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**Remembering Where You Came From:
Portraits of Rural Students in Higher Education**

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**Remembering Where You Came From:
Portraits of Rural Students in Higher Education**

by

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Dedication

In honor of my amazingly supportive, selfless, and loving parents, without whom, I never would have aspired to, much less completed, this milestone.

Paul Sutton

Janice Paschall Sutton

In loving memory and honor of my grandparents, who have been and continue to be my biggest fans; constant encouragers; and the communion of saints who surround me.

Cranfill H. Paschall

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L. Duane Sutton

LaVerne Craft Sutton

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**Remembering Where You Came From:
Portraits of Rural Students in Higher Education**

Melinda Jan Sutton, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Marilyn C. Kameen and Edwin R. Sharpe, Jr.

The number of studies related to students from rural backgrounds in higher education has waned in recent decades; however, over one-third of children in the United States continue to be educated in rural locales and their college-going and college-completion rates lag behind those of their urban and suburban peers. Because many rural students are white, they are typically considered part of the white majority on campuses, but they often encounter challenges unique to students from rural backgrounds and unlike those of their majority white peers from urban or suburban backgrounds. Therefore, a number of researchers have called for additional, qualitative studies regarding students from rural backgrounds as a unique cultural group and their experiences with higher education.

The current study utilizes portraiture, the qualitative methodology developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann-Davis, and a cultural framework combining social capital and critical standpoint theories to explore factors that affect students' enrollment, persistence, experiences, and perceptions related to higher education. Six students from one rural Texas high school who graduated in the top ten

percent of their high school classes participated in the study, which included in-depth interviews, observations, and analyses. Each of the students collaborated in the creation of his or her portrait as well; these portraits portray the students' higher education experiences in considerable detail.

Several factors are shown to have an impact on the experiences of rural students in higher education, including social capital, relationships, tacit knowledge, and finances. The study also demonstrates that female students from rural backgrounds face additional barriers related to higher education, such as romantic relationships, limitations on their future plans, and self-confidence. Implications for research, practice, and policy are also offered as opportunities to improve the experiences of rural students in higher education, and ultimately, their college enrollment and persistence rates.

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Prologue

During my doctoral program, I knew the day would arrive when I had to determine a dissertation topic. Through classes and conversations, I received advice from faculty members, alumni of the higher education administration program, and fellow students to select a topic in which I was interested and one about which I was passionate. As I looked around, I realized that many of my colleagues had done just that: they had identified topics in which they had a particular interest and that they would remain committed to throughout the duration of their dissertation processes.

As I contemplated what my own topic would be, I naturally turned to a phenomenon in which I had sustained an interest for quite some time. In fact, I developed an initial interest in this topic while I was in high school, although I couldn't have articulated that interest in the formal terms I attempt to use here. Instead, I simply noticed that the vast majority of students from my rural high school (and hometown) did not go to college, and those who did seemed to have a hard time completing what they started. Certainly, I had not reached these generalizations in any scientific or methodological way; they simply developed from anecdotal evidence, observations, and the experiences of my peers and me. Nonetheless, when it came time to select a dissertation topic, I found myself returning to my roots and the challenges I experienced and witnessed my friends and family encounter as we all attempted to navigate postsecondary education after high school and beyond our hometown.

When I graduated from high school, I was fortunate to earn a significant scholarship to Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas. I remember the intense, dichotomous feelings of excitement and anxiety I had about pursuing my education and a life outside my hometown. I had attended all 13 years of public schooling in this community, a small, East Texas town, where I had many friends but where I never felt as though I fully fit. I was also fortunate to have a family, specifically my parents and grandparents, who set an expectation early that I would attend college and complete a bachelor's degree, at a minimum. They also intentionally exposed me to opportunities both within and outside our town through travel domestically and abroad; activities and events ranging from ballet to basketball; and lots of reading. With this background in mind, SMU seemed like the academic, cultured community of which I couldn't wait to be a part, but I was also concerned about my ability to fit in academically and socially based upon my observations of other students who had graduated from my high school at the top of their classes only to return home due to academic difficulties, homesickness, or myriad other challenges. Unfortunately, I didn't have a large number of peers from my graduating class preparing for a similar path into higher education with whom I could share my insecurities; I had graduated with a class of approximately 130, and I can think of fewer than 10 who enrolled in a four-year institution following high school graduation. Pursuing postsecondary education was a lonely, scary proposition.

At any rate, I remained excited and headed to Dallas for summer orientation and the next four years of my life. The world I encountered at SMU was all for which I had hoped in ways both extremely rewarding and very challenging. To my surprise, I did

fairly well academically and had greater opportunities outside the classroom than I could have imagined, including meeting former U.S. presidents and dignitaries; studying abroad for a semester in Paris, France; and joining organizations and developing friendships that have had and continue to have a profound impact on my life today. I also experienced stark differences from my hometown that made my ability to assimilate difficult at times. SMU has been nicknamed “Southern Millionaires’ University” for its extremely wealthy student population, which was a stark contrast to the socio-economic status of my friends from home. I’ll never forget during my sophomore year when one of my SMU classmates told me she had never met anyone who lived in a mobile home. Many of my high school friends lived in mobile homes, and on more than one occasion, I had spent the night or attended slumber parties at their homes. In contrast, when I went to visit my SMU friends’ families, I was entering the homes of business executives in wealthy enclaves of major cities (although, to be fair, this was not the reality for all of my friends). I also had difficulty at times reconciling the good-natured teasing of my SMU friends who chided me about my thick East Texas “twang,” when my friends and family from home would comment about my “losing” my accent. Needless to say, the differences between my home and my college were quite expansive, despite the fact that both my parents have a college education; this divide became more difficult to bridge as I worked to develop relationships at college while maintaining those from home. At times, I felt as though I had to decide between these two “worlds,” and I wondered if students who returned to my hometown after giving college a try had simply chosen a different “world” in which to live.

After I graduated from SMU and began working in higher education at several institutions, I continued to observe family, friends, and acquaintances from my hometown who went on to four-year institutions (what few there were) and the challenges they seemed to encounter when they arrived. My initial puzzlement that began in high school grew to questions and concerns during my own time as an undergraduate, throughout graduate school, and as a current higher education administrator. Throughout this time, I noticed a pattern with students from my own high school and other students with whom I worked who also happened to be from more rural locales who experienced significant challenges in the transition to higher education. These initial, vague ideas began to evolve into a more well-developed plan for study throughout my doctoral program, and as I approached the time to select a dissertation topic, the question I continued to ponder was fairly straightforward: how could I bring voice to students from rural environments who pursue postsecondary education and experience both successes and challenges? What's more, what could I learn from studying these students that could make their transition to college easier and their chances of success greater? The following research is my attempt to answer these questions.

Chapter One: Introduction

I'm Charlotte Simmons...You are unique...You...are Charlotte Simmons...Momma's and Miss Pennington's words gave her a spurt of confidence. She had faced envy and resentment and social isolation at Allegheny High, hadn't she...and been imperiously uncool...and gone her own way...and never let any of it hold her back in her destined ascension to one of the finest universities in the world. And nothing was going to hold her back now...nothing. If she had to do everything by herself, then she would do everything by herself. But God...she felt so alone. (Wolfe, 2004, p. 78)

In Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*, a naïve yet exceptionally bright young woman from a rural, poverty-stricken town in Appalachia is offered a full scholarship to a "Duke-like" school. She accepts the scholarship and sets off on her new adventure to attain a four-year degree at an institution she believes is in line with her own academic values; however, the reality that greets her is not the intellectual utopia she anticipated. Instead, she is confronted with students from upper-middle class backgrounds who prioritize sex, alcohol, and social status over academics, unless academics can help them gain access to one of their vices.

Background

While Wolfe's Charlotte Simmons is fictional, her experience may not be all that unique for students from rural backgrounds entering higher education, if they make it there at all. A 2006 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* highlighted challenges

that students in four different rural regions of the country face in their pursuit of higher education.

Indeed, students from rural areas are often not advised why they should go to college. Many come from families with little or no experience with higher education, some of whom have a deep reluctance to encourage, or even tolerate, learning “beyond your station.” Such students lack information about how to choose where to attend, how to apply, and how to obtain financial aid. And they don’t know what to expect when they enroll. (“Rural students,” p. B14)

This lack of awareness and information has been magnified as the focus has shifted away from rural education. As the United States became more urbanized in the second half of the 20th century and more people moved to the suburbs, less attention was given to those who remained in rural settings. In particular, fewer studies have been undertaken in recent years related to children from rural environments, both in public and higher education; however, rural students are still a considerable population. In fact, “[f]orty-three percent of the nation’s public schools are in rural communities or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people, and 31 percent of the nation’s children attend these schools” (Beeson & Strange, 2003, p. 2). A group this size deserves specific focus and attention, particularly in light of some of the obstacles rural students face in completing public education, much less advancing to and persisting in higher education.

Problem Statement

The National Center for Education Statistics (2010b) reports that in 2004 approximately 34% of all 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States were enrolled in

colleges or universities; however, the college enrollment rate for rural areas was only 27%. Information regarding persistence rates for students based upon geographic location is not as readily available as that for urban and suburban students. But as the *Chronicle* (“Rural schools,” 2006) article suggests, academic preparation may not necessarily be the primary barrier to postsecondary enrollment and persistence for those from rural backgrounds; instead, other variables related to students’ families and home communities may also play a role.

Research Questions

This study attempts to add to the body of research regarding the enrollment and persistence of college students from rural communities and the personal circumstances and backgrounds that impact the success of these students in higher education. The study is guided by the following questions:

- What factors influence the enrollment of rural students in institutions of higher education?
- What factors influence the persistence of rural students in institutions of higher education?
- What is the nature of rural students’ academic and social experiences in postsecondary institutions?
- How do rural students perceive that postsecondary institutions respond to and meet their needs?

Significance of Study

A study that examines the experiences of students from rural backgrounds in postsecondary institutions and the factors that affect their enrollment and persistence is relevant to the field of higher education in several ways. The size of the rural population; the educational difficulties within rural communities; and the need to consider individuals from rural environments as a population facing barriers to and challenges in education similar to those of other cultural groups make the topic worthy of study.

First, the rural population in the United States is considerable. At the time of the 2000 U.S. census, over 222 million individuals lived in rural settings (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). While the percentage of rural dwellers may be low in a particular state compared to the state's entire population, the actual number of individuals living in rural locales can be quite large. For example, only 20% of the population in Texas lives in a rural environment; however, that accounts for over 3.3 million people, ranking Texas second among the 50 states in terms of rural population (Beeson & Strange, 2000). In addition, although the perception may be that rural populations are declining as individuals move to cities and the United States becomes more urbanized, Beeson and Strange (2000) point out that rural areas actually experience a cyclical "renaissance of interest" and growth from time to time (p. 63). When Beeson and Strange's *Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education* report was published in 2000, they claimed the United States was in the midst of one of these "renaissances" in rural areas.

The educational attainment of individuals living in rural communities is often low as well. In Texas alone, 38% of the rural population has fewer than 12 years of schooling

(Beeson & Strange, 2000). In addition, the college-going rate for students from rural areas is below that of students from urban or suburban locales (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b). Many rural residents consider the educational opportunities available in these locations to be deficient altogether, including teachers and schools of lower quality than those found in urban or suburban settings (Theobold & Wood, 2010).

Rural students are also sometimes overlooked in research, particularly in recent years. Because many rural students are white, they are often not perceived as being a subgroup with challenges that are different from those of the white majority on campuses (Maltzan, 2006; Theobold & Wood, 2010). In fact, some rural advocates suggest that rural students could and should be considered their own cultural group altogether (Atkin, 2003; Theobold & Wood, 2010). Regardless, literature related to the challenges faced specifically by rural students in accessing and transitioning to higher education is minimal, and most of the available research is quantitative in nature. Very few qualitative studies exist that allow the individual experiences of rural students to be examined.

Overview of Literature Review

To provide additional background regarding this topic, a literature review addresses several topics relevant to this study. First, “rural” is defined using the definitions of the U.S. Census Bureau and the categories developed for schools by the National Center for Education Statistics. These common and descriptive definitions have improved the ability of researchers to study specific locales and populations and make cross-comparisons, if needed.

“Rurality” as an identity is explored to provide clarity about the population being studied. The research indicates that individuals from rural backgrounds can be considered in a manner similar to that of an ethnic minority as “rurality” is a distinct identity, often described from a deficit discourse (Theobald & Wood, 2010).

In addition, a thorough review of research regarding college students from rural backgrounds is provided; in particular, the overview of research relating to rural students focuses on the preparation, enrollment, and persistence of this population in higher education.

While research does exist regarding how rural students make their decisions to attend postsecondary institutions and what factors contribute to their persistence, there remains a gap in the literature, which indicates a need for new research that considers non-academic factors and background characteristics specifically relating to rural students’ enrollment, persistence, and experiences in higher education. Notably, the extant research regarding rural students is dated and primarily quantitative in nature, providing evidence of the need for more current studies that consider issues of rural students’ enrollment, persistence, and experiences in higher education.

Methodology

Because this study focused on the individual experiences of rural students in higher education, a phenomenological approach was used. Phenomenology is concerned with individuals’ perceptions of their experiences rather than factual occurrences that may be taking place in the world around them (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990; Willis,

2007). This theoretical paradigm allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Phenomenology is complemented by a qualitative methodology that typically includes in-depth interviews with individuals who have first-hand experience with the particular phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). Portraiture is the specific methodology that was employed in this study "to build a composite of an individual and group" (Chapman, 1997, p. 157). Portraiture is "...designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). It is a collaboration between the researcher and the participant as a full description of an individual is developed. Consistent with other qualitative methods, data was gathered through in-depth interviews, field observations, and a review of written and electronic sources, including yearbooks, newspaper clippings, and social media sites.

The study consisted of a total of six students from a rural Texas high school who graduated in the top 10% of their classes since 2005 and who went on to attend postsecondary institutions. While the original goal was to include students who persisted or are persisting at their original institutions along with students who did not continue to graduation in order to determine what may be contributors to or detractors from the enrollment and persistence of students from rural backgrounds in higher education, all of the students in the study were persisters who were in the process of completing or who

had recently completed their bachelor's degrees, although a number of them had not been retained at their original institutions.

Definition of Terms

Rural: Both the U.S. Census Bureau's and the National Center for Education Statistics' definitions of rural are used. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defines rural as "all territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban," with the definition of urban focusing primarily on population (para. 2). Urban areas include "[a] cluster of one or more block groups or census blocks, each of which has a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile at the time" and "surrounding block groups and census blocks, each of which has a population density of at least 500 people per square mile at the time" (para. 1). In addition, "less densely settled blocks that form enclaves or indentations, or are used to connect discontinuous areas with qualifying densities" are considered urban by the U.S. Census Bureau (para. 1).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010a) redefined rural schools relying less on population and county boundaries and more on a location's proximity to an urban area. Urban areas are those "core areas" with populations of 50,000 or more, and those areas with populations between 25,000 and 50,000 are "urban clusters" (NCES, 2010a). The new system developed by NCES (2010a) has four major classifications (city, suburb, town, and rural), each of which is divided further into three categories, creating 12 categories of schools in total. Specifically within the "rural" designation, there are three distinct types of schools:

- Rural, Fringe, which is a “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;”
- Rural, Distant, which is “a 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;” and
- Rural, Remote, which is a “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” (NCES, 2010).

This system of categorizing schools makes research and comparisons easier both within and between designations.

Rurality: “Rurality” is closely related to “rural;” however, rather than simply defining a geographic location, rurality refers to the way individuals living within a rural setting identify with the culture of their locale. Atkin (2003) points out that “rurality” does not have a universal definition; however, most people have some idea of what the term means to them. He identified six general characteristics of rural life: (1) small scale; (2) isolation, or separation from services and amenities; (3) agriculture; (4) a strong community feeling; (5) conservative and traditional values; and (6) a slower, less pressurized way of life. To the extent that individuals identify with these characteristics may be the extent with which they identify with “rurality.”

Retention: According to Reason (2009), retention is an “organizational phenomenon” (p. 660). An institution retains students with the goal of retaining an entire cohort of students from one year to the next until they graduate.

Persistence: The terms “retention” and “persistence” are often used interchangeably; however, the two are different. While retention may have a broader focus, persistence is concerned with the individual (Reason, 2009). “Because individual students define their goals, a student may successfully persist without being retained to graduation” (p. 660). In this case, persistence is less of an “outcome,” and simply a student’s progress toward his or her higher education goals, which may or may not be graduation from college.

Social capital: A number of researchers (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993) have defined social capital and used this term in various contexts. For the purposes of this study, social capital refers to the access an individual has to information or networks as a result of his or her formal or informal membership in a group.

Limitations

According to Eichelberger (1989), a limitation “...is an aspect of the study that limits the confidence you would have in fulfilling the purpose of the study” (p. 242). In other words, describing limitations helps to point out ways the study may not have produced accurate findings related to the research questions. The following limitations were considered throughout the study.

First, this study was narrow in its scope as it focused solely on the experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education; this focus was narrowed even

further since the participants were all from a single high school in one state. The purpose of the study was to learn in-depth information about these individual students' experiences that contributed to or detracted from their enrollment, persistence, and experiences in higher education. Given the narrow focus of this study and the small number of participants, the results are not generalizable to all students from rural backgrounds. Instead, this study explicated the experiences of students from one high school who chose to participate in higher education and explores factors that impacted their enrollment, persistence, and experiences in postsecondary institutions.

In addition, my role as researcher could also have been a limitation of the study. While I believe my own experiences with higher education as someone from a rural background were informative to the study, the possibility that bias may have impacted the framing of the study or the analyses of the results is quite possible. More specifically, since I am from the town where the high school is located, there is the potential that students were less forthcoming with information if they had concerns about my maintaining the anonymity of the participants as well. They might also have felt compelled to participate in the study if they knew members of my family or if I had a connection with theirs. With this in mind, I made every effort to maintain a high level of professionalism as called for by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) by fully explaining the study to the participants, what their rights were as participants, and what my responsibilities were as the researcher.

Another potential limitation involved my ability to collect comparable levels of data for each participant. Despite the data collection process being the same for all

participants, the amount and type of data collected for each one was not always consistent, which resulted in varying levels of information. Quite simply, some participants were much more talkative or forthcoming with information than others were. I could sense a better “connection” between some of the participants and myself as the researcher than I could with others, which often fostered more in-depth conversations, and thus, richer data. Each student also seemed to have a particular “story” that he or she wanted to be told, despite the questions I may have been asking at the time. For example, students who were particularly frustrated about specific issues related to their high school preparation or the support offered by a postsecondary institution repeatedly focused on these areas in their responses or redirected the conversation at times to come back to the specific issue or challenge they had encountered and wanted to share, sometimes ignoring the question I posed altogether.

Organization of Study

The next chapter presents a review of the literature related to the research questions, including general research related to the access and persistence of students in higher education as well as more specific research related to the experiences of rural students in higher education. Chapter three provides information related to the methodology employed in the study, such as site selection and study participants. Chapter four includes in-depth, written portraits of each of the students who participated in the study, and chapter five presents the five themes that emerged through the analysis of the data. The final chapter presents key findings and suggestions for further study.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

When considering what factors may impact the enrollment and persistence of students from rural communities in higher education, several topics must be explored. First, definitions of “rural” and “rurality” should be clarified. In addition, previous research related to rural students’ academic preparation, enrollment, and persistence should be reviewed. In addition, social capital research should be considered, both as it relates to students’ educational attainment as well as the impact of place of residence. A conceptual framework concludes the review, which offers a possible viewpoint for further inquiry and research on this topic.

Defining Rural

The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defines rural as “all territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban” (para. 2). Of course, this begs the question as to what urban is. “Urban” areas have several characteristics according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), including “[a] cluster of one or more block groups or census blocks, each of which has a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile at the time” and “surrounding block groups and census blocks, each of which has a population density of at least 500 people per square mile at the time” (para. 1). In addition, “less densely settled blocks that form enclaves or indentations, or are used to connect discontinuous areas with qualifying densities” are considered urban by the U.S. Census Bureau (para. 1).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010a) worked with the Census Bureau to redefine the definition of rural schools using the Office of Management

and Budget's (2000) definitions of metropolitan areas. These new definitions rely less on population and county boundaries and more on a location's proximity to an urban area. The new system developed by NCES (2010a) has four major classifications: city, suburb, town, and rural. Each of these four classifications is subdivided further into three categories, with towns and rural areas specifically being "subdivided by their proximity to an urbanized area" (para. 2). Urbanized areas are those "core areas" with populations of 50,000 or more, and those areas with populations between 25,000 and 50,000 are "urban clusters" (NCES, 2010a). Using this schema, NCES has classified all school districts in the United States into one of these 12 categories so that designations are consistent and comparisons are easier to make. Specifically within the "rural" designation, there are three distinct types of communities:

- Rural, Fringe, which is a "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;"
- Rural, Distant, which is "a 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;" and
- Rural, Remote, which is a "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" (NCES, 2010a).

Although a specific rural community can be categorized in one of these designations, the way inhabitants of a particular community see themselves is not clarified. The next section will elaborate upon rurality as an identity.

Rurality as Identity

A number of researchers have explored psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968). While some studies have focused on individuals' faith development (Fowler, 1981) and moral development (Kohlberg, 1963), others have been centered around identity development, particularly with regards to membership in racial or ethnic groups (Helms, 1990). Although rurality as an identity is not often mentioned in these discussions, some researchers have explored this concept as well. In this section, the notion of rurality as an identity will be considered in terms of the definition of rurality, the deficit discourse surrounding rurality, and rurality and education.

Defining Rurality

In his article on the human and symbolic capital development of rural communities, Atkin (2003) points out that "rurality" does not have a universal definition; however most people have some idea of what the term means to them. He goes on to identify six general characteristics of rural life: (1) small scale; (2) isolation, or separation from services and amenities; (3) agriculture; (4) a strong community feeling; (5) conservative and traditional values; and (6) a slower, less pressurized way of life. In particular, Atkin (2003) highlights the "notion of shared social space" as a key feature of rurality. "If members of small rural communities share the same social space, the potential risks in stepping outside that space are considerably higher than that of their

urban counterparts” (pp. 512-513). These potential risks and the associated difficulties of assimilating with an “urban majority” are Atkin’s grounds for suggesting that individuals from rural backgrounds “...could, and perhaps should, be considered a distinct ethnic group living within a society dominated by an urban majority” (p. 507). Because the anthropological designation of ethnicity includes “suffering elements of social exclusion often associated with other minority groups,” Atkin (2003) asserts that rural people are also deserving of consideration as an ethnic group (p. 507).

