area. My study has shown clearly that rural students must handle numerous challenges; what happens when they are part of multiple marginalized groups? This is critical information to obtain in order to make targeted recommendations for how colleges can better assist rural students to persistence and success.

Academic capital in rural areas. It was surprising to uncover that most of my participants had parents who were unable to assist them effectively in navigating college

campuses and the academic environment when only one participant was a first-generation student. One participant with college-going parents even was unaware of what a syllabus is, something most people with some academic capital would consider common knowledge. This brings into question the typical assumptions that researchers and faculty/staff at higher education institutions hold regarding students with college-going parents—that is, that the way we think about academic capital might not be correct. Holding assumptions that all students who are not first-generation, such as my rural student participants, should possess a particular kind of academic capital could be detrimental to providing the kind of college assistance that students may need. I did not pursue this topic further with my participants, but this is an issue that deserves additional research. We as a profession could be making incorrect assumptions about students with college-going parents, harming their potential for college persistence and success.

Final Thoughts

The students in my study were highly motivated and driven individuals. They took knowledge of how to overcome challenges that they got from their time in high school and used it to forge pathways to persistence and success at college. But what of those students who do not have such internal resources? They are more likely to drop out, oftentimes with debt, and wind up in a worse situation than before they started. College administrations need to feel an imperative to welcome all students from underserved backgrounds, including rural students, and to ensure that they have the positive experiences needed for a successful college career. Like any other group of students, rural students should not be expected to arrive at college and develop their

networks and overcome all their transitional challenges on their own; colleges must provide the resources needed for persistence and success.

This study shows that rural students do indeed face challenges similar to those encountered by students from other underserved backgrounds, yet they remain an invisible population on the campuses of most selective four-year colleges. It is unfair to expect their backgrounds to provide the resilience and knowledge they need in order to complete college and attain post-graduation success. Rural students should be seen as who they are: people with unmistakable ability, talent, and skill who still need additional assistance in transitioning to college and continuing on to success without unnecessary stress. In this way, not only can rural students bring their own backgrounds to bear, but they can receive the support they need to create pathways to college persistence and success.

Appendix A

Email to Potential Participants

Dear Friend,

I am a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Policy, Planning, and Leadership at The College of William & Mary. I am inviting you to participate in my dissertation research, which is designed to gather data on the experiences of rural students attending selective colleges.

The criterion for participation is self-identification as a student from a hometown in a rural location. If you do not meet this criterion, your interest in this study is appreciated, but I will be unable to use your participation. Please respond to me either way, so that I may make note of your self-identification as a rural student or that you are not a rural student.

Participation in this study includes a digitally recorded interview in a face-to-face, telephone, or Skype setting lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. In-person interviews will take place in a location of your choosing. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and your responses are confidential. Additionally, you may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Amy Sikes, by email at amy@wm.edu or by phone at 757-221-2422.

Thank you in advance for your response.

Sincerely,

Amy Sikes

Appendix B

Student Demographic Questionnaire

- 1) Where is the geographic location of your hometown/area?
- 2) What is the population of your hometown/home area? Feel free to give your best estimate if you don't know exactly.
- 3) What are the general ethnic/racial demographics of your hometown/area?
- 4) What is your ethnic/racial identity?
- 5) How many students (approximately) are in your high school?
- 6) How many grades does your high school have (i.e., 8-12, 9-12)?
- 7) What year are you in college?
- 8) What is your current major/minor?
- 9) Are you a first-generation student? "First-generation" is defined as someone whose parents did not graduate from college, either two-year or four-year. Yes No
- 10) What is your gender?
- 11) How would you describe your family's social class?

Appendix C

Consent Form

The College of William & Mary

Rural Students at Selective Four-Year Colleges: An Invisible Minority

Consent Form

Amy Sikes is a Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Policy, Planning & Leadership program at the School of Education of the College of William & Mary. The focus of this study is on rural students and their lived experiences at college.

Your consent to participate in this project indicates that you will agree to participate in an individual interview and focus group with this researcher and give permission for the conversation to be audio recorded or recorded via telephone or Skype. You also give permission for any information provided in writing to be used for the purposes of this study.

