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## **ABSTRACT**

Tinto (1993) argued that all students have different needs and require different resources and services to enable them to persist at the university level. One group of students that requires individualized attention is students from rural areas. During the 2010-2011 academic year, 57% of public school districts in the U.S. were in rural areas (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). These rural school districts serve a quarter of the students who attend public schools in the U.S. (Schiess & Rotherham, 2015).

Rural students have lower college enrollment and persistence rates than non-rural students (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Koricich, 2014; U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Rural students may be less prepared for college than their non-rural peers, which may lead them to decide not to enroll in college (Schiess & Rotherham, 2015). Additionally, they may possess many of the qualities, such as coming from a family that has a low level of education and belonging to a low socio-economic group, that increase a student's risk of dropping out of college (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976).

There is little information available about the experiences of college students from rural areas. This study begins to fill this research gap by exploring the following question, "How do rural students perceive their experiences coming from a rural background and enrolling at a 4-year urban university?"

A phenomenological study was conducted using data from in-depth interviews of rural students enrolled at a 4-year urban university between the fall of 2013 and the fall of 2016. Interview data was coded for common themes. Findings of this study include: 1) Rural students face isolation in their rural communities. This isolation includes both geographic and social

isolation; 2) Rural students face many of the same challenges that students from other geographic locations, but these challenges appear to be more severe for students from rural backgrounds; 3) Rural students often struggle to fit into their college environment; and 4) Coming from a rural background can also be an advantage for students when enrolling in college. This report discusses these findings in more detail and suggests how the information gained from this study could help rural students in the future.

**Off the Rural Back Road: Describing the Experiences of Rural Students who Enrolled at  
an Urban 4-Year University**

By

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Instructional Design, Development, and Evaluation.

Syracuse University

May 2019

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, a quarter of students attend a secondary school located in a rural area (Schiess & Rotherham, 2015). While the high school graduation rate for students living in rural areas is higher than the graduation rates of students living in cities and towns, rural students are less likely to go to college than students located in any other area of the country (Koricich, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In fact, only 64% of rural high school students enroll in college after high school graduation, compared with 70% of students from metropolitan areas and the national average of 66% of students (Koricich, 2014; United States Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Schiess & Rotherham (2015) suggested that one reason rural high school graduation rates are high, but rural postsecondary enrollment and persistence are low, is that the curriculum in rural schools isn't as rigorous as the curriculum of schools in other geographic locations, which leaves rural students unprepared and less qualified for postsecondary education than their peers from other geographic locations. Additionally, rural high schools may encourage students with high GPAs to attend large, prestigious universities. This is because these universities provide students with more post-graduate opportunities and a challenging undergraduate learning environment (Guiffrida, 2008). These students, who were at the top of their high school classes, may end up transferring to a smaller college or dropping out of college completely because their high school experiences did not prepare them for the large university system. This leads rural students who enroll at large universities to feel lost and like they don't fit in (Guiffrida, 2008). Additionally, colleges and universities are also finding that it is difficult to recruit and retain students from rural areas who do enrolled in post-secondary education (Des Garennes, 2014). This is becoming true even for land grant universities, such as the University of Illinois, which opened to make sure that individuals from low socio-economic

backgrounds, such as rural students, had access to a college education (Des Garennes, 2014).

Recruiting and retaining rural students is challenging because of the poor economic climate in rural areas and the lack of advanced classes in rural areas, which leaves rural students unprepared for college course work (Des Garennes, 2014). Also, rural students may not have someone to look up to who has attended and completed college (Des Garennes, 2014).

Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) noted that college students from rural areas have a lower persistence rate than students from urban areas. The researchers suggested that rural students have many of the qualities—such as coming from a family that has a low level of education and belonging to a low socio-economic group—that increase a student's risk of dropping out of college (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). While students from rural areas are remaining enrolled at universities longer than in the past, there is still a gap between the college completion rates of students from rural areas and their suburban peers (Yan, 2002).

Even though a quarter of students in the U.S. attend secondary school in a rural area, the education of rural students receives little attention when it comes to education research and policymaking in the United States (Schiess & Rotherham, 2015). This is because there is a lack of funding for rural education research, and rural education research is often discouraged in favor of research regarding more populated areas (Ayers, 2011). The federal grants available for rural research are usually linked to agriculture, rather than education, which leads university researchers to explore topics that receive more funding rather than researching rural education (Sherwood, 2011). The lack of information available regarding rural education has created a negative cycle. The few researchers who attempt to conduct rural education research don't have the background information that they need to ask the right questions (Sherwood, 2011). This leaves researchers and policymakers unable to create a unified and fact-driven case to promote

policies and legislation for rural schools. Lack of information regarding the needs of rural areas also helps to ensure that rural educational issues will continue to receive little legislative attention (Sherwood, 2011).

Studying the college experiences of students from rural areas is important because, in today's economy, obtaining a college degree is becoming more and more critical to finding employment and achieving increased lifetime earnings (Schiess & Rotherham, 2015). The gap between the educational levels achieved by rural residents and individuals who live in non-rural areas not only affects people living in rural areas individually, but it also affects the rural communities they live in as a whole (Schiess & Rotherham, 2015). Rural areas whose economy is dependent on jobs in farming and agriculture now need individuals to have college degrees to meet the demands of the new technology being used (Gibbs, 2005). Additionally, rural areas that depend on jobs in the manufacturing industry are finding that the manufacturing field is moving away from the use of low-skilled laborers and, instead, is looking to hire individuals with advanced degrees (Gibbs, 2005).

Dr. Soo-yong Byun, an associate professor of Educational Policy and research associate at the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Pennsylvania State University, noted that there is no theory that specifically addresses the persistence of college students from rural areas (personal communication October 15th, 2015). Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) further argued that many of the researchers who have explored the issue of student persistence have not considered how different background characteristics impact college persistence because those researchers have focused on college students in general, rather than looking at students from different backgrounds separately. Byun et al. (2012) suggested that researchers must explore the background, pre-college, and college experiences of rural students because, although colleges

and universities are still having trouble recruiting rural students, more rural students are enrolling in college than in the past. Colleges need to prepare so that they can meet the needs of rural students (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). Learning more about the background, pre-college, and college experiences of rural students will help researchers and college faculty identify the best strategies to help rural students complete their college degree (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012).

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of rural students who attended an urban 4-year university. While conducting this study, I was also interested in the role these experiences might have had on whether or not the rural students I talked with persisted at the 4-year urban university where they began their degree.

### **Research Question**

This study investigates the following research question:

- 1) How do rural students perceive their experiences coming from a rural background and enrolling at a 4-year, urban university?

**How was this question studied?** To investigate the research question, I conducted a study using qualitative research methods. While conducting this study, I recruited students who graduated from a rural high school and enrolled at the same urban four-year university after completing their high school degree. All participants enrolled at the university between the fall of 2013 and the fall of 2016. If they had persisted, the students were freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or seniors in college at the time of the interviews. I asked each participant to complete a brief demographic questionnaire before the interview occurred; all participants were also asked to sign an informed consent form before the interview began. This form also asked participants if it was ok for me to record the interviews. At the end of each interview, I also asked each participant if I

could contact him or her with any follow-up questions that I had. All follow-up questions were either asked in person, during a second interview, or via email. Prior to beginning my research, the study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### **Key Terms**

**Rural.** There are many definitions for the term rural. Rural can mean an isolated location separated from other areas of the country. It can also be an area that contains a small number of residents (Bealer, Willits, & Kuvlesky, 1965). Other definitions of rural explore the socio-cultural characteristics of rural residents and how coming from a rural area affects the people who live there (Halfacree, 1993). The United States Census Bureau does not have a definition of rural; instead, they define “non-urban” as having a population of less than 2,500 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Finally, the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) has a system of Locale Codes to classify all schools in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). These classifications include codes for various areas, including Rural: Remote locations, Rural: Distant locations, and Rural: Fringe locations (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This study used the NCES' classifications because all school districts in the U.S. have a classification. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education still uses these classifications today (See Appendix A for a full list of these codes and their definitions.).

**Urban.** The current study used the definition of urban used by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 2010 Census. The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban as “a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements, along with adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses, as well as territory with low population

density included to link outlying densely settled territory with the densely settled core” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Urban territories have a population of more than 2,500 people and have at least 1,500 of the residents living outside of institutionalized group living facilities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). There are two types of urban areas that the U.S. Census Bureau acknowledges: 1) Urban Areas (UAs), which have 50,000 or more people; and 2) Urban Clusters (UCs), which contain at least 2,500 people, but less than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

I used the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition to define urban for this study. This was because the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data (CCD) only provides Local Codes for elementary and secondary schools. The current study investigates rural students who attended an urban college, so I needed another method for defining which colleges were in urban areas.

**Persistence.** There are two types of persistence: 1) Long-term persistence and 2) Short-term persistence. I defined short-term persistence as remaining enrolled at the same college or university after a student’s first year of college. Long-term persistence is defined as staying enrolled at a college or university until the student has completed his or her degree. Persisters are students who stayed enrolled at the urban four-year university where they began their degree. Students who left the four-year school where they began their degree and dropped out completely are non-persisters. Students who left their original university before completing their degree and enrolled at another four-year college or university, 2-year college, technical school, or community college where they completed their degree are part of a third category: “persisted at another university.” These students are in a third category because, although they have persisted and completed their degree, they may have different characteristics. These students’ unique characteristics might have led them to attend another university. Students who dropped

out of their original university and attended another institution where they completed their degree are part of the study's population. I chose to talk with the students who participated in my study about their experiences at their original university and not focus on their experiences at the second university that they attended. I wanted to learn about their experiences at the original urban university they attended. The second university they attended might not have been in an urban area or might not have been the same size as their original university. This could impact the answers that the participants provided when asked about their college experiences.

Additionally, while at their second university, students might have been exposed to different factors and situations that were not present at their original university. These factors and situations no doubt affected their college experiences at their new universities; it would be challenging to compare a student's experiences at their new university with the experiences of a student who had only attended one university.

### **Summary**

In the United States, 12 million students attend school in rural areas (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). While these students are staying in college for longer than they have been in the past, there is still a gap between the degree completion rate of rural students and the degree completion rate of students from other geographic locations (Yan, 2002). In the past, researchers have explored how different experiences affect whether or not a student will persist by looking at college students as a whole, rather than looking at the specific factors and characteristics that affect students from different geographic locations (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). It is important learn more about the experiences of students from rural areas because these students may have college experiences that are different from students from other geographic locations and may require the



university they attend to use different strategies to help them persist and complete their degree. This phenomenological study describes the experiences of rural students who attended an urban 4-year university by asking the following research question: “How do rural students perceive their experiences coming from a rural background and enrolling at a 4-year urban university?” The next chapter will discuss conducted research regarding the college experiences of students, the college experiences of rural students, student persistence, and the college persistence of students from rural areas. I will also introduce the theoretical framework that guided this study.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with information regarding students' experiences in college, what we know about rural college student experiences, previous research concerning college student persistence, why exploring the college experiences and persistence of college students who come from rural areas is important to, and the theoretical framework that guided this study, particularly in its early stages.

The following chapter provides an introduction to college students' experiences. Next, I explore what we know about the experiences of rural college students. I address the research already conducted regarding college student persistence; the chapter then presents some of the factors and experiences that affect whether a student persists. I also discuss the importance of studying the college experiences and persistence of students from rural areas. The limitations of past research regarding student persistence are also examined; finally, I present Tinto's Theory of Individual Departure from Institutions of Higher Education. Tinto's theory is the theoretical framework that guided my thinking regarding rural college student experiences and persistence, the initial design of this study, and the development of the questions I asked participants. Later on, I used a phenomenological theoretical framework to guide my data collection and analysis. I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

### **College Student Experiences**

One of the largest areas of higher education research is research regarding college students. In fact, in the past 60 years, researchers have conducted tens of thousands of studies on college student samples (Pascarella, 2006). A subset of this research includes studies that explore the impact that a student's experience in college has on the student (Pascarella, 2006). Pascarella (2006) stated that research relating to college student experiences is being conducted at an

accelerating rate. He notes that it would not be an exaggeration to say that more than 6,000 studies have occurred in this area of higher education research alone.

One of the most recognized methods of measuring college student experiences is the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). C. Robert Pace developed this questionnaire in the 1970s (Gonyea, Kish, Kuh, Muthiah, & Thomas, 2003). Results from the CSEQ show that demographic characteristics aren't the only factors that affect students. Student experiences and engagement also affect college impact and success. (Gonyea, Kish, Kuh, Muthiah, & Thomas, 2003). This idea that factors other than demographic characteristics might affect students prompted the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) to encourage institutions to measure student experiences and behaviors in addition to direct student learning outcomes (Gonyea, Kish, Kuh, Muthiah, & Thomas, 2003). The CSEQ is one of the few national assessment tools that collects information regarding students' progress toward achieving desired college outcomes and the learning process students go through (Gonyea, Kish, Kuh, Muthiah, & Thomas, 2003). The over 150-item questionnaire contains questions about students' background characteristics as well as questions in three specific areas— college activities, college environment, and estimate of gains— of students college experiences (Gonyea, Kish, Kuh, Muthiah, & Thomas, 2003). The norms of the results of the CSEQ are available online, and other colleges and universities can use them to compare their own findings (Gonyea, Kish, Kuh, Muthiah, & Thomas, 2003).

Other researchers conducted studies using different methods for collecting data regarding college student experiences. Kuh (1995) interviewed senior students at 12 universities to learn more about their college experiences, specifically the experiences that they had outside of the classroom. The author also explored the impact that these experiences had on the students'

learning and development (Kuh, 1995). Eight individuals who were members of Kuh's research team conducted semi-structured interviews with all 149 participants. The researcher found that out-of-class experiences helped produce positive college outcomes for students (Kuh, 1995). The experiences that had the greatest impact were ones that required students to complete tasks while working with individuals from many different groups, such as professors, administrators, and other students (Kuh, 1995). Students reported these benefits regardless of their ethnicity or sex. The effects of certain experiences varied from institution to institution (Kuh, 1995). The author observed significant gains in Interpersonal and Practical Competence in students at large universities who had participated in leadership activities. Based on this finding, Kuh (1995) suggested that it is particularly important for students enrolled at large universities to take on leadership roles. Finally, Kuh (1995) reported that the institutional context, specifically its culture and values, has a large influence on students' learning and personal development. This is because the culture and values of an institution not only affect students on their own, but contextual factors can also impact the effect of other experiences (Kuh, 1995).

Finally, Harper (2005) focused on the college experiences of high-achieving African American male students. He interviewed 32 students at six predominantly white research universities located in the mid-western United States. Harper's (2005) definition of "high-achieving" included having a high GPA and doing well in class as well as membership in extra-curricular activities and taking on leadership roles outside of the classroom. The researcher felt it was important to include both in-class and out-of-class activities; he believed that both in-class and out-of-class experiences affect admission to the top graduate schools and getting competitive jobs. Harper (2005) also felt that valuable learning experiences rarely happen to the students who were only successful in class. Harper (2005) found that campus involvement wasn't something

new to the students he spoke to. Many of the participants in his study had taken part in extra-curricular activities during high school (Harper, 2005). Participating in extra-curricular activities in high school helped participants develop the confidence they needed to pursue more challenging leadership roles in college. Participants reported that, in college, older African American students had encouraged them to participate in extra-curricular activities (Harper, 2005). Later on, the participants decided to pursue leadership roles in these organizations as a way to repay the debt they felt they owed to the older students who had helped them become involved in the organization (Harper, 2005).

### **Rural Student Experiences**

Little information is available concerning the experience of rural students who enroll at 4-year urban universities. When doing a simple Google scholar search for “College Student Experiences”, research regarding many different subgroups comes up, such as first-generation, black, Latina/o, transfer students, athletes, LGBTQ students, and even students from urban areas. While research has been conducted to collect more information about the experiences of these groups, one group that appears to receive little attention is students from rural areas. Rural students are enrolling in college, so it seems odd that there isn't more information available about rural students. This lack of research is particularly alarming because of the high percentage of rural students who end up dropping out of college.

Pascarella (2006) noted that researchers need an expanded idea of what diversity means when exploring college student experiences and the impact that these experiences have on college students. Pascarella (2006) also stated that much of the research available regarding college student experiences focuses on issues of diversity that are visible, such as racial and ethnic diversity. He believed that researchers have neglected other types of diversity, such as diversity

of values, political or religious beliefs, and social class (Pascarella, 2006). The researcher went on to say that interacting with people who have diverse values and ideas can impact college students and their development. Learning more about diverse students can help researchers develop a better understanding of the lives and experiences of college students (Pascarella, 2006). Expanding our ideas of diversity is also important to because the same experience or intervention might have completely different impacts depending on the characteristics of a particular student (Pascarella, 2006). When an experience or intervention affects individual students differently, the effect is a conditional one (Pascarella, 2006). These effects are different than general effects, which affect every student the same way, regardless of their background characteristics (Pascarella, 2006). General effects tend to receive more attention. This is harmful because researchers miss the difference in affect that an experience or intervention has depending on a student's background characteristics (Pascarella, 2006). This is why it is important to uncover more information about the college experiences of students from rural areas. That way, universities are aware of the effects an experience or intervention has in relation to where a student came from.

Although research regarding the college experiences of students from rural areas is lacking, there are a few researchers who have begun to explore this topic. One of the most cited articles about the experiences of rural students who enroll in college is by Aylesworth and Bloom. The authors' piece discusses research they conducted about the 1970 freshman class at a large state university (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) found that rural students who enrolled at the large four-year university where they conducted their study had lower levels of self-esteem than their urban counterparts. These students were more worried and unsure about what their college experiences would be like. When asked what presented the biggest problem

during their freshman year, rural students reported feeling alienated and having high levels of stress (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). These issues are different from problems such as trouble with schoolwork and financial issues, which non-rural students tend to report having (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Rural students also reported that they were lonely, had trouble navigating the large and complex university administrative system, were unhappy with their academic experience, had difficulty adjusting to the freedoms of college life, and felt misunderstood more often than students from urban areas (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Rural students also reported higher levels of stress and frustration. They often chose to escape those feelings through the use of drugs and alcohol or by dropping out of school (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Rural students reported higher levels of self-doubt and more serious personal problems than their urban peers (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Finally, urban and rural students have different reasons for choosing to attend college (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Attending college also appeared to have different implications for rural students (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Rather than choosing to attend college for personal growth and enrichment, rural students often attended college hoping to learn specific skills that would lead them to reach their career goals (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Because of this, if rural students do not believe that their academic experience is leading them to their desired career path, they may choose to drop out (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976).

Downey (1980) also explored the college experiences of students from rural areas. He stated that an important factor to consider when exploring the rural college experiences is the size of the high schools students attended (Downey, 1980). Downey (1980) reported that having a small social system in high school tends to have many dramatic impacts on the social behavior and performance of students from rural areas. The researcher stated that rural high school students

usually participated in a wide variety of activities (Downey, 1980). They also tended to maintain the same variety of activities once they enrolled at a university (Downey, 1980). Rural students were also more likely to choose to take on more difficult tasks and leadership roles (Downey, 1980). Downey (1980) suggested that students from small, rural high schools might be more willing to explore a wide variety of activities in college because rural communities valued their participation. Rural communities valued the students' involvement because there were so few people. Even if the student didn't have a high level of skill in the activity they participated in, they felt good about their participation. This, Downey asserted, is because the organization needed them and valued their presence at the activity alone (1980). Because they feel valued, students who attended small, rural schools tend to miss less work, school, and extra-curricular meetings (Downey, 1980). They are also usually on time to any event they attend (Downey, 1980). Downey (1980) stated that college size, type, and location affect the impact that a rural student's high school experience has on their college experiences. Rural students have an easier transition into colleges with social systems like the one in their home community. This means that it might be easier for them to transition into a local community college versus going to an urban university (Downey, 1980). The author further posits that a difficult transition into an urban university could cause rural students to have some dissatisfying experiences while they are in college (Downey, 1980). Finally, Downey (1980) stated that the transition into state colleges and land-grant universities might also be challenging; at these schools, students have a less active role in social interactions because of the large number of students who attend (Downey, 1980).

Downey (1980) reported that the lack of encounters with a variety of occupational role models also affects the college experiences of students from rural areas. The author argued that



because of the small number of people in rural areas, rural students aren't exposed to many career options until they enroll in college (Downey, 1980). After enrolling in college, however, students from rural areas learn more about new career opportunities. They also may change their majors more often than non-rural students (Downey, 1980). Rural students also evaluate career options differently than other students because they assess a career's compatibility with the rural environment they came from (Downey, 1980).

Felder, Mohr, Dietz, and Baker-Ward (1994) conducted a study that examined the differences between chemical engineering students from rural and small town backgrounds and chemical engineering students from urban and suburban locations. The researchers found that urban students scored significantly higher on all three of the measures used for college entrance (SAT Math, SAT Verbal, and the Admissions Index) at the university where the study took place (Felder, Mohr, Dietz, & Baker-Ward, 1994). Additionally, the rural students in this study had significantly lower freshman GPAs than their urban peers. They also had significantly lower grades in their first-year science and math courses (Felder, Mohr, Dietz, & Baker-Ward, 1994). Felder et al (1994) also noted that many more urban students than rural students came into college with AP credits; this led urban students to be able to skip some of the introductory courses (Felder et al, 1994). Rural students also tended to give their academic preparation a lower rating than their urban peers (Felder et al, 1994). Finally, rural students in this study reported spending less time taking part in extra-curricular activities than their urban peers (Felder et al, 1994). This is different from other studies that report rural students have high levels of participation in extra-curricular activities. The authors do not provide any explanation as to why they observed this difference.

Swift (1988) addressed the personal characteristics and values of students from rural areas.

He also discussed how these personal characteristics and values might affect the students' transition into an urban college environment (Swift, 1988). The author asserted that a relaxed, friendly, and warm environment often characterizes rural areas (Swift, 1988). This environment is very different from the more cold and fast-paced urban environment that students enter into (Swift, 1988). Rural students may feel overwhelmed when they first enter this new environment. Additionally, the urban lifestyle may disrupt some of the values embedded in their rural environment (Swift, 1988). This may make their transition more difficult if they are not well prepared for this shift in values (Swift, 1988). Rural students may also feel like outsiders because of their values and the way that they speak (Swift, 1988). They may also have difficulty making decisions in their new environment because they are in an unfamiliar environment and don't have the same support system that they had in their home community (Swift, 1988).

Ganss (2016) explored the first-year transition process of students from rural Oregon. In her study, Ganss (2016) used narrative inquiry to learn about the common experiences and enrollment barriers that students from rural areas faced. Based on the student stories she collected, the researcher uncovered four major themes: 1) unexpected emotional and social transition into college; 2) motivations for enrolling in college; 3) lack of social and co-curricular involvement; and 4) new exposure to diversity and consciousness of a rural identity. Ganss (2016) noted that rural students feel unprepared when they enter college, especially when it comes to the friend-making process. They also feel like they have limited support from higher education professionals during their transition and as they begin to question their rural identity and values for the first time (Ganss, 2016). The researcher noted that while rural identity is not something that is currently being explored in the literature, it should be because rural identity plays a key role in how students from rural areas experience college (Ganss, 2016).

McCulloh (2016) explored the importance of parental support of first-generation students from rural areas. The researcher used qualitative methods to investigate how the perceptions rural first-generation college students have regarding their level of parental support impacts their decision to remain enrolled in college (McCulloh, 2016). McCulloh (2016) found that the rural students who she spoke with had strong family connections and close relationships. This social capital increased the likelihood that the students would remain enrolled in college and complete their degree. McCulloh (2016) further noted that colleges and universities must be aware of the importance of parental involvement and support and create programs for college students that allow parents to have an active role in their children's education.

Finally, Morton, Ramirez, Meece, Demetriou, & Panter, (2018) investigated the perceived barriers, anxieties, and fears of prospective college students from rural areas. In their study Morton et al. (2018) spoke with 10 high-achieving rural high school students to learn more about their experiences as they begin to prepare for the transition from high school to college. When describing their communities, the rural students in the study conducted by Morton et al. (2018) talked about coming from tight-knit communities that did not have a lot of opportunities, such as jobs, shopping, and things for teenagers to do. One advantage that participants in Morton et al.'s (2018) study reported was smaller class sizes with more individualized support. Many of the participants worried that they were not prepared for college, so they would either not get into college or fail out of college if they were able to enroll. The rural students also worried about being able to pay for college and finding a new social group once they arrived on campus (Morton et al., 2018). Finally, many of the participants in Morton et al.'s (2018) study worried about the academic preparation that they received and their knowledge regarding the college application process. These students reported that geographic isolation and economic hardship

might have contributed to feeling as though they were not as prepared as students from other areas (Morton et al., 2018). The researchers noted that it is important for rural school districts to begin empowering students at an early age and create a “college-going” culture so that students feel confident in their ability to be successful in higher education (Morton et al., 2018).

### **Introduction to Persistence Research**

A topic addressed when exploring college student experiences is the impact that a student’s experiences has on whether they persist at the college they attend. Tinto (2007) noted that, initially, researchers explored the issue of student persistence from a psychological standpoint in addition to student’s skills and personal characteristics. Tinto (2007) also stated that the focus of much early research was on what the students were doing wrong, rather than problems within the colleges and universities that students encountered that may have led to students not persisting. Participants also emphasized not having many educational opportunities because they were a great distance away from colleges and universities. They also mentioned not having a variety of, if any, AP courses.

### **Factors and Experiences that Impact College Student Persistence**

Tinto (1975) and Spady (1971) began to examine other factors in addition to the students’ personal characteristics and how outside factors might impact student persistence. Spady (1971) looked at many variables such as students’ academic potential, friendship support, and family background. He suggested that the students’ family backgrounds could impact students’ persistence in college (Spady, 1971). Spady (1971) separated family background into two parts. The first part he labeled as cosmopolitanism, which included ethnic and religious background, socioeconomic factors, and the geographic location the student came from (urban, rural, or suburban). The second set of family background variables were variables related to family

relationships; these included the amount of family support that the student received (Spady, 1971). Spady (1971) also explored the students' personal characteristics, the values and expectations of the system in which they lived, how their characteristics interact with the characteristics of the system that they lived in, and the impact that the interaction between their characteristics and the system's characteristics may have on them.

Additionally, Wiley, Wyatt, and Camara (2010) explored other measures of college success including: 1) SAT Scores, 2) Rigor of High School Curriculum, and 3) High School GPA. To test the rigor of the student's high school curriculum, Wiley et al (2010) developed the Academic Rigor Index (ARI). This measure used the information collected on the SAT questionnaire regarding the courses that the students took in high school as well as the level (regents, honors, AP, etc.) of the course. Students received a 0-5 score for each subject on the measure based on the rigor of the course they took (Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2010). The researchers found a positive relationship between high school rigor and freshman year GPA (Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2010). An ARI Rating of 4 or above usually indicated a higher GPA in the student's freshman year of college (Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2010). Finally, the authors suggested that testing should occur as early as eighth grade so that the students could receive support during their high school years (Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2010).