Rurality and Deficit Discourse

From academic research to popular media, a deficit discourse exists related to rural locales and individuals. Even Marx (1967) in his essay on capital, pointed to the superiority of urban society as compared to rural. He remarked:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. (p. 84)

Theobald and Wood (2010) explored “...the cultural connection between being rural and being considered or defined as backward, uncouth, and unsophisticated – a hayseed, hillbilly, cracker, yokel, hick, or country bumpkin” (p. 18). They facilitated a day of conversation among administrators, teachers, students, and community members from 18 rural school districts to discuss rural education. Through the dialogue, Theobald and Wood (2010) observed that, “Somewhere along the way, rural students and adults alike seem to have learned that to be rural is to be sub-par, that the condition of living in a rural

locale creates deficiencies of various kinds...” (p. 17). Like Atkin (2003), Theobold and Wood (2010) attribute this perceived deficiency to the type of “...identity issues that stem from racial, ethnic, and religious memberships – but in the case of many rural dwellers, deficit identities are learned by individuals possessing the privilege of white skin” (p. 18). While the popular media can contribute to the development of a deficit identity, rural youths’ educational experiences may also play a role in this development as well. The next section will elaborate on this part of rurality identity further.

Rurality and Education

According to Howley and Howley (2010), much of the curriculum in public education in the United States “tends to feed the cultural assumption that suggests that in all cases, bigger is better” (p. 27). A natural extension of this sentiment is that big cities are “better” than small towns or that large schools are better than small schools. Rural youth internalize these messages and often perceive themselves as less academically prepared than their urban or suburban peers. In Theobold and Wood’s (2010) day-long conversation regarding rural education, they found that many of the rural students were “...well aware that we don’t have the best schools, we don’t get the best teachers or the best education. We know that we’re going to have to catch up when we go to college” (p. 28). This finding is also supported by freshman survey data reported by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI, as cited in Howley & Howley, 2010), which found that rural students attending a publicly-supported comprehensive college in Nebraska perceived “...their academic ability and their self-confidence to be significantly lower than their peers at similar institutions across the country” (p. 28).

While students from rural environments may perceive themselves as academically inferior to their peers from more urban locales, there may be additional worries they have when considering the pursuit of postsecondary education: namely, social exclusion from their friends and family back home. Atkin (2003) discovered that many young people from rural backgrounds “...found it difficult to engage fully in the opportunities – or threats – offered by lifelong learning” because of social exclusion related to their rural identity (p. 515). Atkin compares this fear of social exclusion to that of members of ethnic groups, which also differ from the majority. Atkin asserts that rural students’ “habitus” may support the development of values and beliefs that are different from those of urban society, or the “dominant position;” therefore, rural students may be “disadvantaged in developing the networks necessary for social and human capital accumulation” that contribute to postsecondary educational attainment (p. 515).

Despite the concerns of many rural students that they will experience social isolation from their home communities, Howley and Howley (2010) discovered that “out-migration” was a common theme within rural schools. In these environments, students “...learn authoritatively to leave rural places,” and rural schools shape identities to “willingly embrace departure” (p. 46). To return to the curriculum within public education, students are taught that “...the United States is synonymous with ‘progress,’ and progress is culturally defined as ever more urban growth and development” (p. 27). Therefore, young people from rural environments may not consider themselves full participants in the American experience until they leave their small towns and move to more urban locales as well (Howley & Howley, 2010).

Research on Rural Students in Higher Education

In considering the literature that is available regarding students from rural backgrounds and institutions of higher education, the research is divided into three areas: (1) rural students' preparation for college; (2) the enrollment of rural students in higher education; and (3) the persistence of students from rural backgrounds in higher education.

Preparation of Rural Students for Higher Education.

Educational aspirations of rural students. Boyle's (1966) work provides some insight regarding the effect of high schools on students' aspirations to attend college. First, he reviewed four independent studies that considered high schools' influence on students' educational aspirations. One way that high schools were shown to influence students' aspirations was simply in their ability to impart knowledge and develop skills in their students. When high schools had different educational standards, students' aspirations were affected as well. Specifically, he noted the decentralization of public education in the United States, and that divergence of standards was quite possible, particularly for smaller school districts. Secondly, Boyle pointed out that high schools also influence students' values and attitudes through the development of different subcultures that affect the motivation of students planning to attend college. Peer groups within a high school can influence a student's perception "of what college life is like, of how enjoyable the experience is likely to be" (p. 633). For students from smaller school districts – rural schools, in particular – where the college-going rate may be low, there may be fewer opportunities for peers to influence a student's attitude about going to college, at least in a positive or informed manner.

Boyle (1966) also conducted his own study of 1,701 girls in their final year at 70 high schools in western Canada. “Data were obtained that provided measures of family background and college aspirations. In addition, high schools were classified according to population composition and the size of the community in which they were located” (pp. 634-635). Based on the father’s educational level and other socioeconomic factors, Boyle categorized each school as high, medium, or low status with high status indicating a high school comprised of more students from a higher socioeconomic status and low status indicating more students from a lower socioeconomic status. Of the schools included in his study, all of the high status schools were located in metropolitan areas but none of the low status schools were. Therefore, it would follow that the low status schools were located in more rural areas. With family background controlled for, Boyle’s study indicated that “attending a ‘high status’ school in comparison with one of ‘medium status’ has a fairly strong effect on the student’s aspirations (0.21), but there is almost no difference between ‘medium status’ and ‘low status’ schools (0.01)” (pp. 635-636). Again, if these labels were considered in light of their general geographic location, it would appear that schools in more metropolitan areas exert a greater influence on students’ aspirations to attend college than those in rural areas do.

Blackwell and McLaughlin (1999) specifically considered the educational aspirations of students from rural environments and how these students’ aspirations affect the achievement of their goals. The researchers used data from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth* (NLSY) to conduct their study; hence, the data included boys and girls who were between 14 and 17 years of age in 1979 and between 25 and 28 years old in

1990. “The educational goals of the youth in the NLSY in 1979 show that rural youth aspired to fewer years of education than their urban counterparts” (p. 37). Rural boys’ educational aspirations averaged 13.8 years of schooling, and rural girls’ educational aspirations averaged 14.2 years (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999). Comparatively, urban boys and girls aspired to an average of 14.6 years of schooling. By 1990, none of the groups (rural boys or girls nor urban boys or girls) had achieved their “average educational aspirations,” although rural youth were closer to achieving their goals than their urban counterparts were even though their original aspirations, or goals, had been lower.

Following this initial comparison, Blackwell and McLaughlin (1999) also considered rural and urban youth in terms of being “advantaged,” “average,” or “disadvantaged.” Even when advantaged, rural youth still maintained lower aspirations in terms of years of schooling than urban youth did; advantaged rural boys aspired to 17.3 years of schooling and advantaged rural girls aspired to 18.1 years of schooling. Both of these figures are below that of advantaged urban boys and girls, whose aspirations were 18.6 and 18.2 years of schooling, respectively.

Through further analysis of students’ aspirations and attainment, Blackwell and McLaughlin (1999) found girls’ – particularly rural girls’ – educational attainment to be “...more closely tied to family background and resources than for boys” (p. 42). On the other hand, boys’ achievement was influenced more heavily by the average education level within their communities (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999).

Additional descriptions focused specifically on the academic preparation of students from rural backgrounds can also be found in the literature. Herzog and Pittman (1995) described the opportunities students from rural communities have regarding college preparation:

...rural schools are still smaller and poorer than nonrural schools. Historically, student population has determined funding allocations, and smaller numbers mean fewer dollars. Fewer dollars mean fewer teachers and fewer advanced or specialized courses, thus putting students in rural schools at a disadvantage. (p. 116)

To learn more about their students' perceptions of rurality and their experiences with rural education, Herzog and Pittman developed the *Rural Attitude Survey* and administered the questionnaire to 108 students from rural and urban backgrounds in five courses in educational foundations and psychology at Western Carolina University. While generally positive about their experiences, those students from rural high schools could also be quite critical. One student wrote, "I went to this high school that was so old we were lucky to walk out alive" (p. 118). Two other students wrote that they had difficulty getting into college-prep classes, "...because there was only one counselor, and she figured if you were poor, you were automatically a loser" (p. 118). If these articulated experiences of college preparation are indicative of those of other students from rural backgrounds, it would certainly follow that their access to and persistence in college would be affected as well.

Guiffrida (2008) conducted a review of retention literature to identify patterns in persistence among students from rural communities who participate in postsecondary education and to uncover potential challenges faced by rural students who attend large universities. As a result of these reviews, he compiled a number of suggestions for rural high school counselors to help prepare rural students for their transitions to large universities. First, he encouraged counselors "...to help students sort through the various influences on their decision to apply to large institutions and to help them explore other motivations, beyond prestige and pressure, for choosing to attend a large university" (p. 12). The right "fit" for the student was a recurring theme in his article, as he also suggested that counselors should encourage their students to visit campuses during the academic year before they decide to attend. Guiffrida (2008) also found that rural students often became "...overwhelmed by the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity inherent in many large universities" (p. 13). Therefore, he proposed that counselors in rural high schools provide increased opportunities that would expose rural students to cultures and environments different from their home communities. He also suggested that counselors encourage their students to become involved in co-curricular experiences when transitioning to a large university while maintaining strong connections to members of their home communities, as these connections seemed to be factors that contributed positively to rural students' persistence. Finally, Guiffrida (2008) encouraged counselors to prepare rural students for the number of academic options (majors, classes, etc.) available to them at a large university but also to seek out help, including counseling, advising, and other support services, if their experiences became overwhelming. In his

review of the literature, Guiffrida found that rural students were less likely to take advantage of these services, and thus, would end up leaving the university.

Rural Students' Enrollment in Higher Education

Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine (1995) used data from the *High School and Beyond* longitudinal survey to analyze the relationship between students' place of residence, social capital, and college attendance. Four categories for place of residence were defined: urban, suburban, small town or city, and rural or farming community. Like Coleman (1988), the authors distinguished between social capital at the family level and at the community level. "At the family level, social capital reflects the nature of the relations that exist among family members" (p. 366). On the other hand, social capital in the community includes "...the norms, social networks, and interactions between adult members of the community and children that serve to facilitate or support educational attainment" (p. 366).

The original dataset included responses from the same population of students who were surveyed every two years from their sophomore year of high school through four years following their senior year of high school. Some students pursued postsecondary education immediately, while others did not. Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine (1995) used data from the survey distributed two years after the students graduated from high school "...to assess students' decisions to attend or not attend a two- or four-year college program" (p. 368).

When compared across place of residence only, Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine's (1995) study revealed that suburban students have the highest likelihood of attending

college (67%), with 62% of urban students attending college and 53% of students from small towns attending. Meanwhile, rural students have the lowest likelihood of attending college (43%) when compared to their peers from other places of residence. Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine (1995) also conducted regressions on all the variables, and determined that "...rurality, parental education, family income, family social capital, and community social capital are each shown to independently predict college attendance" (p. 371). In addition, "parental expectation of college has the largest coefficient, exerting a strong positive effect on college attendance...", and parents of rural students are least likely to expect their children to attend college; 80% of urban parents expect their children to attend college, 81% of suburban parents do, and 70% of parents in small towns expect their children to attend college, while only 63% of rural parents have that expectation of their children (p. 372).

Yan (2002) found similar patterns in his study of rural students in Pennsylvania, although he did not specifically take social capital into consideration. Yan used the *National Educational Longitudinal Survey* (NELS, 1988) to determine who among Pennsylvania rural students gain access to postsecondary education; rural students' access to in higher education was compared to that of their urban and suburban peers.

Yan's (2002) work revealed that rural students were more likely not to attend college compared to urban and suburban Pennsylvania students. "Among rural students in the study group, 48 percent did not attend college, compared to only 28 percent of urban students and 36 percent of suburban students" (p. 6). Parental expectations also played a major role in rural students' college enrollment. "Rural students...were more

than twice as likely to be expected by their mothers to end their education with high school than urban or suburban students (27 percent versus 4 and 12 percent)” (p. 10). Students’ own expectations of themselves also contributed to their postsecondary pursuits. “Rural students who did not go to college were about twice as likely as urban and suburban students to expect they would end their education with high school (27 percent versus 15 and 13 percent)” (p. 10).

Rural Students’ Persistence in Higher Education

Overview of persistence research. Reason (2009) asserted that “[w]riting a comprehensive review of research on student persistence is a Herculean effort” (p. 659). A considerable number of researchers have focused on college student persistence, and numerous studies have been conducted regarding the factors that contribute to attrition. In fact, so much energy has been devoted to this topic that Tierney (1992) suggested, “...one could argue that student departure has been the central focus of higher education research” (p. 604). Therefore, providing a comprehensive review of the literature on student persistence with any type of brevity is difficult. Nonetheless, an overview of several seminal works is presented here.

First, however, persistence must be defined and differentiated from another term often used in studies of student departure: retention. According to Reason (2009), retention is an “organizational phenomenon” (p. 660). In other words, an institution retains students with the goal of retaining an entire cohort of students from one year to the next until they graduate. Often, retention rates are measures of institutional quality. On the other hand, persistence is an “individual phenomenon” (p. 660). Students are

persisting to a goal, which may or may not be graduation from college. “Because individual students define their goals, a student may successfully persist without being retained to graduation” (Reason, 2009, p. 660). Therefore, persistence is less of an “outcome,” per se, and simply a student’s progress toward his or her higher education goals.

Spady (1970) is the father of modern persistence research, which was extended by three of his students: Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993), Pascarella (1980, 2005), and Terenzini (1980, 2005). Specifically, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) built on the work of Tinto (1975), who developed a predictive model of the dropout process using the concepts of academic and social integration. With their study at Syracuse University, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) examined the predictive validity of Tinto’s model. In order to do so, they developed measures specifically to address academic and social integration as defined by Tinto. These included (1) peer-group interactions, (2) interactions with faculty, (3) faculty concern for student development and teaching, (4) academic and intellectual development, and (5) institutional and goal commitments.

Persistence of rural students. Schonert, Elliott, and Bills (1989) set out to obtain information on the “educational pathways” of rural youth from Iowa school districts with enrollments of less than 300 following the first five years after high school graduation. In total, 174 individuals who graduated from a rural high school in Iowa in 1983 participated in the study. The researchers developed a survey instrument using questions from the *High School and Beyond* study. They telephoned participants once as a pre-contact and followed up three additional times. The researchers also conducted on-

site visits to school districts to collect transcript information on each respondent and talk to school personnel. Two descriptive educational categories (persisters and nonpersisters) were used and were further divided by two-year and four-year institutions. Respondents were compared on five characteristics: (1) family background; (2) other influences (familial); (3) other influences (non-familial); (4) student characteristics; and (5) high school and college background (p. 5).

Among the sample used by Schonert, Elliott, and Bills (1989), 90 of the college attendees matriculated at two-year institutions (65%). Of this group, 61 students were “persisters” in two-year colleges, and 29 were “non-persisters.” There were not significant differences among the persister and nonpersister groups based upon gender or marital status. There were interesting differences among family backgrounds, however; for example, “[t]he fathers of nonpersisters had attended vocational or trade school at higher rates than other parents” and “[t]he mothers of nonpersisters were about twice as likely to have attended a four-year college (21%) than the mothers of persisters (11.5%)” (p. 9). (This finding is particularly interesting as it contradicts much of the other research available regarding the influence of a mother’s education level on a child’s educational attainment.) In addition, the mothers of persisters were more likely than the mothers of nonpersisters to work full-time while the respondents were in elementary and high school. Consistently, nonpersisters indicated that they withdrew from college because they “could not afford to continue” and “career indecision” (p. 11).

There were 89 students who comprised the group of four-year college attendees in Schonert, Elliott, and Bills’ (1989) study, with 68 being “persisters” and 21 being “non-

persisters.” Like the two-year college attendees, four-year college persisters and nonpersisters had a similar demographic composition but their family backgrounds were somewhat different. Every four-year college nonpersister lived with both parents during high school, while this was “slightly less likely among persisters” (p. 12). The work patterns of mothers for persisters and nonpersisters was also different from those of their two-year counterparts. For four-year college attendees, the nonpersisters were more likely than the persisters to have mothers who worked full-time prior to and during the students’ elementary and high school years, which was the opposite for two-year college attendees. Although the vast majority of both persisters and nonpersisters had planned to attend college, “almost twice as many nonpersisters as persisters ‘had not thought about’ attending college (29% to 15%)” early in their high school careers (p. 13). Like their two-year college peers, nonpersisters were most likely to indicate that affordability and career indecision were the two primary reasons for withdrawing from college as well. Another characteristic to note among the four-year college cohort was their involvement in co-curricular activities in college; the persisters were almost twice as likely to participate in a sorority or fraternity (18%) as compared to nonpersisters (9%).

In Schonert, Elliott, and Bills’ (1989) study, the rural Iowa students had a considerably higher degree-completion rate than the national average at the time of the study. (While many of the students were labeled “nonpersisters” because they left an institution of higher education at some point, many went back to complete their degrees.) The researchers indicated the role and influence of the family in rural Iowa was one of the most important factors influencing this persistence. Almost all of the students in the

study “grew up in a traditional family unit” (p. 15). In addition, only 6% of the respondents attended college outside the state of Iowa. In addition, the parents of the respondents influenced the educational decisions of students more than any other group. The researchers concluded that “possessing a high degree of perseverance fostered by the traditional rural family allowed the rural students to overcome many of the obstacles that would otherwise have interfered with their educational attainment” (p. 16). While not explicitly stated, this also supports the notion that family social capital could have an impact on a student’s persistence in postsecondary education.

While Yan’s (2002) study considered the enrollment of rural youth in higher education, he also looked at how well those who enrolled in college persisted and what factors influence rural Pennsylvania students’ persistence in postsecondary education. Rural (69%) and urban (68%) students had similar persistence rates, although both groups were less likely to persist compared to students from suburban backgrounds (75%). A number of factors contributed to rural Pennsylvania students’ persistence (or lack thereof) as well. First, the socioeconomic status of rural students seemed to play a role in their persistence. Students from rural backgrounds who persisted in college were “concentrated in the middle and high” socioeconomic status levels (p. 7). In addition, gender made a difference. While rural females were more likely than rural males to attend college, they were also more likely than rural males to drop out or delay enrollment. Finally, financial aid seemed to be an important, perhaps overriding, consideration in rural student persistence. Students from rural backgrounds who persisted were more likely to have at least one or more types of financial aid. Yan also

stressed that further research is needed to determine how the characteristics of the postsecondary institution influence rural students' college enrollment and persistence as well.

One of the few qualitative studies involving the persistence of rural students is Schultz's (2004) dissertation focusing on the first semester experiences of first-generation, rural students from agricultural families. A total of six students were interviewed. Several relevant findings were produced from the study that impact the experiences and persistence of rural students in higher education. First, "...the participants found themselves unaware of the need to build new relationships, and to cope with a college environment and culture which proved to be extremely dissimilar to that which they had known all their lives" (Schultz, 2004, p. 49). This was manifested through students' discomfort with living in the residence halls and their interactions with culturally diverse individuals in the college setting. Size was also a factor that affected rural students' persistence in higher education. Students lacked experience with large towns or large campuses by virtue of the fact that small towns or agricultural communities were their original places of residence; this made their transition all the more difficult at times (Schultz, 2004). The "agricultural heritage" of students was both a strength and a hindrance. Many students felt that this background provided them the resilience and determination necessary to persist at their given institution, but "...that heritage also seemed to create obstacles," including a lack of understanding of rural students' clothing choices made by non-rural students, the belief of rural students that they have to work harder before college than non-rural students, and the general feeling

of rural students that they are simply “different” from their non-rural peers (Schultz, 2004, p. 50).

Another qualitative study of rural students and attrition is Maltzan’s (2006) ethnography of one rural high school in Danville, Ohio. Through a traditional cultural anthropological approach, Maltzan sought to “describe the impact of rural culture on patterns of postsecondary persistence” (p. 37). Her research questions looked primarily at the role that the home community played in providing barriers and support to students’ postsecondary enrollment and persistence; her hypothesis was that the “resistance to higher education in its many articulations...is not a matter of rural deficiency as much an assertion of rural identity” (p. 37). Through observations and interviews at one high school, Maltzan logged over 2,000 hours of fieldwork and interviews, specifically focusing on those high school seniors who had an interest in pursuing a four-year degree and those who had most recently graduated from this small Ohio high school and were freshmen in college. Maltzan concluded,

The analyses of data illustrate the implications of rural culture for the development of identity, college decisions processes, and patterns of postsecondary persistence for research participants. In Danville, rurality became not only the system of meaning with which people made sense of the world, but importantly, it was the system of meaning with which those bound for college made sense of themselves. (p. 200)

However, Maltzan was quick to point out that rural students are often overlooked as being at high risk for early withdrawal from college “...in light of the privileged racial

identities they carry. This privileged social identity renders white rural students invisible in discussions of access and equity in higher education” (p. 214). In essence, Maltzan refocuses the discussion of access and persistence on agency rather than race. Regardless, her experiences with the students from Danville seem to be consistent with the findings from previous research regarding challenges to the enrollment and persistence of students from rural communities and point to the need to consider these students as a unique group based on their geographic background rather than their race.

Conceptual Framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) define the conceptual framework of research as “...the main things to be studied – the key factors, constructs or variables – and the presumed relationships among them” (p. 18). Maxwell (2005) elaborates on this by suggesting that a conceptual framework “...is primarily a conception or model of what is out there that you plan to study, and of what is going on with these things and why – a tentative theory of the phenomena that you are investigating” (p. 33). He contends that there are four main sources for modules used to construct the conceptual framework: (1) the researcher’s own experiential knowledge; (2) existing theory and research; (3) pilot and exploratory studies; and (4) thought experiments. The conceptual framework for this study of rural students’ experiences in higher education is drawn from the researcher’s own experiential knowledge; existing theory and research; and a pilot study conducted by the researcher.

A hybrid approach involving social capital theory and critical standpoint theory is used to frame the study. Before delving into the way these two theories complement one

another and can be useful in a study of rural college students' enrollment, persistence, and experiences in higher education, each of the concepts must first be explained independently.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital has been conceived of and defined by a number of researchers, including Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000). Each of these researchers has developed his own nuanced definition of social capital, but in essence, social capital refers to the access an individual has to information or networks as a result of his or her formal or informal membership in a group. Social capital can be measured both in groups and in individuals.

Three forms of social capital were explored in depth by Coleman (1988): obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Obligations and expectations are reciprocal relationships where one may do favors for another with a returned favor expected. “[I]ndividuals in social structures with high levels of obligations outstanding at any time have more social capital on which they can draw” (p. S103). Information channels are another form of social capital in which social relations are used to acquire information that would be beneficial to an individual for other purposes. Finally, norms and effective sanctions can serve to encourage or discourage certain behavior in a social setting. Coleman (1988) pointed out that norms can constitute a powerful form of social capital.

Although social capital has a number of positive consequences, negative results of social capital also exist, according to Portes (1998). These include exclusion of outsiders

from the community, thereby limiting their own social capital. In addition, social capital can exert excess claims on group members, which may “prevent the success of business initiatives” under certain circumstances, such as when norms or expectations require individuals to employ or otherwise help relatives who may be a drain on rather than a help to the business (p. 16). Restrictions on individual freedoms may be a third negative consequence of social capital, which can impose conformity upon group members or drive others to leave entirely. And, finally, a “downward leveling of norms” may also occur as a result of social capital when “individual success stories undermine group cohesion” (p. 17).