You understand that the accuracy and honesty of your responses are an important and integral part of a successful outcome for this research study. You also understand that you have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) during the interview. There will be no penalty for choosing not to answer any question(s). Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. A copy of the study will be sent to you electronically once it is complete using the email address you provide.

As in all research, there may be unforeseen risks to the participant. You understand that the only anticipated risks involve the inconvenience of responding to my questions and the time taken to participate in the conversation. One way in which you may benefit from this activity is having the opportunity to contribute to research and

practice that may enhance the ability of graduate students to better understand contemporary undergraduate college students.

You understand that all of the information collected is confidential. That means that your name will not appear on material associated with this project. You may select a pseudonym to represent yourself if you wish; if you do not, one will be chosen for you. I will destroy any notes and audio recordings two years following the completion of this study. You understand that by providing your e-mail address, the researcher may contact you to verify data or ask additional follow-up questions.

You understand that you may refuse to participate in this research study without prejudice or penalty. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact the researcher, Amy Sikes, at amy@wm.edu. You understand that you may report any problems or dissatisfaction to Dr. Thomas Ward, Chair of the School of Education Internal Review Committee at 757-221-2358 or EDIRC-L@wm.edu.

By signing below, you acknowledge understanding the purpose and requirements of the study, and that you agree to participate in this study. Your signature below signifies that you are at least 18 years of age and that you have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant _____ Date _____

Pseudonym _____

E-mail _____

Researcher _____ Date _____

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL
STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW
BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN
SUBJECT COMMITTEE (PHONE: 757 221-3901) ON _____ AND
EXPIRES ON _____.

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

- How would you describe yourself?
- Please describe the area where you're from.
- Do you want people to know where you're from?
- How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status?
- Did you have experience in using technology before you arrived at college, either at home or in school?
- Could you describe your high school experience?
 - Do you feel it prepared you for your current college experience?
- Did you have the opportunity to take AP or other advanced courses at your high school?
 - If so, how do you think doing so affected your transition to college?
- What role, if any, does your family play in your life while you're at college?
- Do you think of yourself as a rural student at [institution]?
- Please describe your experience in transitioning from high school to college.
- Do you think your college helped you in this transition? Please explain why or why not.
 - Can you think of ways in which your college could make you feel more supported?
- Do you feel that you have the opportunity to interact with other people like you?
- Please describe your overall feeling about being at this college.
 - Do you experience any particular challenges on a regular basis?
 - If so, to what do you ascribe those challenges?
- What is your general comfort level during your classes?
- What is your general comfort level during your interactions with other students here?
- What is your general comfort level during your interactions with professors here?
- Do you think your overall experience here has been affected by where you're from?

Follow-up questions

- Did you participate in any research programs or undertake any faculty-mentored research while at William & Mary? If so, please tell me how you think it affected your experience here. If you didn't, please try to think of how that affected your experience and let me know that, too.

- Would you have felt comfortable going to the Center for Student Diversity for assistance if you needed it?

References

- Abdul-Alim, J. (2015, December 2). College grad rates don't always benefit all students [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://diverseeducation.com/article/79228/>
- Achinstein, B., Curry, M. W., Ogawa, R. T., & Athanases, S. Z. (2016). Organizing high schools for Latina/o youth success: Boundary crossing to access and build community wealth. *Urban Education, 51*(7), 824-854.
- Araújo, N., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Morieson, L., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2014). Belonging in the first year: A creative discipline cohort case study. *Student Success, 5*(2), 21.
- Baird, L. L. (2000). College climate and the Tinto model. In J. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 62–80). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bensimon, E. M. (2007). The underestimated significance of practitioner knowledge in the scholarship on student success. *The Review of Higher Education, 30*(4), 441-469.
- Betts, J. R. (1996). What do students know about wages? Evidence from a survey of undergraduates. *Journal of Human Resources, 31*(1), 27-56.
- Bettinger, E. P., Long, B. T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). The role of application assistance and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment. *Quarterly Journal of Economics, 127*, 1205-1242.
- Booth, N. R., Travis, S. P., Borzumato-Gainey, C., & Degges-White, S. (2013). Social engagement: Helping students find their place in campus life. In C. Borzumato-