Zhao and Liu (2011) investigated the effect that the quality of a student's high school has on their success in college. They found that high school course rigor had the highest positive impact on a student's readiness for college. They also found that behavioral readiness impacted the student's success in completing their college degree (Zhao & Liu, 2011). For their study, Zhao and Liu (2011) constructed a high school course rigor index. Using this scale, the researchers awarded each graduate 2 points for each of the 5 content areas in which they took classes.

Students earned two points if they took an advanced or honors course and passed the class.

Students received one point if they took an advanced or honors course, but did not pass (Zhao & Liu, 2011). Students who took and passed Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses got four points (Zhao & Liu, 2011). Finally, students who took an AP or IB course but did not pass earned two points (Zhao & Liu, 2011).

Adelman (1999) noted that a student's high school curriculum represents the largest percent of the resources that they bring with them to college. It also affects whether the student earns their Bachelor's Degree. Academic resources, such as the rigor of the high school curriculum, have a stronger link to degree completion than other pre-college experiences such as a student's socio-economic status (Adelman, 1999). Adelman (1999) measured what he terms "academic intensity" by constructing variables that cover 15 high school subject areas. He constructed these variables by standardizing the credit ranges for the courses (Adelman, 1999). For science courses, Adelman constructed two variables. One covered all science classes and one covered science classes that also had a lab counterpart (Adelman, 1999). The researcher separated math courses into remedial math classes, all High School math credits, net math credits (all the courses minus the remedial classes), and HIGHMATH (the highest level math course that the student took in high school) (Adelman, 1999). Then the researcher explored the credit distributions in the six core subject areas and separated them into five intensity levels (Adelman, 1999). Adelman (1999) removed remedial courses and looked at lab courses to ensure his scales also measured school quality. Points were also added for the number of AP courses that students took and the highest level of high school math that they reached. Subtraction of points occurred when the student took mostly remedial math courses (Adelman, 1999). An interesting element of Adelman's (1999) study was that all students could reach the highest level of high school

curriculum intensity and quality. Students could reach this if the high curriculum intensity courses are available to them and they took these courses that allow them to reach a high level of high school curriculum intensity and quality. This is different from other measures, such as class ranking scales and GPAs. Adelman (1999) further found that the most important factor this scale measured was the HIGHMATH because it had the strongest relationship to degree completion.

### **Current Trends in Persistence Research**

From 2009 until 2012, student persistence rates of students who attended any postsecondary institution in the U.S. dropped 1.2 percentage points (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). The following year, the National Student Clearinghouse (2015) reported that the persistence rate for students who entered college in the fall of 2013 had increased 1 percentage point from the persistence rate of students who entered college in the fall of 2012. A report presented by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2014) found that the first-time, full-time 6-year graduation rates of students who enrolled at any postsecondary institution between the fall of 1996 through the fall of 2006 had changed from 55.4% for the 1996 cohort to 59.2% for the 2006 cohort. For first-time, full-time students who enrolled at private-nonprofit institutions, like the university included in this study, the 6-year graduation rates had changed from 63.1% for the 1996 cohort to 65.5% for the 2006 cohort (NCES, 2014).

Because there has only been a slight increase in student persistence rates within the last 15 years, it is still necessary to study student persistence. This will allow postsecondary institutions to help students who are still not persisting in college. Tinto (1997) reported that, although there is a body of literature and theory available about student persistence, we still don't have a complete picture regarding the factors that affect student persistence. This suggests that researchers must conduct more studies on student persistence. Conducting more studies on

students persistence will help researchers develop a clearer picture of the factors that affect whether a student persists. Tinto (1997) believed that collecting more information regarding student persistence could better inform researchers and policy makers. Those stakeholders can then use this information when creating educational policies and organizational reform in higher education (Tinto, 1997).

Within the last 10 years, more researchers have attempted to develop an increased understanding of student persistence and the factors that affect whether a student persists. In one of the most recent books about the experiences of undergraduate students, titled *How College Works*, Chambliss and Takacs (2014) explored the experiences that helped undergraduate students get the most from their undergraduate education. The researchers addressed many things that affect students during their undergraduate careers and the tools that they gained while completing their college degree (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). Chambliss and Takacs (2014) found that the relationships students gained in college had the greatest impact on student persistence. The authors noted that finding friends in college is necessary for students to remain enrolled. Also, having friends affects undergraduate students' decisions about the courses that they take and the activities they participate in during college (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). Finally, Chambliss and Takacs (2014) stated that not only are the relationships students develop with their peers important, but the relationships they develop with their professors and faculty members impact their undergraduate experiences.

Finally, the factors that impact the performance of minority students in higher education are still not well understood (Fleming, 2012). Researchers are still searching for new ways to promote minority student success in higher education (Fleming, 2012). The Oregon University System (2011) suggested that one minority group that has received little attention in college



enrollment and persistence research is students from rural areas. In his article, Brown (1985) noted that student attrition in higher education is a problem. He reported that rural students are more likely than students from other geographic locations to drop out of college. The author found that, although rural students are at a higher risk of dropping out, they receive little attention in the field of educational research. Also, researchers have not identified specific factors that increase rural students' risk of dropping out (Brown, 1985). Based on his literature review, Brown (1985) attempted to identify factors that might contribute to rural students dropping out of college. One of the factors that seems to impact rural student persistence is high school size. Brown (1985) identified three studies that suggested that students from small high schools are more likely to drop out of college than students who attended large high schools. Although the results of these studies indicated that high school size might affect college persistence, Brown (1985) also identified three other studies that showed that high school size had no impact on the persistence of students from rural areas. In his review, Brown (1985) identified four main factors that contributed to rural student dropout. These factors were: 1) The social system of the rural area they come from; 2) The students' academic abilities; 3) The preparation rural students receive in high school; and 4) Non-academic factors, such as a lack of social interactions in high school, a disconnect between the values of their rural environment and the values and norms present in their new college environment, a cultural disconnect between their rural background and their college environment, and heavy use of drugs and alcohol. Several other factors that the author also identified included students' parents' level of education and possessing goals that are different from other college students (Brown, 1985). Although Brown's article did address the persistence of rural students, it is more than 30 years old and

might not be reflective of today's rural students. By studying today's rural students, researchers will be able to develop a better understanding of the factors that impact them.

### **Why Focus on Rural Areas?**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classifies 33% of schools in the U.S. as rural (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). When students from rural areas enroll at a four-year college, they have new experiences and face challenges that are unique to rural students. Although rural students come to four-year colleges with the same level of intelligence as urban students, they tend to have a higher dropout rate than their urban peers (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976).

Students from rural areas are less likely than their urban peers to enroll in college right after graduation (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). This is due to the belief of some rural students that all they need to be successful is a high school education (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Rural students may think that with their high school degree, they will be able to get a job on the family farm or in a factory (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). While this may be the case in some situations, it may not always work out the way that these rural students hoped. If they can't find a job, rural students may end up feeling lost, ignored, and unable to contribute to society (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). While rural students make up the lowest proportions in America of students who attend college, they are often lost in debates over college access (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017).

When rural students do attend college, they also may experience culture shock (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Several factors cause this feeling, including going from a school with very few students to attending a university with a large student body (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Rural students are also transitioning from an environment where they had known all their neighbors for

a long time to an environment where they may not know anyone (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Rural students may also feel intimidated when they get to college because of the size of the campus (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). They also may have trouble connecting with the non-rural students who attend their college (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Finally, rural students who enroll in college may experience prejudice. Additionally, other students may have misconceptions about them because of their rural background (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Charles Fluharty, the president and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the University of Iowa, stated that disdain and negative beliefs regarding people from rural areas “is the last acceptable prejudice in America” (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Fluharty noted that rural students aren’t stupid; he also asserted that they are able to perceive when other people are treating them differently because of their rural background (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Exposure to these negative beliefs and misconceptions could have a great impact on the college experiences of students from rural areas.

College students from rural areas are also less likely than students from non-rural areas to persist to their second year of college (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). This discrepancy between rural and non-rural persistence rates occurs at all types of colleges and universities— two year, four year, public, and private (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). The discrepancy between rural and non-rural persistence rates also does not appear to vary based on the student’s academic performance while they were in high school (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). Rural students have many experiences that researchers have indicated can increase the likelihood that students will drop out of college including (1) lack of quality teachers, (2) local economic climate, (3) family socio-economic status, (4) parents’ education levels, and (5) institutional fit:

**(1) Lack of quality teachers.** Many rural school districts find it very difficult to recruit and keep quality teachers (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Arnold et al (2005) used the definition of ‘quality teachers’ provided in the No Child Left Behind Act, which states that teachers are highly qualified if they have a state certification and have a Bachelor’s Degree in the subject that they are teaching (Klein, 2015). Lack of quality teachers is especially harmful to rural students because of the link between teacher quality and student achievement (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). During the 2005-2006 academic year, NY State began reporting teacher quality measures on the school report cards for each of the school districts in the state. These report cards show the percent of teachers who have less than three years of experience. They also report the percent of teachers who have a Master’s Degree plus 30 credit hours or a PhD in each school. Currently, other states in the U.S., such as New Jersey and Massachusetts, are also making information regarding the quality of the teachers in their public schools available to the public.

**(2) Local economic climate.** Rural school districts face financial hardships because of the economy of the area the school is in. Malhoit argued that the small population of individuals living in rural areas often leads to a small tax base for the school district to collect from (as cited in Mathis, 2003). This limited amount of financial resources may limit the number of extra-curricular activities and advanced courses that rural school districts are able to offer to students. As Zhao and Liu (2011) suggested, high school rigor, which includes the number of AP, IB, advanced, and honors courses a student took in high school, has the highest positive impact on a student’s college readiness. A student's college readiness impacts the student’s degree attainment. Rural students who

attend high schools that are unable to offer AP, IB, advanced, and honors courses may struggle to complete their degrees because of the lack of rigor in their high school curriculum.

**(3) Family socio-economic status.** Like non-rural students, rural students are also affected by the socio-economic status of their family (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) believed that the difference in rural and urban student retention was largely because, in general, rural students come from families with lower education levels. Rural families also tend to be members of low socio-economic classes (Aylesworth and Bloom, 1976). Students who are members of low socio-economic classes are often less involved in campus social activities (Walpole, 2003). This could impact rural students because, as Tinto (1993) noted, students who aren't involved in the social activities on campus are more likely to leave college. This is because they are not socially integrated into the campus community (Tinto, 1993). Students who are members of low socio-economic classes also have a lower degree attainment rate (Walpole, 2003). They also tend to have lower academic aspirations than their peers who come from high socio-economic classes (Walpole, 2003). The income of rural families is also often lower than non-rural families, so rural students often struggle to find ways to pay for college (Gibbs, 2000). Finally, rural students frequently aren't prepared for the economic adjustments they have to make in their new urban, college environment (Swift, 1988). Rural students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, may have financial difficulties when they move to an urban environment (Swift, 1988). This is because they are unaware of the costs associated with urban life and don't know how to budget for their new environment (Swift, 1988).

- (4) Parents' education levels.** Rural students are more likely than their non-rural peers to have parents who did not attend college (Gibbs, 2000). Bean (2005) argued that a student's parents' levels of education had a strong influence on student retention. This is because having parents who attended college led students to receive more exposure to college, which causes them to have an easier transition to college life (Bean, 2005).
- (5) Institutional fit.** Bean (2005) noted that institutional fit is another important aspect of student persistence. If students believe that they "fit in" with the other students who attend their university, and have common values and beliefs, they are more likely to persist (Bean, 2005). This means that the students' self-concept of who they are and the values they possess must match their perceptions of the other students enrolled at their university. This may be a challenge for rural students who enroll in four-year urban universities because their self-concepts and identities as rural students might not match the identities of the other students at their university and the culture of the university as a whole. Rural students might feel out of place and choose to leave the university because they don't feel like they fit in.

### **Limitations of Past Research**

The major limitation of the research available regarding student experiences and persistence is that it does not explore the experiences of students all the way to their senior year of college. Instead, many studies focused on the first-year transition process that students went through and whether the students remain enrolled after their first semester or first year of college (short-term persistence). These studies do not show what factors and experiences affect whether a student completes their degree. The factors and experiences that students have when they are first enrolled in college might be different from the experiences that students have later on in their

college careers. Because of this, researchers need to study the experiences of rural college students throughout their time in college. Also, the factors that affect only short-term persistence might be different than factors that affect degree completion. This means that researchers must more thoroughly investigate what factors impact degree completion.

Student voices are also missing from current research. Much of the research that is available regarding student persistence looks at the causal relationships seen between student characteristics and experiences and whether the students persisted. This prevents rural students from having the opportunity to share their stories. By leaving rural students and students' voices out of the research, researchers might not develop a complete understanding of everything that affects student persistence.

The majority of literature regarding the college experiences of students from rural areas is at least five years old. In the past five years, the U.S. has experienced many economic changes due to The Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016). While the U.S. economy is now currently in recovery, the U.S. population is still facing challenges due to the deep economic hole left by The Great Recession (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016). Additionally, many of the jobs in today's job market require workers to obtain a college degree (Schiess & Rotherham, 2015). Also, there have been many technological advancements in the last five years that could affect the overall college experiences of college students from rural areas who are currently pursuing a college degree. Recently, interest in students from rural areas is on the rise, and more researchers have begun to conduct studies regarding rural students. Even though more research regarding rural students is currently being conducted, even more is needed to fully understand the college experiences of students from rural areas.

Because of these changes and advancements, researchers must conduct new studies regarding rural college students. This will help us to determine the factors and experiences that affect the rural college students of today. Through such studies, researchers and practitioners will be able to ensure they are providing the curricula and support that today's rural college students need so that they have positive college experiences and persist to degree completion.

Finally, when research is conducted regarding the needs of students as they prepare to enroll in college, it is often conducted in urban and suburban environments and then applied to rural students, rather than going to rural students first (Sparks, 2019). Interventions that are developed based on research conducted with urban students may not fit the specific needs of students from rural areas, so rural students are placed at a disadvantage and miss out on the support they need (Sparks, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

During the process of planning this study, I used Tinto's Theory of Individual Departure from Institutions of Higher Education to inform my thinking and create the interview protocol. In the following sections, I provide an introduction to Tinto's theory, outline the criticisms of Tinto's theory, and discuss how Tinto's theory relates to rural students.

#### **Tinto's Theory of Individual Departure from Institutions of Higher Education**

While creating a theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education, Vincent Tinto (1993) used Arnold Van Gennep's work regarding the rites of passage that members of a tribal society go through as a guide to think about the stages that students go through during their post-secondary careers. Van Gennep, Vizedom, and Caffee (1960) suggested that researchers could apply the idea of rites of passage to many situations. The researcher believed that the rites of passage model fits especially well with situations where an individual, or group of individuals,



leaves their community or geographic location, transitions into a new environment, and then settles a new environment (Van Gennep, Vizedom, & Caffee, G. L., 1960). Based on Van Gennep et al.'s framework, Tinto (1993) suggested that there are three stages that students go through while in the early part of their post-secondary career. The first stage is separating from community that the student came from (Tinto, 1993). This may involve the student separating from membership in their high school community, their family, and membership in their home community (Tinto, 1993). This stage may be a particularly challenging time for students who come from communities whose values and behavioral norms do not align with the culture of the university they attend. These students may begin to reject some of the norms and values of their home communities (Tinto, 1993). The next stage that Tinto (1993) described is the transition between high school and post-secondary education. This transition stage may be very difficult for students, especially those who have begun to reject some of the values and norms held by their home community but have not yet adopted the values and norms of their new college environment. Additionally, the transition stage may look different from student to student. Students who come from communities that have similar norms and values to their college environment tend to face fewer changes (Tinto, 1993). They also may have an easier transition process compared to students who come from communities that are very different from the college community they are transitioning into (Tinto, 1993). In the final stage that students go through during their early college years, Tinto (1993) reported that students attempt to integrate into their new college community; during this stage, students must determine what norms and values are important in their new environment (Tinto, 1993). The students may adopt some of those norms and values (Tinto, 1993). Unlike the integration stage seen when transitioning into other communities or organizations, successful integration into the college community can be

difficult for students to determine if they have (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) noted that many colleges offer first-year programs and extra-curricular organizations that help students integrate into college life, and students participate in rituals that show that they have gained entry into these groups. At the same time, there are no formal ceremonies or rituals that help to show when an individual has integrated into college life as a whole (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto also used Durkheim's Theory of Suicide to help examine student dropout and formulate his theory of student persistence. Tinto (1975) was particularly interested in what Durkheim (1961) would call egoistic suicide. Tinto (1975) reported that egoistic suicide is more likely to occur when an individual's values do not align with the values of their current environment. It can also occur when an individual does not feel like they are part of the community they are currently in (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) argued that the same conditions within a social system that might cause suicide might also lead individuals to dropout of higher education.

Tinto (1975) made it clear that colleges are very complex systems. He noted that students are not only required to integrate themselves into the social domain of college, but they are also required to integrate into the academic domain of college (Tinto, 1975). This means students may successfully integrate into one domain but still end up dropping out because they have not integrated into the other domain (Tinto, 1975).

Still, even after considering the work of Durkheim and Van Gennep, Tinto (1975) added other factors, such as personality characteristics, educational expectations, background characteristics, and institutional commitment, which specifically related to individuals, to his framework. Tinto (1975) suggested that factors related specifically to individuals helped to explain why some people dropout of college and others do not, even if they experienced the same environmental factors.

Finally, Tinto (1993) claimed that it is important to create a longitudinal model of student persistence. This way, researchers can determine how all the factors Tinto identified can lead to different types of student drop out from higher education. I have presented Tinto's longitudinal model in Appendix B.

### **Criticisms of Tinto's Theory**

While Tinto's work has received praise in the field of persistence research, several researchers have noted that Tinto's theory does have some flaws. Bean (1981) criticized Tinto's model because Bean felt that goal commitment and institutional commitment should not be in the model twice. Bean (1981) reported that Tinto's model made it appear that students could have two different levels of goal commitment and institutional commitment: One affected by exposure to factors and experiences before enrolling in college and one that was a product of their integration into the postsecondary institution that they attended. Bean (1981) argued that students couldn't have more than one level of goal commitment and institutional commitment. Instead, Bean (1981) argued that students had one level of goal commitment and institutional commitment affected by both their pre-college experiences and their integration into the postsecondary institution that they attended at the same time.

Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) also voiced concerns regarding Tinto's theory. The researchers believed Van Gennep's rites of passage, which Tinto integrated into his theory, may not apply to all students, particularly students from minority backgrounds (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) suggested that, by using Van Gennep's rites of passage, Tinto's theory made it seem as though minority students needed to give up their culture and values and take on the values of the dominate culture to integrate into college life and complete their degree.

Yonai (1991) believed that the findings from the studies conducted, which claim to support the relationships within Tinto's model, only explain a small amount of the variance seen in student persistence. Yonai (1991) argued that the small amount of variance might be due to the unclear definition of variables used in the studies. The researcher suggested that clarifying the terms used in these studies might eliminate the variance that was seen in student persistence (Yonai, 1991). Yonai (1991) also criticized Tinto's model because it does not provide clear operational definitions of all the variables that impact student persistence. The lack of clear operational definitions of variables has led the researchers who use Tinto's model to use different operational definitions in the research they conduct (Yonai, 1991). The fact that there is not a clear operational definition of the variables that Tinto addressed has made it difficult to synthesis the research that used Tinto's model because while the studies may be using the same terms and variables, they might be talking about different things (Yonai, 1991).

Finally, Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) also raised some concerns regarding the validity of Tinto's theory. The researchers reported that, when expanding on his theory, Tinto does not use any of his past research to support his claims (Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). Instead, Tinto assumed the validity of his research and did not support his assertions with any empirical evidence (Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997).

### **What Tinto's Theory Have to Do With Rural Students?**

In his discussion regarding the stages students go through during the early part of their college education, Tinto (1993) noted that, during the first stage, rural students, as well as students from other minority groups, may find separating themselves from their home communities extremely difficult. For these students, separating themselves from their home communities might represent a complete shift in how they think about their daily lives (Tinto,

1993). In the second stage, Tinto (1993) indicated that rural students may have difficulty transitioning from high school to college because they are weren't prepared to make the transition.

Tinto (1993) stressed that student departure from college is a very complex issue. He noted that that there is a wide variety of factors that might impact whether students choose to persist in college (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) also made it clear that researchers studying student persistence should not focus on the entire student body because students from different backgrounds may react in different ways to various factors they come in contact with. Students also bring different characteristics with them when they enter college (Tinto, 1993). I hope that by focusing in on a specific group of students– students from rural areas– I can begin to solve some of the mysteries regarding student departure from college.

### **Summary**

One of the largest areas of higher education research is research regarding college students. A subset of this research that has been receiving increased attention is research on the impact that a student's experience in college has on the students themselves (Pascarella, 2006). It is important to learn more about the experiences that college students have because they have a large impact on a student's learning and development (Kuh, 1995).

Little research is available about the experience of rural students who enroll at 4-year urban universities. This is alarming because, while rural students are attending college, researchers are not collecting information that they could use to help rural students be successful in college. Pascarella (2006) noted that researchers studying college student persistence need an expanded idea of what diversity means. Pascarella (2006) noted that it was important to expand the definition of diversity because the same experience or intervention might have completely

different impacts depending on the characteristics of a particular student. By limiting the definition of diversity to one or two specific variables, such as sex and ethnicity, researchers might miss important effects that an experience had on a student. This means that researchers must include other categories, such as the geographic location a student came from, such as a rural area, in their definition of diversity.

A topic discussed in the field of higher education research for the last 40 years is student persistence (Tinto, 2007). Researchers began investigating persistence from a psychological standpoint (Tinto, 2007). Later, Tinto (1993) and Spady (1971) began exploring the impact of external factors of student persistence. Other researchers, such as Adelman (1999), Zhao and Liu (2011), and Wiley, Wyatt, and Camara (2010), also explored the impact that external factors, including the rigor of the students' high schools and the courses students took while they were in high school.

Even though researchers have spent many years studying college student experiences and student persistence, we still do not have a complete understanding of what students experience and how these experiences might impact student persistence (Pascarella, 2006; Tinto, 1997). The Oregon University System (2011) reports that we know even less about the experiences and persistence of minority groups, such as students from rural areas. Scholars need to conduct more research regarding the experience of rural students because, as of 2012, the NCES considered 33% of schools in the U.S. rural (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). These rural students may attend high schools that have limited financial resources. This could cause the schools to not be able to offer their students a wide variety of extracurricular activities and advanced courses (Malhoit as cited in Mathis, 2003). They may also come from low socio-economic backgrounds and have parents who did not attend college (Sherman & Sage, 2011;

Gibbs, 2000). Additionally, these students may feel out of place because they don't feel like they fit in at the college where they enrolled (Bean, 2005). All these factors are part of a rural student's experience and put rural students at a greater risk of not persisting in college.

The theoretical framework that guided my thinking during the early stages of this study was Tinto's Theory of Individual Departure from Institutions of Higher Education. While this framework is not specifically tailored to rural students, I believe that using this theoretical framework as a guide to help me formulate my study might allow me to develop a clearer picture of the experiences of college students from rural areas.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of rural students who attended an urban 4-year university.

I used qualitative research methods, specifically in-depth qualitative interviews, to answer the following research question:

- 1) “How do rural students perceive their experiences coming from a rural background and enrolling at a 4-year urban university?”

In addition to interviewing participants, I also asked all participants to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire prior to participating in the interview portion of this study (See Appendix C for a blank copy of the questionnaire that the participants were asked to complete.) Two of the participants were also asked to take part in follow-up interviews. I also asked five participants follow-up questions via email to clarify earlier responses.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Besides Tinto’s Theory, while conducting this study, a phenomenological theoretical framework guided my research. The roots of the phenomenological theoretical framework are in philosophy; the phenomenological theoretical framework is commonly used in the human and social sciences (Creswell, 1998). Using this framework, I explored the experiences and structures of meaning in the experiences of students who graduated from a rural high school and then enrolled at a 4-year urban university. This helped me to be better able to describe the experiences of the rural students I spoke with. In the future, using this framework could also help me to provide descriptions of the students’ experiences to individuals who are working with rural students enrolled at 4-year universities (van Manen, 1990). While using this theoretical framework, I acknowledged and incorporated the experiences I had as a rural student who



enrolled at a 4-year urban university. I also acknowledged my own views about the experiences of students from rural areas. This allowed me to focus on the meaning of the experiences of the rural students I spoke with while conducting this study (Creswell, 1998).

In the current study, the phenomenological theoretical framework was the basis for my research methods. When I first selected my research methods, Tinto's Theory helped serve as a guide to determine which methods I would use. Tinto's Theory also helped me to think about and formulate the questions I wanted to ask my participants.

### **Methodology Overview**

The following section contains a brief introduction to qualitative research and phenomenological research, the specific type of qualitative research that I used during this study, and the research methods that phenomenological investigations use.

### **Qualitative Research**

Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016) noted that qualitative methodology is research that produces descriptive data, such as the observations of the participants' behavior and the participants' own words. Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016) state that qualitative methodology is much more than a set of tools used to collect data. Instead, qualitative methodology is a way of looking at and exploring the empirical world (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016) stated that qualitative research is inductive and explores participants and settings holistically rather than looking at how a person or place relates to specific variables. Finally, qualitative researchers explore how individuals behave and think and the meaning that they attach to things in their day-to-day lives (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). While there are many types of qualitative research, such as narrative, ethnography, case

study, and grounded theory, the current study used a phenomenological approach, which I discuss in more detail in the following sections.

### **Phenomenology**

Edmund Husserl started the phenomenological research movement in the beginning of the 20th century. Its roots are in the works of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Mach (Moran, 2000). Lester (1999) noted that the purpose of phenomenological research is to illuminate a specific phenomena by looking at how the actors who experienced the phenomena perceive the situation. This study attempted to illuminate the phenomena of rural students who enrolled at a 4-year urban university. The actors I spoke to are the rural students themselves.

Moran (2000) stated that phenomenology is:

*A radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. (p. 4)*

Phenomenological research pays close attention to “life as it is lived” (Moran, 2000, p. 5) and the nature of consciousness as it is lived, rather than how it might appear or what makes sense based on philosophical tradition (Moran, 2000). Moustakas (1994) noted that there were 10 principles of conducting phenomenological studies in the context of human science research. These principles are:

- (1) Phenomenological studies look at the whole phenomenon from many sides and perspectives;
- (2) Phenomenological studies describe, but do not explain or analyze, lived experiences;
- (3) The researcher, experience, and participant are all interwoven;

- (4) The researcher's thinking and experiences are also included as data and scientific evidence;
- (5) Researchers need to carefully construct research questions guiding the study and think about every word that they are using;
- (6) An investigation of intersubjective reality is part of all aspects of the research process, but it is also important to recognize your own ideas regarding experience and what it means;
- (7) Phenomenological researcher hopes to provide true and detailed complete descriptions of what they are thinking and observing;
- (8) Phenomenological research questions place focus on meaning and promote future investigation;
- (9) Phenomenological research looks at how things truly appear in nature and in their natural world; and
- (10) In phenomenological research, meaning is sought from how things appear and gets meaning from reflection on experiences, judgments, and understandings regarding the world (Moustakas, 1994).