Coleman (1988) emphasized that social capital exists at both the family and community levels. Social capital in the family setting is essentially the relationships between children and their parents. This social capital may provide access to other types of capital possessed by the family. Outside the family, the social capital that exists within a community involves the social relationships that exist among parents and in the parents’ relations with the institutions of the community.

While Coleman (1988) offers defined levels of social capital, some scholars argue that concepts of capital are much more nuanced. In other words, social capital in one setting may not lend itself to being considered capital in another setting. Although his reference was to cultural capital specifically, Bourdieu’s (1977) conceptualizations of “dominant cultural capital” that encompasses traits of “powerful” and “high status” social groups versus “non-dominant cultural capital” that account for capital within “lower status” groups could apply to social capital as well. Having high levels of access to

social capital in a perceived lower status setting may not translate into high levels of access to social capital in a setting that is perceived to be of higher status.

Social capital in educational research. Social capital theory has often been used in educational research. In the previously cited study, Coleman (1988) used the *High School and Beyond* dataset to demonstrate ways social capital plays a role in students dropping out of high school. Because social capital involves relationships, the parent-child relationship can contribute to or detract from a student's social capital. For example, when there are more children in a family, children may have less interaction with parents, and thus, reduced social capital. Likewise, a single-parent household will have less social capital than one with two parents. This is supported in Coleman's findings from the *High School and Beyond* study that demonstrated larger high school dropout rates for students from single-parent homes and from families with several children.

Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless (2001) also considered students' access to family and community social capital and their educational achievement. At the family level, a two-parent household was one factor that contributed positively to educational achievement while an increased number of siblings or siblings who had dropped out of high school impacted achievement negatively. At the community level, parents who know their children's friends' parents facilitated educational achievement as "...the ties formed...provide[d] closure in local networks, which can reinforce community norms and practices that promote achievement" (p. 58). Involvement in religious and non-religious groups also facilitated educational achievement. On the other hand, schools in

which students travel considerable distances and that have high numbers of students who have experience multiple moves since first grade had reduced educational achievement as meaningful relationships were more challenging to form.

Critical Standpoint Theory

Critical theory evolved from Marxism, which held that "...those who owned the means of production often oppressed the workers" (Willis, 2007, p. 48). Today, critical theory often still focuses on oppression of one group by another, but the concept has broadened to include many forms of oppression based on a variety of social and cultural factors.

To serve their critical aim, social theories must (a) represent the social world in relation to the interests of the oppressed – i.e., those who are the subjects of study; (b) supply an account of that world which is accessible to the subjects of study, which enables them to understand their problems; and (c) supply an account of the world which is usable by the subjects to study to improve their condition. Critical theory is theory of, by and for the subjects of study. ("Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science," 2011, pp. 14-15)

Willis (2007) also contends that the entire research process from the critical theorist's perspective is a value-laden activity; the researcher's own values and beliefs are evident from the selection of the research topic to the development of the research design to the analysis of the data gathered.

Standpoint theory is a type of critical theory. It was initially used by George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his reflections on the institution of slavery (Wood, 1994).

Hegel (1807), a prominent 19th-century German philosopher, noted that society as a whole recognized that slavery existed, but that the nature of the institution was perceived quite differently depending on whether one's position was that of master or slave. From this insight, Hegel reasoned that in any society where power relationships exist, there can be no single perspective, no "correct" understanding of social life. Each person sees society only as it appears from the perspective of his or her social group, and every perspective is limited. All views are partial because each reflects only a particular standpoint within a culture stratified by power. (Wood, 1994, p. 51)

Since Hegel's time, standpoint theory has emerged primarily as a type of critical feminist theory with the underlying assumption that those who are "...subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial aspects" (Wylie, 2003, p. 26). In other words, those individuals outside the majority may have an understanding of the world that is different from and perhaps more complete or objective than the perspectives of individuals in the mainstream.

Standpoint theory involves situated knowledge, or "...epistemology conceiv[ing] of knowers as situated in particular relations to what is known and to other knowers" (Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science," 2011, p. 2). It is an individual's "situation" in society that provides him or her the unique vantage point with which to view the world. Situated knowledge is closely linked to social location, a concept that appears frequently in standpoint theory literature as well. Wylie (2003) defines social

location as the position of an individual in a “hierarchically structured system of power relationships” (p. 31). This position, or social location, impacts his or her experiences and understandings of those experiences. Wylie (2003) goes on to explain that social location “systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic content” (p. 31). The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (“Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science,” 2011) describes an individual’s social location as “...her ascribed social identities...and social roles and relationships” (p. 3-4). These identities, roles, and positions create unique experiences and understandings that help form each individual’s standpoint.

Another facet of standpoint theory is the concept of insider-outsider status. “Insider-outsider status” alludes to the access an individual may have to a certain social situation but acknowledges that the individual will never fully reach “insider” status because of his or her social identity or group membership. The insider-outsider status of participants in a research study may allow someone “...to get more and better evidence, to discern motivations more accurately, to make connections between causal factors more quickly, and to test and cross-test a wider range of explanatory hypotheses” (Wylie, 2003, p. 39). When conducting studies using standpoint theory, the researcher must also “...approach inquiry from the perspective of insiders rather than impose on them the external categories of professional social science, a managing bureaucracy, ruling elites” (Wylie, 2003, p. 27). The researcher must not make assumptions about the group being studied based on the position of the dominant class; instead, he or she should consider the

standpoints of the study participants as being valid and perhaps more insightful perspectives on the phenomenon.

Merging Social Capital and Critical Standpoint Theory

Based on experiential knowledge, existing theory and research, and the results of a pilot study, social capital theory has proven effective as a concept used in educational research to predict student achievement; however, the research involving social capital that informs this study has been quantitative in nature, making it difficult to achieve a deeper understanding of the way an individual's family and community can impact their experiences with postsecondary education. Critical standpoint theory provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of rural students' experiences in higher education holistically while considering ways their background may play a role. These students bring unique social identities and group memberships into postsecondary education that may be different from those of individuals from urban or suburban backgrounds. Most rural students are also able to provide an insider-outsider perspective in that they are part of the white majority on campuses yet may not be fully accepted because they are "culturally different" as a result of their geographic background. Standpoint theory allows for the unique experiences and understandings of rural students to be explored further.

Summary

The overview of literature presented here provides the research context for the current study. While there is an abundance of literature related to students from rural backgrounds in higher education, a number of studies are dated, and recent research

related to rural college students is more limited. In addition, while research exists regarding rural students' preparation for and access to postsecondary education, there is less information available regarding factors that contribute to students' persistence in higher education. In fact, no studies were identified that considered rural students beyond their first year of college. Finally, most research related to rural students in higher education is quantitative in nature and provides comparisons of rural students to their urban and suburban peers. A more qualitative approach to studies of students from rural backgrounds is warranted in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

This study attempts to address some of the current gaps in the research by learning more about the experiences of students from rural backgrounds in postsecondary education and factors that contribute to and detract from their enrollment and persistence in higher education. Because rural students are often an overlooked group in higher education research, a critical theory framework will be employed with the goal of providing valuable information to student affairs practitioners; high school teachers and administrators; parents; and rural students themselves in an effort to improve the enrollment and persistence of students from rural backgrounds. Standpoint theory will also be part of the conceptual framework in order to gain a deeper understanding of these students' unique experiences. With this background in mind, the following chapter presents the methodology used for the study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study focused on the individual experiences of college students from a rural community and the influences their original place of residence and backgrounds have on their enrollment, persistence, and experiences in higher education. The following research questions guided this study:

- What factors influence the enrollment of rural students in institutions of higher education?
- What factors influence the persistence of rural students in institutions of higher education?
- What is the nature of rural students' academic and social experiences in postsecondary institutions?
- How do rural students perceive that institutions respond to and meet their needs?

While the college-going rates of students from rural communities remain below that of students from urban or suburban environments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b), research related to this population has declined in recent years as the attention has turned to other groups considered to be at risk for not completing postsecondary education (McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010). Regardless, rural students continue to encounter challenges as they matriculate through higher education, which contribute to persistence rates that are also well below those of their urban and suburban peers (Elliott, 1989; Maltzan, 2006; Yan, 2002).

Much of the research that exists regarding rural students and postsecondary education is quantitative; this approach is also insufficient for understanding the

individual experiences of students from rural communities (Maltzan, 2006). Therefore, further study – qualitative study, specifically – of rural students in higher education is warranted.

Theoretical Paradigm

Because this interpretive study centered on students' individual experiences in higher education, I used phenomenology as the theoretical paradigm. Phenomenologists concern themselves with perceptions, or *phenomena*, and how individuals derive meaning from their experiences (Willis, 2007). Individuals' perceptions of their experiences are the focus in a phenomenological study rather than factual occurrences that may be taking place in the world around them (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990; Willis, 2007). More specifically, phenomenologists are interested in how individuals "...put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview" (Patton, 2002, p. 106). Because this study focused on individual students' experiences in higher education, phenomenology was an appropriate paradigm choice in order to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions and worldviews (Van Manen, 1990).

According to Patton (2002), the basic foundational question for phenomenology is, "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (p. 104). While phenomenology is concerned with individual experiences and perceptions, it also is concerned with how a particular, common phenomenon may be experienced by a group of people in order to create a shared meaning, or essence (Patton, 2002). The shared meaning, or essence, is

developed through documenting individual perceptions and then bracketing, analyzing, and comparing across group members to identify common themes that create the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Bracketing is simply the researcher's process of identifying the "essential features," or common elements, of the phenomenon for a group of individuals (Eichelberger, 1989). Eichelberger (1989) explains that simply interviewing individuals is not a phenomenological study; instead, the researcher must employ bracketing to find the commonalities between the individuals in order to create the shared experiences, or essence, of the phenomenon.

While phenomenologists seek to understand the essence of a particular phenomenon, it is important to note that phenomenology's goal is not to reach generalizations. Instead, phenomenology "...attempts to understand the local context rather than find universals or laws of human behavior" (Willis, 2007, p. 108). The understanding of a phenomenon through this approach allows for "...a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" and "bring[s] us in more direct contact with the world" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). By learning more about a specific phenomenon, we learn more about the world itself.

Methodologically, phenomenology is consistent with a qualitative approach that typically includes in-depth interviews with individuals who have first-hand experience with the particular phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The participants "...have 'lived experience' as opposed to secondhand experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Participant observation is also used. All aspects of the particular phenomenon are considered in phenomenology, "...how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it,

remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The goal is to provide a complete picture of the way an individual or a group of individuals experiences a particular phenomenon. Patton (2002) also points out that one of the “narrowing elements of heuristic inquiry within the larger framework of phenomenology” is for the researcher herself to have personal experience with and an intense interest in the phenomenon.

Positionality

According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), positionality “...describes the relationship between the researcher and his or her participants and the researcher and his or her topic” (p. 31). Before embarking upon a qualitative study, the researcher must be aware of her own position “...so as to guard against hearing, seeing, reading, and presenting results that conform to the researcher’s experiences and assumptions about self and other, rather than honoring the participants’ voice in the study” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 103). While this self-awareness and disclosure is important, inside knowledge into a phenomenon can also be advantageous and appropriate in a qualitative study. Patton (2002) suggests that in a phenomenological study specifically, the researcher should have personal experience with and an intense interest in the phenomenon being studied. This allows for “...discoveries, personal insights, and reflections of the researchers” (p. 107). Therefore, I approached this study with caution so as not to make assumptions about the study participants’ experiences in college based on my own experiences but also with limited insider knowledge (albeit several years

removed) about what some of the general experiences are for students from rural backgrounds in higher education.

As a graduate of a small, rural high school who went on to attend a medium-size, private postsecondary institution, I had a keen interest in the college enrollment and persistence of other students from rural backgrounds, which was my initial reason for pursuing this study. While I felt academically prepared when I went to college, there were a number of non-academic factors that made persisting at my chosen institution challenging at times. For the past 20 years, I anecdotally observed as a rural high school alumna, and more recently, as a higher education administrator, other students from rural high schools have a difficult time “fitting in” and persisting in higher education. Therefore, I arrived at this study with a particular passion and interest in learning more about this perceived phenomenon.

My own experiences of having grown up and attended 13 years of public schooling in a small town also added to my credibility with the study participants and allowed for trust to develop more quickly. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “Respondents are much more likely to be both candid and forthcoming if they respect the inquirer and believe in his or her integrity” (p. 256). Aside from my own personal experiences growing up in a small town and obtaining a college degree that I hope the study participants found credible, I also made every effort to keep the participants’ identities anonymous and to present the information they shared in a responsible and accurate manner by collaborating with them in producing the findings.

Research Design

Creswell (2007) points out that, “The research process for qualitative researchers is emergent. This means...that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data” (p. 39). This proved to be true for me in the current study. While most of the original research design remained intact throughout the study, there were some adjustments as I began collecting and analyzing the data. A full explanation of the research design used during the study is presented here.

Sample Selection

As Miles and Huberman (1994) explain, “...you cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything” (p. 27). Therefore, purposeful sampling was used in this study to identify information-rich cases for study in depth (Patton, 2002). “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Using a smaller number of information-rich cases can provide greater insight and more in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

Due to the size of rural high schools themselves as well as the low college-going rates from rural high schools, the number of individuals pursuing postsecondary education is relatively small. Nonetheless, study participants were drawn from one high school located more than 50 miles from Dallas, Texas. While the high school has approximately 1,000 students, the town where the school is located only has a population of approximately 2,000 inhabitants (Texas State Handbook Online, 2010). The school district draws students from several small, nearby towns and rural areas. Based on the

categories developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010a), the high school would be considered “Rural, Remote,” as it is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area that has a population of 50,000 or more. The school district’s student population is predominantly white; Hispanic students comprise the largest minority group, accounting for 10.7% of the student body, and African-American students account for 2.6% (Texas Tribune, 2010). Fewer than 1% of students are Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American (Texas Tribune, 2010). The Texas Tribune’s *Public Schools Explorer* indicates that 59.2% of students in the district are economically disadvantaged, and 45% are at risk for dropping out of school (Texas Tribune, 2010).

Since 2005, the high school has had an average college-going rate of 12.9% (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2010). This percentage only included students attending two-year and four-year institutions in the state of Texas; however, very few students attended colleges or universities outside the state. In addition, in fiscal years 2008 and 2009, one-fourth of students who enrolled in postsecondary institutions from this high school had grade point averages below 2.0 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2010). Based on these figures, college enrollment and persistence appear to be challenges for students from this community and high school.

Six students from this high school who graduated in the top 10% of their classes since 2005 and who matriculated to two-year or four-year institutions were interviewed. Students in the top 10% were targeted for the study under the assumption that this designation indicated a student was academically prepared for college-level work. Only students who had been out of high school at least one year were included since factors

affecting a student's persistence, his or her successful pursuit of educational goals, would have been difficult to assess during the first year of postsecondary education.

While the academic background of the students was relatively consistent, maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling was used within the sample from the high school. For example, efforts were made to include a relatively equal number of male and female students as well as roughly equivalent numbers of students from graduating classes since 2005 who were of "traditional college age." The study also included participants who currently attend or have attended a community college; a regional public university; a large, research institution; an out-of-state postsecondary institution; and a private college. Students who transferred between institutions were also included. While the original intent was to include students who did not complete their higher education goals as well, virtually no students were identified who fit this description. Despite not being able to identify "non-completers," the individual students who participated in the study met several of the desired criteria simultaneously. A small group of students were originally identified through research in the local newspaper, which listed the names and future plans of many of the top 10% graduates. From this sample, additional study participants were identified through the snowball method, which "identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know that cases are information-rich" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28).

Prior Field Study

A short, ethnography was undertaken in fall 2010 as a pilot project for the present study. (See Appendix A for the interview protocol.) In the prior study, four students

(three females and one male) were interviewed about their preparation and transition to postsecondary education from this particular high school. In addition, a high school counselor and a high school teacher were interviewed, and yearbooks and newspapers were reviewed in order to get a better sense of the college-going culture promoted at the high school. Some of the themes that emerged in the pilot project – namely, the impact of students’ tacit knowledge of college life, the influence of students’ relationships with family and friends with regard to their college-related decisions, and students’ interest in or aversion to new and different experiences – reappeared in the current project, and while a full, comprehensive ethnography was not possible for the pilot study, the previous project informed the research questions and design of the present study.

Method

While a qualitative approach was used for the study, portraiture is the specific method that was employed. Portraiture was initially developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) as a way to describe effective schools and was expounded upon further by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). In their book, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) defined portraiture as a qualitative methodology that bridges science and art. These two fields are merged by combining “...the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature” (p. 4). In Featherstone’s (1989) essay, he described Lawrence-Lightfoot’s portraiture as “scholarship in education that combines the distancing power of analysis with another kind of power – the deep gesture of solidarity” (p. 376). In other words, in portraiture, the researcher maintains a somewhat removed

analysis of the phenomenon being studied, but she and each participant form a relationship as they work together through dialogue and review to develop each portrait.

Through the use of “events and societal contexts,” portraiture “build[s] a composite of an individual and group” (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). It is “...designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). Portraiture searches for the goodness in individuals, noting that this “goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). The portraits may not necessarily capture an individual as he or she sees oneself, but instead convey the full “essence” of an individual, some of which may be familiar to the individual but some of which he or she may not be aware or may resist (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Portraiture uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, and as such, appeals to a wide audience. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) specifically sought to “broaden...the audience...[by] communicating beyond the walls of the academy” (p. 9). Featherstone (1989) referred to portraiture as “a people’s scholarship” because it uses scientific facts gathered in the field to give voice to individuals’ experiences (p. 376). Although a legitimate methodology in its own right, the delivery of portraiture is appealing to a wider audience, and therefore, may also be more accessible to a wider variety of individuals who can use the information for constructive ends.

According to Chapman (2007), "...the portraiture methodology is used when a researcher wishes to produce a full picture of an event or person that tells as much about the subject as it does about the researcher, or portraitist" (p. 157). While the researcher is the "primary tool for data collection, analysis, and interpretation," her own personal and professional interests and identity are not separated from the research itself (p. 158). Truly, portraiture is a collaborative process between the researcher and the participant.

Since portraiture is a form of qualitative research, data was collected using traditional approaches. According to Patton (1990), qualitative research "...consist[s] of three kinds of data collection: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observation; and (3) written documents" (p. 10). In order to provide well-developed portraits of the students selected for the study, all three data collection methods were utilized.

In-Depth Interviews

Rubin and Rubin (2005) point out that interviews are critical components of qualitative research and are "...conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion" (p. 4). Because each interview is different based on the specific traits of the researcher and the participant, each conversation is unique (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In portraiture, the interaction between the portraitist and the subject is crucial to the development of the portraits.

The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3)

In consideration of this element of portraiture, each student participated in two interviews, at least one of which was one-on-one in a private setting and at least one of which occurred in the student's current "setting." Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) indicate that setting, or context, is crucial to a portraitist's work. "The context is rich in clues for interpreting the experience of the actors in the setting" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41). All students were interviewed on his or her respective campus or in his or her home, which was sometimes his or her family's home. "Surrounded by the familiar, they can reveal their knowledge, their insights, and their wisdom through action, reflection, and interpretation" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 43). The second interview occurred anywhere from several weeks to several months after the initial interview. This allowed time for me to reflect on the information shared during the first interview and begin initial analysis of the data. The questions then posed in the second interview were much more unique to each participant based on information shared in the first interview, and I was able to clarify and ask specific follow-up questions related to information shared or observations made in the initial interview and subsequent communication. The second interview also focused more on the future plans of each student. Each interview was transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

Field Observations

Aside from in-depth interviews with students, field observations also took place when meeting with students in their current contexts. This was consistent with traditional qualitative research.

During fieldwork, the researcher spends time in the setting under study – a program, an organization, a community, or wherever situations of importance to a study can be observed and people interviewed. The researcher makes firsthand observations of activities and interactions, sometimes engaging personally in those activities as a “participant observer.” (Patton, 1990, p. 10)

Generally, field observations took place during the same time as the interviews with the students and included observations of the students’ appearances and dress; interactions with their family or peers; and other artifacts in the environment that provided insight. During my time with each student, I made written notes of observations regarding details that would not be captured through the oral interview; following each interview, I typed and organized these notes into topics or themes that would help inform the student’s portrait. While it was important to develop a schedule for the visit in order to maximize the opportunities to observe the student in action, “[i]t is also most important to leave space for unscheduled time to roam the halls and speak spontaneously with actors on the scene” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 166). This additional time outside the formal interview with a student afforded more opportunities to learn about the individual.

Written Documents

Finally, a review of written and electronic documents related to the students and their community of origin also took place. Written documents included high school yearbooks as well as the community newspaper for information related to each of the students during their time in high school and as residents of a rural community. The students all agreed to become “facebook friends” with me during the study as well, and

their postings and interactions with others through social media provided additional opportunities for learning about the students.

Analysis

The analysis of the data took place in two phases. The first phase involved analysis within cases in order to develop a portrait of each individual student. Through the analysis, themes emerged that lead to the development of specific portraits, which are presented in Chapter 4. The second phase included an analysis of the data across cases through traditional open and axial coding. These themes are presented in Chapter 5. A more in-depth explanation of each type of analysis is explained further here.

The on-going analysis within each case took place throughout data collection. The analysis began through reflections Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) refer to as “impressionistic records.” An impressionistic record is “a ruminative, thoughtful piece that identifies emerging hypotheses, suggests interpretations, describes shifts in perspective, points to puzzles and dilemmas (methodological, conceptual, ethical) that need attention, and develops a plan of action for the next visit” (p. 188). Following each interview, I created an impressionistic record that captured my own observations and reflective thoughts regarding the interaction with the student. These regular impressionistic records allowed for “ongoing coding” of the data, which is often referred to as “identifying emergent themes” in portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Continual identification of themes is an “...iterative and generative process; the themes emerge from the data and they give the data shape and form” (p. 185). These emergent

themes eventually resulted in outlines for each of the portraits into which data were sorted.

In portraiture, the goal is a standard of authenticity rather than reliability and validity, which are the traditional standards of quantitative inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). After both interviews had been conducted, drafts of the portraits were developed and were then shared with the student participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe portraiture as the “co-creation of a narrative;” hence, the initial portraits were shared with students to ensure authenticity. These draft portraits were sent to students asking them to review for factual errors. Although pseudonyms were used and selected identifying features were masked to some extent in the portraits, this review by the students was meant to ensure the students were comfortable with the level of detail included and to solicit their feedback as to how “authentic” they found the portraits to be. While the portraits may not have reflected the way students would have described themselves, the students agreed that the portraits were accurate and authentic.

After the development of the portraits, the data were sorted once again through both open and axial coding. In open coding, data are “...broken down so that as many ideas and concepts as possible are identified and labeled” (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 51). This then “...sets the stage for axial coding, where the data are reassembled so that the researcher may identify relationships more readily,” (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 51). The transcribed interviews were read and re-read several times with each of the four research questions in mind to develop open codes, which were then sorted into common themes

through axial coding. The results were five themes that ultimately emerged and are discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

As in all qualitative research, an attempt to generalize the findings to theory was made and will be explored further later in this study. Because qualitative research is influenced by an individual researcher's attributes and perspectives, the goal was not to produce a study that is replicable. Instead, Huberman and Miles (2002) point out that the goal is "...to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with a detailed study of that situation" (p. 174). The data analysis described here provided here helped to achieve this goal.