- Gainey & S. Degges-White (Eds.), *College student mental health counseling: A developmental perspective* (pp. 69-79). New York, NY: Springer.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In S. Szeman & T. Kaposy (Eds.) *Cultural theory: An anthology* (pp. 81-93). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Bowen, W. G., & Bok, D. (1998). *The shape of the river: The long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, H. R. (2015). *Path to success: HBCU institutional agents supporting African American men matriculate* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (Order No. 3717633)
- Campbell, C. A., Deil-Amen, R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2015). Do financial aid policies unintentionally punish the poor, and what can we do about it? *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2015(172), 67-76.
- Carbado, D. W., Crenshaw, K. W., Mays, V. M., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 303-312.
- Carter, D. F. (2006). Key issues in the persistence of underrepresented minority students. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2006, 33–46. doi:10.1002/ir.178
- CashCourse. (2014). The College of William and Mary: Cross-campus partnerships bring students to CashCourse. Retrieved from <https://www.cashcourse.org/info/CashCourse-Across-the-USA/Success-Stories/College-of-William-and-Mary>

- Casselman, B. (2014, April 30). Race gap narrows in college enrollment, but not in graduation [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/race-gap-narrows-in-college-enrollment-but-not-in-graduation/>
- Castleman, B. L. (2013). *Prompts, personalization, and payoffs: Strategies to improve the design and delivery of financial aid information* [Working paper]. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia.
- Chen, X. (2005). *First generation students in postsecondary education: A look at their college transcripts* (NCES 2005-171). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Choy, S. P. (2001). Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment. Findings from The Condition of Education.
- Choy, S. P. (2002). *Access & persistence: Findings from 10 years of longitudinal research on students*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Colyar, J. (2011). Strangers in a strange land: Low-income students and the transition to college. In A. Kezar (Ed.), *Recognizing and serving low-income students in higher education: An examination of institutional policies, practices, and culture* (pp. 121–138). New York, NY: Routledge.
- CollegeData. (2018). Understanding college selectivity. [Blog post]. https://www.collegedata.com/cs/content/content_choosearticle_tmpl.jhtml?articleId=10004
- Cooper, M. A. (2008). Dreams deferred? The relationships between early and later postsecondary educational aspirations among racial/ethnic groups. *Educational Policy*, 23, 615-650.

- Cox, R. D. (2004). *Navigating community college demands: Contradictory goals, expectations, and outcomes in composition* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (Order No. 3165333)
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review* (43)6, 1241-1299.
- Crenshaw, K. (2016, October). The urgency of intersectionality [TEDtalk]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Davis, M., Dias-Bowie, Y., Greenberg, K., Klukken, G., Pollio, H. R., Thomas, S. P., & Thompson, C. L. (2004). "A fly in the buttermilk": Descriptions of university life by successful Black undergraduate students at a predominately White Southeastern university. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75, 420-445.
- DeAngelis, T. (2009). Unmasking "racial micro aggressions". *Monitor on Psychology*, 40(2), 42.
- Degges-White, S., & Borzumato-Gainey, C. (Eds.). (2013). *College student mental health counseling: A developmental perspective*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Deil-Amen, R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2014). From FAFSA to Facebook: The role of technology in navigating the financial aid process. In Andrew A. Kelly & Sara

- Goldrick-Rab (Eds.), *Reinventing financial aid* (pp. 75-100). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Dolan, T. G. (2008). Minority students and college success: Challenges and solutions. *Education Digest, 73*(7), 27-30.
- Dowrick, P. W., Power, T. J., Manz, P. H., Ginsburg-Block, M., Leff, S. S., & Kim-Rupnow, S. (2001). Community responsiveness: Examples from under-resourced urban schools. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 21*(2), 71-90.
- Drum, K. (2017). Just how bad is the rural economy, anyway? [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2017/06/just-how-bad-is-the-rural-economy-anyway/>
- Dunstan, S. (2013). *The influence of speaking a dialect of Appalachian English on the college experience* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (Order No. 3575619.)
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
- Engstrom, C., & Tinto, V. (2008). Access without support is not opportunity. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 40*(1), 46–50. doi:10.3200/CHNG.40.1.46-50
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban high school*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