**Entering the field.** One of the main elements of phenomenological research, and qualitative field research in general, is getting the researcher as close to the participants as possible. By doing this, the researcher is able to describe what the participants are experiencing while they are in a specific situation (Ebrahim, 1995). To get close to the participants in the current study, I interviewed them to learn more about their experiences. Participants were initially contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. To connect with participants, I shared information

about my own background and rural upbringing; I also explained why this research was particularly important to me.

After the individuals whom I contact agreed to participate in my study, I asked them to select a location for the interview. I asked participants to determine an interview location because I wanted them to select a place where they felt comfortable. I believed that allowing participants to choose an interview location could give me some insights into the places that they identify with. If it was not possible to meet with a participant in person, I used Skype or the telephone to conduct the interview.

I felt it was very important for me to establish rapport with each of the participants. Rapport is the development of trust between the researcher and the participant and involves the researcher showing the participant that they respect them and the information they are sharing (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). To establish rapport, researchers also need to create a space where the participants feel comfortable and safe (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I established rapport with my participants by speaking with each of them as peers. I also conducted the interviews as conversations, rather than as very structured interviews. This was easy for me to do because the participants were all around my age, had gone to the same college as I did, and had some of the same, or similar, experiences growing up because of our rural backgrounds. At the same time, because I was nervous when I started collecting data, some of the initial interviews were more structured than I would have liked. As time passed and I became more comfortable speaking with my participants, it was easier for me to talk with them. The later conversations I had with participants were far less structured than the initial interviews.

**Phenomenological data collection.** When conducting a phenomenological study, Waters (2016) reported that researchers can use any data collection method that allows participants to

describe their “lived experiences”. This can include interviews, written self-reports, or works of art. Waters (2016) cautioned researchers to be as indirect as possible with their instructions; this prevents researchers from guiding participants to describe their experiences in a particular way.

I decided to use in-depth qualitative interviews while conducting the current study because I determined that using in-depth qualitative interviews would help me to better understand the experiences of the rural students who enrolled at a 4-year urban university in the students’ own words. Using in-person interviews and video call interviews allowed me to hear what the participants were saying and also see their expressions, tone of voice, and body language while they described their experiences. Observing the participants’ expressions, tone of voice, and body language provided another dimension to the data I collected that I might have missed if I had only received a written self-report. At the same time, I understand that the students may not have shared every aspect of their experiences. Certain experiences might have been embarrassing, personal, or just something that they did not want to share with me. There were also two participants who were unable to participate in either an in-person interview or a videoconference interview. I spoke with these participants over the phone, so I missed the opportunity to see their expressions and body language. However, because I spoke with the participants over the phone, I was able to listen to their tone of voice, which helped me gain some idea of what they might be thinking about while they were talking to me. Finally, taking steps to help participants feel comfortable with me may have increased the amount of information they were willing to share with me, but the participants could have still left out some important details regarding their experiences. In the future, additional follow-up studies must occur so that I can develop a clearer picture of the experiences of rural students who attended a 4-year urban university.

**Phenomenological data analysis.** In phenomenological research, it is necessary for the researcher to immerse himself or herself in and think critically about the data he or she has collected (Carpenter, 2007). To begin the process of data analysis, researchers must listen carefully to the participants while they are being interviewed and then read and reread the interview transcripts after the interviews occur (Carpenter, 2007). During the data immersion process, researchers need to identify important statements from the interviews and extract them from the transcripts (Carpenter, 2007). Researchers will then explore the relationships and connections between these statements and identify common themes within the data (Carpenter, 2007). Carpenter (2007) noted that it is important for researchers to identify relationships, connections, and common themes. Carpenter (2007) further suggested that it is also necessary for researchers to disclose how the statements and themes emerged in the final research report.

While conducting the current study, I used a data analysis procedure similar to the one described by Carpenter (2007). I include a detailed description of the data analysis procedure for the current study later in this chapter.

### **Current Study**

In the following sections, I will provide a detailed overview of the current study. This overview includes the study's context, the population, participant selection and contact, and the data collection and analysis methods. See Figure 1.1 for a diagram of the study's data collection procedure.

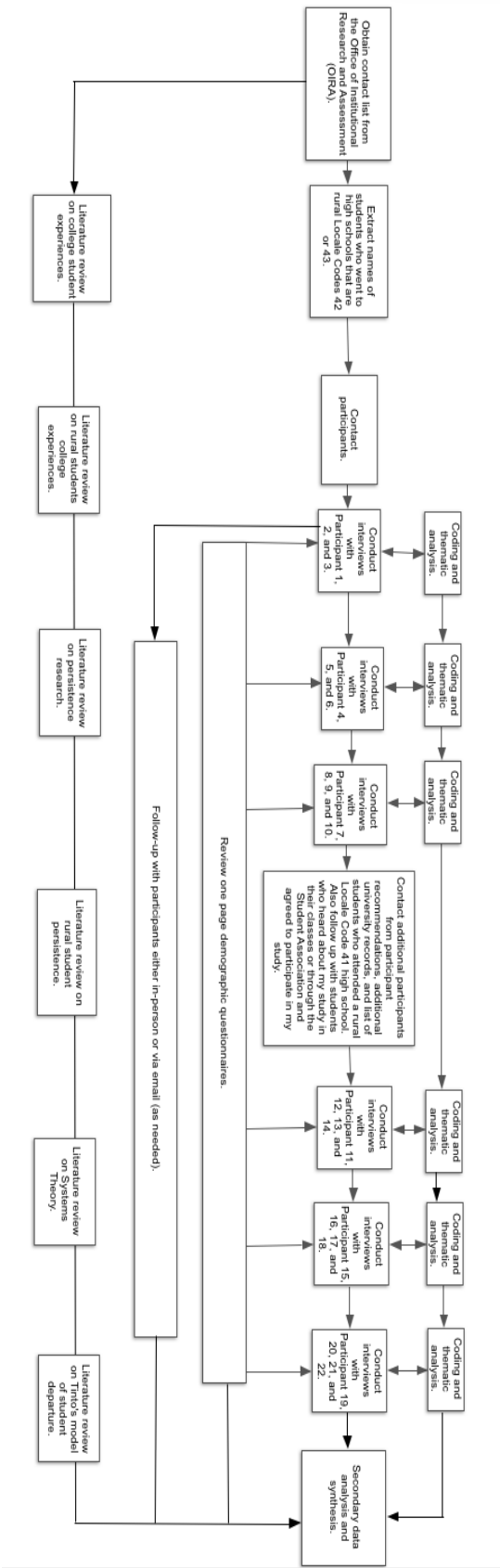


Figure 1.1 Data collection procedure.

## **Context**

This study took place at a private, urban Research I University located in the Northeastern United States. In the fall of 2015, the university had a student population of 21, 789 students. Of these students, 25.4% are members of a minority group (7.4% African American, 6.4% Asian American, 8.6% Hispanic, 2.4% two or more races, and 0.6% Native American.). Women represent 55% of the undergraduate population at the university where this study takes place, while males represent 45%. While the University reports many demographic variables regarding their students, it does not disclose the geographic locations (urban/suburban/rural) that their students come from.

## **Population**

The population for this study is all students who entered the private, urban Research I University where their study took place between the fall of 2013 and the fall of 2016 and graduated from a rural high school located in the United States. This study only included students who graduated from high schools that have a rural Locale Code of either 41, (Rural, Fringe), 42 (Rural, Distant), or 43 (Rural, Remote). When I first started collecting data for this study, I wasn't planning on including students from the first rural Locale Code, 41 (Rural, Fringe) because I worried that these students would have too much access to urban amenities, such as museums, libraries, and universities. I also wondered if these students would consider themselves to be from rural areas (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). After speaking to a few students who self-identified as rural who had attended high schools labeled Locale Code 41, I learned that these students did consider themselves to be from rural areas; I also found that their experiences were similar to the



experiences of students in the other two rural Local Code categories (42 and 43). In fact, when students self-identified as rural students, it was usually those who attended Locale Code 41 schools. This led me to decide to include students from category 41 in my study as well.

I used several methods to identify students who could participate in this study. When I began my research, I had only planned on speaking with students who should have been seniors at the time of the interviews. With this goal in mind, I reached out to the university's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) and requested a list of all the students who enrolled at the university in the fall of 2013 and should be seniors in the fall of 2016, when I began data collection. This list contained the students' names, mailing addresses, email addresses, current enrollment status, and the high schools that each of the students attended. The list I received contained more than 3,000 names because it included students from all geographic locations.

After obtaining the list of students from OIRA, I gathered three spreadsheets from the NCES website that contained the Locale Codes for all the high schools in the U.S. Each spreadsheet contained a list of public high schools separated alphabetically by state. Using the filter function in Microsoft Excel, I determined which high schools the NCES classified as one of the three rural Locale Codes. Then, I created a new MS Excel spreadsheet that merged all three of the NCES Locale Code spreadsheets together but only contained information about Code 41, 42, and 43 high schools. I used the Locale Codes to determine which of the high schools that the students attended were rural. These students were part of the study's population. I did this by entering the spreadsheet containing the list of seniors into a secure Microsoft Access Database along with the list

of rural schools. Then I ran a query that linked the two lists together and generated a new spreadsheet containing only the information from rural students. I assigned each participant listed in this spreadsheet a unique identification number. I removed all students who did not attend one of the rural high schools that the NCES classifies as rural. This allowed me to generate an initial population list. Then I exported the file and created an MS Excel spreadsheet. When I created the initial population list, I had planned on only contacting students who had attended Locale Code 42 or Locale Code 43 high schools. I kept students who had attended Locale Code 41 schools in the spreadsheet in case I needed to go back and contact them later on. Using the filter function in MS Word, I determined that there were 18 students who attended either Locale Code 43 or Locale Code 42 high school and should be seniors in the fall of 2016. At the end of the spring 2016 semester, 14 of these students were still enrolled at their original university and 4 were no longer enrolled at the university.

After conducting my pilot study and first round of interviews, I spoke with my committee and we determined that I needed to include more participants in my study. I expanded my participant list in several different ways to increase the number of participants. First, I decided to include all the students in my spreadsheet, even the ones who had attended Locale Code 41 high schools. Next, I found out about other students from rural areas who were currently at the university from the students whom I had initially spoken with. This included students who had attended high schools that had rural Locale Codes, but were not seniors. After the initial interviews, I obtained additional university records of students who had attended rural high schools. These records were not limited by grade level and contained the names of students who, if they remained

enrolled at the university, should be freshmen, sophomores, or juniors in college at the time of the interview. Finally, a friend who was taking an education class, and was also a member of the Student Association (SA) at the university, spoke about my project in his class and at one of his SA meetings and asked if anyone was willing to participate. I entered the participants who I found via word of mouth and via the additional university records I received into my MS Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet contained the final participant list.

### **Participant Selection**

When I first started the interview process, I felt that, given the small population size, it was important to attempt to interview all 18 students. By doing this, I believed I would be better able to describe the experiences of rural students who attended an urban 4-year university. With this idea in mind, I chose to contact all the students in my original population list and ask them to participate in my study.

Next, I contacted any student who an existing participant identified as a rural student, and I asked them to participate in my study as well. I also took the list of students who had attended a Locale Code 41 school and assigned each student a unique identification number. Then I randomly selected numbers and contacted the students from the Locale Code 41 list that included those numbers. I used the same method to select participants from the additional university records that I received. Finally, I interviewed any student who had learned about my study from either their class or the SA and had reached out to me.

## **Contacting Participants**

After obtaining approval from the university's IRB in August 2016, I sent an email to two participants as part of my pilot study. I selected these participants because the university was not in session and these participants' home addresses were less than an hour from the university. This meant if the participants were not in the city yet I would be able to drive and meet them closer to their homes. The email introduced the study and asked the individuals to participate in the study. In the email, I explained that if the individual agreed to take part in the study, they would fill out a demographic questionnaire and participate in a one-hour interview. At that time, I also created a password protected Excel spreadsheet that listed all the people I contacted. I used this spreadsheet to help me keep track of who had responded to my email and who had not. The spreadsheet also contained information about when I first contacted each participant, if I needed to send him or her a follow-up email, whether the participant agreed to participate, when I sent him or her the demographic questionnaire, whether I had received the demographic questionnaire, and when I interviewed him or her. I was the only one with access to this Excel database. I saved the file on an encrypted drive on a password-protected computer. Two weeks after I sent out the first email, I sent out another email to the two participants. This email reminded the participants that I had asked them to participate and encouraged them to respond. One week later, after only hearing back from one of the participants, I picked a third person to contact. I sent the participant the same email as the original two participants. This participant responded to my email within a few hours. In October 2016, I added a third participant to the pilot study. I sent the same

introduction and follow-up emails to this individual. The data collected from participants in the pilot study was added to the data collected later on and included in the final report.

In the spring of 2017, I began collecting the rest of the data for my dissertation. In early January 2017, I sent all participants (15 students), except the three individuals who had already participated, the same introductory email I used in my pilot study. I also included the participant who did not respond to my email during the pilot study in this mailing. Two weeks later, I sent out a second follow-up email– the same follow-up email used in the pilot study– to all participants who did not respond to the original email. At that time, I received numerous responses from my participants and began to schedule interviews with all of the individuals who responded to my email. In the future, I will choose to email a few participants at a time, rather than emailing everyone all at once. This is because the large number of responses I received was overwhelming. It was also very difficult to keep track of everyone’s schedule.

Next, I began thinking about the most effective method of contacting the students who did not persist at their original university. At first, none of the students who did not persist at their original university responded to my emails, so I explored why that might be. I found out that the university did not have up-to-date contact information for students who did persist. It turned out that the students who did not persist might not be ignoring me because they do not want to participate. Instead, they did not receive my emails because they did not have access to their university email accounts. Because of this, I chose to look up all students who did not persist up on FaceBook and send them a private message. I contacted five students via FaceBook and received a response from two of those students. I only contacted the students who did not persist once using this method

because I was able to see that they had received my message. If they chose not to respond, it may be because they did not want to participate in my study. I was only able to get in contact with three students who did not persist at the 4-year, urban university where I conducted my study. While I did conduct interviews with these students, after speaking with my committee, I determined to leave their data out of the current study because there were so few of them. In the future, I would like to try to contact a larger number of non-persisting rural students so that I can learn more about their specific experiences at 4-year, urban universities.

### Participants

Table 1.1 contains a complete list of all the individuals who participated in my study. This table contains the participants' age, race, gender, grade, college major, and their high school's state.

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Grade	College Major	H.S. State	Participant Number
Earl	21	White	Male	Senior	Dual Degree: Information Management and PR	NY	1
Pam	21	White	Female	Senior	Biology	ME	2
Russell	21	White	Male	Senior	Civil Engineering	NY	3
Jason	21	White	Male	Senior	Accounting and Finance	CO	4
Dinah	21	White	Female	Senior	Public Health	ME	5
Katie F.	21	White	Female	Senior	International Relations and Economics	MT	6
Tom	21	White	Male	Junior	Broadcast and Digital Journalism	VT	9
Jake	20	White	Male	Sophomore	Accounting	NY	10
Victoria	22	White	Female	Fourth Year Architecture Student	Bachelor of Architecture, B. Arch (Five Year Program)	KY	11
Rachel	22	White	Female	Senior	Public Relations and Sociology	PA	12

Wyatt	22	White	Male	Senior	Economics and Policy Studies	MO	13
Alex	20	White	Female	Junior	Psychology and History, Minor in Forensics	NY	14
Katie	22	Mixed Race: East Asian/Caucasian	Female	Senior	Biology	NH	15
Lyndsy	20	White	Female	Senior	Communication Sciences and Disorders (Speech Pathology and Audiology)	NY	16
Ian	21	White	Male	Senior	Marketing and Business Management	NH	17
Alison	22	White	Female	Senior	International Relations	AK	18
Olivia	21	White	Female	Senior	Social Studies Education, History, and African American Studies	NH	20
Kelly	21	White	Female	Senior	Biomedical Engineering	NY	21
Olga	18	White	Female	Freshman	Psychology	ME	22

Table 1.1 Participant list.

### **Data Collection Methods**

I conducted in-depth interviews that were approximately one hour in length to collect data for this study. Data collection for my dissertation study occurred during the spring 2017 academic semester. I conducted all the interviews at a time and location chosen by the participants. All the in-person interviews that I conducted, except for one, occurred at the library on the university's Main Campus. The other interview occurred at a participant's apartment. Two participants who were still students at the university could not meet in-person, so I conducted their interviews over the phone. I was either in my private home office or in a private basement office at the university while I conducted these interviews.

One week before interviewing each participant, I sent him or her a one-page demographic questionnaire. I asked participant to return it to me prior to meeting with me

for our interview. This questionnaire asked the participants close-ended demographic questions, such as the number of years that they attended the high school that they graduated from, the number of students in their graduating class, the highest degree completed by their parents, and whether they were on Free/Reduced Lunch while they were in high school or elementary school. It also contained open-ended questions about their definition of rural and the type of environment that they would like to live in after they graduate or when they get older. I reviewed the participants' answers prior to meeting with them. Some of the participants did not return the questionnaire before the interview. These participants either handed them to me at the interview or filled them out while they were talking to me. The information I obtained from the questionnaire helped provide me with background information regarding the participants. This information was also used to guide some of the questions that I asked. If needed, I asked the participants to explain or clarify some of their answers while conducting the interview. I also informed each participant of how I would use the information collected in the questionnaire.

Finally, during the interview process and while I conducted the initial data analysis, I determined whether I needed to contact any of my participants for follow-up clarification. I had conducted follow-up interviews with two of the people who participated in my pilot study; these follow-up interviews occurred in the fall of 2016. The information that I collected during the initial interviews guided these follow-up interviews. Additionally, I followed up with five of the participants via e-mail. Four of the students were contacted one additional time, and one participant was contacted twice. This occurred when I



needed further clarification about something they had said or if I had forgotten to ask them something.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Throughout the interview process, I transcribed all the interviews. Then I created a separate word document for each of the participant's interviews. While transcribing the data, I began analyzing the data using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While using this method, I printed out each of the interview transcriptions and read through them. While reading them, I identified common themes that appeared in the interview transcripts. I created code categories based on the themes that I identified. I named each code and assigned the code a specific highlighter color so that I could identify examples of that code in the transcripts. I also used post-it notes to flag specific codes and to write down notes and things that I wanted to remember in each of the transcripts. As I transcribed more interviews, I read through the data and highlighted where instances of the categories had occurred. While coding the data, I wrote memos for each of the codes that I have identified.

These memos included:

- (1) The title of the code;
- (2) The definition of the code category;
- (3) Characteristics of the code category;
- (4) Conditions where the code category would occur;
- (5) My hypothesis regarding the code category;
- (6) An example of the code category from the data;
- (7) A non-example of the code category from the data; and

(8) A brief summary of the code.

Appendix D contains an example memo.

After creating these memos, I integrated new instances of the code by comparing them with the definition and memo I had created for the code (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Next, I determined whether the instance fit in with the definition and properties that were already identified for the code that it is part of. If the new instance did not fit the definition of the code I already developed, I then altered the definition or removed the instance from that code category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once I identified the codes and the data instances into the code categories, I conducted a secondary analysis and synthesis of the data. The secondary analysis involved re-reading the transcripts and the code categories I created. I also reviewed my memos and the descriptions of each of the code categories. Once I conducted my final analysis of the data, I began to synthesize the data and the code categories and started writing the final report. Doing this helped me to provide a more through description of the experiences of the rural students who attended an urban 4-year university. Finally, I hope to be able to see how the data collected during my study relates to information that is in the literature.

### **Subjectivity- The Researcher's Reflections**

I grew up in a rural area located in the Adirondack Mountain region of upstate New York and attended the same public high school from kindergarten to 11th grade. I graduated a year early and enrolled at a local college for what should have been my senior year because I had taken all the courses that my high school offered. I was also ready for a change. After my first year of college, I decided to transfer to an urban, 4-year university to complete my degree. I completed my degree, but a lot of my friends from

high school and elementary school never finished their degrees. My experiences and the experiences of the people I grew up with caused me to want to learn more about the experiences of other rural students.

I also had to be aware of my views regarding earning a college degree and how these views impact the research I conduct. I believe that it is very important for students to earn a college degree, but other people may not feel this way. Participants who decided not to complete their degree might feel embarrassed and may not want to talk to me if I exposed my views regarding the importance of a college degree. Because of this, I was careful when talking about higher education. Finally, I made it clear that I was not pushing the students to complete their degree or that I thought less of them because they did not finish their college education.

Finally, I have a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree is in social work. My educational and interest in learning about people's stories has drawn me to qualitative research. I love learning about people, their experiences, and the relationships people have with those around them.

### **Study Strengths and Limitations**

The major strength of this study is that, by conducting interviews, I was able to collect first-hand information about the experiences of rural students who enrolled at an urban 4-year university. Interviewing these students gave them the opportunity to have their voices included in the discussion regarding student persistence.

Another strength of this study is that that I talked to current students and students who recently dropped out of college. This allowed me to learn more about the experiences of today's students from rural areas. This is important because students who were in college

five or ten years ago might not have had the same experiences as today's students. Information from past students might not be useful when trying to understand the experiences of students today.

A limitation of this study is that it was challenging to contact students who have not persisted. This is because the university does not have up-to-date email addresses for these students. Additionally, the mailing addresses of the students who did not persist were not always accurate. While I attempted to contact non-persisting students using the information provided by OIRA, only one of the non-persisting students who I reached out to via email responded. This led me to use additional sources, such as FaceBook to contact non-persisting students. While two of the students I contacted via FaceBook responded to my message, three other non-persisting students did not respond. I chose not to contact them again because I was able to see that they had read my FaceBook message and chose not to respond. This led me to believe that they might not have wanted to take part in my study. Additionally, they might have thought that my message was Spam or a fake study. I know that I would have been hesitant to respond to someone I didn't know via FaceBook messenger. In the end, I determined that I didn't have enough non-persisting students to include their data in the current study. In the future, I would like to look for different ways to contact non-persisting students so that I can learn more about their experiences.

Finally, a second limitation of this study is that, because it is using self-report data, the results of the study might not be accurate. Participants might tell me what they think I want to hear, rather than what is actually going on in their lives. They also may withhold

information about their college experiences because they are embarrassed or do not want me to know about certain details of their lives.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the reader with a brief overview of the theoretical frameworks I used to guide the study. I introduced qualitative research and phenomenological research, the specific type of qualitative research used in this study. Next, I provided the reader with a detailed description of the research methods I used in this study. I described my data analysis methods. I also addressed my own subjectivity as an individual from a rural area conducting research regarding rural students. Finally, I discussed the strengths and limitations of the current study.

## **Results**

In the following chapters, I will present the results of the current study. The results are separated into four chapters based on overarching themes that I have separated the results into. These themes include: 1) Isolation; 2) Tight-knit Community; 3) College Environment; and 4) Social Interactions.

## CHAPTER IV: ISOLATION

*My definition of “rural” is a small town in a distant area [Alison Questionnaire].*

Isolation is defined as “the state of being in a place or situation that is separate from others” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary (Online), 2018). When participants discussed what rural meant to them, this sense of separation from others was a common theme. Yet, isolation is not only about being physically isolated. Participants spoke about isolation in more complex ways. To them, isolation was geographic and social isolation, and impacted the resources available in their respective communities. These types of isolation are linked because they all have to do with the space that separates rural communities from other areas and the impact that this separation has on rural life.

Participants talked about rural isolation in terms of geographic isolation— isolation created by the separation of their communities, farms, and homes from urban or more populated areas. Distance, natural barriers, and limited access enhanced and created the isolation.

Jason illustrated lack of access to rural areas by describing the route to get to his home community:

*[My Town] is crazy because, there's the main highway and you get to one point where you have to take a left and once you take a left off that main highway, it's just a straight up climb through the valley, it's a single lane [Jason Interview].*

Entering and leaving rural areas is challenging for both rural residents and people who want to visit rural areas. Bull, Krout, Rathbone-McCuan, and Shreffler (2001) noted that

rural areas are isolated from the rest of the world by distance, lack of access to quality roads, and harsh terrain. These conditions serve as barriers that limit rural residents from receiving the goods and services that they need (Bull, Krout, Rathbone-McCuan, and Shreffler, 2001).

Along with towns being difficult to reach, Jake noted that rural towns were:

*Separated by farmland and forests [Jake Questionnaire].*

Physical features isolate rural community members from one another in the same rural community. Rather than working as a whole community unit, individual farms act as mini towns—hiring workers, making the things that they need, and depending on themselves rather than other people in the community. Lyndsy and Jake talked about how natural resources and elements of nature helped to keep rural areas separated from other areas [Questionnaire]. Natural resources isolate rural communities by acting as a wall preventing, in some instances, new people and ideas from entering the community. Nature can also hold community members in, perpetuating the values and beliefs that are present in the community.

Jason stated that his rural community is:

*Kind of like super kept away off the grid [Jason Interview].*

He spoke with fondness of his town, commenting that:

*[My Town] is probably one of the most beautiful places in the United States. Year round too! So many colors there [Jason Interview]!*

Jason felt spoiled in his hometown because of its natural beauty. When he was home, he could almost walk out of his door and be on a ski slope. The natural beauty in his community, complete with large mountains and winding roads, isolated it from the rest of



the country, so community members weren't exposed to other areas that did not contain the same natural resources. When Jason and his peers ventured out of their hometown, they finally realized that the rest of the United States wasn't as pretty or surrounded by nature.

Geographic isolation was not the only type of isolation participants discussed. Participants also addressed the social isolation that occurs in rural areas. J. D. Vance (2016) suggested that rural areas are more socially isolated than ever before and that rural community members are passing this isolation down to future generations. Social isolation also included having a limited number of community members. Participants noted that social isolation involved a lack of exposure to new people and ideas. They addressed how rural communities attempt to continue rural values and beliefs. Finally, participants described the affect that isolation has on community members.

Participants discussed population size in their definitions of rural:

*Don't have a lot of people around [Lyndsy Questionnaire].*

*An area of a certain population size that is generally much smaller when compared to other cities in the state [Alex Questionnaire].*

*With a smaller population comparatively to other areas [Olivia Questionnaire].*

Lyndsy, Alex, and Olivia expressed a common element of their definition of rural: low population density. Each of them described isolated areas as having fewer people. It seems that this is something they were not aware of until they experienced living in an urban area and saw the large amount of people who live in cities.