Chapter Four: Portraits

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), if ethnographers are listening *to* a story in their work, then portraitists are listening *for* a story in theirs (p. 13). Indeed, through initial visits with six college students who attended Hamden High School and subsequent conversations, reflections, and analyses with each of them, their narratives emerged, revealing what is “unique” about each student, yet pointing to “what is universal within the portrayal of uniqueness” as well (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 168). These six portraits relate the experiences of current college students and their encounters with post-secondary education. While all come from the same starting place – the small town of Hamden – all have arrived in higher education with varied expectations, preparation, and support, which has resulted in their unique and informative experiences. Following are their individual stories.

Adrienne

Introduction

One of the first students I identified to interview was Adrienne. She had graciously participated in a project I conducted for a class the previous year, and I had gotten to know her then. She eagerly accepted my invitation to participate in this study as well. This time around, the first interview with Adrienne took place in the living room of the apartment she shared with three female friends in the college town where she was attending a state university; the setting of the second interview was the living room of the sparsely-furnished apartment she shares with her new husband, Mitch, in the suburb where the commuter school to which she plans to transfer is located. In the short time I

have known and interacted with Adrienne, she has experienced a number of significant life events: marriage, moving, and transferring schools, to name just a few. While Adrienne freely admits that she does not particularly like change, she has learned to accept it over the course of her short life.

Adrienne is a beautiful young woman with long, curly blonde hair and a pleasant, easy smile. She is quite petite, standing only about five feet tall, but the energy and enthusiasm Adrienne exudes more than makes up for what she might lack in height. Casual clothes – a sweatshirt and jeans for our interviews – are the attire she typically chooses for her small frame. Although Adrienne cares about her appearance and often models for “self-portrait” headshots of herself on facebook, there is nothing pretentious about her. Instead, she is authentic, open, and natural. She does not wear much make-up, and her hair requires minimal styling. Even the way she shares information about herself – honest, direct, and forthcoming – is evidence that “what you see is what you get” with Adrienne.

Throughout our conversations, Adrienne’s candor, word choice, and insight into her own experiences reveal an intelligent and thoughtful young woman who has had to grow up quickly. Perhaps because of my previous interactions with Adrienne or perhaps as another demonstration of her genuine spirit, she unabashedly shares what has influenced her enrollment and persistence in college, including her strong connection to family and friends; the limited (and sometimes inaccurate) information she received in high school; and her strong desire to “begin her life.”

“It’s so hard to be far away....I have so many more attachments at home.”

Although Adrienne freely discusses many details of her life, one of the subjects about which she speaks most often and most passionately is her family, and considering its size and complexity, this may not be entirely surprising. Adrienne is the oldest of six children, all girls ranging in age from 21 years old (Adrienne herself) to her five-year-old baby sister who has not yet started kindergarten. A quick scan of Adrienne's facebook pictures – ranging from childhood pictures of Adrienne with her arm affectionately and protectively around a younger sister to more recent pictures of her and her sisters laughingly piled on an over-sized chair that is much too small to fit all six of them – provides further insight into the close and loving relationships among the girls. Although they share a common bond, each of the sisters claims her distinct role within the family as well. “When you have a lot of siblings, you need something to distinguish you,” Adrienne shares. While one of her sisters is considered the peacemaker of the family and another has a more rebellious streak, Adrienne was a precocious child, learning to read before she even began school and never losing her interest in books and learning, which has resulted in her being known as the “book smart one.” Adrienne willingly admits, “I’m the smart one, and I’m kind of proud of that title. You know, it’s something that distinguishes me from the rest of them.”

Although Adrienne and her sisters spent much of their lives in the Hamden area because their paternal grandparents lived there, Adrienne and her family resided in the Dallas area during her kindergarten year and then lived in a smaller community about 20 miles away during her elementary and middle school years. After her grandparents passed away, her father inherited their home in Hamden, and Adrienne, her parents, and

her five younger sisters moved to the area and into her grandparents' home when she was in the eighth grade. Her father owned a landscaping business, and her mother held down various part-time jobs when she was not needed to provide support for her husband's business, particularly during the slower, winter months. "It's a very loving household," Adrienne shares. "You know, it's great family-wise, but financially, it's just been a dead-end." In fact, her family has experienced significant financial struggles almost since Adrienne can remember.

Adrienne's paternal grandmother was an educator and encouraged her son – Adrienne's father – to pursue a college education; however, he did not enjoy college, according to Adrienne. "He just felt that he could do his business, and so, I think he has maybe two classes and that's about it." During our first interview, Adrienne shared that her father called her just a few days earlier to inform her he had lost his job. "He just called me about four days ago and was like, 'Yeah. I just got laid off,'" Adrienne says. "So, I'm a bit out of the loop. I don't really know quite when this happened." While Adrienne's mother eventually became a Certified Medical Assistant (CMA) and a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) when Adrienne was in junior high, her journey to obtain these certifications was not a smooth one. "She did lots of schooling," Adrienne remembers. "Like, she would take classes on again, off again all through, like, my childhood....and, it's been really hard for her because she's had to work different jobs and had so many kids, you know." Adrienne's mother is now employed by a retirement center and is working toward becoming an occupational therapy assistant, which is a four-semester certification program. Adrienne's mother has only been able to complete

two of the semesters, however, "...because financially or children or whatever, she's had to drop out," according to Adrienne.

During Adrienne's sophomore year of high school, her parents separated. While her father remained in the house in Hamden that he had inherited, the landscaping business he had owned for 20 years went under; Adrienne's mother moved to a Dallas suburb about 60 miles away. The three oldest daughters, including Adrienne, stayed in Hamden to live with their father, and the three youngest girls moved in with Adrienne's mother. The divorce was finalized during the spring of Adrienne's first year in college. "When my parents were divorcing, I was very much the rock for my sisters," Adrienne shares. "And, I feel very protective over them. And, I want to be there. I want to be the most amazingly awesome sister in the whole entire world." Although several years have passed since her parents' divorce, Adrienne continues to provide stability for her sisters and mediate between family members. "I'm very much the mediator between my dad and my sisters, and my sisters and my mom...and then between the two of them," Adrienne says. Even now, Adrienne must be careful not to show one parent preferential treatment over the other, including the amount of time she spends with each. "I have to be careful to split my time pretty evenly," Adrienne says. "Make sure I go see both of them." As a result, when Adrienne makes visits home from college, the time she spends at each parent's home is divided equally.

After her parents' divorce and the dissolution of his business, Adrienne's father went to work for a company that provided a variety of services, including power washing and striping parking lots; this is the position from which he had been recently laid off that

Adrienne shared during our first visit. At the time, her father's employment status was particularly troubling to Adrienne considering her father's fiancée, Pauline, had given birth to a baby boy – Adrienne's half-brother – approximately three months earlier, and her father and Pauline were going through a difficult time in their relationship as well – a situation Adrienne was not confident would improve; all of these factors created considerable uncertainty for Adrienne about her father's future. By the time of our second meeting, however, Adrienne's father and Pauline had gotten married, although Adrienne nor any of her siblings had attended the wedding. "They wanted to do [the wedding] private in between themselves," Adrienne says. Although her father is still without a job, his personal situation seems more stable, at least for the foreseeable future. Pauline is a corrections officer and is able to provide for their family financially while Adrienne's father stays home to care for their son. Adrienne feels this works well because "...to have to pay for childcare would be more expensive than if my dad got a job, and so he's kind of being Mr. Mom right now." Adrienne's father also maintains partial custody of her other siblings, who are at his and Pauline's home every weekend. "It's just not really feasible for him to have a job," Adrienne contends. "Somebody has to be able to take care of everybody." Indeed, the role of family caretaker may fit Adrienne's father quite well since family is especially important to him.

While Adrienne appreciates her father's commitment to and focus on family, this has sometimes created conflict between him and his maturing daughters as they began to develop their own interests and relationships outside of the family. Adrienne herself was involved in a number of extracurricular activities in high school, including band and as a

member of the history team that competed in academic meets; she also worked for a local restaurant as a waitress to pay for her car and some of her other expenses, such as clothing or outings with friends. The income she earned through her part-time job also helped pay some of her family's monthly bills. The time these activities required of Adrienne often took away from time she was able to spend at home with her family. As a result, her father insisted that she quit band at one point so that she could spend more time at home with him and her sisters. Adrienne did not agree. "I help pay bills in this house...I pay for everything on my own," Adrienne told her father during a particularly tense time. "What are you going to ground me from? Frankly, I can take the money that I'm using to help support your income and just go get an apartment on my own. I understand your house, your rules, but I can leave your house." After that exchange, Adrienne and her father came to an agreement that she could participate in band and other activities while she continued to contribute part of her income to pay the household bills. Eventually, she and her father had to come to an agreement regarding her college attendance as well.

The messages Adrienne received from her father related to college were mixed; while he recognized Adrienne's intelligence and talents, he also did not want her to leave home. On the one hand, he would say, "Adrienne, you're really smart, and you need to go do something like doctor or lawyer or whatever...You've been gifted with these brains and you need to use them," according to Adrienne. On the other hand, he would also tell Adrienne, "College is useless. You just need to work." Regardless of her father's ambivalence, Adrienne knew she wanted to pursue a college degree, but her

father continued to challenge her choices, including her choice of major, which was zoology for a brief period of time. “What money are you going to make being a zookeeper or working in a zoo,” he asked Adrienne. “You go through four years of college, and you come out with a degree that’s not going to provide for you. It’s not worth it.” Once again, they have reached a compromise. Adrienne says that she has come to understand her father’s rationale related to majoring in something that will lead to a good job. “I’m a fan of job stability,” Adrienne confesses. “So, I like knowing that when I get out of college, there’s going to be a job waiting for me.” Her father has also relented regarding her educational decisions. Generally, he now says, “Whatever you want to do, Adrienne,” and allows Adrienne to make her own choices; however, this has not stopped him from voicing his opinion about his younger daughters’ futures.

Two of Adrienne’s younger sisters are also making plans to leave their father’s home in the near future to pursue other opportunities, and although Adrienne’s father has opinions about each of his younger daughters’ decisions, he is approaching each quite differently. Adrienne’s younger sister Maureen is a senior in high school and also plans to attend college like her older sister, but her father has concerns about Maureen “going away” to school, much as he did with Adrienne. “It is a fight with my dad because he’s doing the same thing to [Maureen] that he did to me,” Adrienne shares. “He doesn’t want her to move off. He wants her to go to junior college her first two years and live at home. He’s like, ‘It’s cheaper, and you’re not ready....Don’t do what Adrienne did and just make all the decisions yourself and then run away [to school].’” While Maureen makes preparations to move out in order to start college, Adrienne’s 16-year-old sister is also

getting ready to move out of her father's house. She will be moving in with her boyfriend whose family is furnishing them a small home in which to live. Adrienne shares that her father told her sister, who can be especially independent and rebellious, "Responsibility will be good for you. And, if you need to come back, you are always welcome back in my household...You just gotta go do your thing cause you are not listening to me anymore, and you need a taste of the real world." While Adrienne is not especially happy about her 16-year-old sister's future plans, she has counseled Maureen to make the decision that is best for her. "I'm like, 'Maureen, just stay strong. It is your decision. You can go to [a particular school] if you want to. Just kind of ignore him...,'" Adrienne says. "I mean, it sounds bad, but...he doesn't want his baby girls to grow up at all. He is hanging on for dear life." Although Adrienne recognizes her father's concerns about his daughters leaving home for college, she has heard alternative messages from others, which provided some balance and perspective as she considered her options.

Perhaps because of her own struggles in obtaining a degree and developing a career of her own, Adrienne's mother never allowed a college education not to be an option for Adrienne. Instead, Adrienne's mother "...drilled into my head, 'Don't get pregnant. No boys. Get your education. No babies,'" Adrienne explains. "She's like, 'Just go to college. Just get it done as soon as you can be over and done with it because if you don't, then it will be a fight to get it done later on in life.'" While Adrienne's mother also encouraged Adrienne's two sisters who are currently in high school to pursue a college degree as well, Adrienne shares that her mother is less influential in her two older sisters' lives simply because they do not live with their mother. Nonetheless, with the

strong support of her mother and the blessing of her father, Adrienne forged ahead in making a number of decisions about her future, one of those being to pursue her education at a state university over 200 miles away from her family and home.

Determining where to go to college was not an easy decision for Adrienne. “It was like picking a name out of a hat,” she says. At first, Adrienne contemplated going to schools where a number of her friends from high school were planning to attend, but she eventually changed her mind. “I decided I didn’t want to go somewhere that everybody was going, which is really strange because I like knowing people,” Adrienne shares. “You know, I like knowing what I’m kind of doing and where I’m going.” While Adrienne knew a few people from her high school who were either already students at the state university or who would also be attending the state university, they were not close friends. “So, it was really just like being here on my own,” Adrienne acknowledges. Although Adrienne did not have close friends from home attending the state university with her, her great aunt works in admissions at the school. “[My aunt]’s a college recruiter, and it was really nice because any time I had a question...I mean, she could answer it in general for just about any college...but she really was like, ‘Well, [the state university] offers this, this, and this program,’” Adrienne shares. Because of the additional information her aunt was able to provide about the state university, Adrienne felt a higher comfort level in attending. “I kind of picked [the state university] because the information...was more readily available to me,” Adrienne admits.

During Adrienne’s first semester at the state university, she worked hard to make friends and get involved in campus life. Almost immediately, she joined the rugby team,

even though she did not have any experience playing rugby herself, and while she liked many of the women on the rugby team, she had difficulty developing meaningful friendships with any of them. “I hated [the college experience] so much,” Adrienne remembers. “I was miserable. Like, I did all those activities thinking I would make friends, but rugby took up so much of my time and they were such a different type of people...I just couldn’t make any really good friends on that team, and I spent so much time practicing with them and traveling with them for games...that I didn’t have time to make friends outside of that.” Adrienne also did not get along with the roommate she was assigned in her residence hall. “There were just little things that you...sometimes you just don’t get along with people...,” Adrienne acknowledges. “So, the person that I spent most of my time with...because you’re in your room a lot of the time between studying and doing homework or whatever...I didn’t get along with a whole lot.” To make matters worse, Adrienne’s cell phone did not work in her residence hall room, which meant she typically had to leave her residence hall in order to have a conversation with any of her family or friends from home. “I couldn’t talk to any of my best friends or my parents or anybody like that,” Adrienne says. “I was kind of cut off.”

At that point, Adrienne contemplated leaving the state university, and she was encouraged to do so by her father who wanted her to be closer to Hamden. “My dad was like, ‘Come home! Come home,’” Adrienne shares. “He’s like, ‘I miss you, too! Just come closer!’” Instead, Adrienne quit rugby and became involved in the residence hall association, which allowed her to begin making more friends on campus and within her residence hall, specifically. She also received encouragement from her maternal

grandmother who had gone to college out-of-state herself to remain at the state university one more semester before deciding to leave. Adrienne remembers her grandmother telling her, “You know, it’s hard the first semester. You feel homesick. Just give it a shot. You know, stick out there another semester. If you don’t like it, it’s just one semester. You can handle it...just day-by-day.” Fortunately, Adrienne’s experiences during the second semester of her first year were much more positive. She continued to develop relationships and became friends with women with whom she chose to live her sophomore year. “After that second semester, I was like, ‘Well, okay. You know what? This really wasn’t as bad. I’m kind of glad I stayed,’” Adrienne acknowledges. Despite her improved situation at the state university, however, she continued to miss her family and friends at home and never stopped considering the option of transferring. “So, like, that was pulling me back toward [my family],” Adrienne shares. “I like being far. I like this time a lot. I really...I like [the college town]. I like the location, you know. But, I am ready to be closer to home.” Although Adrienne enjoyed her time at the state university much more after her first semester, she plans to transfer to a school closer to her family after her sophomore year.

While the desire to be closer to her family continued to play a role in Adrienne’s happiness at the state university, another factor in her decision to transfer was introduced in the spring of her first year when she reconnected through facebook with her childhood friend, Mitch. “One day, I was just on facebook, and I was like, ‘Oh hey! We’re friends on facebook! I haven’t talked to [Mitch] in forever,’” Adrienne remembers. After reconnecting online, Mitch and Adrienne began telephone conversations and shortly

thereafter, started dating. “We just started talking, and the rest is history,” Adrienne says. Because Mitch was attending college at a commuter school in a Dallas suburb about 80 miles from Hamden, the couple began dating long distance in the spring of Adrienne’s first year of college and became engaged nine months later. Although many of their family members wanted the couple to wait until the summer to tie the knot if not until after they both had completed their college degrees, Mitch and Adrienne did not want to wait. They also had hoped to marry on the anniversary of their first date, which was in March; hence, they felt a spring break wedding would work well. “People have asked me [why we don’t wait to get married]...I really don’t have a satisfactory answer for people...I’m like, ‘Because I don’t want to,’” Adrienne says. “And, I feel like that’s a good enough answer. I don’t want to wait. Yes, it would make more sense to wait, but I don’t want to. I want to get married to this boy.” At the urging of their parents, Mitch and Adrienne participated in pre-marital counseling and also invited friends and family to the wedding, rather than eloping as they had originally planned. “I feel like we’re being fairly sensible in our rashness,” Adrienne explains. After their spring break wedding in the backyard of her mother’s home, Adrienne returned to the state university to complete the semester; that May, she moved to the suburb where Mitch was attending college and where they now rent an apartment together. At the time of our second visit as part of this study, Mitch did not plan to return to college at the commuter school and hoped to enroll in the police academy to become a police officer instead. Adrienne will enroll at the commuter school Mitch attended; she’s also working part-time at a local pre-school, where she will continue to work while taking classes during the semester.

Adrienne contends that even if she had not gotten married, she would have transferred after her second year at the state university. “Before, you know, I got engaged, I was thinking about leaving...you know, just because it’s so hard to be far away,” Adrienne says. “I have so many more attachments at home and that I feel responsible for.” The desire to be geographically closer to her family is particularly strong for Adrienne and has been a factor since she left Hamden originally. “I probably would still move because my family...my life is up there...all of my family...all of my sisters. I’m so close to them, and they want me to come to their band concerts and stuff, and I can’t when I’m this far away,” she says. Although Adrienne had contemplated transferring from the state university almost since she arrived simply because she missed her family and friends, the atmosphere of the college was not the one for which she had hoped, either. “[The decision to transfer] was kind of a combination of just...I realized like how much I wasn’t...like, how unhappy I was...like missing my family and stuff like that...and all my friends. And then...just the fact that everybody looks at this college and goes, ‘It’s a party school.’ That really bothers me cause it’s like, ‘Well, I’m not here to party. I’m here to learn.’” From an early age, Adrienne has been interested in learning, and being in an educational environment where she did not perceive learning to be valued was challenging for her. “This college is not for serious people,” Adrienne says, and while she enjoys fun times herself, she is also quite serious about her education. Based on these factors, Adrienne’s decision to transfer was solidified.

“They fed us a lot of wrong messages.”

Almost from the moment she began high school, Adrienne was focused on obtaining a college degree, and in order to pursue that path, she was advised to make good grades so that she could gain admission to college and perhaps even earn a scholarship. “My [high school guidance] counselors stressed, ‘You know, you want to be in the top of your class,’” Adrienne remembers. She also learned that one of the best ways to bolster her grade point average (GPA) in order to be at the “top of the class” was to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses since Hamden High School awarded an additional 10 points toward a student’s final grade in each AP course. AP classes can be similar to the pace and content of college-level classes and can help prepare students for the rigor of university coursework; students can also earn college credit and advanced placement in college courses if they earn a score on an AP subject exam deemed acceptable by their chosen school (The College Board, 2013a). “If [the high school] offered AP, I took it,” Adrienne says. “And, the reason why I took those classes [was] because they weighted in your GPA. You kind of had to make a choice between dual credit and you’ll get the automatic, you know, college credit if you pass the class, or if you have AP, you get extra points in your GPA. And, I went for [the AP courses] because I was trying to make top, you know, one or two [valedictorian or salutatorian].” With the additional points that could be earned by taking AP courses at Hamden High School, a student’s cumulative grade point average as well as class rank could be significantly affected.

Because Adrienne took a number of AP courses in high school, she also elected to take several of the corresponding AP subject exams to see if she might be able to earn

college credit for the content she had already mastered in high school; she earned a score of four on two of the English AP subject exams and a score of three on the AP history subject exam. She also tested out of college algebra. Although a score of three out of a possible five on an AP subject exam denotes a student as “qualified,” each college determines whether it will award credit and advanced placement for a particular score (The College Board, 2013). In Adrienne’s case, her score of three on the AP history subject exam was not high enough to satisfy the requirement of the college she hoped to attend, and she was unable to earn credit or advanced placement for her AP work; however, her high school history teacher soon presented another option to her. Adrienne’s high school history teacher taught classes at the local community college as well as a dual credit history course at Hamden High School after school; he allowed Adrienne to take the history course he was teaching after school for dual credit, guaranteeing her college credit since the AP exam had not produced the result she wanted. “I took [the dual credit history course] after school because if I took it during school, then the most I can make in a dual credit class is a 100, and that’s lower [than could be earned in an AP class],” Adrienne reasons. “Like...even if I make a 96 on my calculus class, I got 10 extra points for being in AP. So, that really goes into 106 into my GPA. And, so 100 would bring my GPA down.” Being able to take the dual credit course after school was appealing to Adrienne because she could earn college credit without the risk of her grade point average “suffering;” in other words, she did not need the class to satisfy a high school requirement, so she could simply take it for college credit without concern about her grade point average being affected. The only challenge

was the time of day that the dual credit history course was offered. By her junior year of high school, Adrienne was spending as much as 40 hours each week at her “part-time” waitressing job. Because the dual credit history course was taught after traditional school hours, Adrienne knew she would have difficulty attending the class regularly enough to pass and keep her job, but her history teacher understood her situation and allowed her to take the course without coming to any of the classes except the one where the mid-term presentations were given. Adrienne aced the presentation without any preparation simply because she already knew so much about the subject from the AP history course she had taken previously, and she ultimately passed the class and earned college credit as well, having only attended one session of the class.

While the hope of earning college credit and advanced placement was not realized through Adrienne’s enrollment in AP classes, her strategy to take as many AP classes as possible in order to increase her grade point average paid off; she finished high school as the salutatorian of her graduating class. In retrospect, however, her decision to take primarily AP courses is one Adrienne now regrets because she feels as though the college credit she could have earned through more dual credit courses would have benefited her more. “I wish I had taken dual credit...everything dual credit,” she admits. “Because if you take it during...like through the high school, you get discounted prices as well from the junior college prices, which are already greatly, you know...they’re much less expensive than university prices. So, I would have taken as many dual credit classes as I can because I do not like college enough to stay in here forever.” Adrienne attributes her arguably misguided coursework decisions in part to the advice she received from her high

school guidance counselors. “[Class rank] does not matter,” Adrienne contends. “It does not matter that you were...you were valedictorian or salutatorian. [College admissions officers] look at your GPA, and they look at your SAT scores when you’re coming into college. And, [the high school guidance counselors] didn’t tell us that. And, so they were like, ‘Your...it’s ranking that’s important.’ And, [the college admissions officers] don’t care.”