- Fischer, M. J. (2007). Settling into campus life: Differences by race/ethnicity in college engagement and outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education*, 78, 125–156.
doi:10.1353/jhe.2007.0009
- Fleming, J. (1984). *Blacks in college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gallo, J., & Beckman, P. (2016). A global view of rural education: Teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention. *Global Education Review*, 3(1), 1-4.
- Gammell, W. J. (2008). *College persistence: A comparative analysis across conventional and less-common cohorts* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (Order No. 3334955.)
- Gerkhe, R. S. (2005). Poor schools, poor students, successful teachers. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 41(1), 14-17.
- Greene, H. R., & Greene, M. W. (2001). *The public Ivies: America's flagship public universities*. New York, NY: Cliff Street Books.
- Grimes, L. E., Haskins, N., & Paisley, P. (2013). "So I went out there": A phenomenological study on the experiences of rural school counselor social justice advocates. *Professional School Counseling*, 17(1), 40-51.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82.
- Guyton, C. D. (2011). *Exploring the lived experiences of rural African American millennials at predominantly White institutions* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database (order No. 3491227.)
- Harper, C. E. (2011). Identity, intersectionality, and mixed-methods approaches. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2011(151), 103-115.

- Harper, S. R. (2010). An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM. In S. R. Harper & C.B. Newman (Eds.), *New Directions for Institutional Research: 2010*(148), 63-74.
- Hernandez, D. M. (2017). The actions institutional agents take to support first-generation Latino college students at a Catholic Hispanic-serving institution: An embedded case study. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA.
- Hernandez, D. M., & Sikes, A. M. (2015). *Institutional agents' support of underserved students at tuition-free institutions: A multiple case study*. Unpublished manuscript, School of Education, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.
- Horvath, M., Goodell, J. E., & Kosteas, V. D. (2018). Decisions to enter and continue in the teaching profession: Evidence from a sample of US secondary STEM teacher candidates. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 71*, 57-65.
- Huang, Y., & Chang, S. (2004). Academic and co-curricular engagement: Their relationship and the best combinations for student growth. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*, 391-406.
- Inkelas, K. K., Daver, Z. E., Vogt, K. E., Brown, J., & Leonard, J. B. (2007). Living-learning programs and first-generation college students' academic and social transition to college. *Research in Higher Education, 48*(4), 403–434.
doi:10.1007/s
- Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. (2017). Cooke Foundation awards \$855,000 in grants to benefit low-income rural students [Blog post]. Retrieved from

<http://www.jkcf.org/cooke-foundation-awards-855000-in-grants-to-benefit-low-income-rural-students/>

Jimenez, P. W. (2012). *Institutional agents' impact on transfer student success through the avenue of social capital* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (Order No. 3514198)

Kahlenberg, R. D. (2013, February 11). How much do you pay for college? *The Chronicle Review*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Much-Do-You-Pay-for/137043/>

Kenny, M. E., Blustein, D. L., Chaves, A., Grossman, J. M., & Gallagher, L. A. (2003). The role of perceived barriers and relational support in the educational and vocational lives of urban high school students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 50(2), 142.

Kezar, A. (2011). Rethinking postsecondary institutions for low-income students success: The power of post-structural theory. In A. Kezar (Ed.), *Recognizing and serving low-income students in higher education: An examination of institutional policies, practices, and culture* (pp. 3-25). New York, NY: Routledge.

Kezar, A., & Yang, H. (2011). The hidden curriculum: The difficulty of infusing financial education. In A. Kezar (Ed.), *Recognizing and serving low-income students in higher education: An examination of institutional policies, practices, and culture* (pp. 192–214). New York, NY: Routledge.

Kim, Y. K., & Sax, L. J. (2009). Student-faculty interaction in research universities: Differences by student gender, race, social class, and first-generation status. *Research in Higher Education*, 50, 437-459.