Participants further mentioned that limited connection to outsiders was also part of isolation. Earl commented:

*[OC: Rural areas are] Often somewhat distant or slightly disconnected from urban society [Earl Questionnaire].*

Earl addressed the disconnect that is seen between rural and urban culture and ideas. The geographical barriers to rural areas that were discussed earlier in this chapter create an impermeable wall that prevents new people and information from entering and leaving rural communities. Also, rural residents are not exposed to diversity, differences in opinion, nor mainstream media.

Katie presented a specific example of the disconnect described by Earl:

*To get to even a grocery store you need to travel to the next town over [Katie Questionnaire].*

Rural areas often lack methods of transportation other than personal motor vehicles (Bull et al., 2001). When describing what it is like to live in a rural area, Wuthnow (2013) asks his readers to imagine living in a place where there is no form of public transportation and the nearest airport is two hundred miles away. Unlike urban residents who have easy access to airports and bus stations, traveling far distances from rural areas typically involved loading up your car and then going to an urban area to catch a plane, train, or bus. Additionally, simple shopping trips might turn into an all-day adventure because of the amount of time it took to get to urban areas. Rural students described their hometowns as isolated because they lacked these amenities. Wuthnow (2013) reported that in rural areas, there is usually only one small grocery store that has extremely high prices and little selection. The nearest sit-down restaurant, Wal-mart, and mall are forty

miles away (Wuthnow, 2013). When rural community members need to shop, they have to pack up the supplies needed for the day, hop into their cars, and then travel slowly through winding roads that lead away from their hometowns to more urban areas.

Participants also linked isolation to a rural mindset. Ian mentioned:

*Well, the mindset is much narrower to begin with [OC: In his hometown.]. People have a much more local mindset in [My State] and the problem is the distance, you know, I had to drive 25 minutes to work every day [Ian Interview].*

He reported:

*That 25-minute gap isolates [My Town] in a lot of ways. It's in the middle of [My State] but it is very isolated from the rest of the community in the county area whereas [My University's city] is a real city. It's a port to different parts of the world. You see that with the huge number of refugees we have here. That just forces people to think differently [Ian Interview].*

The difference in rural and urban mindsets is caused by the separation of rural communities from the rest of the country. It is hard to get to rural areas, so new people and ideas are often not present. Ian's new urban environment has a train station, a bus station, and an international airport. It also has several highways that lead to and from major cities in the United States. There are several colleges in the city, so people travel from all over the world to study, conduct research, and work there. The individuals who come to the city bring their own experiences and culture with them when they arrive. Ian compared his hometown to his college community, noting that exposure to new

experiences and cultures affects how people act and shapes how they think about the world. The ideas and beliefs of people living in isolated rural areas are rarely challenged, so the norms of rural societies remain unchanged.

Katie, who came from the same rural community as Ian, expressed a similar sentiment of feeling isolated in her home community. Katie stated:

*I think [My High School] has a relatively high rate of students who go to university, so it [OC: Going to college.] was always the expectation. There's also a large proportion of the kids in a graduating class who just go on to [State University]. They don't prepare you for the diversity that you could experience in college. Most of the courses are geared towards if you're going to stay in the [State] schools and stuff, not much expanding, I would say [Katie Interview].*

Katie believed that her high school helped perpetuate the community's isolation. Diversity and differences in beliefs, values, and options were not addressed, so students weren't prepared for what they might experience outside of their rural area. Instead, students at Katie's school only had access to the ideas and value norms present in their community. Community norms are unchallenged and it appeared that students were not encouraged to leave their community and explore other areas of the United States.

Finally, like Ian and Katie's communities that focused on preparing students for rural life, Jason's community also prevented outside influences from getting into the community. Jason stated:

*The only commercial thing we allowed in is Starbucks and that's only allowed at like one of the newer hotels. Anything else that comes in with commercial license we don't allow in. And so that goes along with the Valley Floor coming to [the town]. We spent a stupid amount of money just to keep it free and wildlife [Jason Interview].*

Isolation meant a lack of exposure to new ideas and values that might challenge the norms of the community. Rather than allowing anyone or anything to enter the community, leaders could decide who and what they wanted to let in. This was made easier by the natural barriers, such as winding roads and forests, which separated the community from the rest of the world.

While researching more about the Valley Floor that Jason was talking about, I learned that, as you travel into the town, if you look to your right you will see the Valley Floor. After a long legal battle, the Valley Floor area is now a designated public open space that will remain “forever wild.” This means that wildlife, such as deer and elk, can live there without being disturbed by developers hoping to create commercial lots and condos. It was hard for developers to access Jason’s home community because it was geographically isolated, and community members fought hard to prevent outside influences from coming in. Preventing outside influences from entering the community was important to rural residents because it helped maintain the community’s values and beliefs. Additionally, restricting chain businesses, such as Wal-Mart, from coming into the community helped maintain the free, wild space because the animals were not forced

to move out of the area and the trees in the area had not been cut down to make space for new stores.

Because they have been separated from outside influences, some rural students have difficulties going to non-rural colleges and universities. Jason discussed other students from his high school and stated that when they:

*Get to the real world and everything that applied in a rural little town doesn't apply in a different setting and they end up coming back [Jason Interview].*

Jason further noted:

*Like, we grew up in a Utopian place. Like, yea [My hometown] is amazing, but nowhere else in the world's like that. So, like, when I'm in New York City, I'm looking at it like, 'wow, look at all this opportunity. Look at all these new things for me to do,' and I think other people look at it like, 'it's not [My hometown].' My ski mountain isn't three miles from my back yard. I can't walk everywhere. And, so, they go back, and then they get stuck there and that's when I think it's [OC: Coming from a rural area] a big detriment [Jason Interview].*

Jason also talked about the effect that isolation has on the people who decide to leave their hometown. When rural students get to college, they are exposed to a buffet of clubs, events, classes, and activities that they can take part in. The number of activities students are able to participate in might be overwhelming at first to rural students because they are not used to having a wide variety of options, but many get over this initial shock and become excited about all of the possibilities. For Jason, there was not just one path in his

college community that everyone had to follow, like there was in his hometown. Instead, he could follow his own interests and decide how he wanted to spend his free time. Jason was able to try new things and decide what he liked and was able to stop participating in an activity if it no longer appealed to him. Eventually, Jason learned to thrive in his new environment. New experiences excited Jason, but it seemed that other individuals who left his home community were not as excited and ended up returning home. A discussion of rural students' transitions from rural to urban life, and the issues that they face while making this transition, will occur in the college environment section of this report.

Isolation was also discussed in terms of the resources that were present in the participants' rural communities. Participants described rural as being "country" and painted a picture of an area full of natural resources. Participants reported:

*Rural is somewhere that...has lots of space and farms between houses. Being able to see grass and trees and woods when looking out the window, not seeing your neighbors from your window, having the room to have pets and animals and barns and space to be outside and do things like four-wheel around your house and snowmobile; it means not being in the heart of noise and people and having peace and calm around you [Lyndsy Questionnaire].*

*Rural is a place that is dominated by nature rather than man-made landscapes like urban cities [Pam Questionnaire].*

Participants frequently included the landscape of an area in their definitions of rural. Lyndsy and Pam used specific examples of how the landscape of a rural area compares to the landscape of other environments. Having a lot of space seemed to be a key element of

Lyndsy's definition of rural. She paints a picture of a wide-open countryside where residents can do what they please. A major theme in Pam's definition of rural is that rural areas are pure and not touched by humans. Rural areas that Pam described, complete with trees, wild rivers, and open wilderness, are a far cry from the concrete jungle that Pam expects in a city. Wuthnow (2018) noted that participants in his study enjoyed the natural beauty of the rural areas that they lived in. While participants in Wuthnow's (2018) study acknowledged that modern travel and technology had impacted life in their community, they also reported that certain things had stayed the same. For example, they could look out their window onto their farm and, except for the new technology that was now on the farm, it would be hard to tell if they were looking out into 1918 or 2018 (Wuthnow, 2018). While there were new crops growing in the fields, the fields that Wuthnow's (2018) participants were looking out into were the same fields that they had worked on as small children and that their dad and grandfather had worked on as well. The mountains that they looked out at were also the same and had remained untouched (Wuthnow, 2018). This idea of remaining pure and unchanged through the course of time appears to be a key aspect of rural life for many rural residents.

While Pam and Lyndsy compared the scenery in rural areas to the scenery of urban environments, Alex and Nick talked about the rural landscape being a source of income:

*A lot of the economy was based upon farming [Alex Questionnaire].*

*People partially living off of natural resources like farming, for example [Nick Questionnaire].*

Alex and Nick included a community's economy and job market in their definition of rural. They suggested that a rural area is a community that uses land as a resource for its



livelihood. These natural resources are the biggest asset of many rural communities (Wuthnow, 2018). Rather than depending on people and resources outside of the rural area, rural residents depend on themselves and use resources present in their own community. In many rural areas, community members live off the land and grow their own food (Wuthnow, 2013). Rather than relying on outside chain grocery stores, rural community members still eat the food that comes from their gardens and the animals that they raise on their farms (Wuthnow, 2013). Rural communities value self-reliance. A discussion of self-reliance and other rural community values will occur later on in this report.

People living outside of rural communities also benefit from the resources rural areas contain (Brown and Swanson, 2003). Rural residents benefit from the natural resources present in their communities, but isolation also means a lack of access to other important social resources. These resources include the latest news, new trends in fashion and mass media, new information and ideas, and opportunities that non-rural residents have access to.

Olga shared:

*Everything is one step behind; for example, trends are always late when coming to the high school [Olga Questionnaire].*

Isolation might lead rural areas to fall behind other areas of the country. As was addressed earlier in this chapter, distance and other natural barriers make it challenging to reach rural areas. Because of these barriers, the latest trends in fashion and music arrive in rural areas after urban areas. Also, the pace of rural life is slower and rural residents

might not see the need to jump on the latest trends when they finally arrive in their community.

In her definition of rural, Olga shared that there was:

*Not a lot of opportunities i.e. not many travel sports teams [Olga Questionnaire].*

Olga played soccer and wished that she had had the opportunity to play for a more competitive local team like her non-rural peers. Instead, Olga had to leave her community and go to a city in another state so that she could play soccer and have college soccer recruiters see her play. There was a limited number of people in Olga's community, so the area wasn't able to offer the same levels of competitive sports teams that are present in other areas of the country.

Besides the lack of sports opportunity, there were also fewer academic opportunities, such as advanced course offerings. Beaulieu, Israel, and Wimberley (2003) reported that academic achievement levels in rural areas are inferior to the achievement levels of students in other areas of the United States. They suggested that this was caused by the presence of inadequate school facilities in rural areas, teachers teaching subjects outside their field of expertise, and the high population of minority and low-income students who live in rural areas. Pam reported that rural meant having:

*Less opportunities for career and academic growth than an urban area [Pam Questionnaire].*

Pam expanded:

*It's like rural don't give you a lot of opportunities to figure out, like, what you want to do. I think, like, that's just my*

*experience...like, so we have the generic classes, like math and science and English and whatever, but then when I came here [OC: To college.] my friends were talking about, like, yea, we had economics and all these, like, financial marketing, like...they just had like...in engineering and all these advanced computer science stuff that, like, I never would have gotten to take. So, I think that's why I came in undecided whereas other people have a better sense of what they want to do. Just 'cause there's more opportunity [Pam Interview].*

Beaulieu, Israel, and Wimberley (2003) noted that poor achievement levels in rural areas are often linked to rural students' lack of access to specialized and advanced courses. Rural students also lack role models with college degrees and often come from families with low education levels (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003). Additionally, rural students are not exposed to careers that require high levels of education because this type of employment is not typically found in rural areas (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003). Finding a job can be challenging in rural areas; there are not a lot of employment opportunities. For example, Ian had to travel 25 minutes, one-way, to get a job in another town. Pam wished that she could have taken more advanced classes in high school. She felt that she was missing out on something that other students had the opportunity to experience; Pam believed she was behind academically because of her rural background. She was also not aware of the college major and career options that she could select from. Several things caused this. Limited funding and low numbers of students prevented rural schools from offering a wide range of courses. The courses that were available were

usually the ones that the state required or were focused on the skills needed to survive in rural areas. There are also fewer career options in rural areas. This meant Pam was not exposed to the vast number of careers available in non-rural areas.

Finally, participants discussed the academic resources available to them in their rural communities. Russell reported:

*My freshman year [OC: Of college.] we had like Calculus and they all did well because they all had taken it. I hadn't taken it in high school, so I didn't do as well. A bunch of my friends actually were able to actually test out of it [OC: Calculus.] and then also, like, all my electives in Social Sciences that I have to take or I've had to take, I had to take them here because...and all my other friends, their high school credits counted [Russell Interview].*

Coming from a rural environment prevented Russell from receiving the same academic resources as other students. This caused him to be unable to perform at the same level academically as his non-rural college peers. Russell didn't feel like he lacked these resources until he got to college and compared his high school's curriculum with his peers' high school curriculum. He had always done well in high school and expected that to continue. Instead, when Russell enrolled in college, he saw the courses that the other students in his program had taken in high school. When he saw this, Russell thought that he had missed out on the opportunities given to non-rural students. He believed that he needed to work harder to keep up and do as well as they were. Russell felt bad about himself and his background because he came into college a step behind his non-rural peers.

Victoria also reported that she was behind when it came to her academic preparation.

When talking about the other students in the architecture program, Victoria stated:

*They've had all this extra guidance I would say, that they were very well prepared. They knew so much more. That was a learning curve almost for me [Victoria Interview].*

She noted that while her high school offered some AP courses, it did not prepare her for the top tier architecture program that she enrolled in. Victoria, like Russell, felt she had to work harder than her non-rural peers to perform at the same academic level. Victoria had done well in high school, so this was something she wasn't expecting. Having to work harder than non-rural students was one more hurdle rural students have to overcome because of their background. In addition to the normal issues a student faces when transitioning from high school to college, rural students also have to deal with the transition from rural to urban life, something that will be discussed in more detail later in this report. These extra concerns lead rural students to have to pull up their sleeves, dig in, and work extra hard to be successful in college.

Finally, Kelly shared:

*I graduated Valedictorian from my high school graduating class, so I've always wanted to do really well, so I think I was worried about not being able to do as well coming from a small place in, like, a big school [Kelly Interview].*

Rural students tend to see themselves as coming into college with a disadvantage because of their rural background. Kelly worried about how she was going to perform when she got to college because of the academic preparation and resources that she had received in

high school. There was less competition at Kelly's high school because of the small number of students who lived in her area. She was unsure about how she would do in a setting with a larger student body, many of whom had taken advanced courses in high school. Although this concerned Kelly at first, she successfully transitioned from her small high school to the larger college environment. Kelly reported that she ended up being very successful once she got to college.

While Victoria, Kelly, and Russell expressed concerns regarding their academic preparation because of their rural background, Earl noted:

*I think it was pretty common to for a lot of students like me at least to, like, be in very close contact with a lot of our teachers if we did need help or we had questions about any of that [OC: The college application process.] [Earl Interview].*

Earl saw having a small student body as an advantage of going to a rural high school. He and the other students at his school built strong personal connections with their teachers, which is something that might not happen as easily in a larger community. While small schools are not something only found in rural areas, the strong bonds that develop because of geographic isolation and small population density are unique to rural life. Not only did Earl see his teachers at school, he would bump into them at the grocery store and around town. They were his neighbors, his friends' parents, and sometimes even his coaches, mentors, and friends. Earl's teachers knew his background and were there to support him on a personal level. This meant that when it came time for teachers at Earl's school to write their students' college recommendation letters, what they wrote was far more personal than what teachers from larger, non-rural schools could write.

Katie F. also talked about the benefits of going to certain rural high schools. She reported:

*I think, by the time I left, we were actually the number one rated high school in [My State], so I think I was pretty well prepared academically. There was only two AP classes and both of them were taught by my Mom, so I took both of those. But otherwise, I think that I had a really excellent education, but I'm not sure that's the norm [OC: For rural schools in her home state.]. A lot of rural high schools in my area I don't think got a lot of the same opportunities, but we had a lot of excellent teachers [Katie F. Interview].*

Katie F. discussed her exposure to high-quality teachers because of her high school's location. Many individuals wanted to live in a national park, surrounded by trees, mountains, and wildlife, so they applied to teach at her high school. Because of its location, her school was able to take its pick from a large pool of candidates. This increased the likelihood that they would hire high-quality teachers. While Katie F. talked about having access to quality teachers, she noted that her school was an exception to the norm of rural schools. She felt that not all rural high schools would have access to the same large candidate pool that her school had access to because it was in a national park. Katie F. felt different from other rural students. Feeling different from the norm is not something that is rural-student specific, but it was a notion expressed by all participants.

Ten of the participants reported that they had received a more “well-rounded” education than some of their non-rural peers. Russell said:

*I feel like I was definitely more well-rounded because when I was in high school, I was able to play a bunch of sports and, like, be in a bunch of activities, work, and do this and do that and still maintain pretty good grades. Most of my friends here, they're really smart, but they didn't do a lot of other stuff 'cause they had all this school stuff to do, so they're not as well-rounded, I don't think [Russell Interview].*

Rural residents have argued that growing up in a rural area helps rural children become more “well-rounded” (Wuthnow, 2013). Rural children have space to roam and are often given the opportunity to go outside and create their own adventures because rural parents feel that the area they live in is safe enough for their children to roam around freely in (Wuthnow, 2013). This can help rural children to feel more in control of their own lives, self-sufficient, and better able to make their own choices (Wuthnow, 2013). What these students miss out on because of a lack in extra-curricular activities, they often make up for by being able to express themselves as individuals and not feeling like they had to conform to fit in with specific clubs or organizations (Wuthnow, 2013).

Coming from a small rural school was a positive experience for Russell and his peers because the lack of students allowed them to participate in a greater number of activities. In rural areas, there are barely enough students to make a team or organization so students did not have to compete for spots in extra-curricular activities. Students were able to take part in multiple activities, such as sports, arts, and academic clubs because of the limited number of students. Rural students could decide which activities they wanted to take part in without having to worry that there wouldn't be enough room. They also



could try out new sports and activities and learn what they liked and what they did not like.

Alison and Wyatt talked about their high schools' strong focus on career and technical education. Wyatt shared that students were bussed into his high school campus to take classes at the career center located across from the main academic building. He reported that the National FFA Organization, formally known as the Future Farmers of America, was very important at his high school. His school was very proud of their chapter of the FFA because they won various competitions. Wyatt reported that the FFA had its own building on campus and stated:

*I thought that our academics were not as emphasized as they could've been because FFA got a lot from the school [Wyatt Interview].*

The values of the high school that a student attends can severely impact their academic success (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003). When students attend a school that holds norms and values that stress the importance of superior academic achievement, students tend to perform at higher levels (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003). The FFA had a lot of "political clout" at Wyatt's school and won many competitions, so they often received funding over academics and other extra-curricular activities. This upset Wyatt, who wanted the opportunity to take more advanced academic courses and could have impacted the academic performance of the students who attended his high school (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003).

Alison talked about her school's focus on the trades and reported that her school had a good trade program. She stated:

*A lot of students would go [OC: To the trade program.], 'cause that's [OC: In the trades.] where most students ended up [Alison Interview].*

Alison's high school prepared its students for rural life by focusing on skills used in career paths that were common in rural areas. Rather than preparing students for college and other more academic paths, the school continued the career norms that were present in the rural area that they lived in. While this strategy may be good for students who want to stay in their community because it provides them with the skills that they need to find a job, it might have a negative effect on students hoping to leave. These students may not have the tools needed to be successful in non-rural areas. Additionally, rural students might not be aware of career options besides the ones that are present in their home community.

### **Chapter Summary**

Participants discussed rural isolation from three perspectives including geographic isolation, social isolation, and available resources. Geographic isolation entailed separation from non-rural areas by large stretches of land that impacted how quickly rural residents received their information and the access that they had to the goods and services that they needed. Isolation sometimes occurred within rural communities because acres of land separate houses into islands in a sea of farmland and forests that led to insular communities. Social isolation involved limited access to current news and information in rural areas. New people rarely enter rural communities, so rural residents are not exposed to new cultures and ideas. When rural students go to college, they often encounter students from diverse backgrounds for the first time. Rural students may be unsure about

how to interact with diverse students because cultural and ethnic diversity is lower in rural areas than it is in urban areas of the country (Wuthnow, 2013). Isolation leads rural values and norms to go unchallenged and unchanged. Wuthnow (2018) noted that small communities, defined as less than 25,000 participants, which fits with the current study's definition of rural, take great pride in their local communities. He reported:

They [rural residents] value their local community, They understand its problems but they like knowing their neighbors and they like the slow pace of life and they like living in a community that feels small and closed.

Finally, participants discussed the resources present in rural communities. While some noted that people in rural areas have access to an abundant supply of natural resources, they also reported that they did not have as many academic, career, and extra-curricular opportunities as their non-rural peers; this led to, at times, feelings of inadequacy as study participants entered the college campus and encountered, in their view, more prepared peers. In the next section of this report, I will discuss the relationships between rural community members and the support systems that rural students have.

## CHAPTER V: TIGHT-KNIT COMMUNITY

*It's [OC: The Participant's Home Community] very like close.*

*Like, everyone knows everyone and it's very supportive [Olga Interview].*

Wuthnow (2018) reported that two of the most common statements given when people discuss rural communities are that everyone knows each other and that everyone who lives in rural communities are very similar. In this chapter, I will discuss the elements of tight-knit communities that were described by the students who participated in my study.

Participants reported that they came from “tight-knit” communities where “everyone seemed to know each other.” One aspect of a “tight-knit” community that participants addressed was having a high level of familiarity with your neighbors. Having high levels of familiarity meant knowing personal information and the history of the other people in the community that you came from. Familiarity also included knowing several generations of community families on a personal level. Olga reported that the community members are “very similar” to one another.

Olga expanded on this, saying that you could tell the locals from the visitors. This was because of the way in which the locals talked, the support that they provided for one another, and the culture that they shared:

*I don't know if you've ever heard of, like, the [State] accent or,  
like, everyone's always like [Town name said in the state accent.]  
and then, so, like, that's that culture and like they're just...like,*

*their [OC: The locals] family's been here forever and stuff [Olga Interview].*

Rather than being a group of people who lived in the same area, community members knew intimate details about what was going on in each other's lives. Katie discussed why she believed community members were so close:

*I also think that rural involve a level of familiarity – people in the community tend to know each other because they either all went to school together or their parents are all old friends [Katie Questionnaire].*

Rural community members are close and develop a high level of familiarity with one another because they have known each other all their lives. Families do not often move away from rural areas, so connections develop across many generations; so not only do you know your friend and their parents, but you also know their grandparents and other extended family members. Because rural community members do not often leave the place where they grew up, it is common for rural residents to have gone to school with their neighbors and to have known them since childhood (Wuthnow, 2018). Staying in the same community with the same small group of people enables community members to forge strong bonds that span generations of families.

The people living in rural areas know a lot about the family history and background of the people around them. Citizens become very comfortable in their home community because they don't have to explain themselves or their background. Additionally, people in rural areas marry other people within their community (Wuthnow, 2018). Because of this, rural communities become home to large extended and interconnected families all

living within the same small area (Wuthnow, 2018). Bonds between community members are often very strong. Also, these connections make the chance that two people will know each other much higher than it would be in a larger city or suburban area (Wuthnow, 2018).

Earl talked about the strong connections he had with his high school teachers:

*A lot of the times, like, coaches for teams were teachers or work at the schools, so, like, most of my interaction was just, like, things in and out of the school that all tied together with that same set of people [Earl Interview].*

In rural communities, you see your teachers in other places besides the classroom (Cerrone, 2017). They are people you look up to, serving as mentors, club advisors, and coaches (Cerrone, 2017). While talking about a teacher who served as a mentor throughout his high school career, Earl noted:

*Her [OC: Earl's teacher.] husband was my Mom's teacher. I know my Mom, like, once every couple months with run into them at, like, the grocery store or, like, whatever and they'll catch up and stuff [Earl Interview].*

Seeing their teachers and the same community members on a regular basis creates a strong sense of familiarity for rural students and the people in the community that they come from (Cerrone, 2017). Rural residents also develop a sense of comfort and belief that no matter where they turn, someone who knows and understands them will always be available.

Finally, there is a flow and routine to rural life. Time seems to pass while individuals stick to the same way of life as their parents and grandparents before them. Community members know who to expect to see where and can feel safe knowing that they aren't in for a lot of surprises.

Another element of tight-knit rural areas is the support systems that develop in these communities. Rural residents have strong connections with one another and look out for each other (Delreal & Clement, 2017). Rural residents also often show compassion to their neighbors in times of need (Delreal & Clement, 2017). This compassion appears to be more common in rural areas than it is in other geographic locations (Delreal & Clement, 2017). Katie shared the following story:

*His family's house burned down in a fire. Basically, the whole community came together and we put on a barbecue and everything. Basically for, I guess, a couple of months, people were helping to make things and provide food for the family and give them a place to stay while they rebuilt and everything [Katie Interview].*

The family that Katie described in this story was struggling and, rather than having to face it on their own, the community rallied around them. Not only was the family given material things that they needed, but also time and emotional support to help the family rebuild their life. Although people receive support in non-rural areas, the support that they receive often comes from sources that are different from the sources that provide support in non-rural areas. In non-rural areas, support is often provided by outside sources, such as FEMA and the American Red Cross. Support in rural areas is often local

and comes from community members, rather than outside sources. There could be many reasons why support is provided by different groups or individuals depending on where the people who need support are located. First of all, there are more people in non-rural areas, so they need the type of large-scale support that outside agencies can provide. The differences could also be because of the strong, family-like relationships that develop in rural areas. These relationships may lead community members to help their “family” rather than looking to outsiders who might not provide a personal level of support. Finally, as I mentioned in earlier chapters of this report, geographic isolation can make it challenging to access rural communities; because of the geographic isolation, help might not be able to come as fast as the rural community members need it to come. Rather than waiting around to get the help they need, rural community members may decide to work together to come up with a solution to their problems on their own.

Katie told a more personal story about her rural community coming to help her family when they were having trouble. She stated:

*It's definitely that they try to be there for each other, little things like my neighbors would come over and snow blow our driveway in the winter when my dad started to go blind and my mom broke her leg, so it was little things, too [Katie Interview].*

Members of Katie’s community saw that a family was in need and, rather than standing back watching the family struggle, they went out of their way to help them out. The help Katie’s family received did not help them solve a large emergency. Instead, they got help completing daily tasks that family members normally complete. If they had lived in a larger community, they might not have received this level of help because there are so



many people that neighbors do not know personal details about the lives of the people around them. Instead, in Katie's community residents acted more like family than neighbors.

Prayer and religion are another type of support that is typically present in rural life (Wuthnow, 2018). Tom stated:

*People would come out and say, 'oh, I need prayers for this' kind of, and you could kind of tell that when people said that they were expecting other people to believe in that and help them out and people would. It always seemed like if you needed something, you would contact a neighbor, a friend, something like that, and whatever it was would be resolved with the help of everybody else [Tom Interview].*

Tom talked about the importance of prayer in his community. Not only was religion valued in his community, it was the expectation that community members have a certain set of religious beliefs. It is the assumption in his community that everyone in the community had the same set of values. New values and ideas rarely entered their communities, so these norms were not challenged.