The perceived poor college advice Adrienne received from her high school guidance counselors was a common theme throughout our conversations. “Our counselors were terrible,” Adrienne asserts. “Like, they were the worst...my high school counselors...they kind of fed us a lot of...I would say wrong messages. I would say that the messages that they told us weren’t really true just based off my college experiences.” In addition to suggesting that class rank was a heavily-weighted factor in the admissions process, Adrienne’s high school guidance counselors also led students to believe that college courses were going to be extremely difficult and that graduates of Hamden High School typically did not complete their bachelor’s degrees, according to Adrienne. “I feel like [the high school guidance counselors] made it sound like, ‘Oh my gosh. You are just never gonna...it’s attainable. You can get in and don’t worry about paying for it, but oh boy, once you get in, you’re going to have a hard time staying in,’” Adrienne says. “That was definitely the message I felt like they told us.” Indeed, when Adrienne graduated from high school as the class salutatorian, she worried she would likely have a difficult time – if not drop out of college altogether – based on messages conveyed to her by the Hamden High School guidance counselors.

As a result of the frustrations Adrienne experienced with her high school guidance counselors and because she had considerable concerns regarding a number of issues related to attending college, she turned to her high school teachers for college-related advice instead. “I was just so intimidated by the fact that I did not know anything, and it was just this vast, unknown void,” Adrienne remembers. “And, I did not like thinking about it. Like, I just couldn’t handle it; I don’t know why.” Adrienne’s teachers, however, encouraged her not to worry. “I had some really good, helpful teachers. And, they’re like, ‘[A college education] is...it’s attainable. Don’t listen to your, you know, counselors,’” Adrienne says. “They’re like, ‘You can do this. It’s really not that bad.’” Specifically, Adrienne had reservations about completing her first college application and beginning the process of applying to college, in general. “The whole applying for college thing freaked me out so badly,” Adrienne acknowledges. “I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to like...I was scared for leaving high school. I was scared to leave my friends, my family. I was scared of going to a totally new place. I was like, ‘What if I fail out of college? What if I’m not really smart? What if...’ You know, I had all these, like, doubts in my mind, and I didn’t even want to talk about it. I just wanted to avoid the whole college subject. I hated the idea of leaving high school.” Her teachers were quick to come to her aid. Adrienne shares that one day her senior year during her journalism class when students were commiserating about their college applications, her teacher stopped the class and said, “Okay. You know what? Nobody go do their stories today. We’re going to sit down, and we’re going to walk through, you know, how to do an application,” Adrienne remembers. This same teacher also provided her students the

website for the “Common Application” to Texas colleges as well as the website where students could complete forms related to financial aid. While this guidance was helpful, Adrienne did not have a computer at home where she could access these sites outside of school in order to complete her applications and other related forms. Again, a teacher provided assistance. Adrienne’s history teacher offered to let her come to his house to use his or his wife’s computer to complete her applications, which is exactly what she did.

In addition to the support Adrienne received from her teachers regarding the college admissions process, the content and format of their courses also prepared her for higher education. Generally, Adrienne says she felt academically prepared for university-level coursework, despite the negative messages she received from her high school guidance counselors indicating, “College is so hard. You have no idea.” Perhaps because of the messages from her high school that made her question her college preparation or perhaps because of her own initiative and focus on achievement, Adrienne has frequently sought out academic support services since she has been in college to help her understand course content and excel in her classes. She attended a number of supplemental instruction sessions at the state university where she began her college career, primarily ones related to her science classes. In fact, Adrienne says she has “lived” in the student academic assistance center every Tuesday night since she has been in college to receive guidance with some of her more challenging courses.

Although Adrienne had positive relationships with her teachers in high school, the need to ask for assistance or spend considerable time understanding course material is

somewhat new to her. During our first conversation, which occurred shortly before finals in the fall semester of Adrienne's second year at the state university, she acknowledged, "These classes that I've taken [this semester] have been harder than any other classes that I've taken before....and, it surprised me. You know, I was not used to having to put that much effort into my classes. So, I'm going to pass all my classes, but that's not what I like." There have also been times when Adrienne has had difficulty understanding some of her instructors, making her mastery of the course material particularly challenging for her. "My physics teacher, especially...she was Greek, and she was very hard to understand," Adrienne remembers. "And, the textbook...like, even [the faculty member] admitted...she's like, 'It's terrible.' So, I can't understand the teacher. I can't understand the textbook. And, I just was like, '[State university]! You kind of set me up for failure here!'" Even though Adrienne has ultimately passed all her courses in college, the time and effort sometimes required for her to do so is a somewhat new experience for her.

Regardless of a few academic challenges, Adrienne has enjoyed adjusting to life in the college town where the state university is located. At first, the size of the campus and town were intimidating to her. "When I came here to [the college town], I was like, 'Oh my gosh. This city is huge.' And, people were like, 'Are you kidding me? This city is nothing,'" Adrienne remembers. "And, I'm like, 'Seriously, you could put my high school...or, you could put the whole entire town of my town in like our college campus. Okay? This is...this is huge.'" Soon, the size became more comfortable to Adrienne, and the community created on a college campus seemed similar to the feel of the small

town she left. “I feel that living on a college campus...you kind of have a sense of closeness that’s very similar to a small town,” Adrienne says. “There’s definitely a sense of community here.” Despite some similarities, Adrienne acknowledges that living in the college town is unlike living in the small town of Hamden related to issues of diversity and acceptance, however. “There are some characters here [in the college town] that you would never find in Hamden...ever,” Adrienne says. “But, I feel like in Hamden, they would have been ostracized. There is definitely a...you have kind of a social hierarchy [in Hamden] where if you were in...if your family was in that town when that town first settled, you’re kind of at the top. You’re the people that are in the...like, the Lion’s Club and Rotary Club.” According to Adrienne, the college town is quite different. “Everybody’s way more accepting here; we’re not tempered by old ideals.” Adrienne herself has tested the openness of the campus community and college town at times, too. “I had pink streaks in my hair first semester, you know,” Adrienne shares. “It didn’t matter. And, that would not have been okay back home in Hamden.” In spite of Adrienne’s acquired affinity for the college town, she frequently acknowledges that she has missed her family and loved ones and is ready to transition to the commuter school where she will be transferring in the fall, a location that is much closer to Hamden. “I love [the college town]. Love that town. Wish I could pick it up and move it 200 miles closer, though. I miss my family. I miss, you know...I didn’t like being so far from Mitch,” Adrienne says. But, as she now prepares to transition to a new campus, her acclimation will begin anew in some ways. “I don’t even know where my classes are [at

the commuter school]...it's like being a freshman all over again," Adrienne speculates. "I am starting completely over...just about." And, in some ways, she is.

Despite a slightly "rocky" start and a few ups and downs, Adrienne seems to have enjoyed her taste of college life at the state university and the atmosphere of the college town; she has also indicated that she is ready to move on and would feel the same way even if marriage were not in the picture. "I was ready to leave, you know, that campus...that partying...that everything," she says during our second interview. "You know, I kind of got sucked into it my freshman year. And, I love my roommates to death, but they were kind of not such a great influence, you know, on [the partying] end. And, I was constantly having to tell them, 'No.' Or, be their DD [designated driver], so it's like clean-up crew. And, I was just like, 'You know, this is great, but I am much more; this is not me. I am much more academic-oriented and goal-oriented, and I know what I want, and this is not what I want.' I was just ready to move out of there." While Adrienne anticipates the commuter school will provide a different academic environment for her – one she feels will be a better fit for her, she is experiencing some anxiety about her life outside of the classroom in the suburban community where she now lives with Mitch. "I'm really nervous about going to [the commuter school]," Adrienne acknowledges. "Like, Mitch is my only lifeline right now. Like, I don't have a social life outside of him...much. Like, I have other friends that live further away, and they've come and visited. But, I just...I don't have a life of my own here yet, and that is kind of a daunting challenge. To build that part scares me and worries me the most." Even though the academic environment of the state university and college town may not have been

congruent with Adrienne's own goals and values, she had made friends with the women with whom she lived her sophomore year. "We all got along so well. And, I really miss them a lot," Adrienne admits. "Like, I'm glad to be here [attending the commuter school in the suburb], but [her roommates in the college town] became my best friends." While Adrienne is happy now living with Mitch and being closer to her family, she also hopes to create new friendships at the commuter college, which can be an intimidating challenge at times as well.

Although the social adjustment to the suburbs and married life may be more difficult for Adrienne to anticipate and mitigate, she has done as much as she can to prepare for the academic transfer to the commuter school. At the state university, Adrienne was required to consult with an academic advisor her first semester, and she went again the second semester of her first year. Because she felt more confident in her course planning, she did not seek assistance her sophomore year in scheduling classes; however, she plans to see an academic advisor every semester for the remainder of her college career. "From now on, I have to go see an advisor because of my...like, how they accepted my hours are so weird that the computer won't let me register myself," she explains. While all Adrienne's credits transferred from the state university to the commuter school, "...they didn't transfer as what they were supposed to." Therefore, Adrienne met with an academic advisor twice before her move to make sure she understood the way her credits would transfer. "I was so confused. I made two separate trips to come up here," Adrienne shares. "Because I do not mess around when it comes

to planning my classes. Like, that is probably the biggest stress for me every semester is planning my classes so I do not waste hours, time, and money.”

These three factors – credits, time to completion, and finances – have significantly influenced Adrienne’s approach to her college experience thus far and will continue to have an impact as she makes transitions in her personal life and college career as well. When Adrienne transfers to the commuter school the fall of her junior year, she will be taking fewer hours than she did at the state university. “This fall, I decided to take 12 hours because I’m going to work as well, and I don’t know how that’s going to go,” she says. “But, I’m taking 12 hours. And, one of them is an on-line class; I’ve never taken an on-line class before. So, we’ll see how that goes.” Adrienne’s classes are scheduled for the morning so that she can work in the afternoon, and she plans to save her homework for the weekends when she is not at her job, much like she did at the state university, although doing homework on the weekends there was usually due to procrastination. While Adrienne has some control over the number of credits she chooses to take each semester and the time it takes her to complete her coursework, she may have less control over the money. Adrienne received a considerable scholarship from the state university based on her SAT scores; fortunately, when she chose to transfer to the commuter school, she was awarded the Outstanding Transfer Student Scholarship, which totals approximately \$3,000 per year. “That is actually about the same as the one that...actually, it’s a little bit more than the one that [the state university] offered me as an incoming freshman,” Adrienne shares. “You know, and generally as a freshman, you get more scholarships, but...and tuition’s a little less expensive here, too. And then,

financial aid...and then the State of Texas has also given me some scholarships just from...like scholarships that stay with me for graduating, like, top ten percent and whatever.” When she combines these various financial aid sources, the vast majority of Adrienne’s educational expenses are covered. Because of her scholarships and other awards, Adrienne has only had to take out about \$5,000 in loans each year she has been in school.

“I want to get out and start my life.”

Adrienne’s focus on getting through college in the most efficient way possible began before she ever stepped foot on a college campus. In fact, before Adrienne selected the college she would attend, she selected her major, thinking that would be one hurdle she could get out of the way early. “I figured if I...I should pick my major before I pick my college because that, you know, kind of dictates where you go,” Adrienne remembers. But, selecting a major was not a simple task for Adrienne. “The hardest challenge is picking a major that you like and that you think is practical enough that you can get a job,” she shares. “Because, I mean, why else are you in college other than to get a better job?” The selection of a major that would help her secure a job was challenging for Adrienne since the field she enjoyed – history – was not necessarily one she felt would lead to a career. “I really like history and all those things, you know, but I just don’t feel like I can pursue [it],” Adrienne acknowledges. “It’s...you know what you like, but what are you going to do with it? It’s like when you get a history degree, what do you do with a history degree?” Adrienne’s father felt the same way. Therefore,

Adrienne chose to major in biology, a field she anticipates will provide a number of professional options for her upon graduation.

One of the career paths that Adrienne originally considered as a biology major was to become a veterinarian, but she soon changed her mind. “I don’t want to spend eight years in college. I want to get out and start my life,” Adrienne shares. “So...kind of looking at occupational therapy right now. But, I’ll stay a biology major with that. I’ll just be a biology major and then...go on to master’s school [for occupational therapy].” Efficiency related to her college education is a high priority for Adrienne, and she does not want to do anything to delay her completion. At one point, her father suggested Adrienne get a medical certification of some sort so that she could work while she is in college; however, Adrienne did not like this idea because she worried about the delay it could create for her in obtaining a degree. “I didn’t like that plan, either, because I wanted to get in and get out,” Adrienne says. “I didn’t want to like waste time with a certification that I’ll probably never use after college. I mean, it’s a financially sound idea, I guess, but I just didn’t like it, and I wanted to do it my way.” In fact, Adrienne’s “way,” which includes careful planning and a dogged focus on completion, may result in her graduating a semester early from college altogether.

Although Adrienne is determined to make her own decisions related to her college career and long-term plans, she respects her parents’ own experiences and advice as well. In fact, witnessing the financial challenges of her parents has played a significant role in Adrienne’s approach to her own future. “I saw how hard they struggled,” Adrienne acknowledges. “My mom has, you know, been trying to go to college in...for like the

past 10 years. I don't want to be in those shoes. And, she tries so hard, and my dad has worked so hard all his life and gotten nowhere financially." Adrienne knows first-hand how financial difficulties can affect children, too. Adrienne was a member of the Hamden High School Band, which often went on out-of-town trips to perform, sometimes as far away as the east or west coast; however, because Adrienne had a part-time job that was needed to pay not only her bills but to contribute to the family income as well, she was unable to participate. "I bought my own car, and I, you know, paid for all my own bills, and I never got to go. Like, I got to do lots of things in high school...like, little field trips...but, like band...they would go to Florida or they would do like all these other things, and my parents...when they were together or when they were separated, they just...they couldn't pay for it," Adrienne remembers. "And, because I had a job and other things...I just...I just couldn't pay for it, either, you know. I had bills to pay...not only my own, but sometimes the household bills as well." These memories and similar ones have contributed to Adrienne's determination to create a different experience for her own children. "I want my kid...like, they're going to get a job to learn responsibility, but I want to be a parent that can provide for them," Adrienne shares. "And, so I just don't...I want to get my degree so I can have a good job to provide for my child."

Family is important to Adrienne, and she and Mitch plan to have children of their own some day. "Mitch and I would one day like to have children...two, maximum. He's like one, but I don't like the only child idea, so two is our goal." They would also consider adopting a child. "Ever since I knew what adoption was, all my baby dolls have

always been adopted,” Adrienne shares. “The idea of giving someone a second chance has always appealed to me.” Adrienne’s commitment to Mitch and her future family is what helps her maintain focus on the goal she believes will help her realize these dreams: earning a college degree. “Like, I want to have a good, secure job...you know, provide for my family and children and, you know, whatever,” Adrienne says. “And, I want to be able to take the vacation and stuff, and I know that I’ve got it fixated in my mind that a college education is the way to earn that.” After receiving her degree, Adrienne believes she would like to work at a children’s hospital. “I’d love to work at like...one of those type hospitals that specifically concentrates on children,” Adrienne says. “I do not want to own my own business. I do not want to do that at all. I don’t want that stress. I’d rather just, you know, concentrate on my patients. I’d prefer to work with children.” Frequently, Adrienne describes her ideal future not only in terms of what she wants but also in terms of what she does not.

As focused and driven as Adrienne can be, there are times when she gets discouraged and down as well. “Sometimes, there are times where I’m like, ‘I just want to quit’...but, I don’t because people have this expectation of me that I don’t make Cs or that I don’t get distracted or that I want to succeed,” she acknowledges. “And, that expectation is what keeps me going. Because I’m a people pleaser...and, I hate to disappoint people more than anything else in this world. So if I...even if there’s days that I want to slack off or not finish that homework assignment, I think, ‘No, because people would expect me to do otherwise.’” The recent major life events Adrienne has experienced – marriage, moving, and transferring to a new college – have also stirred

some anxiety within her. “This future experience? I’m really nervous,” Adrienne shares. “As much as I wanted to move away, I hate change so much.” But, uneasiness hasn’t resulted in failure for Adrienne previously, and it is not likely to occur now, either; after a brief moment of uncertainty, her dogged determination quickly reappears. “Like, [Mitch] expects me to finish. I expect myself to finish,” Adrienne admits. “I don’t want to quit college. I want to get a good job. I want to succeed...in that sense. I know there’s different measures of success, but I want to succeed, you know, educationally, financially...and I want to, you know, be an encouragement to my children. It’s really just important to me, and the whole family’s cheering me on, so...it’s...there’s kind of a lot of...of pride staked into the matter.” Adrienne knows exactly what she wants, and in her mind, the path to that goal is very clear.

Conclusion

The attachments Adrienne has with her family and loved ones; the advice she received from personnel in her high school; and her own desire to “begin her life” have all contributed to the resolve Adrienne has to complete her college education. She wants to make her family proud; she wants to prove her high school guidance counselors wrong; and she wants to create a better life for her future children and family. She also wants to make her own decisions, even when some are not supported by those who love her; she wants her hard work throughout her schooling to have paid off, even if it means some of the advice she received from her high school counselors may have been right; and she wants everything to remain at the status quo, even though she realizes that cannot happen nor does she truly want it to. Adrienne’s ideal future is often as much about what

she wants as it is about what she does not. Regardless, Adrienne believes earning a college degree is the panacea for many of the difficulties she has already endured and the winning lottery ticket that will lead to a better life. Given the perseverance she has already displayed, there is no doubt that Adrienne will not only achieve her goal of a college degree but many others, including – and most importantly – a happy and stable life.

Cameron

Introduction

Before contacting and visiting with Cameron, a number of other students indicated he should be interviewed as he was unlike anyone else from Hamden High School. And, a quick scan of his facebook pictures – everything from displaying his experiments with stage make-up to showcasing his range of facial expressions to documenting his adventures in small towns throughout the state – would support that claim. Based on the tagging and captions related to these pictures, Cameron is beloved by many; there are a number of comments from friends telling Cameron how much they love him or miss him. They also frequently compliment him on his good looks, his ever-changing hairstyle (“faux-hawk” to varying lengths of a layered look with a stylish sweep across his brow), and his increasingly muscular physique on his otherwise thin and nimble frame.

Cameron is a handsome young man with the chiseled features and facial expressions of a young movie star, which is apropos given that Cameron is a musical theatre major with aspirations of being a professional actor one day. But, as his mother

jokes, “Good genes. No ugly people allowed in our family!” Like many of his family members, including his brother who is 10 years older and his younger sister, Cameron has dark hair and eyes with a flawless complexion and perfectly straight white teeth. He looks young for his age, perhaps because of his small build, and his friends good-naturedly tease him about his youthful countenance.

While all the students I interviewed had a high level of energy, the electricity emanating from Cameron is palpable. As we visited, he sat erect and spoke very quickly, enunciating each word clearly and distinctly. His hands shake a bit, although he is not nervous; rather, he seems to have so much pent-up energy that he is bursting at the seams to let it out, which results in a slight shaking of his limbs; his enthusiasm is also a bit contagious as I could feel my own pace of speech and intensity level increasing while we spoke. Although Cameron and I covered a broad range of topics in our time together, our conversations centered primarily on the independent, discouraging, and rewarding journey he embarked upon to pursue musical theatre as a career; his own inner focus and determination to succeed; and his innate desire to please others throughout his life.

“And so, who was I going to ask in Hamden?”

Rather than Cameron making the conscious choice to major in musical theatre, he says that “it selected [him].” Cameron initially became interested in theatre because his mother was the school district’s coordinator for academic competitions, including those for speech and drama, and when Cameron was in elementary school, his mother would take him out of class to watch the high school students perform plays, which is when he says his love of theatre began. Cameron claims his interest in vocal performance is really

his father's "fault," however, because his father didn't want Cameron to be in band. That meant choir was Cameron's only option for a fine arts course in high school. Cameron joined the high school choir, eventually becoming the group's president, and also became involved in the local community theatre organization where he was cast in roles for a number of their productions. "And so, from then on, [music and theatre] kind of meshed together, and I realized there was a career opportunity for this," Cameron explains. "And, that's what I loved and I got good at it. So, it chose me."

Cameron did not decide he wanted to pursue musical theatre as his major until the summer before his senior year of high school, which put him at a disadvantage in terms of preparation for his college auditions and for musical theatre programs at the university level. "I guess, looking back, I could have done more work in Dallas," Cameron acknowledges. "But, at that point [in high school], I don't believe that I was as solidified in my decision to pursue musical theatre to tell my parents, 'Hey, let's drive an hour-and-a-half to Dallas every day so I can do this show and get some professional credits.'" There were also limited resources for Cameron to get any advice about how to go about pursuing musical theatre. Fortunately, some of the adults involved in the local community theatre organization had worked with actors over the years who are now involved in shows on Broadway in New York City; they connected Cameron with these theatre professionals who provided guidance about which college programs to consider. Cameron also relied heavily on the internet for information on musical theatre programs. "The internet is a great resource because there are websites all over the place – open forums where students and parents from schools can talk, you know, candidly about what

the programs offer, what their drawbacks are,” Cameron says. “You find a lot of misleading information on the internet, and you kind of have to filter through and take it with a grain of salt, but it was probably the biggest resource that I had, you know....Who was I going to ask in Hamden?” Cameron speculates that he is the first student from Hamden High School in decades, if not ever, to pursue musical theatre as a college major, and ultimately, as a career. Knowing this, who could Cameron ask from his hometown or high school for advice about what he should do to apply to programs or prepare for his auditions? But Cameron is not one to blame his circumstances. Cameron’s attitude is: “You can’t expect someone to hold your hand and walk you through it every step of the way. You need to take initiative.” Considering the limited information on musical theatre programs to which Cameron had access, his own initiative became even more important as he contemplated how to pursue his passion in college.

As Cameron learned, high school seniors audition for college musical theatre programs beginning as early as August and continue through April, and when he began considering his options, Cameron focused primarily on out-of-state schools. “I spent most of my senior year stressing out and auditioning for programs at a lot of out-of-state programs,” he remembers. Cameron’s first choice of schools was one in New York City. It was his early-decision school and his first college audition. In fact, his audition for this school was as close as Cameron had ever come to a professional audition. But, the outcome was not the one he had hoped for. “I was kind of blind, you know. I didn’t know what it’s like in New York auditioning or what to expect or what I even needed to do,” Cameron says. “I didn’t know any of that, and so my audition for [the New York

City school]...was a hot mess. And, I had such hope because it was my first...it was my first choice school, and I had, like, kind of put all my eggs in that basket my fall semester of high school.” As one would imagine, admission to a musical theatre program in New York City is highly competitive, with only a dozen or so students a year being admitted, and unfortunately, Cameron was not one of those. “I was not nearly as prepared as I should have been in terms of my professional package as an actor. Academically, I was great, but you know...,” he trails off. Today, Cameron acknowledges he would have been wise to audition at more Texas schools, but his senior year of high school, he was a bit naïve to the process. “Well, I kind of fell into the trap of the wide-eyed musical theatre major senior year of high school...So, I didn’t really cover my Texas bases like I should, admittedly,” Cameron contends. “And, so...then there are some deadlines, like, I missed that expired in November, and by that time, I was still [New York City school]-convinced. And so, that was purely my mistake.”