- Kirby, E. (2007). Predictors of white and minority student success at a private women's college. *College Student Journal*, 41, 460.
- Knottnerus, J. D. (1987). Status attainment research and its image of society. *American Sociological Review*, 113-121.
- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540-563.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lehman, J. B. (2014). *Low income, rural student experience with college costs and financial aid in the college choice process: A phenomenological analysis*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (Order No. 3672049).
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lord, C. G., & Saenz, D. S. (1985). Memory deficits and memory surfeits: Differential cognitive consequences of tokenism for tokens and observers. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 49(4), 918.
- Lundberg, C. A., Schreiner, L. A., Hovaguimian, K., & Slavin Miller, S. (2007). First-generation status and student race/ethnicity as distinct predictors of student engagement and learning. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 44(1), 57-84. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.1755
- Martin, G. L. (2012). *Getting out, missing out, and surviving: The social class experiences of White, low-income, first-generation college students*. (Doctoral

- dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database (Order No. 3516740.)
- Martin Lohfink, M., & Paulsen, M. B. (2005). Comparing the determinants of persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation students. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*, 409–428. doi:10.1353/csd.2005.0040
- Martinez, J. A, Sher, K. J., Krull, J. L., & Wood, P. K. (2009). Blue-collar scholars?: Mediators and moderators of university attrition in first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(1), 87–103.
doi:10.1353/csd.0.0053
- Martinez-Cosio, M., & Martinez Iannacone, R. (2007). The tenuous role of institutional agents: Parent liaisons as cultural brokers. *Education and Urban Society, 39*(3), 349-369.
- Massey, D., Charles, C. Z., Lundy, G. F., & Fisher, M. J. (2003). *The source of the river: The social origins of freshmen at America's selective colleges and universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McGlynn, A. (2009). Proven pathways to success for minority students. *Education Digest, 74*(9), 42-45.
- McIntosh, P. (2004). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Race, class, and gender in the United States, 6*, 188-192.
- Museus, S. D., & Kiang, P. N. (2009). Deconstructing the model minority myth and how it contributes to the invisible minority reality in higher education research. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2009*(142), 5-15.

- Naumann, W.C., Bandalos, D., & Gutkin, T. B. (2003). Identifying variables that predict college success for first-generation college students. *Journal of College Admission, 50*, 4-9.
- Norton, H. E. (2010). *Engagement of nontraditional students and communication variables predictive of academic success and persistence*. (Doctoral dissertation) Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database (Order No. 1487711.) ,
- Overture Institute. (2017). 5 strategies for recruiting in rural areas [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://www.theoverturegroup.com/blog/5-strategies-for-recruiting-in-rural-areas/>
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education, 75*(3), 249–284.
- Patton, L. D., Flowers, L. A., & Bridges, B. K. (2011). Effects of Greek affiliation on African American students' engagement differences by college racial composition. *College Student Affairs Journal, 29*(2), 113-123.
- Paulsen, M. B., & St. John, E. P. (2002). Social class and college costs: Examining the financial nexus between college choice and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 73*(2), 189–236. doi:10.1353/jhe.2002.0023
- Pendakur, S. L. (2010). *The search for transformative agents: The counter-institutional positioning of faculty and staff at an elite university* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (Order No. 3434494)

- Peterson, T. H. (2009). Engaged scholarship: Reflections and research on the pedagogy of social change. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(5), 541-552.
- Petrin, R. A., Schafft, K. A., & Meece, J. L. (2014). Educational sorting and residential aspirations among rural high school students: What are the contributions of schools and educators to rural brain drain? *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(2), 294-326.
- Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). First- and second-generation college students: A comparison of their engagement and intellectual development. *Journal of Higher Education*, 76, 276–300. doi:10.1353/jhe.2005.0021
- Poynton, T. A., Lapan, R. T., and Marcotte, A.M. (2014). Financial planning strategies of high school seniors: Removing barriers to career success. *Career Development Quarterly*, 63(1), 57-73. doi:10.1002/j.2161-0045.2015.00095.x
- ProximityOne. (2017). About ProximityOne. Retrieved from <http://proximityone.com/about.htm>
- Ray, J., & Kafka, S. (2014). Life in college matters for life after college. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/168848/life-college-matters-life-college.aspx>
- Rios-Aguilar, C., Kiyama, J. M., Gravitt, M., & Moll, L. C. (2011). Funds of knowledge and forms of capital for the rich? A capital approach to examining funds of knowledge. *Theory and Research in Education* 9, 163-184.
doi:10.1177/1477878511409776
- Rollert, K. (2015). Perspicacity, pension, and purpose in under-resourced urban schools: Implications for urban teacher preparation models. *National Teacher Education Journal*, 8(3).