When so many other businesses and organizations leave rural communities, churches and other religious organizations usually remain intact (Wuthnow, 2018). Religion is not a quick fix for the problems faced by rural residents; instead, it is almost therapeutic and provides rural community members with a place to go when all hope seems lost (Wuthnow, 2018). Wuthnow (2018) further noted that faith and religion are more meaningful in rural communities because there are a limited number of other places to

turn. For example, it would be less likely for a congressman to respond to a letter from a small business in a rural area than a letter from a large corporation located in an urban center (Wuthnow, 2018). Also, the nearest therapist might be over an hour away; so, if a community member is feeling depressed or stressed, they might turn to their faith or to a religious leader for help (Wuthnow, 2018).

Wyatt shared that he felt that there is a greater sense of personal responsibility in rural areas. He reported:

*People living in rural areas didn't blame outside forces or circumstances when things went wrong [Wyatt Interview].*

In rural communities, residents believe that individuals should take responsibility for themselves (Wuthnow, 2018). When they cannot support themselves on their own, it becomes the responsibility of the community, rather than outside organizations, to help these individuals (Wuthnow, 2018). Community members felt responsible for the success of the community as a whole, and as though they needed to support other community members in times of need rather than waiting for help from someone outside of their community. They were a team or family unit that worked together to achieve common goals. If one community member was struggling, the rest of the people living there knew that and was there to help them and pick up the slack so that the community remained strong.

In rural areas, community members look out for one another and appear to genuinely care about one another (Stone, 2014). Jason shared:

*Your parents cared as much about all the other kids as they...you know, not as they did you, but it was that extent you weren't just*

*friends with your friends, you were friends with your friend's family, with your friend's siblings, with your friend's uncles, if they're around [Jason Interview].*

The support system that Jason had developed in his home community was more like a family than a group of people who all lived in the same rural town. Jason illustrated the many connections that developed in his community. Rather than being superficial or short term, the connections that developed within Jason's community ran deep and lasted for generations. Jason painted a picture of a web of connections within his community where everyone is either related to one another or knows each other on a very personal level. You could almost take a string to trace these connections and that string would touch everyone in the community.

Tom also discussed the strong ties that developed within his home community. He explained:

*My neighbor was my auto mechanic, and he was there to help me out of a couple tight spots with that every now and then. And that's not just for me because I live just down the road, but it's for anyone that he's met within the town or even outside in other towns [Tom Interview].*

Rural community members appear to always have people they can turn to in times of need (Stone, 2014). Rural community members are often seen as helpful, and it is common for people in rural areas to know whom to go to for the help that they need (Stone, 2014). Tom suggested that the people in his community did not pick and choose whom they helped out. He believed that they would help out anyone in need in their

community. Rather than having to take his car to be serviced by someone he did not know, Tom was able to get his car repaired by someone who he knew well. While this is not rural area specific, it is less common in urban areas where there are more people.

Over time, participants were also able to develop support systems in their college community. Earl reported:

*A lot of the faculty really are there to kind of, like, help you, and I think that's enhanced because it's so small they will just know you by default, too [Earl Interview].*

Earl noted that the community in his home college, the Information Technology School, was very supportive. Earl felt that the school was so supportive because of how small it was. Having faculty contact and feeling supported by instructors is important to rural students (Murphy, 1984). Murphy (1984) stated that rural college dropouts reported feeling more stress around faculty contact than their rural peers who remained enrolled in college. Feeling supported can often be the difference between dropping out and remaining enrolled in college (Murphy, 1984). Earl disclosed:

*I like it [OC: His college.] too 'cause I have had, like, a handful of professors that, like, still, to this day, like, know my name and, like, say hi in the hallway and stuff like that. Which just happens because it's small. It's nice to, like, even though you're in a bigger place here, it's nice to be in, like, the [Information Technology School] and still run into people without it being too much [Earl Interview].*

Earl was able to create a rural-like environment within the large, urban college he attended. It appeared that the Information Technology School community embodied some of the traits of a rural community, such as containing a small number of people and knowing everyone in the community. Because of the limited number of people in the Information Technology School and in his specific major, Earl took classes with the same group of students throughout college. This enabled stronger, long-term connections to develop among teachers and students. Earl was a senior at the time of the interview, so he saw these long-term connections develop versus some of the other participants who were in lower grades and just entering the campus community.

While participants did find support systems in their new campus community, some of them still struggled at first to find support systems and noted these new support systems were dramatically different from the ones that they had left behind. Cerrone (2017) noted that rural students look to their parents and hometown support systems when searching for emotional and financial support. This was true for the participants in the current study. Katie, who was a senior in the largest college on campus, The College of Arts and Sciences, discussed some of the differences between her support systems back home and the ones that she had developed in college. She noted:

*I would say back home the community feels more like emotional support over you whereas here, not that they're not supportive, but everything is centered around academics so it's kind of, "How can we help you to feel good about yourself so that you can finish this?" rather than "How can we make your life better and help you develop as a person?" [Katie Interview]*

Katie described how the support systems in her two communities were different from one another. First, she talked about the emotional support she felt at home. Living in the community for so long and knowing the other community members so well could have fostered this type of support. Rural students spend their whole lives building relationships with the other people living in their community (Cerrone, 2017). These relationships can be very useful. In times of stress, rural students can turn to their hometown support system for guidance and someone to listen to them (Cerrone, 2017). Later, Katie talked about the support she received in college being academic-focused rather than something more personal. This makes sense because she was in a university setting. This setting has a specific goal: getting students to complete their degrees. Also, Katie's professors did not live near her or know her family or her family's history.

Rural students are often intimidated by the size of their lecture hall classes (Cerrone, 2017). This leads rural students to feel uncomfortable approaching their professors during class and trying to develop connections with them (Cerrone, 2017). Because the professors do not know students on a personal level, rural students, such as Katie, are not able to develop the same type of connections that rural students develop with their teachers and peers at home.

Kelly reported that the support system she had at home was different from the support she received at college. Kelly stated:

*There's just not a lot to do, like, once you've been away, and I just feel like the people here just, like, support you in different ways. Back home, not that they don't support you, but they just kind of don't see things the same way. So I feel like, they more of, like I*

*said, want to stay home, don't really go anywhere else, where, like, with me, I'm kind of like, ok, I want to see as many places as I can and, like, different experiences. So, it's, like, different, like, viewpoints, kind of [Kelly Interview].*

She reported:

*I feel like a lot of people here support that and want you to, like, kind of have opportunities to, like, see things and, like, do different things [Kelly Interview].*

The people who Kelly encountered at the university were more supportive of her decision to search out new experiences and explore new places. Like Katie, it seemed that the differences in the support Kelly received had to do with the goals of the environment that she was in. Kelly's home community members took steps to remain close and continue the deep-rooted connections that had developed over multiple generations. When Kelly left home and entered college, she received a new type of support that focused on new experiences and academic and career success.

Tom stated:

*And then just being without my support system back at home. My parents and sister, we're a very close family, and my friend group was very close all through high school and a bunch of my friends from high school were friends from [School], my Elementary School, that I've known since I was pretty much born. So, for the first time in my life, I was kind of without anyone around who had*

*been a friend of mine of a support system of mine for my first 18 years [Tom Interview].*

For the first time in his life, Tom was away from the support system he had developed in his home community. While all students deal with leaving their support systems at home, urban and suburban students may have had to develop new support systems more recently than rural students. Urban and suburban students usually transition from different elementary schools, to middle school, to high school and made new support systems in each new school that they attended. Rural students, like Tom, may have gone to the same school with the same students all their lives. Because of this, they developed strong connections with the few students who they went to school with, but never had the experience of leaving those support systems behind until they went off to college. This is something that Tom faced, and it potentially added extra stress to the already stressful transition into college and from rural to urban life.

While leaving behind the safety net in his rural community intimidated Tom, spreading her wings excited Pam. Pam had a different perspective on leaving the support systems she had at home. Pam reported:

*Being here, I've learned how to do things on my own that I wouldn't have learned how to do in a rural community 'cause you just call somebody that you know. I just remember in high school one time, like, I don't even know why, but I ran out of gas, like, just something stupid and simple like that, but I didn't panic. There was never, like, a moment when I felt unsafe or like something bad could happen. I just felt...even though my Dad...my parents*



*weren't home or whatever, I could just call anybody that I knew and they would come help me out. Whereas, if that happened here, like, I'd have my [College Name.] friends, but it's not the same as having a whole kind of community help you out. Like, I was at the UPS store by Tops and my car wouldn't start. I have an automatic start and ran out of battery. It was not, like, a big deal, but it was just, like, I don't know who to call, like, I don't know what to do, do I have to call like a whole tow company? I don't know how to deal with some of that stuff. So, that's definitely, like, you're used to knowing everybody when you need help and coming here, you have to figure it out on your own [Pam Interview].*

Through new experiences and interactions, rural students like Pam develop and grow as individuals (Cerrone, 2017). Pam argued that the support systems she had at home did not help her develop coping strategies because she knew that if she needed assistance she could always turn to someone in her community for help. At college, she didn't know everyone, which forced her to learn how to solve problems on her own for the first time. Although rural students may enjoy having the close-knit community unit that coming from a rural area provides, entering college allows them to realize that they are able to live on their own and develop new support systems in a larger, more diverse environment (Cerrone, 2017).

Finally, the support systems that the rural students developed influenced their decision to remain enrolled in college.

*I immediately tried to find people who I would be able to ask for help for something or tell them something if something came up, and again, I was very lucky to find that right away. And that helped ease the transition, I guess, I would say [Tom Interview].*

Tom actively sought out the support that he needed to be successful in his new environment. He also looked for ways to develop, rural-like connections at their university by joining small clubs that helped make the university seem smaller. While some of the connections may have been different from his home community support systems, they appeared to be valuable because Tom persisted at the university where he first enrolled.

Another aspect of rural “tight-knit” communities that participants addressed was the values present in the areas they came from. In rural areas, it is common to have a set of clearly established values that are shared within the community (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). These values are typically the basis of social norms in rural communities (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). Community members assume that others living in their community will hold the same values that they possess, which leads them to trust other community members and depend on them to help achieve common goals within the community (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

Wyatt described the values of his home community as “bedrock values,” which he explained were “more traditional” values. When asked to explain what he meant by more traditional values, Wyatt stated:

*A lot more traditional when it comes to everything from marriage to abortion and everything else [Wyatt Interview].*

Not only is there stability of people living in rural areas, there is also stability of values in rural communities. The values currently present in rural locations are the same values that have been there for many years; values are passed down from one generation to another (Stone, 2014). Relationships with both blood family and community family are valued in rural life (Stone, 2014). This leads younger generations to take pride in the fact that they hold the same values as the generations of community members who came before them (Stone, 2014).

Russell stated that the individuals in his community were:

*Definitely more conservative values, beliefs. I guess like “old school beliefs” as far as things go [Russell Interview].*

Russell thought that conservative or old-school values were values associated with religion and maintaining the family unit. Maltzan (2006) reported that an important aspect of rural culture is religion and a shared set of strong moral values. These values can include abstaining from drugs, alcohol, and sex and being involved in the church community (Maltzan, 2006). Maltzan (2006) stated that when rural students arrive at college, they try to connect with people who share the same values they possess. If rural students do not find people who share their values, they are less likely to persist because they are used to being surrounded by a community full of people who have common beliefs (Maltzan, 2006).

Alison spoke about the values she observed in her home community:

*Very close-minded. It's very, very Republican town. [Celebrity]'s from my hometown. You know about that. A lot of people they ... It's really the last frontier. They have the mentality of marry young,*

*have kids. The mom stays at home. The dad goes off and works construction, or builds cars. Not a lot of people leave, stay for college. They'll go to [State College], or they'll go to a community college. It's not very common for students to graduate and leave the state [Alison Interview].*

Like Alison, a participant in Stone's (2014) study described the people living in her community as closed-minded. This was seen as a disadvantage of growing up in a rural area—that people in rural communities are closed-minded because they hadn't had the opportunity to experience new things (Stone, 2014). Alison considered her community's values to be traditional. Behaviors considered normal included marrying at a young age, having children early, and having the man of the house work while the wife stays home to take care of the children. From the way that Alison talked about these values and called her community “the last frontier,” it seemed as though she did not share the same values as other members of her community. She noted that it was uncommon to move away from her community or even leave for a short time to go to college. Instead, community members appeared to want to live in the community their entire lives. This could be because residents feel safe in their home community because values and norms rarely change. People know what to expect when it comes to the actions and behaviors of others, so there are few surprises, and they are not shocked by what goes on.

Coming to college exposed participants to new ideas and values. They also began to realize what their own values were. Alex explained:

*I realized out of high school and in college more about how liberal I actually am, I think. So, my dad's conservative as well, and my*

*mom's half-and-half, kind of. But I kind of always grew up in a situation where everyone's republican, sort of, because of the military, or nobody really talked about it so it wasn't brought up a lot [Alex Interview].*

She reported:

*I don't consider myself crazy liberal, but I'm definitely crazy liberal compared to people at home.*

Sometimes, individuals do not fully recognize their own values until they are placed in opposition to another set of values. Alex was not exposed to values or ideas that varied from the ones held by her rural community members. When she enrolled in college, she encountered a wide range of diverse values and ideas. While in college, Alex finally had the opportunity to talk about her views regarding political and social issues. Talking about politics and values allowed Alex to think about her beliefs and ideas. Moreover, exposure to new values and beliefs helped her to form her own values and beliefs— some of which were now different than the values of her home community. Through these new experiences, Alex grew as a person and began to think critically instead of accepting her community's values and beliefs without question. This led her to develop her own views on life and the way that the world worked.

Wyatt shared:

*I have a couple of friends that we put together a political dialogue where we talk about conservative versus liberal. A lot of times we get down to that, it's like basically just like a personal responsibility. One of my friends is a sociologist, a really good*

*sociologist. We fundamentally disagree on what are some of those responsibility, how much agency they have over their actions and things like that [Wyatt Interview].*

Wyatt also interacted with new ideas and values in his college community. His interest in the values he encountered led him to find ways to talk about these differences with other people. Wyatt seemed excited to learn about new ideas and values. Rather than dismissing them because they were new and different, Wyatt took additional measures to learn more about the values present in his campus community. This is different from other rural residents, especially those who stayed in their rural community, because they were generally not as flexible or as open to new ideas as Wyatt appeared to be. Wyatt's openness to new ideas and values might be one of the reasons why he left his rural community and why so many of his friends stayed.

Finally, participants shared what it was like to come home after experiencing new values and ideas. Alison reported:

*It's just frustrating to see these people I know have so much potential and not doing anything with their lives. It's just annoying, and all they do is they'll go out to the bar six nights a week [Alison Interview].*

Alison talked about reentering her home community during school breaks and being re-immersed in the values shared by the people living there. Alison expressed frustration because of the lack of value placed on higher education in her home community. Alison stated:

*It's the highest meth per capita in the U.S. It's a fun fact about my town. There's not a lot going on there. Most my friends, they either dropped out of high school, they're married with kids right now, or they got addicted to drugs. That's why I wanted to get out. My hometown is not pleasant- [Alison Interview].*

Alison was unhappy in her home community and found an escape from her community by going away to school. She did not approve of some of her community's values and activities, such as drug use, that community members took part in. In the end, this unhappiness was one of the primary reasons why she decided to leave her rural hometown and go to an urban, out-of-state college. Leaving home to pursue their college degree is common for the best and brightest rural students (Maltzan, 2006). While little is known about rural students' experiences at postsecondary institutions, one thing is clear: if rural students leave to pursue a college degree, it is very unlikely they return to their home communities (Maltzan, 2006). This "Brain Drain" puts rural communities at a great disadvantage for myriad reasons (Maltzan, 2006). Rural parents who never went to college struggle to provide the support that their children need to prepare them for higher education (Maltzan, 2006). Rural students also lack access to role models who have obtained college degrees (Maltzan, 2006). Lack of exposure to these role models puts rural students at greater risk of dropping out of college and choosing to forgo college altogether (Maltzan, 2006).

Alison noted:

*I don't talk about anything to do with politics or liberalism, or anything. Because, they're right, you're wrong. I don't want to argue with anyone about that [Alison Interview].*

Alison had to learn what was acceptable for her to talk about while she was at home and what topics she needed to avoid. Values and behaviors that went against the norm of her community were not tolerated as openly as they were on her college campus. Alison appeared to be more flexible and accommodating of new ideas than the other people living in her home community. Rather than facing ridicule and conflict, she rarely discussed the new ideas that she had learned in college. What she was learning in school excited Alison, and she wanted to share this new information with her friends and family back home. She talked about the difficulty she faced trying to bridge the divide between rural and urban values.

Like Alison, Alex shared:

*As soon as you express your feelings or your thoughts about something that may be different or considered radical ... Like, someone literally said I was a radical at home, and I was like, "Because I voted for Hillary Clinton I'm a radical? Come on, people." So that's just very strange" [Alex Interview].*

Alex enjoyed learning about diverse values and ideas. Discovering that other community members were not as open to new values and ideas as she was, and that what she was learning was not accepted in her home community, surprised Alex. Instead, when Alex went home, people thought her new ideas were radical. She felt out of place in the area she had once considered very secure.



Alex noted that her community was accepting, until:

*You express your feelings, or your thoughts, or try to have deep conversations about race and all of this stuff [Alex Interview].*

Alex reported:

*Like, right now I'm taking religion and bodies of color class; absolutely love it; super interesting; very, very interesting. I went home a couple of weekends ago and I was talking about it to some of my friends and they were like, "Why are you taking that class?" And I was like, "Because I enjoy it. Because it's interesting." [Alex Interview]*

The people in Alex's community did not understand why anyone would want to learn about new ideas and values. Alex talked about her rural community having a specific set of values; these values have been in place for a long time and are the norm in her community. Because her community was located in an isolated area, few new values and ideas enter the community and challenge the norms of Alex's rural hometown. When Alex left her hometown to go to college, she experienced new values and ideas. Very few people from Alex's town leave, so it is difficult for them to understand why anyone would want to leave. Alex is one of the few sources of new ideas and values to enter the community, and her new ideas challenge some of the norms currently in place. Because Alex's ideas are different from the rural norm, community members may avoid talking about them and may not accept them. Alex felt separated from her home community because of her new values. At the same time, however, she still held a lot of her home community's values, so she did not completely fit in with the people at her college. Alex

was not quite sure where she fit and struggled to find a balance between the old and new values and ideas.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the major aspects of what participants described as “tight-knit” communities. These aspects include shared values and beliefs, a high level of familiarity amongst community members, and the strong support systems that are present in “tight-knit” communities. In addition to discussing aspects of their home communities, participants also compared the rural environment they came from with the new college environment that they entered. When rural students are able to develop connections with their professors that are similar to the connections they had with their high school teachers, they tend to like the classes better than courses where they are unable to develop a bond with their professors (Cerrone, 2017). If rural students feel supported by the faculty at their college or university, they are more likely to persist (Murphy, 1984). Additionally, when students in general develop strong connections with the people around them, and have significant experiences with their college peers, they are more motivated to want to learn and to stay enrolled at the college that they attend (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014).

While some participants struggled to leave behind the safety and comfort of their home communities, they became excited by the new experiences and values they encountered in college. Leaving home helped participants to grow and form their own values and ideas. They also realized that they were able to take care of themselves and find ways to get the help they needed on their own. The next chapter examines the

participants' transitions into their college environment and the urban area that surrounded it.

## CHAPTER VI: COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

*People kept telling me, like, you need to be aware of your surroundings, like, you need to make sure you're locking your door. I don't lock my doors at home. I've...that's not a thing [Dinah Interview].*

The quote above provides just one example of an adjustment rural students have to make when they enroll at a college or university in an urban environment. For rural students like Dinah, not only were they facing a transition from high school to college, they were also learning how to navigate urban life and the challenges present in their new surroundings. The following chapter discusses the experiences that the rural students who I spoke with had while transitioning into the urban environment in which their college was located.

When rural students started to attend college, they were close to urban amenities for the first time. Dinah shared:

*[OC: When she was in her hometown.] If you wanted to go shopping, you had to drive 45 minutes to get to, like, the closest, like, malls. If you wanted to go to the movies, that was another, like, 20 minutes away driving [Dinah Interview].*

Dinah concluded:

*I can't just be, like, "oh, I'm gonna just walk downtown and just, like, go to the shop" or "I'm going to go do this." Now it's like, oh, I want to go to the mall...let me drive to [City], which is, like, an hour and fifteen minutes [Dinah Interview].*

Olga had a similar experience when she left her rural community. She reported:

*For me, to, like, go shopping, you have to drive at least, like, 30 minuets to get to, like, T.J. Max and then you have to drive an hour to get to, like, a mall, so it's, like, really cool, like, having the mall right here and, like, a movie theater that has, like, real movies when they come out [Olga Interview].*

One of the benefits students from rural areas experience when they move to an urban environment is the convenience of being close to local stores and entertainment (Heinisch, 2018). Many rural students find that everything they want is within close proximity for the first time in their lives, and that they have easy access to anything that they need (Heinisch, 2018). Dinah and Olga talked about the differences between going to the mall or the movies in their home communities versus what it was like to shop in an urban area. This ties into the previous idea of isolation.

The rural areas that Dinah and Olga came from were geographically isolated. As noted in Chapter Four of this report, isolation made traveling to other communities a time-consuming process. Travel usually involved packing up their cars and setting off on a full-day trip instead of a five-minute drive to the retail store. Participants were also socially isolated because big-box stores and chains rarely enter, and are sometimes even blocked out of, rural communities. Day-to-day activities that urban people take for granted, like going shopping or other forms of entertainment, took a lot of time and planning. This is because they had to travel far distances to access these amenities. Since moving to an urban area, Dinah and Olga learned that not everyone has to travel as far as they did to go shopping or out to dinner. Instead, residents of urban areas are often able to

walk or take public transportation. Rural students might not have realized what they were missing until they left their rural communities and had easy access to stores and chains.

The ways in which people get around was another adjustment that participants in the current study had to make. Earl spoke about his experiences getting around New York City, where he completed an internship, and in his college community. He stated:

*You don't have to drive everywhere...being able to walk out your door and have anything you need within, like, five or ten minutes is huge [Earl Interview].*

Moving to the city opened Earl's eyes to new amenities, all of which were waiting for him right outside of his door. This was a far cry from the long drive it took to access amenities, such as shopping, while living in a rural area.

Russell discussed navigating public transportation for the first time in an urban environment. He reported:

*If I'm taking the bus, I've got to make sure that it's going exactly where I need to go, like, not even a little bit a ways, because I don't want to get myself lost and not know where I am, so that's never good [Russell Interview].*

Russell talked about the importance of being careful while navigating public transportation. Russell felt very safe in his rural community and had to learn to be careful where he was going in the city. He also learned the importance of taking extra safety precautions, such as locking your door or walking in groups.

Katie spoke about getting used to the noise in the city.

*The noise was, at first, a lot to get used to and all the sirens and fire trucks and everything. That was disturbing my sleep a little bit early on, but now I've gotten pretty used to it [Katie Interview].*

When Katie moved to the city, she had to adjust to the noise and lights in her new environment. Urban environments tend to be unfriendly, harried, and hurried (Swift, 1988). Urban residents tend to have faster language patterns and mannerisms that are very different than those of rural students, which cause rural students to stand out and feel out of place in an urban environment (Swift, 1988). While adjusting to the noise and lights of the city could seem like a small change, it was another thing rural students dealt with as they entered college.

Besides the extra noise in their new environment, rural students also had to adjust to the greater number of people living in urban areas. Rural students can find it hard to be in such a crowded environment and may struggle to find other students who are similar to them and come from rural backgrounds (Heinisch, 2018). Earl stated:

*Sometimes it sucks, like being around people this much [Earl Interview].*

He reported that, after coming from an environment where there weren't a lot of people, he found that there was sometimes "too much going on" [Earl Interview]. As noted earlier in this report, isolation leaves people living in rural areas with fewer entertainment and activity options. At first, the number of people that he encountered and all the entertainment options available were overwhelming. For some rural students, researching the clubs and activities that are available to them in the city before they arrive can help to make all of the options less intimidating (Swift, 1988). While Earl seemed overwhelmed

at first, he later noted that he preferred having too much going to being at home and having nothing to do.

The participants also had to change some of their behaviors to meet the needs of their new urban environment. Dinah reported:

*[OC: Dinah also learned.] Don't make eye contact with people while you're walking [Dinah Interview].*

When Dinah moved to the city, she had to learn new behaviors that went against the behavioral norms of her home community. Not being able to make eye contact with the people she met on the street new to Dinah. It took some getting used to because, in the rural area that she grew up in, she had learned to smile at someone when she walked by him or her. Dinah also had to worry about people coming into her house and taking her possessions. For the first time in her life, Dinah needed to lock her door. She also learned that there were areas of the city that were unsafe for her to go. This was very different from her home where she could travel wherever she pleased.

Katie described some of the differences between her behavior at school and in her home community.

*Here I walk a lot more and then it's the vigilance and the don't go out alone at night, which is different [Katie Interview].*

Not only did Katie have to get used to walking everywhere she went, she had to learn what areas were safe to walk through. Katie also realized it was safer for her to have people around her when she walked around the city. In rural areas, people look out for one another and there is always someone there to protect you (Maltzan, 2006). Because there are so few people in rural areas, when something seems out of the ordinary or



wrong, someone will usually spot it and prevent anyone from becoming harmed (Maltzan, 2006).

Wyatt had to change some of his usual behaviors when he moved to an urban environment. Wyatt stated:

*I wanted to carry a knife every day on campus like I did in high school. Not into school, but during the summer when I was just working and stuff, I carried a knife every day, things like that. That was frowned upon, so I didn't do that [Wyatt Interview].*

In Wyatt's home community, carrying a pocketknife was normal and helped make daily tasks, such as housework and hunting, easier. Wyatt never got in trouble at college for carrying a pocketknife, but he learned that carrying one around campus was not something that was typically done. Also, he realized that you could get into legal trouble if you did carry a knife and were caught. This illustrates a difference between urban and rural values and norms. Carrying a pocketknife in a rural area is acceptable because it helps residents complete daily tasks; In urban areas, a pocketknife isn't needed for work and is perceived as a weapon. Wyatt went on to report:

*Going from a highly conservative area to a lot more liberal area was a lot different. I watch my words really carefully and things like that. I guess, that would probably be the biggest adjustment. It was just the political shift.*

Wyatt addressed the political and cultural differences that he saw when he moved to the city. The political views and beliefs that are often found in rural areas are very different than the ones most commonly seen in cities. Rural students must learn how to navigate

this new political scene and what is acceptable for them to discuss and say in their new environment.