Although Cameron applied to a number of schools across the United States that had strong musical theatre programs, he was ultimately not accepted to any of these schools. Instead, because of his role in one of the productions of the local community theatre, he was noticed by two theatre faculty members from a nearby private, two-year college who were attending one of his shows with two of their students. “Those two students as well as two directors from [the private, two-year college] came and saw the show that I was in. And, that’s when they kind of noticed me and recruited me to come there,” Cameron remembers. They had read in the program’s short biography of Cameron that he was interested in pursuing musical theatre as a major and that he was

still deciding which school he wanted to attend. “God bless ‘em, they are people-people. Like, they can talk you into anything,” Cameron admits. Regardless, they were successful in getting Cameron to consider the two-year college approximately 60 miles from Hamden as an option for him to pursue following high school graduation.

Cameron auditioned at the private, two-year college and made plans to enroll there the fall after he graduated. “Just looking around at the campus, I wasn’t terribly excited about it, but I knew that at this time, time was running out and I needed this place to at least spend a semester,” he says bluntly. Cameron continued to pursue other four-year options after he was accepted into the private, two-year college. In fact, he contacted the department chair at another four-year public university in Texas in late-spring of his senior year asking if he might still be able to audition. While the chair allowed him to audition, Cameron was not accepted to the program and was told if he had auditioned in time for the school’s November deadline, he would have been accepted.

With limited options, Cameron decided to enroll at the private, two-year college. “I go there so that I can go ahead and start studying in my field immediately,” he says. “It’s...it was strictly just a place to go first semester where I could study my...what I wanted, get credits that I needed, and transfer to a four-year program immediately.” Unfortunately, however, the fit was not a good one for Cameron, and he felt the impact right away. “It’s my understanding that it used to be, you know, some kind of esteemed theatre school in the private sense. But, apparently, it had just been going downhill, and so by the time I got there, it kind of was crashing,” Cameron acknowledges. Cameron’s use of the word “crashing” is more fitting than he may have even intended. Cameron

speculates that the college had been experiencing some financial difficulties during his time there. “There was some financial confusion...and I think they misallocated a lot of my financial aid,” Cameron shares. Unfortunately, Cameron’s concerns are well-founded. The private, two-year college, which was the oldest junior college in the state at one time, declared bankruptcy approximately 18 months after Cameron transferred from the school to the institution he is now attending, and the two-year college has now closed its doors for good (Steth, 2013).

Aside from financial worries, Cameron also feared for his safety while at the two-year institution. “In terms of city, [the two-year college] just wasn’t safe. That’s really as much as I can say about that just because I never felt safe walking alone at night.” Cameron acknowledges he may have been somewhat naïve regarding the behavior of many college students because of the home environment from which he came. “I don’t drink or do drugs; I’m kind of sheltered in that point.” However, he did expect to feel safe at college.

Perhaps the defining experience for Cameron at the two-year college was when he was “hot-boxed.” Cameron describes a day when he had a class cancelled, so he returned to his residence hall to take a nap. After he woke up, Cameron says he was really hungry at one point and then very paranoid. He left his residence hall to go help some of his friends with a service project, and when he returned, he says, “the smell [of marijuana] just bombarded me.” According to Cameron, someone in the residence hall had been smoking pot and blowing the smoke into the vents, which then filtered into his room. He called the campus police who told him there was nothing they could do since the smoke

was obviously coming through the vents and they were not sure whose room it was actually coming from. Cameron was extremely displeased with the police's response – enough so that Cameron moved out of his residence hall that very night and into the residence hall room of a female friend. “I stayed at her dorm, which was against the rules because it's a private Christian university and you can't stay in a girl's dorm after hours, but if the cops aren't going to do their job anyway, I'm going to stay in a safe dorm.” Shortly after this incident, Cameron made the decision to transfer as soon as he was able.

After making the decision to leave the two-year college, Cameron had the daunting task of auditioning for and being accepted to musical theatre programs once again. “There's only a handful of schools that even offer this major, and even less schools from that pool let you transfer in as a musical theatre major because they have their students and they want to work with those students all four years and get their training instilled into them,” Cameron explains. With this in mind, he made the decision to transfer to the regional, four-year public institution approximately 150 miles from Hamden that he is now attending; it offers musical theatre as a major and Cameron transferred with the hope that if he was unable to get into the musical theatre program immediately, he could continue to work toward that goal while he is enrolled as a student there. The lower cost of a public institution was also appealing to Cameron. “It was a state school that had a program that even if I didn't get in immediately, I could work and get into later on. It wasn't just a ‘yes you did’ or ‘no you didn't’ forever. And so, it was cost effective in terms of it's really great, but also, the program has a national reputation, and...I'm in it now,” Cameron shares gratefully.

Cameron has found a strong support system and group of friends at the four-year institution, primarily among other theatre and dance students. Although there are a few other students from Hamden who are attending the institution as well, none are musical theatre majors except for Cameron, and they are not students with whom Cameron would have typically spent time anyway. Instead, Cameron has found his niche within the theatre and dance programs. Only approximately 40 to 50 students (first-years through seniors) are part of the musical theatre program there. “You still have a huge network of friends, bigger than I would say even some of the people that have a real major like math or something like that that have their circle of friends, I’m sure,” Cameron speculates. “But, you don’t get buddy-buddy with your huge department like theatre or dance does. And, I’m really lucky in that sense. And, we all have parties and stuff, and we hang out and it’s all great.” Coincidentally, the same two students who recruited Cameron to attend the private, two-year college have now transferred to the same four-year institution he is attending as well, and they have all remained friends. Cameron’s mother is much happier that he’s at the four-year university as well because “...she knew that this environment was just more cohesive for artists in general, and in academics – in every sense of the word, it’s better. And so, she came and saw my show this semester, and she was very happy that I’m just, like, surrounded by so much passion in one place, and that’s what I love about it, too.” There is no doubt that Cameron is in an environment now where he is not only thriving but excelling and developing relationships that support his success as well.

Cameron is excited about the opportunities that await him. “The question to ask musical theatre students apparently is, ‘Wow, what are you going to do with that degree,’” he says sarcastically. “Asking is a kick in the face, first of all. There’s so much...like, the opportunities are limitless.” Although many think of acting in New York or Los Angeles or London as the goal of someone majoring in musical theatre, Cameron is quick to point out that those are not places “that you have to get to to know that you’ve been successful.” In fact, Cameron is hoping to stay somewhat local and work in Houston for several years after he graduates. “[Houston]’s great, and I love it. I also like it because...in terms of the arts...it is so fantastic and there’s opportunities everywhere,” he says. “But also the standard of living is a little bit better than New York. A little bit...I say, it’s a lot better than New York. And so, fresh out of college, it’d be a much better place to live.” Since he’s already gotten his foot in the door and started acting in shows there, Cameron feels as though there would continue to be opportunities for him in Houston post-graduation as well. This is particularly important if he hopes to move on to one of the coasts or to go internationally at some point. “And so, building my resume and making money [are my priorities] because before you do move to New York or whatever, you need a good...a good supply of money in cash, in the bank ready to go.” He’s also considering being a part of national touring groups that travel across the United States performing in shows. “I think that’d be so fun, like getting to travel and do a show in a different place, a different state every night. I would love that,” he says. Cameron also acknowledges that most theatre majors teach at some point in their careers, and he

fully expects to do that as well. He might even consider graduate study one day. But for now, Cameron's only two certainties are "...get [professional] credit and get money."

"Calm the hell down."

Although my first encounter with Cameron occurred in the town where he is currently attending college, during our second interview, we met in the living room of his parents' home in Hamden. His parents were getting ready to take his younger sister to visit family in Oklahoma and were preparing for their trip the morning Cameron and I visited for the second time. Generally, our location in Cameron's parents' home was fairly private, but from time-to-time, one of his parents would walk through the area, and his mother worked in the adjacent kitchen off-and-on as well.

Perhaps because Cameron happened to be recovering from oral surgery at the time of our second conversation or perhaps because his parents' home did not offer the same level of anonymity that the setting of our first meeting did, Cameron seemed more reserved during our second visit, although he never seemed uncomfortable. Quite the contrary, Cameron seems very comfortable in his parents' home, and he enjoys a positive relationship with his family, frequently communicating with them while he is away at school. "I call them [his parents] and we will still talk regularly and, of course, I'm texting them back and forth every hour." Although they communicate often, Cameron is not able to visit his family as much as they all might like simply because his responsibilities related to musical theatre limit the time he is able to get away. "Like, even on weekends, which is when students normally get to go home, I'm in rehearsal or I'm doing something else or I'm volunteering...so, I don't get to go home as much as I

want.” Cameron acknowledges that he never gets homesick, though, and he says he’s actually under less stress living away from his parents. “I’m one of those students that like...now that I’m out of the house and I’m living by myself, I get stressed out not nearly as much just because I’m living on my own and I only have to worry about me and taking care of me,” Cameron says. “And, I would never call my family a burden. I love them to death, but you know, it is different just having to take care of you and focus on what you have to do that day.” Cameron certainly has plenty on which to focus. In fact, the word “busy” may not be adequate to describe the pace Cameron maintains as a college student.

Because of Cameron’s involvement both in- and outside the classroom, he rarely has a moment to himself. “There’s really not an hour of the day where I’m not in class or where I’m not devoting towards theatre,” Cameron contends. Not only does he spend a considerable amount of time in rehearsals either for a production he is currently in or preparing for an audition for a show he hopes to be in, but he is also in the university’s honors college. In addition, Cameron has a part-time job at the theatre center’s box office and is the treasurer for the theatre “fraternity” as well. “Everything is down to a science...every minute,” he says. He gives credit to technology for helping him stay organized and focused. “I have become such a better student after getting an iPhone because of the calendar and you have to schedule every hour and it’s right there,” Cameron describes. “And, at the end of the day, my schedule would be just rows and rows and columns of full color because I was busy every hour.” Most likely, Cameron did not need much assistance in becoming a better student; in actuality, he has already

had considerable academic success in college, having made no less than an A in every class he has taken at his current institution. Cameron shares, “I mean, I’m always overburdening myself with like extracurricular activities, but in terms of academics, I haven’t found that the workload was as intense as it was in high school even.”

Based on the choices Cameron made in high school related to course offerings, his assessment of his college workload compared to that of his in high school is most likely an accurate one. Throughout high school, Cameron took primarily Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which is one of the reasons he says he felt particularly prepared for college-level work. “We knew, my senior year, what classes were preparing us for college and which classes weren’t,” Cameron says. He describes wonderful high school teachers in math and English who helped prepare him for the courses and subject matter he and his peers would encounter in college. “They would give you a hell of a lot of work and it wasn’t really simple, but it’s what you’d be expected to do at a university.” There were also some classes that Cameron describes as “blow-off.” “You didn’t question them because it was one less thing you had to do that night, and as a senior, you’re already stressed out enough. But, you knew that there were certain teachers that were preparing you more, and you knew that’s what it would be like in all of college,” he remembers. The number of AP courses Cameron took and tests he was able to pass in high school contributed to his current academic standing in college as well. “That’s why I’m a junior plus now because I had so many college credits coming in with AP scores and...and, dual credit courses and summer courses at [the local community college],” he acknowledges. One of the AP courses he took his senior year of high school was music

theory, a particularly challenging class. “I don’t think they teach [AP music theory] every year because only like five or six students take it because you have to have a hell of a lot of interest to dedicate yourself to learning that stuff. But, I loved it. It was my favorite class I took in high school,” Cameron admits.

Cameron ranked fourth in his high school graduating class and credits his circle of friends who were also in the top ten percent of the graduating class with helping to make sure he was prepared for college. “We all told each other, like, ‘Now, when we get to college, it’s going to be different. We have to go to the professors and make sure they know our names and our face.’” Cameron remembers Hamden High School making a concerted effort to encourage students to go to college as well. “[The high school was] trying to like encourage going to college period, which, you know, for me or most of my group, it wasn’t really an option or something we really worried about,” Cameron says. “Going to college was just like second nature; that’s not an option we had to worry about.” Although Cameron had a peer group in high school that encouraged and motivated one another to excel, he also had an inner determination that has propelled him toward achievement. “For whatever reason, I turned out to be self-driven,” Cameron acknowledges. “My parents never really had to enforce me doing my homework or studying or anything. If anything, they had to tell me to calm the hell down sometimes because I would just get so stressed out and I would always over-burden myself, which hasn’t changed. I still do.” Cameron’s schedule in college is case in point of his nature to take on a great deal, which obviously has not changed since his high school days.

The competitive nature of the theatre department contributes to Cameron's frenetic pace and stressful life as well, but he also readily acknowledges that he creates much of the stress for himself through the choices he makes. "I think my biggest contributor to stress is myself," Cameron admits. "Because I carry myself to so much, and, you know, you've got your classes, which require a certain amount of studying and homework and practice every night. And then, you've also got your show that you're in that semester for your cast. And then, on top of that, there's tons of independent student projects." Cameron shares one recent period of time when a new director arrived at his current institution, and she was teaching a directing class, which Cameron had already taken; however, Cameron wanted to make sure she knew who he was since she was casting for a musical comedy he wanted to be in the next season. In order to get himself "noticed" by the new director, Cameron volunteered to act in 12 different scenes for which students taking the directing class had to cast and direct; each of these scenes was about 10 minutes in length. Therefore, on top of class work, rehearsals for the show he was already in, and his part-time job, Cameron spent a great deal of time preparing for these scenes as well so that he might be in a better position when the director cast for the show he ultimately wanted to be in the following semester. Once again, Cameron attributes his dogged determination simply to an inner drive he possesses. "But, I'm just lucky, again, because for whatever reason I became naturally driven, and so it's never an issue for me knowing...like thinking, 'Oh, I don't want to do this.' No, that's not an option. I want to do this; that's why I said yes. And, I want to do the best job that I can, and so, I'm going to do this and I'm going to rock it," Cameron shares. While the

semester he volunteered to take on 12 individual student projects may have been particularly stressful for Cameron, he also admits that he's not the type of person who can sit still for very long, which may be another reason he stays so busy. "I'm also one of those types that I hate being bored. If I'm not busy, I am...I get depressed," he says. "Like, if I'm not stressed out of my mind...not stressed out of my mind, but if...if I don't have enough to do, I feel like I'm wasting my time and my training here. And so, I want to get the most out of it that I can." Certainly, no one questions that Cameron is doing all he can to soak up every ounce of experience that college can afford him.

Despite his hectic schedule, Cameron does make time for himself, although sometimes he must get to his breaking point before doing so. "I'm such a masochist because I always try and push how much I can do," he says. "And, I've had a couple of breakdowns in the sense that, like, okay I just need to take a night, go home, watch *The Princess and the Frog* or something, and go to sleep...I just want to see a movie, eat soup, and go to bed." These types of days and nights are few and far between for Cameron, perhaps in part because he is surprisingly determined to get eight hours of sleep each and every night. In fact, when he shared his resolve to get eight hours of sleep each night, we were visiting in his parents' home, and his mother chuckled from the kitchen when she overheard him say this, almost as if she had witnessed Cameron's need for sleep first-hand. "In high school, I pulled a couple of all-nighters," Cameron shares, "just because that was necessary, and as a senior, I was a perfectionist and I...if I had to finish a product...a project and make it perfect and if it took all night, that's what I had to do." While he admits to staying up all night due to homework a couple of times in high

school, Cameron has yet to do so in college. To demonstrate how serious he is about his sleep, Cameron goes on to share that one of his professors in college was concerned he was not getting enough sleep, to which he responded, “No. I promise you, I’m getting my eight hours.” There is no doubt that this is the case; no matter how much time theatre may require, Cameron seems to be able to balance it all – class work, part-time job, student organization involvement, acting in shows, and tending to his need for sleep.

“He tries to please everyone and he knows that he can’t.”

From the moment Cameron accepted my invitation to meet, he was exceptionally accommodating and helpful during our conversations, even verbalizing when he makes “air quotes” with his hands to later aid in my transcription of the interview. “That’s in quotations for the transcribing,” he offers at various points during our meetings. While he maintains an incredibly busy schedule himself, he made time for several conversations under less-than-ideal circumstances for him. Our first meeting was squeezed into the small window of time he had between classes and rehearsal when he would normally have lunch. And, while Cameron did have some lunch as we spoke, he did not have much of an opportunity to sneak in bites between the many questions I posed. Cameron also shared well into the interview that we were meeting on his 20th birthday. Upon learning this, I apologized profusely, but Cameron was unfazed. “It is so fine. It’s fine,” he says, and continues on with the topic at hand. Our second meeting occurred in his parents’ home within just a few days of Cameron having his wisdom teeth removed. Following the surgery, I confirmed with Cameron that he felt well enough to meet, but he assured me he did. At one point during the conversation, he did pause and say, “But my

voice is so weird because of the...I just woke up and because of the surgery,” as if he needed to provide an explanation for not having his usual perfect tenor; I hardly noticed a difference and offered to pause or even postpone the interview once again, but Cameron insisted on continuing. “I’m...it’s fine. It’s just weird for me to hear it,” he observes. In Cameron’s world, “the show must go on,” and he seemed eager to assist and support me with my project, almost as if it were his own.

Cameron’s inclination to please others has been an innate part of his psyche since he was very young and is something he readily acknowledges. “This has been something since I was little,” he says. “When my mom wrote on my fifth grade, you know, little sheet that the teacher makes for you, like, ‘What is your child’s biggest problem,’ and she wrote down, ‘He tries to please everyone, and he knows that he can’t.’” The impracticality of trying to please everyone certainly does not stop Cameron from trying, though; instead, the desire to please only seems to spur him on to do more. Cameron offers a more personal explanation as to why this is: “It’s more like...like a deep fear of failure....it’s always just a push to be the best that I can be and never give up, and...because I won’t let myself. You know?”

Perhaps because Cameron’s interest in pleasing others began at an early age, some of the first people he remembers wanting to please are his parents. Cameron shares that his parents, both recently-retired teachers, “...never really had to tell me to work harder or anything because I never wanted to disappoint them.” This interest in pleasing them continues today, and Cameron believes that while his parents may not always directly say so, they are proud of him. In particular, Cameron’s father, a former high

school coach, does not always verbally express his pride in his son, but Cameron says, “I know that he’s really proud in terms of the financial aid that I was able to accumulate my senior year.” College finances are an area where Cameron has not only tried to please his parents but to do as much as he can to reduce the financial burden placed on them, which means Cameron has assumed much of the responsibility for financing his college education himself.

The cost for Cameron to attend the private, two-year college where he began his college career was quite high, and to offset these costs, Cameron applied for a number of scholarships when he graduated from high school. He was awarded many of them. “I applied for everything, and I made a haul,” he shares. When Cameron transferred to the four-year, public university, his expenses were reduced significantly; he also received a transfer scholarship and was able to use the money that was left from the community scholarships he had received coming out of high school toward his education at the four-year university. After his first full year at the four-year university, Cameron was awarded a theatre scholarship worth \$2,500 per year as well as several hundred dollars per semester for being a part of the honors college. He has also taken out several small loans. His job at the theatre center also helps him make ends meet, and he cuts costs wherever he can, limiting his trips home to see his family and walking where he can around campus and in the college town in order to reduce the money he spends on gas. “My parents contribute what they can,” Cameron says, “which is a semester-by-semester basis. And, then I’ve also got generous grandparents.”

Aside from being appreciative of their son's efforts to reduce the financial burden college can often have on a family, Cameron feels both his parents are proud of his performances in the classroom and on the stage as well. "[My dad] is proud of what I'm doing...and, I'm really lucky because he would never tell me this to my face, but he has a lot of faith in me," Cameron shares. "And so, he knows that I'm working hard, and my grades reflect that and so, I just try to keep him happy in terms of that." Cameron's mother, a former English and art teacher, is also pleased with her son's choice of major and career path. "She's great. She's really supportive," Cameron says.

Since Cameron has been in college, he has appeared in a number of theatre productions, and his family has made efforts to attend several of these performances. "This year, especially, they've put more effort in that they've come," Cameron shares. "And, it's only for a day or two, tops, because you know, you have to stay in a hotel or something, but I like when they come to visit." Shortly before one of our meetings, Cameron had played several roles in his college's production of *The Laramie Project*, a play about the reaction of the town of Laramie, Wyoming, to the death of Matthew Shepard, a young man who was a student at the University of Wyoming when he was beaten to death for being gay. Cameron's parents as well as his younger sister who is still in high school traveled about three hours from Hamden to the town where Cameron attends college to watch him in the dramatic production. "It was extremely nerve-wracking for me because a lot is required of me in that show," Cameron says. Throughout the performance, Cameron and his sister, who was in the audience, were sending text messages to one another. Cameron asked his sister, "So, have you been told

what [the play]’s about?” To which his sister replied, “No. Mom tried to tell me what it was about, but Dad wouldn’t let her finish.” After the show, Cameron spoke with his parents and sister and asked them what they thought of it. His sister shared that it “opened her eyes;” his mother remembered hearing about the incident with Matthew Shepherd; and his father said, “Thanks for worrying about your old man.” Cameron acknowledges, “So, [my family’s reaction] was a little confusing, but overall, I got the sense that they enjoyed it and that it was a beneficial experience, if anything.”

While the responses of his family members may have been somewhat puzzling to Cameron, he was proud to be part of a show that addressed social issues and that was “...pertinent to areas like [Hamden].” In fact, Cameron has found that he particularly enjoys being involved in shows that touch on more controversial subjects. Recently, he also had a role in a production of *Exit 27*, a play about a group of Mormon boys who are exiled from their compound and relegated to living in the desert, and “...which, again, deals with...kind of the idea of religious indoctrination and the effects...on your psyche.” Cameron describes the show and his experiences being part of the cast as, “...twisted, and...it was interesting to do the scene work and realize that for every perception I have about these characters or about what’s going on, they would have the exact opposite.” For Cameron, who comes from a fairly conservative, Christian family himself and admits to living a somewhat sheltered existence, the play may have had particular meaning, especially since Cameron has done his own share of religious exploration.

When Cameron’s family first moved to Hamden his sophomore year of high school, they began attending the Methodist church there. Although Cameron began

kindergarten in Hamden and completed all of his schooling there, his family actually lived about 20 miles from Hamden in another small community until the beginning of Cameron's 10th grade year; prior to that time, the family commuted to work and school in Hamden since both of Cameron's parents were teachers in the Hamden school district. When they moved to Hamden after almost a decade of working and going to school there, Cameron and his family also joined a church in Hamden. While Cameron was not unhappy with his family's choice of the Methodist church, he also wanted to explore other churches in their "new" community. So, Cameron did just that, visiting a variety of churches ranging from Pentecostal to Baptist to Church of Christ to non-denominational. "But eventually, I settled in with my family's church just because it was easier and they were more comfortable with that," he shares. Cameron went on to become involved in the church's youth group, even participating in international mission trips some summers when he was in high school.