- Rubin, R. B. (2011). Recruiting, redefining, and recommitting: The quest to increase socioeconomic diversity at Amherst College. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 44*(4), 512-531.
- Ruiz, R., & Perna, L. W. (2017). The geography of college attainment: Dismantling rural “disadvantage.” In M. Cahalan, L. W. Perna, M. Yamashita, R. Ruiz, & K. Franklin (Eds), *Indicators of higher education equity in the United States: 2017 trend report* (pp. 95-102). Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Higher Education, Council for Education Opportunity (COE) and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) of the University of Pennsylvania.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*, 63–75.
- Spencer, S. J., Steele, C. M., & Quinn, D. M. (1999). Stereotype threat and women's math performance. *Journal of experimental social psychology, 35*(1), 4-28.
- Spradlin, T. E., Rutkowski, D. J., Burroughs, N. A., & Lang, J. R. (2010). *Effective college access, persistence and completion programs, and strategies for underrepresented student populations: Opportunities for scaling up*. Bloomington, IN: Center for Evaluation & Education Policy.
- St. John, E. P., Hu, S., & Fisher, A. S. (2011). *Breaking through the access barrier: How academic capital formation can improve policy in higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review, 67*(1), 1–40.

- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2010). A social capital framework for the study of institutional agents and their role in the empowerment of low-status students and youth. *Youth & Society*, 43(3), 1066-1109. doi:10.1177/0044118X10382877
- Strawn, R. M. (2014). *Drivin' trucks, huntin' bucks, and reading Aristotle?: The rural student's college choice dilemma* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (Order No. 3580434)
- Stuber, J. M. (2011). *Inside the college gates: How class and culture matter in higher education*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Swail, W. S. (2003). Retaining minority students in education: A framework for success. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tieken, M. C. (2016). College talk and the rural economy: Shaping the educational aspirations of rural, first-generation students. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 91(2), 203-223.
- Tierney, W. G. (2009). Applying to college. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15, 79-95. doi:10.1177/1077800408325329
- Tierney, W. G., & Venegas, K. M. (2006). Fictive kin and social capital: The role of peer groups in applying and paying for college. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(12), 1687-1702. doi:10.1177/0002764206289145
- USDA ERS. (2013). Rural-urban continuum codes [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/.aspx>

- U.S. News & World Report. (2015). Top 100 – lowest acceptance rates. Retrieved from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/lowest-acceptance-rate/>
- Vagle, M. D. (2014). *Crafting phenomenological research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experiences*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Venegas, K. M. (2006a). Internet inequalities: Financial aid, the internet, and low income students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49, 1652-1669.
- Venegas, K. M. (2006b). Low-income urban high school students' use of the internet to access financial aid. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 36(3), 4-15.
- Virginia Foundation for Community College Education. (2015). *Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative*. Retrieved from <http://cdn.vccs.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/RVHI-Case-for-Support-Final.pdf>
- Walpole, M. (2003). Socioeconomic status and college: How SES affects college experiences and outcomes. *The Review of Higher Education*, 27(1), 45–73.
doi:10.1353/rhe.2003.0044
- Walpole, M. (2011). Academics, campus administration, and social interaction: Examining campus structures using post-structural theory. In A. Kezar (Ed.), *Recognizing and serving low-income students in higher education: An examination of institutional policies, practices, and culture* (pp. 99-120). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wang, X. (2009). Baccalaureate attainment and college persistence of community college transfer students at four-year institutions. *Research in Higher Education*, 50, 570-588.

Yoder, M. J. (2007). *Rural students' access to and success in higher education: A case study* (Doctoral dissertation). North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.

Vita

Amy M. Sikes

Birthdate: February 13, 1969

Birthplace: Richmond, Virginia

Education: 2011-2018 The College of William & Mary
Williamsburg, Virginia
Doctor of Philosophy

1991-1993 The University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia
Master of Arts

1987-1991 The University of South Carolina
South Carolina Honors College
Columbia, South Carolina
Bachelor of Arts