Alison also noted that she had to change the way that she dressed to fit in her new environment. She stated:

*Coming here, people dress really trendy. I wasn't used to that. My roommate, now, my sophomore/ junior year, she always took me shopping and dressed me ... She [OC: Told me.], "You need to fit in." [Alison Interview]*

Not having the same clothing as the other people in their new environment can make students from rural areas feel out of place (Heinisch, 2018). Things that were acceptable and seen as the norm in their hometowns, like wearing boots and being covered in mud from the barn, can cause people in urban areas to stare at rural students who are not wearing name brand clothing and business attire that is more typically seen in an urban environment (Heinisch, 2018). Some rural students may feel badly about the way they look, while others may embrace their rural dress, even in their new urban environment, and wear their cowboy boots with pride (Heinisch, 2018). Alison was not bothered by the fact that her roommate thought that it was important for her to dress in a certain way to fit in. Instead, it surprised her because needing to dress in a particular way and keeping up with the latest trends was not something that occurred in her hometown. Isolation led her town to not have access to the latest fashions. Also, while dressing in a stylish manner appears to be something valued in urban areas, it is not valued as much in rural areas.

Finally, Alison discussed what it was like to go back home after spending time living in an urban area:

*It's really hard being able to bridge what you learn here and also not be construed at home as someone who is ... I don't know.*

*Someone who just doesn't know what they're talking about. Who's just liberal and who's dumb [Alison Interview].*

Alison not only had to face challenges transitioning into urban life, but she also had to readjust to living in a rural environment when she went back home. The education and income levels of individuals living in rural areas tend to be much lower than in other areas of the United States (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003). The limited number of people in rural areas who went to college prevents rural students from having as many opportunities to interact with people who have a college degree. Alison was a first-generation college student and wasn't exposed to many people in her community who had gone to college. She had to learn what was ok for her to share about her life at college and what she was learning and what she had to keep to herself because it did not align with the values and beliefs of her home community. After seeing new ideas and ways of thinking, rural students may develop values and beliefs that are very different from the values and beliefs shared by members of their rural community (Cerrone, 2017). Alison's values and beliefs had changed, so they no longer fit in with rural norms. Cerrone (2017) found that when rural students re-enter their home community after being away at college, they may become emotionally or financially cut-off by their families because of their new values, ideas, and beliefs. Like other rural students, Alison had to navigate how her new values and beliefs fit in her community. She also had to deal with how the people living there might perceive her and her new values and beliefs.

While rural students are navigating their new urban environment, they are also learning about life on a college campus. Russell stated:

*I remember my freshman year; I didn't ever go to the library.*

*'Cause I was like, "oh, I can work in my room. I can't work in my room, are you kidding me, I still can't work at home." So, I wouldn't do that, I wouldn't ever go to office hours [Russell Interview].*

Russell described something that he had to learn about himself after he enrolled in college. He talked about realizing that he needed to go to the library instead of doing his homework at home. Learning new study habits is not something that is specific to rural students, but rural students might be less likely than their non-rural peers to go to the library. They are less likely to go to the library because many resources, such as libraries, are not available in rural areas. There are a limited number of libraries in rural parts of the United States (Real & Rose, 2017). The libraries that *are* located in rural areas often lack access to amenities such as high-speed Internet, inter-library loans, and up-to-date technology (Real & Rose, 2017). If a rural student wanted to go to the library, they might have to drive to another town. Their lack of access to libraries while they were at home might lead rural students to not consider using their college's library. Kelly shared:

*I think the thing that I struggled with the most was going from, cause none of my stuff was online in high school, so, like, all of the stuff for, like, classes was on Blackboard and, like, online submission [Kelly Interview].*

Taking online classes in high school has been shown to have a positive effect on the persistence of students from rural areas (Dodd, Kirby, Seifert, and Sharpe, 2009). The positive effects are seen because online courses can help students prepare for the academic challenges of college and give them a better understanding of what a college workload will be like (Ast, 2014). Although taking courses online has a positive impact on rural students, many rural school districts are still unable to offer online classes to their students because of financial, personnel, and technological limitations (Ast, 2014).

Kelly described having issues navigating and using the online tools used in her college classes. Unlike some of her peers who had used online submission platforms in high school, Kelly was not exposed to the online submission process. Kelly came from a rural area that did not have reliable Internet access. Kelly's high school might not have used online submission platforms because its students did not have Internet access at home. Kelly shared that, while it took some getting used to at first, she was now able to navigate the online submission system.

Finally, coming to a four-year urban university exposed participants to new cultures they had not encountered at home. The diversity on campus and in the surrounding community was different from what participants experienced at home. When describing their hometowns, participants reported:

*[OC: The participant's hometown is.] Very ethnically white, literally close to 98% [Ian Interview].*

*I'm the very rural part [OC: Of the county that he lives in.]. Yeah, it was mostly people of Caucasian background, that were Christian... [Jake Interview]*

As I discussed in Chapter Four of this report, isolation can create a homogeneous culture in many rural areas (Heinisch, 2018). Many rural areas are comprised of citizens who are white, Christian, and have conservative values (Heinisch, 2018). The demographics and diversity of the people in their home community were the first things participants in my study discussed when asked to describe their hometowns. Jake and Ian talked about coming from rural areas that have a racially homogeneous population that lacks diversity of both race and values. Lack of diversity appeared to be common in the rural towns that participants came from. Alison stated:

*The diversity really threw me off. I came from a prominently white, Catholic town. Coming here, I had never met someone who was Jewish before, before I came to [The city where the university is located.]. Learning about all these new cultures that I had no idea even really existed was another kind of culture shock to me [Alison Interview].*

Experiencing diversity for the first time can make the transition into college difficult for rural students (Guiffrida, 2008). Like Alison, they may feel overwhelmed and experience “culture shock” (Guiffrida, 2008). Exposure to new cultures and people from different traditions had a great impact on Alison’s college experience. This was the first time she experienced different cultures and values. This experience provided Alison with a learning opportunity beside what she was learning in the classroom.

In addition to talking about the racial homogeneity of the people in the rural area they grew up in, 11 of the students discussed the socio-economic status (SES) of rural

community members. They compared the SES of individuals living in rural areas to the SES of their peers at college. Russell shared:

*Not a lot of people make a lot of money. Yea, probably pretty low income, I mean not like impoverished, but not a lot of people drive BMWs [Russell Interview].*

Russell suggested that rural residents are all part of the same socio-economic class. He indicated that while people in his community are not poor, they do not buy extravagant items, such as sports cars. This is different from many of the students at his college. One thing that was not clear was whether rural residents place value on other items and buy those things or if they cannot afford items that Russell would consider extravagant.

Victoria spoke about the socio-economics of her family and the other people in her town. She stated:

*“I think if somebody invites you to go somewhere maybe, and they're like oh let's go do this or let's ... And it's something expensive, and they don't understand maybe that you can't afford it. I guess there's a part of my experience that, coming from a lower-income family, that you can't relate to people that come from a bit more money and they don't understand. I don't think they mean it the wrong way or anything like that. It's just a cultural divide maybe [Victoria Interview].*

Victoria had trouble relating to the other students at her university because they came from different socio-economic backgrounds. These students had access to goods and experiences that Victoria's family was unable to provide for her, such as college prep

classes during the school year and extra help preparing for college during the summer. Heinisch (2018) noted that when rural students are exposed to a greater amount of diversity in high school, such as interacting with people from a wide variety of socio-economic statuses, they feel more at ease when they are making the transition from high school to college life. These students are also more likely to feel like they belong in their new environment versus those students who have never experienced diversity before and now feel out of place (Heinisch, 2018). Victoria was not able to connect with her peers and struggled to find a place where she fit in her new environment.

Victoria reported:

*Some of them [OC: The other students in her program.] even did summer programs. They did architecture programs, and they were like “yeah, it was about \$4,000. My parents paid for it.” I’m like, uh, okay...during my summers, I worked at McDonald’s [Victoria Interview].*

Victoria family’s socio-economic status made it challenging for her to find a group of people with whom she shared common experiences and ideas with in her college environment. Victoria and her peers had different values when it came to money. She had to work to pay for the things that she needed, while the other students in her program were often handed money by their parents. The differences that were seen between Victoria and her peers appeared to create a divide between the two groups. Victoria did not understand what it was like have easy access to money, and her peers did not understand what it was like to work for their money. She suggested that her family’s socio-economic status had caused her to be less academically prepared than the other



students in her architecture program. Victoria had to work during the summer so that she could pay for school. It was rare that her peers had to work, so they had time to do other things during the summer. Many of her peers' families paid for them to attend summer architecture programs, so they were a step ahead of her when they got to college.

While Russell, Alex, Jake, Alison, Victoria, and Ian talked about the lack of diversity in the rural communities that they came from, Lyndsy talked about how her rural community was accepting of diversity:

*When there's difference, we accept it, we listen, we understand. We may not always agree with some of the things but we're not mean... Actually, my best friend is gay and he came out his senior year of high school. He was so afraid, he was afraid to tell me because I'm Catholic and thought I was gonna hate him and I love him, my whole family does. Our senior of high school, he came out and he wanted to bring his boyfriend to our senior ball and the vice principal called him into his office and said, "Look, we are here for you, we support you in what you want to do. If anybody gives you any issues or says anything to you or looks at you weird, you tell us and we'll take care it. We want you to have fun at your senior prom." And nobody did; when he walked out, everybody clapped for him. They all love him. He's the nicest guy there is [Lyndsy Interview].*

Lyndsy's community accepted members who had values that were different from community norms. Her community appeared to be flexible and willing to discuss

differences. However, it appears this acceptance occurred only if you were already an established member of the community. Rural communities place high value on the relationships that develop within the community they live in, so it would only make sense that they would work hard to try to keep these relationships strong and support other community members, regardless of their differences.

At the same time, when new people arrive in rural areas who do not share the same values and beliefs present in the rural community, residents may feel threatened because the newcomers are arriving with new ideas and traditions that may question the current norms of rural life (Johnson, 2003). While Lyndsy noted that her rural community was accepting of the diversity, Rachel provided an example of a situation where rural environments weren't as accepting as they might seem. She reported:

*When I was a kid, I remember that there would be kids that would draw swastikas on my desk and stuff like that. They just didn't understand the capacity of that [Rachel Interview].*

Rachel disclosed that she was one of four Jewish families in her town. Individuals in her community were not exposed to people from different religions, such as Judaism. Rachel believed that because of the lack of diversity in her community, people did not understand differences in culture and religion. Community members would say and do things, such as draw swastikas, without understanding that what they were doing was racist and inappropriate. Lack of exposure could also lead rural residents to become fearful of people who were different because the rural residents didn't know a lot about diverse cultures and beliefs (Cerrone, 2017). They might run away from people who were

different or treat them in a negative way because they had never been exposed to people from different backgrounds before (Cerrone, 2017).

Wyatt discussed situations where he did not feel as though his home community accepted diversity. He shared:

*A lot of politically incorrect things get said, a lot of harsh jokes, things like that. Mostly white Christians, so jokes were made about ... I guess, like, that calling someone a Jew is a negative connotation, but it wasn't so much, like, anti-Semitic. It was a playful insult, I guess or something like that [Wyatt Interview].*

Wyatt suggested that people in his town used the word Jew negatively because they were not exposed to diversity. They also did not understand the meaning of what they were saying. Although the use of politically incorrect statements and jokes is not unique to rural environments, some of the reasons for their use are. The use of politically incorrect statements and jokes in rural areas is partially caused by community members' lack of exposure to new and diverse ideas and cultures. This could be due to isolation. Isolation, both geographical and social, may lead rural community members to be unfamiliar with cultural groups that they are talking about. They may say something inappropriate without understanding the meaning of what they are saying. Also, it might be seen as normal to say certain politically incorrect statements or jokes because they are part of a rural community's vocabulary. These norms of speaking may go unquestioned because multiple generations have used the same phrases. Also, no one comes into the community to question if these phrases are appropriate.

Finally, Alex observed:

*I feel like that's what happened a lot of the time. Then, I remember a girl transitioned into a boy, and that happened throughout the classes in my high school. Everybody kind of regarded, him now, weird, and were not very ... Nobody was every bullying to his face, like, "You're disgusting, whatever, whatever." It was more just, like, people talked about it because it didn't happen a lot, I think [Alex Interview].*

Alex indicated that she did not believe that people in her rural community were mean to people because they were from diverse backgrounds. Instead, she thought that lack of exposure to diversity caused community members to be unsure of how to react to new people. They also may feel uncomfortable when they came in contact with individuals from diverse backgrounds because they have not interacted with them in the past. When someone entered her community who was different, that individual's differences may get talked about more than if they entered an urban environment because there are so few people. It is rare for new people to enter a rural community; so, when people do move in, it is a big deal. Alex talked about one of the aspects of rural life, which is having many generations of families living in the same community [Alex Questionnaire]. Rural citizens are sometimes less open to change than non-rural individuals because change is not something they often encounter. Isolation can help continue stereotypes because distance prevents new information and people from entering rural areas. Rural residents have nothing to compare their ideas with, so they might assume that what they think is the same as what people in other areas think. If they *do* interact with a person from a diverse background, they might assume that that individual's behavior reflects the

behavior of their entire group. Having limited exposure to individuals from diverse backgrounds means that if rural citizens have a negative interaction with one person from a minority group, they may assume that everyone else from that group will behave in a similar manner.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter summarized the participants' transition into their college environment. For rural students who go to college in an urban area, not only do they face transitioning into the college environment, but they also must learn how to live in an urban setting. In college, participants had new experiences, such as meeting people from diverse backgrounds, learning to live in a more fast-paced environment, and having to navigate public transportation. For some rural students, this transition can be difficult because their membership in the rural culture causes them to feel different and not fit in with their peers (Ganss, 2016). Because of their background, students from rural areas may struggle to interact with students from urban locations (Ganss, 2016). Participants may not have realized they were missing anything until college, when they came in contact with new experiences for the first time. When they finally get to college, rural students can see that there are ways of looking at the world that are different from the values and ideas present in their home communities (Cerrone, 2017). Exposure to new values and ideas allows rural students to see, sometimes for the first time, that they can shape their own ideas and that they do not just have to follow the norms of rural society (Cerrone, 2017). While this can be an exciting time for students from rural areas, they may also struggle to make the transition back home and must learn what they can share about their new values and ideas with their home community.

The next chapter presents another of the study's themes: the social interactions participants had in their new environment. Participants discussed a wide range of social experiences they had in college and compared them to experiences in their hometowns.

## CHAPTER VII: SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

*I remember moving in the day before, seeing everybody move in. I remember meeting my roommate. I remember just being like, "I can't wait!!" Like, yea, you know, you have the butterflies and one of the funnier stories my parents, me and my parents have is, well, we were sitting at our, I don't know if it was our second to last dinner or our last dinner, and I was just so antsy to get back. We were sitting at a nice restaurant in, I think we were in downtown [City where college is located], and I remember they were like "Jason, you'll get back there soon." And I just remember being there and being like, "oh man, I can't wait to get back and start my first night at college" or whatever. Or just go out and see what the world's like [Jason Interview].*

Moving into college can be an exciting and scary time for all. Chambliss and Takacs (2014) noted that students feel anxious because they are entering new and unfamiliar territory and are faced with the challenge of making new friends, and excited because they are entering a world full of new and exciting opportunities. Like other college students, when rural students arrive on campus, they face the challenge of making new friends.

Jason, who had lived in the same small town all of his life, was worried about making friends in his new environment. Although he was scared, he was also really excited and eager to get out into the college world and make new friends. For rural students, entering college means that they not only have to learn how to navigate the college social scene,

like students from other areas, but it also means leaving behind the friends and support systems that they have had for the majority of their lives. Unlike students who came from larger high schools, rural students have never had to navigate large social systems, similar to the one that they entered in college (Cerrone, 2017). Lacking the experience of steering through a large social scene might present a challenge to rural students, and they may struggle at first when they enter college (Cerrone, 2017). In this chapter, I will address some of the added dimensions of the college friend-making process that are associated with coming from a rural environment.

Finding issues or experiences you have in common with the people around you can help to make the friendship development process a little easier. While some students may have no problem connecting with the people around them, other students, especially those from minority backgrounds, such as rural students and students from low-socio-economic classes, may have trouble finding people with similar interests and backgrounds to bond with (Chambliss and Takacs, 2014). Alex stated:

*I felt like people who were from New York City, Long Island, Jersey area, instantly connected because a lot of them also went to private school; went to private school together, whereas I went to public school. So that was a little weird because they'd all know each other's private schools at least; so, on my floor I'd say at least 50% went to a private school in the city. They'll always be like, "Oh, you went here? I know so and so." And they'll be like, "Oh, yeah. I know him too." Whatever, and then it'll be an instant freshman year connection. Then they'll be like, "Oh, Alex, where*



*did you go?" I was like, "Oh, it was a small town an hour north of here. You don't know where it is." Which would be kind of a running joke because it's different, I guess [Alex Interview].*

In their rural hometowns, rural students knew everyone and shared a common history. When they arrive at college, rural students often struggle to find peers who share common experiences. This leaves rural students feeling left out and different from their peers because of their backgrounds. Alex found it challenging to make friends in college because she did not share the same experiences as many of her peers. Her peers would even joke about where she came from, which could have led Alex to feel even more segregated from the other students.

Alex reported:

*I feel like most people that do go here [OC: To the university that Alex attended.] come from larger areas, whether it be Chicago, I know a lot of people from LA, weirdly enough, or, like, down in the city, like, Boston area was really big. That instantly connected a lot of people. I feel almost like, I don't know if look down on me is the right word, but definitely just regarded differently [Alex Interview].*

Alex felt different from the other students because of her rural background. In their new environment, her peers latched on to each other because of their similarities. This left Alex without a friend group. When asked to provide an example of a situation where her peers treated her as different, Alex shared:

*[OC: A girl on Alex's floor freshman year.] She's like, "I would absolutely hate to go to a small school like that. That had to be so horrible." And kind of just dissing on it. If that makes sense? It wasn't explicitly like, "Oh, wow. You're a horrible for doing that" But just kind of small things that she would say and kind of be almost ... I don't really know how to explain it, but almost like talking down to me [Alex Interview].*

Alex felt that the other students treated her differently because of her background. They had never experienced living in a small town, so the non-rural students had trouble finding ways to connect with Alex, who was a rural student. While having different experiences from her peers seemed to bother Alex at first, she was eventually able to move on and find a friend group that valued her and with whom she shared common interests. Other students may not be so lucky. If they are unable to develop a solid friend group, rural students may cling to the ties that they had in their home communities. Chambliss and Takacs (2014) noted that less wealthy students and students of color were likely to cling to the connections they have back home. These students perceive that they do not fit into their new environment so, rather than trying to fit in, they focus on their hometown connections. The perception that they will not fit into their new environment becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The students do not even attempt to build connections at their university; even if there was a chance that they might find commonalities with the people around them, they don't even bother to look.

Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) stated that students from rural areas often feel behind or that they don't have the same skills and knowledge that their peers from other

geographic locations have, especially when it comes to socialization and academics. Tom reflected on his perceptions of others:

*Oh, these guys know what they're doing so much more than me.*

*People have been drinking since they were 15, you know, people*

*have been socializing in big groups like this for five years and*

*there's little old me, this kid who hasn't done that stuff [Tom*

*Interview].*

Tom shared that he did not have the same experiences, such as drinking at a young age, that a lot of his peers shared. He often felt behind his peers socially. Tom felt less prepared to handle the college social scene because of his rural background and lack of experience. He also felt like he needed to work harder so that he could perform at the same level as his peers socially. Tom was not alone when it came to feeling badly about himself because of his rural background. Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) reported that students from rural areas have lower levels of self-esteem and higher anxiety levels than their urban and suburban peers. These feelings are often seen because rural students do not think they can keep up with their peers socially (Aylesworth and Bloom, 1976). Rural students may also feel badly about themselves because they feel like they do not fit in because their background and past experiences are different than the other students on campus (Murphy, 1984). Because they do not feel as though they fit into their new environment, rural students may isolate themselves even further than they were to begin with. Russell described some of the challenges that he faced. He noted:

*Meeting people was more challenging. I had known all the people in high school since I was five, so I guess I wasn't as good at meeting people 'cause I didn't have to [Russell Interview].*

Learning how to develop new friendships can be frustrating for college students. Cerrone (2017) found that the rural students who she spoke with who did not make friends right away felt discouraged. Cerrone's participants believed they were at a disadvantage because they had come from a rural area where there were very few people and felt like they knew everyone in their hometown. When the rural student entered college and had difficulty making friends, they were shocked because this challenge was something they had never experienced before (Cerrone, 2017). Russell talked about having to make new friends for the first time in many years while at college. Also, the families who live in rural areas rarely move away and often stay in the same place for generations. Rural students are not forced to make new friends very often, so when they get to college, they might not be familiar with the process.

Russell revealed what it was like to learn how to interact and make friends with people from diverse backgrounds. He reported:

*My one friend's roommate was Chinese, so, like, he didn't understand a lot of stuff, so it was kind of strange meeting him 'cause I never interacted with someone, like, super foreign before. So that was kind of different [Russell Interview].*

Russell considered someone to be “super foreign” if they came from another country and did not speak a lot of English. Russell reported that making friends with people from diverse backgrounds was challenging to him. He stated:

*Everybody around me [OC: In his home community.] is pretty similar, there's not as much diversity... I wasn't really exposed to all that kind of stuff [Russell Interview].*

Russell's community lacked diversity, so Russell did not have the opportunity to interact with, let alone make friends with, people from different backgrounds. On top of having to make friends with someone new for the first time in many years, rural students must make friends with people from diverse backgrounds. Participants have never experienced the amount of diversity that they saw when they arrived at college, which made it even harder for rural students to make friends. Russell shared that living in a learning community helped make the process easier. He was able to find common interests with the other students on his floor who were different from him because of their common interests and major. Finding common interests helped Russell talk with them and build connections.

Alison faced interacting with people from diverse backgrounds for the first time when she got to college. She shared:

*It was kind of scary making friends here. Just because I just wasn't used to the lifestyle and I didn't identify with a lot of ... Just how the culture is here and people are. It's a complete culture shock. I didn't feel like I had a lot in common [Alison Interview].*

Alison felt out of place and overwhelmed when she first arrived at college because she was interacting with people whom she did not have anything in common with. Although Alison struggled to make friends at first, things turned around for Alison because she joined a sorority and developed connections with other girls in the organization:

*When I came here. That was really hard [OC: Leaving the connections that she had in her home community.]. I think what really helped was I didn't have a solid group of friends first semester, freshman year, then I joined a sorority second semester. That really helped. Now, all my best friends are in the sorority. Two of them are my roommates and my younger sister followed me here. She's also in my sorority. I definitely think Greek life had a huge impact on my friends and finding a place here [Alison Interview].*

Joining a sorority helped Alison make a rural-like environment at her urban campus. Her sorority was one of the smaller ones on campus and contained a group of girls with similar interests. They met with each other regularly, which helped them to develop strong, more personal, connections similar to the connections she had in her home community.

Russell and Alison were not the first students from rural areas to have to learn how to interact with people from diverse backgrounds when they got to college. Cerrone (2017) discussed what it was like for her participants to leave their rural communities and meet people from different walks of life. Cerrone (2017) noted that rural students must adjust to the diversity that is present when they arrive at college and that their perspective of the world is changed by the amount of diversity they are exposed to in college. Like Alison, participants in Cerrone's (2017) study were overwhelmed and, in some cases, fearful of people who looked different and came from different cultures when they first arrived on campus. Later, the rural students discovered that, even though the students who they met

came from different backgrounds, they had a lot of commonalities and were surprisingly similar to one another (Cerrone, 2017).

The small size of rural communities and high schools, as well as the sense of knowing everybody in their home community, can lead rural students to feel shocked when they encounter difficulties making friends in their new college environment (Cerrone, 2017). In their home communities, rural students knew everyone who lived there, many on a very personal level. Rural students may arrive on campus with the misconception that they need to be friends with everyone on campus (Cerrone, 2017). This misconception influences how they interact with other students and the choices they make when trying to make new friends (Cerrone, 2017). Jake discussed his first few days on campus and shared his strategies:

*We walked around the building looking for other people to meet. I was handing out my Facebook to people because I wanted to make friends, so I was like, here's my number. If you want me on Facebook, I'm Jake, add me. I was just trying to make a network of friends [Jake Interview].*

*At the time, it didn't really hit me how many people actually go to this school. Everyone I encountered, I was like, "oh hey, I'm Jake," and I wanted to meet everyone. I soon started to realize that I wasn't going to be able to meet and befriend everyone [Jake Interview].*

Rural students often talk about how different it was to make friends in college compared to the process they went through to make friends at the university they attended

(Cerrone, 2017). Rural students often feel like they should be friends with everyone who they encounter; when they are unable to do so, they are left to wonder, “Who do I make friends with?” and “Who should I not become friends with?” (Cerrone, 2017). Jake reported:

*The first couple of days, I was trying to get to know people and add people on Facebook and try and plan events, because I wanted to get another big group of friends like I had at home and get to know everyone. I knew everyone at my high school and even people in the class above and class below me. It didn't really hit me how many people actually go here and that people would start to develop their own lives and stuff. Not everyone would be interested in the same thing as you would be, so not everyone would always be in the dorm or be going to the same events you'd be going to. I added a bunch of people and got their numbers. Then I started to slowly figure out who I got along with and who had different interests [Jake Interview].*

Understanding that you do not need to be friends with everyone on campus can be a hurdle for many rural college students (Cerrone, 2017). Rural students often have a definition of friendship that involves creating relationships with everyone in their environment (Cerrone, 2017). Being friends with everyone at a large university is impossible, so holding this idea that they needed to be friends with everyone may present a barrier in their college friend-making process (Cerrone, 2017). They also may feel even more isolated and as though they have failed if they are unable to develop meaningful



connections with everyone they meet (Cerrone, 2017). Getting rid of this misconception will help rural students have a smoother transition into the university community and allow them to focus on developing connections with a smaller group of students (Cerrone, 2017).

When rural students first arrived on campus, they often assume that they are going to be able to know everybody, like they did in high school. Jake discovered that knowing and hanging out with everyone on campus was impossible because there were too many people. He soon learned that the strategies— such as trying to be friends with everyone— needed to make friends in his hometown were different than the ones that he used in college. Jake had not considered making friends based on interests as a possibility because that was not typically done in rural areas. Getting to pick and choose who you want to hang out with is another example of an opportunity that rural students typically do not experience where they grow up. The limited number of people living in rural areas leads rural students to become friends with people in their community because of proximity, rather than having the opportunity to select their friend group based on similar interests.