Involvement in a church has always played a prominent role in Cameron's family and in his upbringing; in fact, he describes there being "lots of tears" over his parents' decision to leave their church home and move to Hamden but that his parents did so because they wanted to own their own home rather than renting, which they had been doing for a number of years. They also wanted to be closer to where they were teaching. "But, they're happy they're here, and they like having their own place," Cameron says of his parents' outlook today. "In terms of the city [of Hamden], I was just ready to get out as soon as I could," he says. And, while Cameron likes Hamden and enjoys returning to

visit his family, when the time came for him to go to college, he was ready to venture to other places.

Although he has been in college and away from his family for several years now, Cameron has independently continued to consider and examine faith. Through this ongoing and introspective exploration, Cameron feels as though his college experience has “amplified” his religious beliefs. “Yes, I’ve been around, you know, more things that I know churches that I grew up with wouldn’t necessarily condone...or because of, you know, their very strict beliefs...whatever...,” Cameron shares. “Where I am now in my beliefs and what they were trying to tell me, I’m sure I would have stood up and walked out or just yelled something. Because it is a little infuriating just to know that to some degree, I was raised with...not by my parents, but by the church...some degree of hate. And, I don’t stand for that at all.” Through his own personal research, studies, and internal questioning and exploration, however, Cameron has reconciled his own beliefs and feelings related to religion. “I found the peace, and I’m really happy with my beliefs now, and I’m happy with who I am, which is, you know, incredibly important.”

Conclusion

The themes of determination, resiliency, and endurance permeate Cameron’s college career thus far. Whether it is navigating the competitive and unpredictable musical theatre auditioning process on his own; remaining concentrated on his goal in spite of repeated rejection and multiple challenges; or running himself ragged so as not to let down a colleague or miss out on an opportunity, Cameron has had to be cunningly resourceful and doggedly focused in order to pursue his passion: musical theatre. “I’ve

always wanted to be on stage. And, that's what I love to do," Cameron says simply. Based on the drive and work ethic he's displayed thus far, there is no doubt Cameron will find success pursuing his dream.

Jessica

Introduction

When I first contacted Jessica, she was very quick to respond, almost exactly as one would expect of a high-achieving student. Jessica graduated as the valedictorian of her high school class and was in her third year of college when we began communicating. Her messages were friendly yet professional, and she was open to visiting with me more about her experiences.

We met in the home she shares with her fiancé (formerly her boyfriend of four years): Chip. Chip and Jessica live in a very small home comprised of a living room with a tiny kitchen in one corner, one bedroom, and a bathroom on property owned by Chip's family, who are heavily involved in the Hamden community. Chip's mother serves on the city council and in a number of civic organizations. While the home is very welcoming and comfortable, it is decorated with more masculine touches: deer heads hang from the walls, dark colors, animal fur, wood.

Although Jessica seemed quiet and reserved when we first met in person, her answers to my questions came more easily as we visited, almost as if she had been waiting to tell someone her story for quite some time. Simple questions about what her experience had been in one realm would lead her to share her dissatisfaction about a whole host of issues in other areas as we explored many facets of her personal, family,

and educational background. Generally, our conversations focused on the role of family in her life; the independence and self-reliance she has learned to assume; and her determination and focus on a better future for herself.

“A big family”

Jessica moved with her mother and sister to Hamden when she was five, shortly after her parents’ divorce. While she maintains a good relationship with her father and stepmother, they live in Arkansas, several hours away, but Jessica’s paternal grandparents live in the Dallas area and she is quite close to them. In fact, Jessica’s “Mima” and “Papa” have played important roles in her upbringing and desire to pursue higher education, perhaps in part because their own story is one of hard work, determination, and economic success through education.

Jessica’s grandparents are originally from Guatemala and migrated to the United States in the 1960s without knowing any English, teaching themselves the language by watching television every day. Eventually, Jessica’s grandfather went on to become a family physician in the Dallas area, and her grandparents not only continue to take college courses for their own edification but encourage their children and grandchildren to do the same. According to Jessica, “It’s mainly been my grandma – my dad’s mom – that has pushed college into my brain.” And, this consistent urging and encouragement made a difference since a college degree has been one of Jessica’s goals from a young age.

About ten years ago, Jessica’s mother was involved in a debilitating car accident that made it difficult for her to work, and as Jessica got older, it became more and more

difficult for her to maintain a relationship with Jessica as well. “She was being mean,” Jessica says. Many of the arguments Jessica and her mother had centered around Jessica’s comings-and-goings, and the tension came to a head at the beginning of Jessica’s junior year in high school. Enough so that when Jessica turned 17 years of age in September of her junior year, she moved out of her mother’s home and in with a friend of hers from high school. Almost one year later, Jessica and her now-fiancé Chip moved into the small house provided by Chip’s parents; this is where Jessica and I first met and where Jessica lived during her senior year of high school and while she’s been in college.

Jessica became the guardian for her younger sister during her sister’s junior year in high school, and her sister lived with Jessica and Chip until she graduated. While Jessica’s sister does have a relationship with their mother – often as a result of Jessica’s encouragement – this has put further strain on Jessica’s relationship with her mother at times. In fact, the spring after Jessica became the guardian for her sister, Jessica’s mother tried to claim her younger daughter as a dependent on her income taxes. When Jessica informed her mother that she had already claimed her younger sister as a dependent since she had been living with her for most of the previous year, her mother stopped talking to Jessica. This created yet another rift between mother and daughter that resulted in one of the longest periods of time that Jessica went without talking to her mother. “It’s easier to not have a relationship with her than it is to have a relationship with her,” Jessica shares.

Perhaps because of Jessica’s own difficult relationship with her mother, she has become even more integrated into Chip’s family. Part of the reason behind this may simply be the proximity Jessica and Chip have to Chip’s family, considering they live

across a driveway from one another. Through Jessica's own description of their living arrangements, it's easy to visualize the family compound. "Living [in Hamden] is like a big family, and especially now that me and Chip live together cause we have his aunt and uncle on this side, his cousin and girlfriend right there, [his parents] right there," Jessica says as she points in various directions, signifying where each family member lives in relation to Jessica and Chip's home. Jessica and Chip also spend a considerable amount of time with Chip's family, participating in family events and traditions on a routine basis. "Sunday's normally like family day," Jessica shares as one example of the time they often spend together. These frequent interactions have also allowed Jessica to develop a close relationship with Chip's mother, in whom she often confides or from whom she seeks advice. According to Jessica, most of her friends are married and pregnant with children of their own already, which limits their ability to truly understand Jessica's current reality and some of the challenges she faces as a full-time college student. This often results in she and Chip primarily socializing with Chip's friends, with whom he has maintained close contact since high school, and Chip's family.

The close-knit relationships and interdependence Jessica and Chip have with Chip's family have also influenced the decisions that Jessica has made about her education, including where she has chosen to attend school. For example, Jessica had originally planned to major in actuarial science when she graduated from high school, and coincidentally, the four-year institution in Dallas that she is now attending started a program the same year she graduated from high school. Although another school in San Antonio also offered the same degree and she and Chip briefly discussed moving to San

Antonio so she could pursue her education there, Jessica found it difficult to justify moving to and living in San Antonio when she had a free place to live in Hamden and could commute an hour each way to a similar program in Dallas. Likewise, living with Chip influenced her decision to start her education at the local community college, or “thirteenth grade,” according to many of her high school teachers. “I went to [the local community college] because it’s close, and I didn’t want to move....and, it’s cheaper. That was most of my reasoning...not because I wanted to go [there],” Jessica admits. But, she also acknowledges, “If I wanted to be with [Chip], I had to go to [the local community college].” Jessica shares that she had envisioned herself going to a four-year institution immediately out of high school and living in the residence halls, but reiterates that those plans were altered after she met Chip. “I had in my head that I was going to go off to college and live in the dorms and all of that stuff, but I met [Chip] and we had got this place and I could live for free...and so that changed that.” The economic advantages of living with Chip simply outweighed other opportunities Jessica might have had or considered. “I would love to live closer to school. I would love to be on campus every day. But, like...like I said, ‘It’s just not financially possible,’” Jessica shares.

After completing two years at the nearby community college, Jessica transferred to a public, four-year institution in the Dallas area with a high nonresidential population, which is about an hour commute each way from Jessica and Chip’s home in Hamden. Jessica tried to limit her classes to two days each week so that her commute was not quite so taxing, but because one of her classes required her to be in Dallas a third day each week in order to take an exam, she stayed with her aunt who lives in Dallas three days

each week. Her first semester there was particularly difficult for her because she was away from everything that was familiar and comforting to her. “That was really tough. Not just class-wise, but emotionally. It was, you know...my sister and my fiancé are here, and I’m there,” Jessica remembers. Another reason that first semester was so difficult for her was because she did not know anyone at the commuter school nor did she find the college’s environment to be particularly welcoming, a stark contrast from the town and the school from which she came. “At [Hamden], everybody knows everybody. You went to school with these people your whole life. Everybody knows who you are. Everybody knows what you’ve done,” Jessica shares. “I didn’t have anyone [at the four-year university], and it was completely terrifying.” After her first semester and after she met more people, she felt more comfortable, however. “I met a couple of people in my classes and I met my professors, obviously. And, the more people I got to...got to know, the more comfortable I felt.” Although “traffic” and commuting are not her preferences, Jessica anticipates that she will continue to drive to Dallas for work after she graduates from college and begins her career. “I’ll probably have to commute even after I graduate college, but I still like it here enough to do that,” Jessica says.

“I figured it all out on my own”

Since she enrolled at the four-year university in Dallas, Jessica has encountered a number of challenges and set-backs that have been quite discouraging to her in pursuing her education. These challenges have made spending time away from her fiancé and her Hamden family even more difficult for Jessica. However, according to Jessica, some of

these stressful situations could have been avoided if she had made different choices about her education at various points, but Jessica did not always realize she had other options.

For one, Jessica's original decision to major in actuarial science posed some unforeseen challenges for her when she transferred to a four-year institution after completing two years at the local community college. Because Jessica did not enjoy many of the classes she had to take in order to major in actuarial science, she decided to change majors during her first semester at the four-year institution in Dallas. She's now majoring in accounting, but she has a number of credits that will not count toward her degree. "I was under the impression that if I got my associate's degree from [the local community college] that I would be core complete when I transferred to a university, and that's not true. I had completed many classes that were not necessary and not needed, and I still wasn't core complete. It tore me down inside. I just feel like I was cheated," Jessica says. She attributes much of her ignorance about credits and transferability to the poor information provided by the guidance counselors in her high school. "The thing that high school lacked in was explaining the specifics of college...like, planning," she offers. Jessica feels that her high school counselors should have helped students to plan for and strategize how to complete their undergraduate degrees much better than they did.

The financial advice and preparation Jessica received was similar. Despite the fact that Jessica worked in the high school's administrative office as a counselor's aide, she was not made aware of financial aid programs she feels could have been helpful to her. Specifically after the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA) issued its report, *Mortgaging our future: How financial barriers to college*

undercut America's global competitiveness, in 2006, a number of institutions across the country began offering financial aid packages that would pay a student's tuition and fees if they came from a low-income family, the cut-off often being an annual household income of less than \$40,000 per year (FinAid, 2013). Although Jessica is aware of these programs today, she was not aware as a graduating senior. "My mom didn't work, you know. We were poor. And, nobody told me about that. I probably would have gone to a university had it been...had I known that. That's for the next four years. I'm covered for the next four years, and now I'm having to figure out how I'm going to pay for what...I mean, [the counselors] knew I was smart, they knew I wanted to go to college, and they knew that I was...my parents didn't have the money to send me. And, they never made me aware. They never told me where to look. I could have done the research myself if I would have known *something*, but I didn't. I had no idea." Instead, Jessica has had to be extremely careful and creative in paying for college, and one technique she employs to make more financial opportunities available to her is to identify with the race she feels may help her the most. Since Jessica's father's side of the family is from Guatemala and her mother is white, Jessica shares that she identifies as both Hispanic and white but uses the Hispanic designation "for school stuff...I get looked at for more scholarships that way. But, I guess for work or something, I put white." Through various mechanisms, she pieces together scholarships and loans to cover her tuition, fees, and living expenses each semester. She also works part-time and even held down two part-time jobs at one point to get practical experience for her major and also to help make ends meet, but this can certainly be tiring, and sometimes discouraging, as well. Jessica acknowledges that

she could be making more money if she could work full-time at one of her part-time jobs but admits she cannot work full-time because she is in school; at times, Jessica questions whether this trade-off is ultimately worth it but she continues to make strides each semester toward her degree.

As a result of the perceived poor advice or lack of advice Jessica received during her time in high school and at the community college, she has chosen to take most of the responsibility for her educational planning and decision-making upon herself. “If I know how to do it on my own, I’m going to do it on my own,” she declares. Even now, despite some of the challenges she’s faced with her classes and credits, Jessica has not ever consulted an academic advisor and has registered herself for classes every semester she has been in school. “I haven’t talked to a counselor to [register for classes]. You know, I go based on what I still need, and I figured it all out on my own. I pick my own classes. I pick what timeslot. I know what prerequisites are for what,” she explains. Jessica shares that she simply finds it easier to do it all herself.

Jessica describes a time during her first semester at the four-year institution when she was having a difficult time in class and needed to drop the class. She had never dropped a class before and wasn’t entirely sure how to go about doing so. “I didn’t know there was a census date. I didn’t know there was a date...that you could...after a certain date, you can’t drop a class and add a new one.” While she had heard of students dropping classes before, she never had dropped a class herself and began calling offices to determine how to go about doing so. She soon discovered that there were a number of implications to her dropping the class, including her financial aid decreasing; because she

had dropped after the census date, she had to pay back some of the financial aid she had received as well. “I called the financial aid office and then they were trying to help me but they didn’t know how much my tuition would decrease to, so I had to call the bursar’s office to see how much...and then she told me the wrong number. So, when I talked to her again, she was like, ‘No, that’s not right. You need to call them back.’ So, I had to call her back. So, it was horrible,” Jessica relates. She also had not realized how the designation of a dropped class would appear on her transcript and that the designation usually depended upon when a student dropped the class. “I mean, it was like two days I missed by dropping it and it not being on my transcript. So, it was horrible,” Jessica reiterates. Jessica feels that being able to talk to someone among her family and friends who could have helped her understand the process would have been helpful, and while her grandparents attended college, she doesn’t “...have any family that’s been in college recently” and could speak to her about how to navigate various processes. Hence, Jessica feels the need to continue doing everything “on her own.”

“I just have a goal. I just know what I want.”

Despite setbacks and feeling discouraged at times, Jessica is determined to persist and complete her college degree. She’s always had an internal drive and motivation to excel, but the support of her family has been comforting and integral to her persistence, particularly the encouragement of her grandparents. “I guess to keep going to school...my Papa has been my biggest inspiration,” she shares. Her grandparents stressed the importance of a college education to her from an early age, and they have also been there to tell her that she’s come so far, she would be foolish to quit now.

Unfortunately, between Jessica's and my first and second meetings, her grandfather passed away after a lengthy illness, but she seems to have even more resolve to finish what she's started now. "I've been through where I was like, 'I don't know if this is for me'....But, it's just in my head as to whether or not I'm going to finish at that point. Ultimately, I will....I just have a goal. I just know what I want."

This resolve and determination have been part of Jessica from an early age. One of her goals in school was to be the high school valedictorian and she became very focused on this achievement early in her high school career, taking mostly Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP) and Advanced Placement courses because those classes afforded her extra points that would be added to her grade point average, which would in turn determine the class standings. But, Jessica's goal almost became derailed when she and her mother had the huge fight at the beginning of her junior year, after which her mother physically packed up Jessica's things and drove her to Arkansas to live with her father the day before school started. Jessica was very upset, primarily because, "...if you don't start at a high school your sophomore year, you don't get a chance to be valedictorian, and I wasn't going to lose that." Instead, Jessica convinced her father to let her return to Hamden; she lived with her mother for another week until she turned 17; and then she and her mother had another argument. That's when Jessica moved in with a friend of hers, but more importantly to Jessica, she also went on to be the valedictorian of her graduating class.

Throughout high school, Jessica was focused on achievement both in- and outside of the classroom, which meant she was often quite busy. While Jessica took AP courses

during the school day for the additional points she might earn toward her grade point average and class ranking, she also took dual credit courses after school in order to earn college credit. “While I was in high school, I was taking dual course classes. So, not only was I taking my high school classes, but I was taking college classes on top of it,” Jessica shares. Jessica also held down a part-time job as a waitress at a local restaurant throughout her high school career. On top of these time commitments, Jessica was on the high school student council, honor society, and volleyball team at various points when she was in high school as well. “I’m used to busy,” Jessica acknowledges.

When Jessica has an objective, almost nothing will come between her and that objective; she is extremely focused and self-motivated. For now, one of those objectives is graduating from college. However, for Jessica, it is not enough just to graduate from college; she wants to do so with honors. “I want to graduate with that...summa...something...honors,” she confesses. Jessica is well on her way to accomplishing this as well. Despite feeling unprepared to perform university-level coursework when she graduated from Hamden High School, Jessica has maintained a 4.0 grade point average throughout her college career. “I’ve never had a B in my life, and I don’t want to have one,” she says. In fact, her most stressful times in college have been when her goals seemed uncertain, such as when she contemplated dropping a course or when she was not confident she had chosen the right major for her, but she has always managed to get back on track and forge ahead.

Jessica’s aspirations do not end at college graduation, either. Far from it. She hopes to become a certified public accountant (CPA) and is currently working part-time

at a local firm to learn more about the field of accounting. In fact, in her short time there, she was offered a full-time position while she was working part-time as a receptionist. “I think I would be full-time right now had I not been in school,” she acknowledges. Her work in the firm is providing her extensive practical experience as well. “I do payroll. I do bookkeeping. I do financial statements...I’m getting a lot of good experience, so I’m kind of excited,” Jessica shares. Since Jessica would also like to have her own CPA firm one day, her work at the local CPA firm is helping her achieve that goal, too. “I kind of get a feeling that I could be pretty big in that company because the only CPA that works there is [the owner], and he’s trying to retire. So, once he retires, they won’t be a CPA firm anymore. They’ll just be an accounting firm. So, they’ll really want a CPA there,” Jessica speculates. Jessica wonders if she might be the one to fill that void for them when the time comes.

Part of Jessica’s motivation to own her own CPA firm ties in with her personal hopes of having a family some day, too. Jessica rationalizes that if she owns a CPA firm, she will have more flexibility to create her own work hours in order to be around and available for her children and their activities. “I don’t want to be the parent that’s working all the time and doesn’t get to go to any games...football games or volleyball games or whatever,” Jessica shares. But, most important to Jessica, becoming a CPA would allow her to provide a better life for her children with opportunities she feels she never had. “I never grew up with an ample amount of money to where I could just do whatever I wanted...and, I don’t want that for my kids,” Jessica says. While Jessica plans to make a future and eventually start a family with her current fiancé Chip, she

acknowledges that she is not willing to “leave it up to him” to make a living, either. Chip has had a variety of jobs since he and Jessica have been together, from veterinarian technician to selling garage doors to working at a lumberyard, which is what he does now. Jessica has tried to support him in finding a more stable job and helped him complete job applications to work at a local manufacturing plant. “We’ve applied there many times, but it’s hard to get in there,” she admits. Although Jessica and Chip have not been successful in securing more permanent employment for Chip thus far, they are continuing to work together to find something for him.

Regardless of uncertainty related to Chip’s career, Jessica and her fiancé are making plans to begin their life together and now have a wedding date set to occur approximately one month before she is scheduled to graduate. They will get married on Chip’s grandparents’ land where Chip proposed to Jessica and where they plan to build a house once Jessica has saved enough money to pay for half of the cost of the house. “That way our mortgage isn’t that big,” she shares. But, Jessica admits that it can be hard to wait. “I wish I could be married now, but school...financial aid stuff...it’s better...it’s best not to be.” So, once again, financial considerations must be taken into account as Jessica weighs her options and the most sound decision for her future, but nothing will divert her from achieving her goals – all of them.

Conclusion

Despite both personal challenges in high school and college; a lack of information regarding the college-going process; and set-backs and discouragements in the university setting, Jessica has maintained an unwavering focus on obtaining a college degree and

creating a better life for herself and her future children. She admits, “I’m honestly sick of school. I feel like I’ve been going so long, and I still have two years, but there’s something in me that keeps me going.” It is this inner determination and resolve that propels Jessica forward, and why there is no doubt that she will complete precisely what she has set out to do.

Lori

Introduction

As I began recruiting individuals to interview, I specifically focused on students who had been in the top ten percent of their high school graduating classes, and Lori was one of the first students I contacted about participating as I felt her experiences as a student-athlete and as a transfer student could be informative. At the time, she was in the first semester of her third year of college, and when I asked her about meeting, she indicated she would be happy to visit with me but she was not sure she had graduated in the top ten percent of her class. After a little investigative work, including verification from the Hamden High School guidance counselor that Lori had indeed graduated in the top ten percent of her class, we confirmed her participation and promptly set up a time to meet.

Lori’s nonchalance related to her standing in her high school graduating class is indicative of the casual and carefree approach she has toward life as well. Each of the visits Lori and I had occurred in the living room of her parents’ home in Hamden with the pretty and petite Lori plopped down on the opposite end of the couch from me, sitting sideways to face me with a pillow on her lap and her legs crossed under the pillow. In

many ways, she could be described as the stereotypical co-ed: long, shiny blonde hair; a toned and athletic build; and a bright, radiant smile. She is the consummate hostess as well, frequently asking if I would like anything to eat or drink during our conversation, even though I had been the one to invite myself into her world. Lori and I were the only ones at her parents' home during our conversations, and later I learned that she requested her parents leave while we visited in an attempt to be as accommodating as possible toward my request to meet and to ensure our privacy. While she willingly answered my questions, her sentences were choppy as she often corrected and interrupted herself in an effort to provide answers that were complete and to my satisfaction.

All of these initial experiences with Lori support what I would soon come to learn about her as well: she is a sweet young woman who simply wants to make others in her life happy. In fact, due to her light-heartedness and her interest in pleasing those around her, the potential impact her decisions will have on others has had an effect on the choices she makes related to her college education. Indeed, as Lori has made decisions about her future in higher education, she has frequently – if not always – taken into consideration how those decisions will affect others, including her family and friends. While Lori's athletic abilities and the opportunities presented to her by these abilities in college as well as her background growing up in Hamden and its effect on her academic preparation for college have played considerable roles in the way she has approached higher education, the influence of family and friends on her future has been particularly significant and notable, consistently serving as a factor throughout every aspect of Lori's life but most certainly when it comes to her post-secondary pursuits.

“Volleyball is just such a passion.”