While Alex, Russell, Alison, and Jake found that coming from a rural area had made making friends a challenge because they had to learn that it was ok to not friends with everyone at their university, other rural students saw their rural background as an asset. Stone (2014) reported that rural students are often more socially prepared than their urban peers. Rural students are used to interacting with everyone in their community, from the very young to the very old, on a regular basis because the small number of people living there. In order to avoid confrontation and keep the peace, rural residents learn how to

interact with the few individuals who are present in their community, no matter what their demographics are. Katie reported:

*Coming from a small town, you're friendly with everyone. In that aspect, I guess it was easy to make friends because you're not that much afraid to just go say hi and introduce yourself and wave to people [Katie Interview].*

Katie suggested that she was more likely to say hello and be friendly to people she met in the street than non-rural students, which made her open to meeting new people. This is similar to participants in Stone's (2014) study, who reported that they felt that they were friendlier than their urban peers. They also noted that students from the inner city were more hesitant to open up than students from rural areas (Stone, 2014).

While Katie felt that coming from a rural area had given her tools to make it easier to make friends in college, she still found making friends difficult at first. Katie shared:

*I think it was hard because you're not used to having that many options of who to associate with. That took some figuring out about who do I like and who do I want to hang out with everyday [Katie Interview].*

Katie had to adjust to the number of people in her new environment. For the first time in her life, she had numerous options regarding people to hang out with. This could be overwhelming at first, especially for rural students who are not used to being able to choose from many different people and activities. Rural students can also feel intimidated by the number of people and feel lost in the crowds and the fast-paced bustle of city and college life (Cerrone, 2017). There are very few activities present in rural areas compared

with urban areas, so urban students are typically used to the busyness they experience on their college campus. Because of their familiarity with city life, urban students tend to be less intimidated by the number of people and activities compared to their rural peers (Cerrone, 2017).

In many rural areas, it is the norm to treat everyone with respect and to be friendly with everyone that you meet (Wuthnow, 2018). Treating everyone with respect and kindness is important for several reasons. First of all, because there are so few people in rural areas, if you are rude to someone who is providing a service for you, such as fixing your car, they might not do a good job or might refuse to help you out the next time you are in need (Wuthnow, 2018). The second reason is that you tend to see the same few people over and over again in rural areas (Wuthnow, 2018). Because you see them daily and at every community event, you do not want to offend your neighbors; so, it is easier to learn how to deal with them and to let the small stuff go (Wuthnow, 2018).

Jason noted that coming from a rural area had given him an advantage when it came to making friends while he was at college. He reported:

*I just know how to deal with people. Because the one plus about a rural community is you have to keep everyone happy. When you have 52 kids in your class, 220 kids in your total high school, who you've known...at least 60% of those kids you've know your entire life. You can't just go head off...you can't just, like, piss anyone off and be like, "That's fine, see yea!" [Jason Interview]*

*Even if I didn't like a kid, hated him, I'd still have to see him every day. I'd still have to interact with him whether I want to or not.*

*And I know his parents well and then, of course, he'd be on the soccer team and he would just get connected into my circle.*

*Whether I liked it or not. So, for me personally, that was probably one of the best things that it could have done for me [Jason Interview.]*

Jason suggested that, because he came from a small, rural area, he had learned how to keep the peace between friends and interact with people who he did not agree with. Learning how to be a peacekeeper made him better prepared to deal with conflicts among friends in college. Additionally, he was more prepared to associate with individuals from diverse backgrounds because he learned how to deal with them instead of blowing them off and choosing not to interact with them because they were different.

Finally, Lyndsy stated:

*I think that's from growing up where we've grown up, we have to be outgoing and willing to talk to new people [Lyndsy Interview].*

Lyndsy noted that people in her family, especially her father, had learned how to talk to people and make friends with everyone. She attributed this skill to growing up in a rural area and having to be friendly with everyone. Because there are few people in her community, it was difficult to avoid someone if you had done something to make them upset, so Lyndsy found that it was better to be nice to everyone.

Another aspect of the social interactions that rural students have when they enroll at four-year urban universities is the misconception that other students have about people from rural areas. They also face their peer's stereotypes of seeing them as "cowboys," "hillbillies," or "bumpkins" (Shamah, 2011).

Alison reported:

*People don't understand that we live in houses. I've had people ask me how I apply to [College] without Internet. We have Internet there. We're not like a third world country. A lot of people ... I've had people that don't know that [My State]'s a state [Alison Interview].*

She also told a story of a trip that she took to New York City. Alison shared:

*I was actually in New York City and this bouncer asked me, "Where's your passport?" I'm like, "What do you mean my passport?" He's like, "You need your passport. You're not a U.S. citizen." I'm like, "Yes, I am. This is my driver's license. I am a U.S. citizen." He's like, "Well, you need your passport." And I'm like, "I don't have my passport. I don't need it to get here." [Alison Interview].*

Alison had to explain her background because the individuals she interacted with did not understand what it was like to come from a rural area. They also made assumptions about her because of where she came from. As Alison spoke about her experiences, her body language and tone of voice changed from being very relaxed to sitting very rigidly and speaking in a sharp tone. Alison's body language suggested that it frustrated and bothered her that she had to explain herself and her background to other people.

Ian shared a story about interacting with non-rural students. He stated:

*One of the first questions people ask when I tell them I am from [Rural Area] is they ask me what the plural of Moose is, assuming*

*that I would just know. They say ridiculous stuff, like Mooses and Meese. Seriously, they think I grew up on a farm [Ian Interview].*

Ian appeared amused by some of the things that people assume about students from rural areas. Rather than getting upset, though, Ian simply did not seem to believe that people would ask him the questions that they did. He seemed surprised that they would hold a certain set of beliefs about all people who are from rural areas.

Like Ian, Katie F. faced misconceptions that she considered amusing. She recounted:

*Mostly I get made fun of and not, like, in a mean-spirited way, but my friends will be like “oh, there's only four people from [My State].” Which doesn't bother me at all; it's not mean-spirited [Katie F. Interview].*

Although Katie F. acknowledged that her peer's comments were not mean spirited, she stated:

*I think one of the hardest things was my peers not understanding that and being alone in the sense of being a rural student. Most of my peers don't get that and don't understand coming from a rural place. So, I think that's one of the hardest things, educating my peers about where I'm from [Katie F. Interview].*

Rural students may also struggle to find common ground with their non-rural peers (Shamah, 2011). Rural and non-rural students have different pre-college experiences that have affected them and shaped their personalities and outlooks on the world. Katie F. struggled to connect with the other students at her college because of her background. Like rural students who do not interact with many people from diverse backgrounds, it

appeared that Katie F.'s non-rural peers had not come in contact with many people from rural areas. Many of these people did not understand rural life. Katie F. shared that she had to explain what it was like to come from a rural area to non-rural students.

Dinah found it hard to deal with some of the misconceptions that she faced. Dinah noted:

*I feel like it's tough because a lot of people think that, like, you're kind of small town, you're kind of a, like, a hick, and you don't, like...you're not going to, like, understand people's, like, diverse culture...I can't talk and, like, where they come from. But, just because I didn't, like, experience that, like, growing up, doesn't mean, like, I don't care and that I don't want to, like, learn [Dinah Interview].*

Although Dinah did not provide an exact definition of the term “hick,” it seemed that Dinah considered a hick someone who is not educated, both in terms of formal education and education about how the world works. They are also not open to new people, ideas, or experiences. It appeared that, although Dinah does not think she is a hick, she still felt she needed to prove it to other people by saying she wants to learn and experience new things even though she is from a rural area.

Dinah said:

*I think a lot of people think, you know, where I come from, we're kind of just closed-minded people and, like, we'll stick to kind of, like, the things that we know and we don't want to experience things that are new [Dinah Interview].*

Dinah was not the only rural student who felt they needed to show to the people around them that they weren't "hicks" (Shamah, 2011). Shamah (2011) reported that it is very common for rural students to feel like they have to prove themselves both inside and outside of the classroom. Feeling like they need to prove themselves causes rural students to have additional stress and makes their adjustment to college much more challenging. Rural students may have never had to explain their background to other people before because they had spent their lives with the same few people. They also did not interact with people who were not from their hometown. They might feel alone because, unlike other minorities, there is no specific group or resource center that serves only rural students. Not having a place to go specifically for rural students means that they have no way to connect with other rural students or get the rural-student specific support.

Alison, Russell, and Wyatt described their hometowns' values as more traditional, and that the people living there tend to be close-minded. Dinah indicated that she disagreed with Alison, Russell, and Wyatt. Instead, someone might appear closed-minded because of a lack of exposure to new people and ideas due to isolation. She argued that just because rural residents are not exposed to something because of their location, does not mean that they would not be open to new ideas or people.

Finally, Ian stated:

*They [OC: Students from urban areas.] have no perspective to my high school experience. I don't think I have any on theirs...I have no reference to growing up in a school of 5,000 kids. That's bigger than my town. That's crazy to me. It's different [Ian Interview].*



Ian acknowledged that his college peers have misconceptions regarding rural students and noted he had some misconceptions about people from urban areas. Ian had these misconceptions because, until coming to college, he never experienced what it was like to live in an urban area. Additionally, as was discussed earlier in this report, rural areas are often isolated from other areas of the country. Isolation can make it difficult for the latest news, trends, and ideas to travel into rural locations. It is also very rare for new people to enter rural communities. Because of their lack of exposure to new information and people, rural students may have no idea what it is like to live in an urban area. They may develop misconceptions of their own regarding urban life and the people who live in urban areas.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter summarized what it was like for participants to make friends and interact with people once they got to college. For some, leaving their home community and making new friends was difficult because they were making friends for the first time since they were very small. Rural students also had to struggle with the realization that, unlike their home community, they would not be able to know everyone and be friends with everyone in their college environment (Cerrone, 2017). Also, participants had to navigate the process of making friends with people from diverse backgrounds for the first time. Although rural students faced challenges when learning how to make friends in their new environment, they also learned that they entered college with unique tools because of their background. These tools included being able to understand people from different socio-economic classes and age brackets because the small number of individuals living in their home community had led them to learn how to interact with

everyone they were exposed to (Stone, 2014). While participants faced challenges, such as exposure to new people and misconceptions, they learned to thrive in their new environment.

## CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION

### Introduction

The current study explored how students from a rural background, who enrolled in a 4-year urban university, perceived their experiences while enrolled. While exploring rural students' perceptions, four main themes emerged. These themes were discussed in detail in the previous four chapters of this report. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of the research I conducted, summarize the implications that my research has on practice, and provide recommendations for future research related to college students from rural areas. The chapter contains six sections: 1) the major findings of this study; 2) a discussion of the implications that the findings have for practice; 3) the limitations of this study; 4) the study's significance; 5) an overview of my recommendations for future research; and 6) a summary of the report.

### Findings

This section contains the major findings of this study. These findings are: 1) isolation has a large impact on all aspects of the lives of rural students and their community; 2) while rural, suburban, and urban college students face some of the same issues, these issues seem to be more pronounced for students from rural areas; 3) rural students find "fitting in" difficult, both when they enter their college community and when they reenter their rural hometown community; and 4) coming from a rural area does have its advantages.

#### **Finding #1: Isolation**

Isolation impacts all aspects of rural students' lives and the lives of the people living in the communities where they grew up. Rural residents had to travel many miles to get

to urban environments and found it difficult to leave their communities because they were often separated by long, winding, one-lane roads, forests, and farmlands.

Participants talked about the difficulties they faced traveling in and out of their home communities. Due to the challenges they faced leaving their home communities, rural students were not exposed to a variety of career options. The limited variety of occupations in their hometowns contributed to rural students being unaware of the many majors available to them in college and what career options were available to them after graduation. For example, in her interview, Pam noted that, when she enrolled in college, she was Undecided, while many of her friends from other areas of the country already picked a major and the career path they wanted to take. Pam felt that her lack of exposure to classes in high school— beyond the basic required math, English, and science courses— as well as her lack of exposure to people in a variety of careers was the reason she did not know what she wanted to do when she entered college.

Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) noted that rural college students experience higher levels of anxiety than their urban and suburban classmates. This anxiety stems from rural students feeling like they are different than their peers in their new college environment, especially when it comes to their socio-economic background and their family's education level. Rural students also worry that they missed out on being exposed to the same experiences as their peers from other areas (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Students from rural areas may begin to question whether they should enroll in college or if it might be safer for them to stay in the comfort of their isolated hometowns. Jason discussed his peers' experiences leaving the, as he described it, "Utopian community" in which they grew up. Jason stated that when his peers left their isolated community, they found that

the rules and norms of their hometown did not apply to the rest of the world. Many of Jason's peers ended up moving back home because they missed rural life and the small, isolated community where they were raised.

Not only do the barriers make it challenging for people to enter and leave rural communities, it was hard for current news and information to enter and leave rural environments. Olga shared that she felt isolation led rural areas to be one step behind other areas of the country; she stated that information regarding the latest trends always seems to enter rural areas after urban and suburban areas.

Isolation prevented people living in rural areas from interacting with people from cultures and backgrounds that were different from their own. Ian noted that the distance that separates rural areas from the rest of the country prevents rural community members from being exposed to new ideas and beliefs. Separation from the rest of the country, Ian argues, leads rural residents to develop a narrow, local-focused mindset. This mindset is different from the mindset of people living in the urban area in which he went to college. Jason suggested that the difference in mindset is caused by the many different people who enter and leave his college community.

Participants in this study reported that coming to college was the first time they came into contact with people from diverse backgrounds. Alison came from what she described as a prominently white, Catholic town. She had never met someone who was Jewish before arriving on campus. She further detailed the shock she felt when she arrived on campus and learned about all of the new cultures she never had direct contact with. While in college, not only did rural students have to learn how to make new friends for the first time since they were small children, but they also, in many cases, have to learn how to

become friends with people from diverse backgrounds. Alison thought that it was “scary making friends” when she first arrived at college. She noted that coming to college was a complete culture shock for her because she didn’t feel like she had a lot in common with the people around her. At the same time, exposure to new beliefs and ideas allowed rural students to see that there were many different ways to think about the world. Coming to college provided rural students the opportunity to question their hometown’s values and beliefs and begin to start forming their own.

Finally, isolation led students from rural areas to miss out on some of the educational opportunities and resources present in other geographic locations. Rural students were often only able to take standard classes, such as math, English, social studies, and miss out on specialized academic opportunities like Advance Placement (AP) classes. Rural communities lack reliable internet access, so rural school districts do not rely on online learning platforms, such as Blackboard, to present class material and as a method for students to submit homework assignments. Many rural students did not use these platforms in the past and struggle to use such systems when they arrive on campus. Kelly shared that the most challenging part of transitioning from high school to college was the transition from having none of her high school assignments online to having the majority of her college course content online.

### **Finding #2: Same Issues, Greater Challenges**

The second major finding of this study is that while rural, suburban, and urban students face some of the same issues, such as navigating the college system and having to leave their support system at home and making new friends, these difficulties are heightened for rural students compared to their peers from other geographic locations.

For example, as discussed in Chapter 7 of this report, when students first arrive at college, they faced the challenge of finding a new group of friends. While finding friends is something all college students face, it might be particularly challenging for rural students. Finding a friend group can be especially hard for rural students because many rural students have been with the same peer group since kindergarten. Russell stated, “Meeting people was more challenging [OC: For him when he arrived at college]. I had known all the people in high school since I was five, so I guess I wasn't as good at meeting people ‘cause I didn't have to.” In many cases, rural students go to the same school from kindergarten until the twelfth grade, so they have never had to leave their friend group and try to make new friends in a new environment. Going to college is the first time that many rural students are without their life-long peer group and the high level of familiarity and support that comes from knowing people all of your life and seeing them every day. Participants Katie and Jason discussed this issue, which was described in detail in Chapter 5 of this report.

While many college students have to learn about the university’s administrative system, learning how to navigate the system can be more challenging for rural students. In rural areas, there are very few people, so rural students will usually only have to talk to one person to obtain all the help they are seeking. This situation is different on large college campuses where there are more people and students have to go to different individuals and departments to get the type of help they need. In many cases, the person rural students go to for help while they are in their rural community is someone they know, rather than an unknown person on the phone who they have never met or interacted with before. The help that rural students get on their college campus is

different than the help they are used to receiving in high school. Katie found that the help she received in high school was more personal. She stated that while in high school she was given emotional support, but when she got to college the support she received was centered solely on academics. Rather than receiving support that would help her overall quality of life, in college, Katie only received the support she needed to be successful in school. When rural students arrive at college, they may expect to receive the same kind of help they did in high school and struggle when they learn that such personalized assistance is not available.

In rural areas, community members look out for one another and take care of each other rather than having to ask outsiders for help. Tom reported that, in his rural community, if you needed something, you would contact a neighbor and whatever issue you were facing would be resolved with the help of other members of your community. Like Tom, Wyatt shared that help comes from inside the rural community. He stated that, when something goes wrong, rural community members do not blame outside forces. Instead of going to an outsider for help, rural community members work as a team to resolve any issues they face. Because rural students are not used to asking a person outside of their community for help, once in college, the student may have difficulty learning how to bring their issues up to someone they do not know.

Finally, while all students have to learn how to get around in their new college environment, rural students face additional challenges because they are not used to navigating an urban environment, either on foot, driving, or through the use of public transportation. After enrolling at a 4-year, urban university, Russell learned the importance of being aware of his surroundings and making sure that he knew exactly



where he was going when he used public transportation so that he didn't get lost. Dinah had to discover where she could walk safely and when it was appropriate to make eye contact with the people she encountered while walking around the city. While Dinah seemed to struggle at first, she eventually got used to navigating the city that she moved to.

### **Finding #3: Fitting In**

Another finding from this study is that rural students find fitting in difficult in their new college environment. Difficulty fitting in occurs in multiple settings. When rural students arrive at college, they may not be able to find people with similar backgrounds and experiences. As there is not a clear-cut set of features or characteristics that readily identify a rural student, it can make it challenging for rural students to find one another on campus. Alex talked about not being able to relate to other students in her program because she was not from New York City and did not attend a private school. Alison also talked about feeling as though she did not fit in because she did not dress like the other students at the university. Rural students may also have values and beliefs that can be different from the other students in their college environment, which may prevent rural students from finding where they fit in on campus.

Finally, non-rural students sometimes have preconceived misconceptions about rural students. As was discussed in Chapter 7 of this report, non-rural students sometimes believe that all individuals from rural areas are close-minded or, as Dinah reported, are "hicks" who do not understand diverse cultures. These misconceptions lead non-rural students to treat rural students differently; as a result, rural students often feel out of place in their new environment. Katie F. talked about what it was like to go to school with

students who did not seem to understand her rural roots. Katie F. reported that she got picked on because she was from a rural area and had to educate their peers about what it is like to come from a rural area. Katie F. said that one of the hardest things she had to deal with when she got to college was feeling alone and different from her non-rural peers who did not understand what it was like to be from a rural area. Rural students, like Katie F., are not used to having to explain themselves because they come from hometowns where everyone knows them and is similar to them. Needing to explain themselves to other students puts additional stress on rural students who are already facing the normal stress that comes with transitioning into the college social environment.

After being away at college, rural students can feel that they no longer fit in their home community. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the values and beliefs of rural students might shift after exposure to new ideas and values for, in many cases, the first time. While at college, rural often students realize their own values and beliefs for the first time. For example, Alex had grown up in a town where “*everyone's Republican.*” When Alex got to college she was able to talk about different political views and realized that she had a lot of liberal beliefs. When rural students re-enter their hometowns, community members may not accept these new values and beliefs. Rural students, like Alex, find it difficult to integrate their new values and beliefs with the ones present in their hometown and sometimes serve as a bridge between traditional rural values and the values that are present in an urban environment. Other rural students, like Alison, may even have to decide what they can and cannot talk about when they go back home. Alison found that it was easier to avoid political discussions when she returned to her home community rather than causing a fight while she was home.

**Finding #4: Rural Advantages**

Participants noted coming from a rural area *does* have its advantages. The rural students interviewed for this study discussed how coming from a rural area had taught them how to deal with people. Jason mentioned that he had to learn how to get along with everyone in his community. He further reported that he would have to see the people living in his community regularly whether he wanted to or not, so it was easier to just be friendly with everyone. When rural students arrive at college, knowing how to get along with a wide variety of people could be an asset. Although students from rural areas are often not used to interacting with people who are different from them, they are used to trying to find ways to get along with others and keep peace among community members. Rural students could use these strategies when meeting new people. Being friendly with everyone could enable them to find interests and experiences they have in common with their non-rural peers who may, at first glance, seem to be very different from the rural students.

Rural communities are traditionally tight-knit, which creates a strong support system for community members. For example, Katie talked about her community members rallying together in times of crisis. Olga also talked about situations where members of her community came together when other community members were in need. Rural students may continue to feel this support, even after they arrive at college. Although it might be difficult for rural students to leave the safety and support of their home communities, they may feel comfort knowing they still have a strong support system at home cheering for them and there for them if they need help.

Finally, the small number of students enrolled in rural high schools allows students from rural areas to participate in a wide variety of extra-curricular clubs and activities. Instead of focusing on one area, such as sports or academics, rural students are able to take part in everything available to them. Having the opportunity to participate in many different extra-curricular clubs and activities leads rural students to be more well-rounded than their peers from other geographic locations who are only able to focus on one activity. Russell noted that while in high school, he was able to play sports, participate in several clubs, work, and still maintain good grades. When he got to college, he found that his non-rural peers were smart, but many of them had only focused on one thing, such as their academics. Russell believed his peers had missed out and were not as well-rounded as he was.

### **Implications for Practice**

The following section discusses the study's implications for practice. The section contains two sub-categories: 1) implications for practice at the high school level and 2) implications for practice at the college level.

#### **High School Level**

The findings and information collected for this study could help rural high schools create programs that better prepare rural students for the transition from rural to urban life. This study began to look at some of the issues rural students face when they enroll at an urban university. If rural high school staff are aware of these issues, such as having difficulty making friends and learning how to navigate the college administrative systems, they can advise their students about how to deal with them. Rural guidance counselors can work with students to devise specific strategies to help make the transition

process easier. For example, guidance counselors could stage mock interactions with students from different backgrounds. This way, when rural students meet new people, they already have ideas about what to say to them. Additionally, the experience of meeting diverse individuals would not feel as foreign to rural students as it would have been without the opportunity to practice. Rural school districts can plan field trips to urban communities so students can practice using public transportation. These trips could be tied to other trips, such as the school's senior trip, in order to cut down on the cost of an additional trip.

Finally, principals and teachers can work together to add opportunities to develop skills needed for urban life into classes that rural students are already taking. For example, navigating the college administrative system to get help accessing scholarships, loans, and other financial resources could be added to a health and home economics course that is already teaching other financial skills, such as budgeting and writing checks. Navigating public transportation and learning how to drive in an urban environment could become a supplemental part of a driver's education course. If time allowed, students could even take a small trip to a more urban area so that they can get experience city driving.

Rural high schools might also consider partnering with universities located outside of their rural community so students are more aware of all of the college options available to them after they graduate. If rural students are aware of their options early on in their high school careers, they may have a better idea of the majors that are available to them and not enter college undecided. One way to partner with colleges and universities outside of the rural communities where these students come from is through dual enrollment

partnerships. Dual enrollment partnerships enable students to take college-level, credit-bearing courses while they are still enrolled in high school (National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, 2018). Taking these courses in high school would expose rural students to college-level coursework while still in the safety of their home community. Rural school districts currently face obstacles while trying to offer dual enrollment courses to their students; the limited number of students who would be able to take these courses may discourage colleges from investing the time and money needed to offer dual enrollment courses in rural districts.

Finding teachers who meet college or university qualifications to teach a post-secondary course, and are willing to live and work in a rural area, is also challenging. One way to solve these issues is for rural school districts to work together. Rural school districts located close to one another may be able to share a teacher who is qualified to teach on the college level. Furthermore, rural school districts could send their students to a BOCES Center or other central location in order to increase enrolment totals and make it more worthwhile for colleges to offer dual enrollment courses to rural students.

Finally, the data collected for this study indicates that rural students are not exposed to other rural students who have left their rural environment, enrolled at an urban university, and chosen a career path that is not typically present in rural communities. Interacting with someone who was successful after they left their rural community might help rural students see that they can be successful at an urban university too. Students from rural areas could also be exposed to the career options that are available to them beyond their rural communities. Principals and guidance counselors in rural schools should track their students after graduation. Then, principals and guidance counselors

could schedule regular career days where graduates can come in and talk about their careers and their college experiences, if they went to college. These career fairs would show rural students that people just like them could go to college and be successful.

### **College Level**

At the college level, this study's findings could better inform advisors of the specific needs and issues faced by rural students. If rural students are identified prior to enrolling in college, they could be given an advisor who has been trained to deal with the specific challenges faced by rural students.

Knowing more about rural students and the challenges they face when they enroll in college could help universities create transition services that target the issues faced by rural students. For example, a particularly important factor for rural students was having a strong, family-like support system. When creating programs for first-year rural students, university faculty should keep this in mind and provide opportunities, such as regular class "family dinners", where students have the chance to bond with their classmates and develop strong bonds with the people in their new environment. Faculty should develop curriculum that helps rural students transition into urban environments. This could include learning how to navigate the bus system and learning about safety walking around in an urban area.

Colleges and universities could tailor the Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U) High-Impact Educational Practices to meet the specific needs of rural students. One of these High-Impact Educational Practices is first year seminars and experiences (Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), 2013). These first year seminars bring small groups of students and faculty or staff together on a

regular basis. Having a small group of students and faculty or staff to meet with regularly could be particularly beneficial to rural students who are used to small classes and strong connects with their teachers. Another High-Impact Educational Practice that might be beneficial to use while working with rural students is Diversity/Global Learning. These courses expose students to cultures, experiences, and worldviews that are different from their own (AAC&U, 2013). Not only could colleges and universities use Diversity/Global Learning courses and programs to help educate rural students about different cultures, colleges and universities could also use them as opportunities to educate students from other geographic locations about rural students and rural culture. Providing information to non-rural students about rural life will help them to better understand rural students and help make rural students feel like their non-rural peers accept them.

Finally, information from this study could help in the creation of programs to connect rural students with one another. This may include creating specific clubs and first-year seminars that target students from rural areas, such as the ones that are already available for students of color and first-generation students.

### **Limitations**

At the conclusion of this study, several limitations were identified. These limitations include: 1) The size of the city where the research was conducted; 2) The application of the findings to other universities; 3) The geographic diversity of the participants. These limitations will be discussed in greater detail in this section of the report.

The first limitation is that the research was conducted in a city with a population of approximately 143,396 people. The experiences of rural students who move from their rural communities to a very large city, such as New York City or Boston, may have



different experiences than the students with whom I spoke. Students who go directly to a larger city may face the same challenges that the students that I interviewed faced, but they may be more extreme because they are moving to an even larger city. This means that my study's findings could not be generalized to these students.

Another limitation is that the study's findings may only be relevant to other 4-year, private liberal arts, urban universities. Students who attend other colleges and universities, even other schools in the same city, may have different experiences because of the focus of the coursework of the college or university and the demographics of the students that the institution serves. For example, a college whose focus is on environmental careers and forestry may attract a larger number of students from rural areas, even if it is located in a city, because of the type of education it provides. Rural students may feel more at home because of the content of their classes and the interests of the other people around them. These universities focus on environmental careers and forestry, so the faculty and staff may be more accustomed to working with rural students and already have the tools in place to help them be successful in college. Students who attend a small liberal arts college located in a rural or town setting will have a different college experience from rural students who attended a 4-year, private liberal arts, urban university. Rural students who attend liberal arts colleges in rural areas will only be dealing with the transition from high school to college and not the extra transition from rural to urban life that was discussed by participants in the research conducted for this report. Although I acknowledge this limitation, I was interested in learning more about the experiences of rural students who attended 4-year, private liberal arts, urban universities and the multiple transitions they faced while attending college. By removing

this limitation, I would have a completely different study and would not have answered my research question.

Finally, none of my participants were from the south or from the far western part of the United States. Because I have not talked to people from these areas, I cannot generalize my findings to students from these areas.

### **Study Significance**

The research I conducted will add to the research already available regarding the experiences of college students and the factors that affect whether students will persist to complete their college degrees. While many other minority groups, such as first-generation students, African-American students, refugees, and members of the LGBTQ population, are included in the discussion of college student experiences and persistence, rural students are often left out of the conversation. By writing this dissertation, I attempt to include the perspective of rural students.

Additionally, many studies regarding college student persistence look at college students early on in their college career. Instead, I included students who were at different points in their college careers. Rather than getting a small snapshot of what college might be like for rural students, this study examined rural students who were at different stages along the path toward completing their degree. Looking at students who were at different points in the college careers could allow readers to see the challenges and successes that rural students faced throughout their college careers.

Finally, the majority of available research regarding rural students who enroll in college is at least five years old. This report adds current information about the issues and

experiences that rural students who are currently enrolled in college are facing so that we are better able to meet the needs of the rural students of today.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several next steps that can take place to learn more about the lives and needs of students from rural areas. First, Qualitative research that replicates this study, but includes students from rural areas of the United States who were not part of my study's population, must also be conducted. Additional research would help me to discover whether there were any differences between the rural students I have already spoken with and students from other rural locations in the United States.

I can also expand on the research I have already begun by conducting a survey of rural students who enrolled in 4-year, urban universities and ask them questions related to their experiences and whether they persisted at the original university that they attended. This would allow me to research a greater number of participants from many rural areas throughout the United States.

In the future, researchers could conduct more research regarding rural students who decide not to remain enrolled at the university that they first attend. Learning more about why rural students leave their original university will help researchers and practitioners to better understand rural students' college experiences and where they go after they left their original university. If these students go to a different university, it might be helpful to know more about the characteristics of the second university that led them to enroll there and whether they ever completed their degree.

Future researchers must also study the type of academic preparation students from rural areas receive. Additionally, researchers can look at how this preparation compares with the preparation of urban and suburban students.

An investigation of the differences between rural students who go to urban universities and those who attend rural ones should also occur. Being aware of these differences, if there are any, could help advisors at rural high schools inform their students of the options available to them after high school. If there are issues that discourage rural students from going to urban universities, high schools could become aware of these issues and come up with strategies to deal with the issues that their students face.

Researchers should also explore what occupations students from rural areas choose and where they choose to live after they graduate from college. Colleges and universities could use this knowledge to prepare their rural students for life after they graduate.

Quantitative research that investigates the transfer, persistence, and graduation rates of rural students must also be conducted. Having current information about the transfer, persistence, and graduation rates could help colleges and universities determine whether more needs to be done to help rural students. The rates could also be compared with the information available regarding urban and suburban student to see how all three groups compare with one another.

Finally, research that looks at rural isolation today should be conducted. This research would investigate whether rural areas are still isolated and, if they are, whether they have become less isolated than they were in the past because of modern technology and improved transportation.

## Study Summary

This study explored the lives of rural students who attended the same 4-year urban university in the northeastern United States. Rural students have lower college enrollment and persistence rates and are often less prepared for college than their non-rural peers (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Koricich, 2014; Schiess & Rotherham, 2015; U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). These students possess many qualities, such as being first-generation students and coming from low-income families, that decrease the likelihood they will persist in college (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Even though rural students have these qualities, there is little research available regarding the lives of rural students who enroll at 4-year, urban universities. The current study attempted to begin to fill this research gap by asking the question, “How do rural students perceive their experiences coming from a rural background and enrolling at a 4-year urban university?”

In order to answer this question, a phenomenological study was conducted using data from in-depth interviews of 19 rural students who enrolled at a 4-year urban university between the fall of 2013 and the fall of 2016. Interview data was coded for common themes; these themes included isolation, tight-knit community, college environment, and social interactions and are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4-7 of this report. The study’s findings could be used in the future to help rural educators better prepare their students for college and increase the likelihood that they will chose to enroll in college. Universities can also use information from this report to create programs for rural students to make sure that they will complete their college degrees. In the future, more research is needed to learn more about rural students from other parts of the United States

who might have been missed while conducting this study. In addition, more information is needed regarding the differences between rural students who go to urban universities and rural students who go to colleges located in rural areas. Finally, it is important to explore the state of rural areas today. Knowing more about the background of students from rural areas could provide researchers and practitioners with information about what may help rural students be successful and may give these groups insights into the paths rural students may take next.

## Appendix A

Common Core of Data (CCD) Locale Codes (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015)

Corresponding Categories	Urban-centric
City	11, 12, 13
Suburb	21, 22, 23
Town	31, 32, 33
Rural	41, 42, 43

### **New Urban-Centric Locale Codes**

#### **11 - City, Large:**

Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.

#### **12 - City, Midsize:**

Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.

#### **13 - City, Small:**

Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.

#### **21 - Suburb, Large:**

Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more.

#### **22 - Suburb, Midsize:**

Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.

#### **23 - Suburb, Small:**

Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000.

#### **31 - Town, Fringe:**

Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area.

#### **32 - Town, Distant:**

Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.

#### **33 - Town, Remote:**

Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.

#### **41 - Rural, Fringe:**

Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

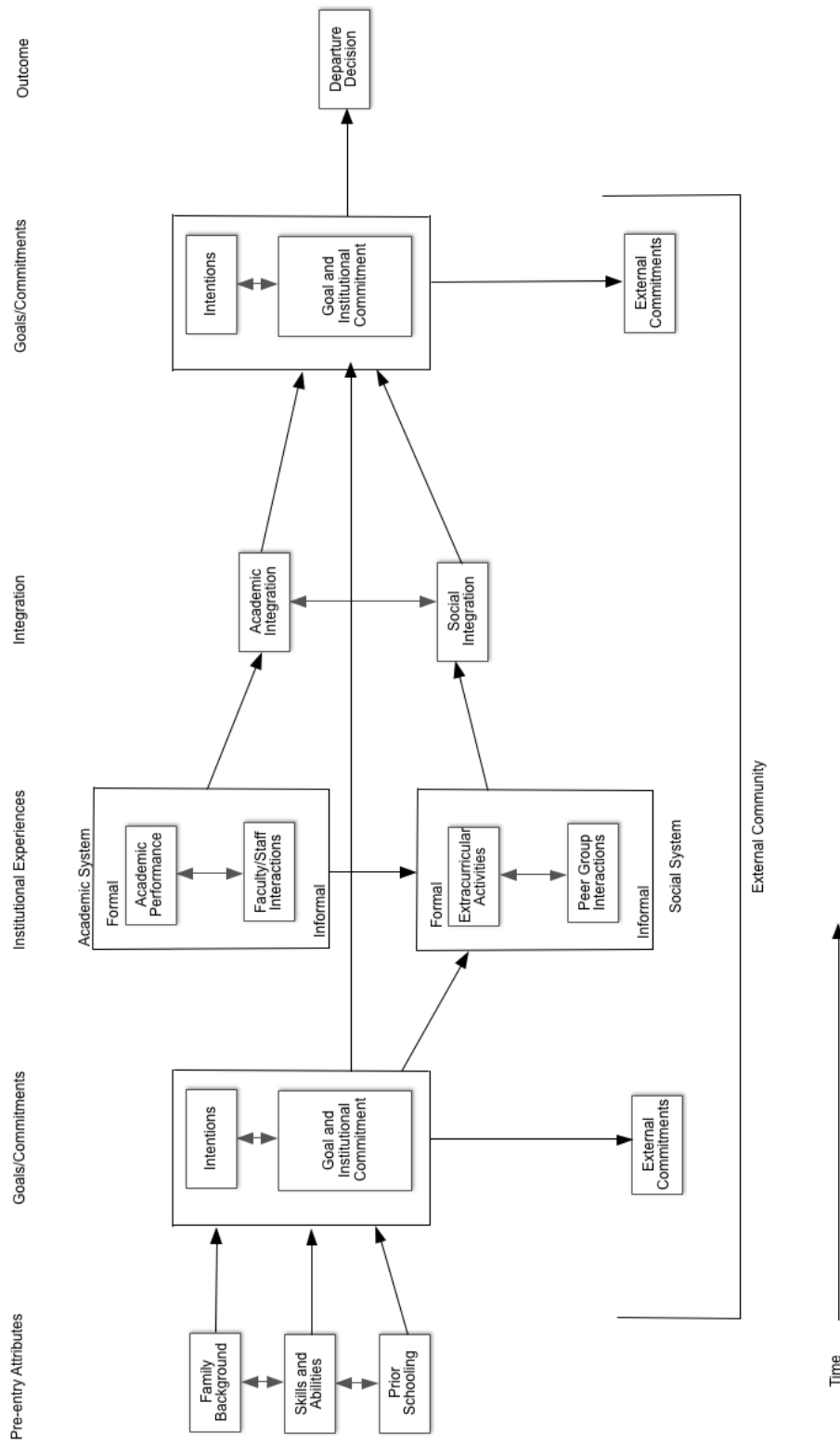
#### **42 - Rural, Distant:**

Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

#### **43 - Rural, Remote:**

Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

### Appendix B Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure (1993)





**Appendix C**  
Blank Pre-Interview Survey Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research that I am conducting regarding the experiences of students from rural areas who enrolled at a 4-year urban university! Prior to meeting with me for an interview, please fill out this questionnaire and send it back to me at [miwebb@syr.edu](mailto:miwebb@syr.edu).

Please note that all of your answers to the questions on this questionnaire will remain confidential and that only aggregated data will be reported. You can stop filling out the questionnaire at any time and choose not to answer any of the questions without penalty. By completing this questionnaire, you assure that you are 18 years of age or older and that your participation is voluntary.

- 1) Gender:  Male  Female
- 2) Age: \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Race: \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Size of high school graduating class: \_\_\_\_\_ Students
- 5) Number of years that you attended the high school that you graduated from: \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) Grade levels in the school that you attended (Example: K-12 school, 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, etc.):  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 7) While in high school, did you take any Advanced Placement or other college level courses?  Yes (Go to Question 7)  No (Skip to Question 8)
- 8) If yes, please list the courses that you took:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 9) While in Elementary and High School, did you qualify for Free/Reduced Price Lunch?  Yes  No
- 10) Are you still enrolled at XXXX University? \_\_\_\_\_  
Yes (Go to Question 11)  No (Skip to Question 13)
- 11) Major: \_\_\_\_\_
- 12) Anticipated graduation date: \_\_\_\_\_ (Skip to Question 14)
- 13) What are you currently doing now? \_\_\_\_\_ (Go to Question 14)
- 14) Parents' highest level(s) of Education (Ex: High School Degree, College Degree, PhD):  
\_\_\_\_\_

15) Parents' occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

16) Please provide your definition of "rural":

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17) What type of environment would you like to live after you graduate from college?  
(Please describe in as much detail as you can.) What would you like to do after  
you graduate from college?

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18) Is there any other information that you think might be helpful for the researcher to  
have about your experience as a rural student prior to conducting the interview?

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## Appendix D Sample Memo

### Dissertation Memo

**Title:** Rural Isolation

**Definition:** Participants describe feeling closed off from the rest of the world in their rural hometowns.

**Characteristics:** This is characterized by lack of exposure to diversity. Rural residents might not experience things such as access to news and information about popular culture and current event. Additionally, participants may talk about having to travel a great distance in order to go to places such as the movies, the mall, or even a grocery store.

OC: Lack of exposure to diversity and life outside of the rural area might lead residents to experience culture shock when they do leave their rural area. They also might not be aware of life outside of their rural community. In some situations, this may cause rural areas and the individuals living in this area to cling on to old ways of living or to stick to the same values and ideas that have been passed down through many generations. This can have both a positive and negative effect on rural community members (Positive: Sheltered community to grow up in; Negative: Not having a clear understanding of how the rest of the world works when they leave their rural hometown.).

**Conditions:** This is seen whenever participants talk about having to travel far distances in order to get the things that they need. It can also be seen when participants describe community values and ideas. Participants might also notice the effects of rural isolation more when they have gotten to college and can compare rural and urban life.

**Proposition/Hypotheses:** When individuals live in low populated rural areas, they may not be exposed to diversity and values that are different from their rural community.

When individuals live in low populated rural areas, they may have to travel far distances to obtain the things that they need, such as food, clothing, and leisure activities.

**Illustration:**

*“Ya had to...if you wanted to go shopping, you had to drive 45 minutes to get to like the closest like malls. If you wanted to go to the movies, that was another like 20 minutes away driving and you know.”*

*“And then...k...like...so Telluride is 98% liberal and it's also, you know, it's also kind of like super kept away off the grid. Meaning the only commercial...so we have Telluride, which...so Telluride is two and a half miles long and then we have our ski mountain and we have this housing community over here, it's called Mountain Village and so the gondola connects to that.”*

**Negative Cases:**

One of the participants talks about the fact that some people from his town were happy living there because they could walk to wherever they wanted to go. He states:

*“[I] Look at all these new things for me to do, and I think other people look at it like, it's not Telluride. My ski mountain isn't 3 miles from my back yard. I can't walk everywhere. And so they go back, and then they get stuck there and that's when I think it's a big detriment.*

**Code Summary:**

The code category Rural Isolation is made up of data instances where participants describe feeling closed off from the rest of the world in their rural hometowns. They may talk about situations where they had to travel far distances in order to go shopping or engage in other activities that they wish to participate in. participants may talk about certain values and beliefs that individuals within their communities hold and feeling behind when it comes to current trends and values. While some may like this isolation, others may see living in an isolated rural area as a detriment and wish to leave so that they can be exposed to new and different ideas and experiences.

**Appendix E**  
Coding Table

Primary Code	Definition	Examples	Sub-Codes
Isolation	<p>This includes situations where participants discuss ways in which their home community is either separated physically from other areas of the country or lacks access to current news, trends, information, or new ideas. Additionally, data instances where participants discuss the resources that are either present or lacking in their home community are included in this code category.</p>	<p><i>Rural to me also means that it is hard to get there. And by hard, I mean flying in is very hard, and the drive there is not a four-lane highway, but rather a single track windy road [Jason Questionnaire]. (Physical)</i></p> <p><i>That 25 minute gap isolates [My Town] in a lot of ways. It's in the middle of New Hampshire but it is very isolated from the rest of the community in the county area whereas [My University's city] is a real city. It's a port to different parts of the world. You see that with the huge number of refugees we have here. That just forces people to think differently [Ian Interview]. (Social)</i></p> <p><i>[OC: A rural area is] People partially living off of natural resources like farming for example [Nick</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Physical</li> <li>2) Social</li> <li>3) Resources</li> </ol>

		<i>Questionnaire]. (Resources)</i>	
Tight Knit Community	Data instances when participants discussed the close relationships that rural community members shared and the values that were present in their home communities. Often, these relationships and values are compared to the relationships and values that are present in the participants' new college environments.	<p><i>I also think that rural involve a level of familiarity – people in the community tend to know each other because they either all went to school together or their parents are all old friends [Katie Questionnaire]. (Familiarity)</i></p> <p><i>A lot more personal responsibility, like less being willing to forgive. I don't know, you should be taking care of yourself, type of thing, rather than blaming it on circumstances [Wyatt Interview]. (Values)</i></p> <p><i>Your parents cared as much about all the other kids as they...you know, not as they did you, but it was that extent you weren't just friends with your friends, you were friends with your friend's family, with your friends siblings, with your friends uncles, if they're around [Jason Interview]. (Support Systems)</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Familiarity</li> <li>2) Values</li> <li>3) Support Systems</li> </ol>

<p>College Environment</p>	<p>This includes situations where participants discussed what it was like to leave their home community and adjust to college life and the surrounding urban community. Instances where participants addressed the differences between their home community and their college environment are included in this code category.</p>	<p><i>The diversity really threw me off. I came from a prominently white, Catholic town. Coming here, I had never met someone who was Jewish before, before I came to [The city where the university is located.]. Learning about all these new cultures that I had no idea even really existed was another kind of culture shock to me [Alison Interview].</i> (Diversity)</p> <p><i>I think the thing that I struggled with the most was going from, cause none of my stuff was online in high school, so like all of the stuff for like classes was on Blackboard and like online submission [Kelly Interview].</i> (Adjustment to college life)</p> <p><i>I wanted to carry a knife every day on campus like I did in high school. Not into school, but during the summer when I was just working and stuff, I carried a knife every day, things</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Diversity</li> <li>2) Adjustment to college life</li> <li>3) Adjustment to urban life</li> </ol>
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		<i>like that. That was frowned upon, so I didn't do that [Wyatt Interview]. (Adjustment to urban life)</i>	
Social Interactions	This code contains data instances where participants discuss the interactions that they had with individuals living in their new college and urban environments.	<p><i>Meeting people was more challenging. I had known all the people in high school since I was five, so I guess I wasn't as good at meeting people cause I didn't have to [Russell Interview]. (Making Friends)</i></p> <p><i>One of the first questions people ask when I tell them I am from [Rural Area] is they ask me what the plural of Moose is, assuming that I would just know. They say ridiculous stuff, like Mooses and Meese. Seriously, they think I grew up on a farm [Ian Interview]. (Misconceptions)</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Making Friends</li> <li>2) Misconceptions</li> </ol>



**Appendix F**

IRB Approvals



**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD MEMORANDUM**

TO: Gerald Edmonds

DATE: August 15, 2016

SUBJECT: Expedited Protocol Review - Approval of Human Participants IRB #:16-204

TITLE: *Rural Student Persistence: Describing the Experiences of Rural Students who Persisted and Did Not Persist at a Urban 4-Year University*

The above referenced protocol was reviewed by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) and has been given expedited approval. The protocol has been determined to be of no more than minimal risk and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation;
2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and
3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

The approval period is August 15, 2016 through August 14, 2017. A continuing review of this protocol must be conducted before the end of this approval period. Although you will receive a request for a continuing renewal approximately 60 days before that date, it is your responsibility to submit the information in sufficient time to allow for review before the approval period ends.

Enclosed are the IRB approved date stamped consent and/or assent document/s related to this study that expire on August 14, 2017. The IRB approved date stamped copy must be duplicated and used when enrolling new participants during the approval period (may not be applicable for electronic consent or research projects conducted solely for data analysis). Federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate through the informed consent process and be provided with a copy of the consent form. Regulations also require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years after your study is closed.

Any changes to the protocol during the approval period cannot be initiated prior to IRB review and approval, except when such changes are essential to eliminate apparent immediate harm to the participants. In this instance, changes must be reported to the IRB within five days. Protocol changes must be submitted on an amendment request form available on the IRB web site. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB within 10 working days of occurrence.

# SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew London'.

Andrew London IRB Chair

DEPT: Office of Associated Provost Academic Programs, 304 Steele Hall      STUDENT: Michaele Webb



INSTITUTIONAL  
REVIEW BOARD  
MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Gerald Edmonds  
**DATE:** August 16, 2017  
**SUBJECT:** **Renewal Approval -**  
**Expedited Review IRB #:** 16-204  
**TITLE:** *Rural Student Persistence: Describing the Experiences of Rural Students who Persisted and Did Not Persist at a Urban 4-Year University*

The request for renewal of your human subjects protocol has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation;
2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and
3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

Your protocol is approved for implementation and operation for a period of one year, from **August 14, 2017** to **August 13, 2018**. If appropriate, attached is the protocol's approved informed consent document, date-stamped with the expiration date. This document is to be used in your informed consent process. If you are using written consent, Federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate by signing the informed consent document and be provided with a copy of the signed consent form. Regulations also require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years.

**CHANGES TO APPROVED PROTOCOL:** By its very nature, research involving human participants often requires change in plans and procedures. You are reminded of your responsibility to obtain IRB approval of any changes in your protocol prior to implementing them, except when such change is essential to minimize harm to the participants. Changes in approved research initiated without IRB review and approval to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participant must be reported to the IRB within five days. Protocol changes are requested on an amendment application available on the IRB web site; please reference your IRB number and attach any documents that are being amended.

**CONTINUATION BEYOND APPROVAL PERIOD:** To continue this research project beyond **August 13, 2018** you must submit a renewal application for review and approval. A renewal reminder will be sent to you approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date. *(If the researcher will be traveling out of the country when the protocol is due to be renewed, please renew the protocol before leaving the country.)*



**UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS INVOLVING RISKS:** You must report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others within 10 working days of occurrence to the IRB at 315.443.3013 or [orip@syr.edu](mailto:orip@syr.edu)**STUDY COMPLETION:** Study completion is when all research activities are complete or when a study is closed to enrollment and only data analysis remains on data that have been de-identified. A Study Closure Form should be completed and submitted to the IRB for review ([Study Closure Form](#)).

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

**DEPT:** Office of Associated Provost Academic Programs, 304 Steele Hall  
Micheale Webb

**STUDENT:**



## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Gerald Edmonds  
**DATE:** August 1, 2018  
**SUBJECT:** **Renewal Approval - Expedited Review**  
**IRB #:** 16-204  
**TITLE:** *Rural Student Persistence: Describing the Experiences of Rural Students who Persisted and Did Not Persist at a Urban 4-Year University*

The request for renewal of your human subjects protocol has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation;
2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and
3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

Your protocol is approved for implementation and operation for a period of one year, from **August 13, 2018** to **August 12, 2019**. If appropriate, attached is the protocol's approved informed consent document, date-stamped with the expiration date. This document is to be used in your informed consent process. If you are using written consent, Federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate by signing the informed consent document and be provided with a copy of the signed consent form. Regulations also require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years.

**CHANGES TO APPROVED PROTOCOL:** By its very nature, research involving human participants often requires change in plans and procedures. You are reminded of your responsibility to obtain IRB approval of any changes in your protocol prior to implementing them, except when such change is essential to minimize harm to the participants. Changes in approved research initiated without IRB review and approval to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participant must be reported to the IRB within five days. Protocol changes are requested on an amendment application available on the IRB web site; please reference your IRB number and attach any documents that are being amended.

**CONTINUATION BEYOND APPROVAL PERIOD:** To continue this research project beyond **August 12, 2019** you must submit a renewal application for review and approval. A renewal reminder will be sent to you approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date. *(If the researcher will be traveling out of the country when the protocol is due to be renewed, please renew the protocol before leaving the country.)*

# SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



**UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS INVOLVING RISKS:** You must report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others within 10 working days of occurrence to the IRB at 315.443.3013 or [orip@syr.edu](mailto:orip@syr.edu).

**STUDY COMPLETION:** Study completion is when all research activities are complete or when a study is closed to enrollment and only data analysis remains on data that have been de-identified. A Study Closure Form should be completed and submitted to the IRB for review ([Study Closure Form](#)).

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.



Katherine McDonald IRB Chair

**DEPT:** Office of Associated Provost Academic Programs, 304 Steele Hall **STUDENT:** Michaele Webb



## **Appendix G**

### Sample Consent Form



Syracuse University IRB Approved

AUG 14 2017 AUG 13 2018

SYRACUSE  
UNIVERSITY SCHOOL  
OF EDUCATION

230 HUNTINGTON HALL, SYRACUSE, NY 13244 (315)-443-4752

Rural Student Persistence: Describing the Experiences of Rural Students who Persisted and Did Not Persist at a Urban 4-Year University

My name is Michael Webb and I am a PhD Student in the School of Education at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

I am interested in learning more about the Experiences of Rural Students who attended a 4-year urban university. You will be asked to participate in an interview. This will take approximately 1 hour of your time. Additionally, you may be re-contacted for a follow-up interview. If you are re-contacted, the follow-up interview will take no more than 1 hour of your time. I will keep your study data as confidential as possible, with the exception of certain information that I am required to report for legal or ethical reasons, such as intent to harm yourself or others. I will assign a number to your responses, and only I will have the key to indicate which number belongs to which participant.

The interviews that will be conducted for this study will be recorded using an audio recorder device and then will be transcribed. These recordings will be used for data analysis purposes only. I will be the only person who will have access to these recordings and transcriptions and all files will be erased upon completion of the study. The interviews will focus on asking about coming from a rural background and the experiences that you had while you attended an urban university.

The benefit of this research is that you will have the opportunity to share information about your experience as a student from a rural area who attended a 4-year urban university. This may help you to feel empowered and like you have some say in your education. Also, you may begin to feel that your experiences are important and that people at the university that you attended and in the field of education value what you have to say. You also may feel good about yourself and your background as a rural student. Finally, if you are a student who dropped out of the university, you might directly benefit from this research because the information that you share could be used to create programs and resources that have been specifically created to meet the needs of rural students at the university. And, if you decided to return to the university to complete your degree, you might be able to use these resources to support you while you are completing your degree.

The risks to you of participating in this study are minimal and exist only where embarrassment may occur as a result of reflecting on your experiences. Any information you provide is entirely voluntary. You can choose not to answer specific questions.

If you do not want to take part, you have the right to refuse to take part, without penalty. If you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research, contact the Michael Webb at miwebb@syr.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013. If you feel that you may be a harm to yourself or others the Syracuse University provides several resources to help you. These resources are the Syracuse University Counseling Center, which can be reached at 315-443-4715, and Syracuse University Health Services, which can be reached at 315-443-9005.

All of my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and I wish to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

- I agree to be audio recorded.  
 I do not agree to be audio recorded.

---

Signature of participant

---

Date

---

Printed name of participant

---

Signature of researcher

---

Date

---

Printed name of researcher

Syracuse University IRB  
Approved

AUG142017    AUG13 2018-

## Appendix H

### Sample Interview Questions

The following questions are examples of other questions that were asked during the interviews that were conducted as part of this study:

1. What does the term "Rural" mean to you?
2. Tell me about what your parents and/or community members expected you to do after high school graduation.
3. Tell me about what the other students from your high school are currently doing now.
4. Please tell me about the process that you went through when selecting a college to attend.
5. Please talk about the academic preparation that you received in high school.
6. Please describe the values and beliefs that you feel are common in rural areas.
7. What are some of the values and beliefs of the individuals who are enrolled at the university that you attend/attended? Please describe these values and beliefs.
8. Tell me about the process that you went through while transitioning from high school to college life.
9. Tell me about the process that you went through while transitioning from urban to rural life.
10. Please tell me about a mentor that you have from your home community.
11. Please tell me about a mentor that you have from college.
12. Describe the friends that you have made in college.

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