Because my second meeting with Lori took place in August before she began her final semester of college, she was dressed for the hot Texas summer in a t-shirt and shorts, revealing her tanned and muscular arms and legs developed through years of playing sports. Lori acknowledges that she’s always been athletic. “I’ve always been involved in like sports,” she says. “Like, I started playing basketball when I was in third grade with [Hamden community youth basketball].” In middle school, she became involved with volleyball and admits, “that’s all really in high school that my life revolved around was sports,” and namely, volleyball. In retrospect, considering the time volleyball required of Lori, doing much of anything else may have been difficult.

Lori played on the varsity volleyball squad for Hamden High School her sophomore through senior years, and was the setter, a critical role. The team was quite successful during Lori’s tenure, advancing to the state play-off’s regional quarter-final round both her junior and senior years. Spurred on by her love of the sport and her high school team’s success, Lori decided during her junior year to pursue opportunities to play volleyball at the college level. “Volleyball is just such a passion, and I knew that I wanted to at least like give it a try in college,” she says.

While some high school student-athletes may be aggressively recruited by college coaches without the student needing to put forth much effort themselves to be noticed, almost all who ultimately want to play at the college level must be more assertive by providing videotapes of their skills to coaches directly and undertaking other outreach efforts. Although Lori was a good volleyball player in high school, she knew she would

need to market herself to college coaches if she wanted to be considered for a spot on a team, which included preparing film and contacting coaches directly. Fortunately, Lori's father is a former college athlete and high school coach himself and took the lead in preparing her tapes to be sent to schools. "[My dad] was the one who did like...he put together my tapes, like, to send out," Lori shares. "And he's the one that made lists [of college coaches] for me to send them to." Several Hamden High School coaches helped with her tapes as well, and the high school guidance counselors assisted in getting Lori registered with and cleared by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Eligibility Center, a requirement for student-athletes before they can receive an athletic scholarship or compete at a Division I or II institution (The College Board, 2013b). "[The coaches and high school guidance counselors] helped me a lot," Lori acknowledges.

Aside from providing individual help and support to Lori, Hamden High School personnel made other college-related resources available to the greater student body of which Lori also took advantage. The high school hosted several college fairs during Lori's junior and senior years, and she remembers talking with representatives from a variety of four-year universities early in her junior year as she had not yet made up her mind as to whether she even wanted to pursue playing college volleyball, much less what school she wanted to attend. By her senior year, however, Lori chose not to participate in the college fairs as she had decided to try playing volleyball in college and felt she needed to focus on two-year colleges in order to do so. "Like, it was...I know I want to play volleyball wherever I can play," Lori remembers. "And, of course I knew I wasn't

going to be able to play somewhere big or like a university. So, I knew I had to start with a junior college.” With this in mind, Lori did not complete a single college application and instead began pursuing opportunities to play volleyball at nearby two-year colleges in earnest; however, the process did not prove to be as straightforward as she might have hoped.

After another successful volleyball season her senior year of high school and after conversations with several area two-year college coaches, Lori signed at the beginning of the spring semester of her senior year with a community college located about 120 miles from Hamden, but a coaching change prior to graduation allowed her to be released from her commitment. With the release came the process of sending her tapes to schools and waiting to see who might be interested in her all over again. Following the mailing of the second wave of recruiting tapes, three different two-year college coaches indicated an interest in having Lori on their teams. Of the three schools, Lori ultimately chose the one she did, which is located about 40 miles from Hamden, because she was offered a full scholarship and the college was close enough to Hamden for her parents to be able to attend her matches on a regular basis; while each of the other two colleges interested in her could offer one of these incentives, neither could offer both.

Despite the initial challenges Lori faced in finding a college where she could play volleyball, she credits the sport with being the biggest influence on not only her college choice but on her ultimate matriculation as well. “If it wasn’t for volleyball, I still would have gone [to college], but I don’t know how differently I would have...which school I would have chosen or anything like that,” Lori says. Being a member of the college

volleyball team also assisted in Lori's transition to higher education. Before she even began classes, she visited the community college to try out for the volleyball team officially and was able to meet other members of the team, many of whom were from small towns like Lori; she met the women who would become her roommates and suitemates as well. Having a built-in social network and support system from the moment she stepped foot on campus was both comforting and helpful to Lori.

Lori had to be on campus two weeks before classes began in the fall of her first year at the community college for two-a-day practices. During this time, her academic advisor, who was a coach at the college as well, personally showed new student-athletes around the campus to familiarize them with the environment and to facilitate their acclimation to post-secondary education. "It was an adjustment going to just [the community college]," Lori acknowledges. The sophomores on the team also assisted in helping new team members adjust to life as a student-athlete at a community college. "If we had problems...or, like, if we didn't know where we were going, they would show us," Lori remembers. Her sophomore teammates also answered questions she had about scheduling classes since, generally, student-athletes needed to be available for team practices and matches in the afternoons, evenings, and weekends. Her more experienced teammates also provided advice about working with faculty members when she needed to miss class due to travel for volleyball matches. "It was a very good experience for me to play," Lori says. "But, it took up so much time and...well, and especially in the fall semester, that that's all we were doing was volleyball, volleyball, volleyball." Indeed,

Lori's life at the community college – with the exception of the spring semester of her second year when the season was over – revolved around volleyball.

Toward the end of Lori's second year at the community college, she began considering where she would go next. Although there were a couple of smaller, Division-III schools outside of Texas that were interested in her playing volleyball for them, Lori admits that she was also ready for a more "normal" college experience by the end of her second year. "I was thinking, 'Well, I want to have like a normal college experience and not have to worry about volleyball,'" she shares. "Because that...takes up so much of your time. And, I was just like, 'I want to be a normal student.'" Rather than go to a smaller school or one that was similar to the college she had attended to play volleyball, Lori was attracted to a large, state university instead. "I knew I wanted to go to like a bigger school...a university...and have that...the experience of going...doing that," Lori says. Therefore, Lori applied to and was accepted into one of the state's flagship institutions in June following her second year at the community college.

While differences between institutions require some amount of adjustment for all students who transfer, Lori believes that her time at a community college aided in her transition to the flagship institution. "It was easy transitioning between the three [high school, community college, and flagship institution] since I didn't go straight from Hamden to [the flagship institution]," she shares. "I know I would have struggled if I would have done that." Lori also has considerably more free time at her disposal at the flagship institution since she is no longer a student-athlete. "I guess at [the flagship institution] I have more free time cause...I had a lot more free time cause I wasn't doing

volleyball stuff,” Lori says. Despite being satisfied with her decision not to play volleyball beyond the community college level, Lori misses the sport and believes this may be an interest she would like to pursue as a coach herself one day. In fact, Lori is working toward a degree in elementary education at the flagship institution, but she is considering taking the certification exam to teach at the high school level after she graduates, specifically so that she can coach volleyball. For now, though, she will remain an elementary education major since, as Lori candidly acknowledges, “...it’s a lot easier, I’ve heard. Like, the secondary [education major] at [the flagship institution] is a lot more demanding.” While Lori may be capable of completing the requirements for a secondary education degree, she will continue as an elementary education major for now and later determine whether she may want to pursue another option.

“I came from Hamden, and they have a power point.”

Although Lori graduated in the top ten percent of her high school class and would have been automatically admitted to any state college or university to which she applied, she has not always been confident in her ability to do college-level work. Even at the community college where she began her higher education career, there were moments she felt unsure of her academic preparation, despite having taken several Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit courses in high school. In fact, her first course at the community college was a basic biology class, a typical course of study for students majoring in nursing, which had been Lori’s original plan coming out of high school; however, the teaching style of the instructor was not what she had expected. “The professor just like...he didn’t...he just lectured, and there wasn’t like any power point or

anything, and it was just...he would write. He would do an outline form on the chalkboard, but he would just write the first word of everything,” Lori remembers. “And then, he would just tell you what else you were supposed to write down, and if you didn’t get it the first time, oh well. And so, that was really intimidating to me on the first day because...I came from Hamden, and they have a power point, and you know...like...so it was really weird to like...to see how professors really...I mean, they can really do whatever they want.” Another science course Lori struggled with was anatomy. “I think the only reason I struggled with [anatomy] was because that was the first like big class I had to take that I didn’t...I couldn’t just use my common sense, you know. I actually had to study and learn, and it was all up to me instead of just using my background knowledge,” she says. “You know, I still don’t even know if I know how to study, honestly.” While Lori ultimately did well in both science courses, she also realized that nursing may not be the right path for her, particularly with some of the challenges she was experiencing in “knowing how to study.”

When she transferred to the flagship institution following her second year at the community college, that is when Lori changed her major to elementary education. “When I first started school, I wanted to do nursing, and I took a couple of classes nursing...of nursing...or, for that major. And, I didn’t really like it,” Lori remembers. “And, so I chose...I guess I changed it because...well, my parents both are [teachers], but I’ve always, like, wanted to work with little kids.” While Lori’s interest in working with children has been the reason she provided for wanting to major in nursing originally and now elementary education, she is already familiar with the broader field of education

based on the experiences of her immediate family. Both her parents received bachelor's degrees in education and her older sister is currently an elementary school teacher. Lori's cousin, who had attended high school in a Dallas suburb not far from Lori's hometown, also majored in elementary education and was attending the flagship institution when Lori transferred. Lori's cousin was able to provide her detailed advice about what to expect academically as an elementary education major, and the two even took some classes together. "She took me under her wing, and showed me the ropes and everything. So, she was really helpful," Lori shares. Despite her cousin's assistance, however, she did not always have the answers Lori needed, particularly related to her degree plan since Lori had transferred in with a number of credits, many of which did not count toward her elementary education major at the flagship institution. Although Lori consulted an academic advisor for some of her more technical questions related to coursework and credits in order to complete her degree as efficiently as possible, she will need to be enrolled a fifth semester at the flagship institution to do her student teaching. In addition, no matter how much preparatory coaching or advice her cousin or others might share, there were simply some academic aspects of the flagship institution that Lori had to experience first-hand. "I knew going into [the flagship institution], that I would...and that...for the...the department I was going in, there was rules...like you can't make a D in a class," Lori acknowledges. "You have to maintain a 2.75 [grade point average], which at that point, I didn't really know how hard that would be. Cause I...I just didn't know like the classes or whatever, but I mean, obviously, it's really easy to maintain that." Lori's decision to change her major to elementary education appears to have

worked well for her, and through the support and assistance she received from her family members and university administrators, she has made a smooth transition to the field.

With changes in academic institutions and majors came significant changes for Lori in the way course content was delivered and in the way she was expected to demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. As opposed to the science classes Lori took as a nursing major that necessitated considerable time outside of class pouring over textbooks in order to learn concepts, her elementary education classes were more project-based and required less studying of specific terms and processes. “My education classes that I’ve taken at [the flagship institution],...we don’t really have to study,” Lori explains. “Like, we don’t have a lot of tests in my education classes. And, it’s mostly presentations. And, lesson plans...or, it’s some kind of project. So, we kind of learn the stuff through everything that we do.” While Lori jokes that education classes are “more about making bulletin boards” than studying for tests, at the time of our first interview, she was struggling with an educational statistics course that was proving particularly difficult for her. “Math has always been my favorite subject because I’ve been good at it,” Lori shares. “But, I’ve come to find out, I’m only good at like algebra and calculus.” She considered dropping the course and taking it online during the summer; however, Lori learned from her academic advisor that she would be unable to do so. Instead, she remained in the class, despite her challenges, and ultimately, she passed.

Aside from difficulties Lori experienced in adjusting to the academic demands presented by college-level work, she encountered a number of “non-academic” matters that affected her classroom experience and required additional acclimation on her part as

well. At the community college, dealing with issues related to diversity was particularly trying for Lori since the vast majority of the citizens of Hamden and students at Hamden High School are White. Although acknowledging the way the diversity of the community college affected her is not necessarily a comfortable subject for Lori, she describes the situation and her feelings in honest detail. “The only thing was...at [the community college]...was getting used to like all the African Americans,” Lori says. “But, that was a big change and a different experience.” Lori lived in the residence hall on campus where a number of other student-athletes lived, including members of the football team, which had recently won the community college national championship. According to Lori, “[The football student-athletes] are all D-I players that can’t make the grades [to get into an NCAA Division–I school].” During her visit to the community college as a prospective student, Lori observed that the environment in the residence hall where the student-athletes lived seemed different to anything she had experienced before. She even asked her future roommates about it. They told her, “It was just something you got used to...and then after awhile...you wouldn’t feel like weird, or whatever.” After Lori arrived at the community college, she spent even more time around the student-athletes. “We would eat breakfast, lunch, dinner with all the athletes. So, we were always around them. And, I mean, they’re big guys, and...it’s just different,” she acknowledges. “They can be degrading...it was African Americans, and so...they’re kind of intimidating at first.” Often, when Lori would pass some of the football players, they would whistle or make comments that made her uncomfortable, and Lori even describes the atmosphere as being “scary” at times. Her academic experiences were

affected by her feelings of intimidation related to some of the student-athletes as well. “I know at one point at [the community college], I took speech, and that was really...like, I don’t like talking in front of people in the first place. But again, with the whole intimidating thing with the culture...the diversity...they would just make you feel real stupid,” she remembers. While Lori is willing to share specific examples as to why she did not always feel comfortable with some of the students at the community college, she also acknowledges that “...living here [in Hamden]...like going out anywhere else is a culture shock when you see something else.” After some time, the diverse student body of the community college became more routine for Lori, and she no longer felt as unsafe as she once did.

While learning how to interact with some of the students she encountered may have been challenging for Lori as she transitioned to the community college, the size of the campus has proven to be an adjustment for her at the flagship institution. Lori still remembers feeling intimidated on her first day of class there. “I was really nervous my first day,” she says. “I can remember...cause on this huge campus, you know, like...but...it was...I got used to it.” Although its size may have become more familiar to Lori, navigating the campus has been another issue altogether. “If we’re having a meeting in one building and I’ve never heard of it, it’s intimidating to be like, ‘Okay. I gotta figure this out. And, am I gonna be on time cause I’m gonna get lost?’” While the physical size of the campus is an inevitable adjustment for many students when beginning their college careers at the flagship institution, Lori did not have to experience the large class sizes of some introductory-level courses since she did not take her “basics”

at the flagship institution. For this, she is thankful. In fact, since Lori arrived at the flagship institution, she has taken many classes related to her major with generally the same group of students. “So, I pretty much stay with the same group of kids,” she says. “So, we all are comfortable with each other and whatever.” Finding a supportive peer group in her major along with the students she already knew at the flagship institution when she transferred has helped Lori become acclimated to the university and has made a very large campus seem a bit more manageable.

“I guess I don’t really go out that much or branch out...”

Although Lori has ventured away for college geographically, she has made frequent trips back to Hamden while she’s pursued her education to see friends and family. During the two years she attended the community college, which was relatively close to Hamden, she would make short visits to see her parents when she had a few hours free; this might be as often as once or twice a week. Her parents also regularly attended her volleyball matches while she was at the community college; her father, who had recently retired and now owns and manages a small business, attended every one of Lori’s volleyball matches (home and away) as well as weekend tournaments while her mother only missed Lori’s out-of-town matches. Between her visits home and her parents’ attending her volleyball matches, Lori would typically see her parents as much as two or three times each week while she was attending the community college. During her first year at the flagship institution, Lori was only in class three days each week, which allowed her to make the three-hour drive home to Hamden approximately once a

month for four-day weekends each time; she visited more frequently after her niece was born in September of her second year.

Perhaps because Lori's family has maintained a consistent physical presence in her life both before and during college, the influence her parents have had on her entire college experience is quite significant. Lori credits them in many ways with setting the expectation early that she would attend college altogether. "I knew that I wanted to go to college, and I had to," Lori shares. "But, so I guess it was never like strictly enforced on me, but I just always knew in my head. But again, it was just an unspoken rule, you know, that I go to college." Lori's parents also played a major role in helping Lori decide where she ultimately wanted to matriculate, particularly since she would be playing volleyball. Not only did Lori want to go to a school where her parents could conveniently travel to watch her play, but her parents wanted to be able to get to her matches easily as well. Lori's parents had additional criteria that they encouraged her to consider as she made her college decision, too. "I mean, they wanted me to go to a school [whose volleyball team]...won...if I could," Lori says. "That had a good track record, I guess. But, they also wanted me to pick a school that was safe. Like...I don't know...low on crime." As educators themselves, Lori's parents have an understanding of and appreciation for the benefits of a college education; however, when Lori was considering colleges to attend directly out of high school, the institutions' academic reputations or rigor were not primary considerations, perhaps in part because Lori was focusing her search on community colleges. "I don't really know that we looked into like the educational aspect of [college] cause I guess we just had...I mean, junior colleges are

just regular standards. You don't...like you don't think about it," Lori acknowledges. Even if volleyball had not been a part of the picture for Lori, though, she speculates her parents would still have wanted her to start at a community college. "I think I would have gone to a community college because of my parents," she says. "It definitely wouldn't have been my choice, but because I would have gotten it free...or, paid for it at [the local community college] for however long...and because that's what [her older sister] did, and it wouldn't be fair." Lori and her sister had been eligible for a tuition scholarship to attend the local community college as top ten percent graduates of their high school, and Lori's older sister had taken advantage of this by completing her first two years of post-secondary education at the community college for free, essentially; therefore, since Lori's parents had only paid for two years of her older sister's college education when she transferred to the flagship institution, Lori felt it was only fair that her parents pay for just two years of her schooling as well rather than all four, which would have been the case had she started her college career at a four-year university.

As they have for many students, finances have played a role for Lori in many of her college decisions, including where she chose to attend. Although she did not attend the community college in her tax-paying district but one just outside of it, Lori's first two years of college were paid for through the athletic scholarship she had been awarded for volleyball, and her parents paid for her semesters at the flagship institution in full without any financial assistance. Lori shares that she wanted to attend the flagship institution originally as a high school student as well, but she was hesitant to go there for financial reasons, even after her two years at the community college. "I always wanted to go [to

the flagship institution],” Lori says. “But then it was such a burden. I mean, not a burden, but it was just...it’s so expensive and everything that I was kind of trying to figure out an...an alternative way to go.” At one point, she considered two other state universities to which she could transfer following her time at the community college, but one was ruled out because her mother felt it was too far away. As she considered the other school and the flagship institution as possible transfer options, finances remained at the forefront of her mind. “I didn’t want to put this financial burden on my parents if I went to [the flagship institution],” Lori remembers. “I felt like I’d be selfish if I chose [the flagship institution] just because...I don’t know...like it just...there was so much to think about.” After witnessing her struggle with the decision about which college to attend, Lori’s parents finally encouraged her to choose the one she wanted and not to worry about the financial implications; only then did Lori feel ready to move forward and enroll at the flagship institution. Despite her parents’ “blessing” to attend the institution she wanted, Lori has continued to monitor her financial situation closely, even limiting her own use of certain services available to her at the flagship institution in order to keep costs low. While Lori has used the health center on campus because “you can go to the doctor, and it doesn’t cost,” she has not used other resources, including tutoring, because these programs were simply too expensive. “[University personnel] do provide you with so much,” she says. “I mean, it might cost you an arm and a leg, but they do have so much.” While some of Lori’s peers took advantage of various resources offered by the flagship institution at an additional cost, Lori’s sensitivity to the financial impact

attending the flagship institution has on her parents limits her involvement in these programs.

Aside from being influenced by concerns about the financial impact her college choice would have on her parents, Lori's time outside of class at the flagship institution has been highly influenced by family and friends as well. In fact, the friends from Hamden and elsewhere who were attending the flagship institution while Lori was playing volleyball during her two years at the community college were extremely instrumental in convincing her to transfer to the flagship institution. "So, ultimately I decided to go to [the flagship institution] because...mainly because of Samantha," Lori shares. Samantha is Lori's best friend from high school. "And then, I wanted to be...like, I wanted to have the...[school] ring...and to graduate from a good, prestigious, four-year school like that." Upon transferring to the flagship institution, Lori moved into a house with four other women: Samantha; Lori's cousin; a sorority sister of Samantha; and a sorority sister of Lori's cousin. Her cousin wanted to live with other people after Lori's first year at the flagship institution, so only four women shared the house Lori's second year. Essentially, Lori had a built-in group of friends from the moment she stepped foot on the campus of the flagship institution. "I guess I don't really go out that much or branch out," Lori acknowledges. "So my close-knit...I mean, [Samantha]...obviously is my best friend. And...we mostly do everything that we do together outside of school." Some of the activities Samantha and Lori enjoy together include socializing with friends, going to sporting events, watching movies, and discussing books they've read outside of class.

Although Samantha is a member of a sorority at the flagship institution, Lori has not had significant involvement with student organizations. In fact, as she completed the form I provided prior to our first interview that requested demographic information as well as details about student organization involvement, Lori struggled a bit. “I’m not really, like, members of these organizations, but I’ve helped out a couple of times,” she confesses. “I don’t even know the official names for all these, but there’s like a cancer society. And, a couple of the...the educational organizations...like, ACEI? I don’t even know what it stands for.” While Lori occasionally volunteers for service projects and sometimes attends meetings for student organizations related to her major, her involvement in co-curricular activities is somewhat limited.

A few months after she transferred to the flagship institution, Lori also began dating Jake, a young man who is from the same town where Lori’s mother grew up and who Lori has known most of her life; Jake’s family lives near Lori’s relatives in her mother’s hometown and Jake lived with another of Lori’s cousins in college. Although Jake does not attend the flagship institution, he lives in the town where the flagship institution is located in a house that his parents purchased when his older sister attended there; he commutes approximately one hour each way daily to attend college in a nearby town because he was not accepted to the flagship institution. Following her second year at the flagship institution, Lori and Jake broke up since Lori was returning to Hamden for student teaching and Jake was remaining in the college town.

Because Lori’s student teaching required her to be enrolled a fifth semester at the flagship institution following her transfer and change of major, she planned to return to

Hamden to complete this requirement and live with her parents to save money. “I’m trying to get it done where I can do [student teaching in Hamden], or somewhere around here,” Lori shared during our first interview, which occurred during Lori’s third semester at the flagship institution. “My aunt lives in [a suburb of Dallas] and I know they have a branch of [the flagship institution]. So, just anywhere here...it would just save my parents a lot if I lived at home or lived with my aunt or...you know, somewhere around here where they didn’t have to pay for that living and extra spending money or whatever.” By our second interview, Lori had confirmed her student teaching would take place in Hamden under a first-year kindergarten teacher at the school where her mother and sister currently work and where she has substitute taught when she has been home during college breaks. Lori will graduate from the flagship institution after she completes her semester of student teaching and speculates that she may remain in Hamden short-term until she finds a more permanent position elsewhere. “I don’t know if I exactly want to be around Hamden, but if something’s open in Hamden at December, then I’m sure I’ll take it and...and save some money. Live here,” Lori shares. Beyond her first year out of college, however, Lori is unsure what her future holds, although she is interested in being a counselor in private practice at some point in her career. She plans to begin work on a master’s degree after she secures a full-time teaching position with the hope of doing as much of the coursework on-line as she can.

Lori is also interested in working in a low-income elementary school. She completed her senior methods class for her degree in education in a school district that had a high level of poverty, and she fell in love with the students there. During our visit,

I mentioned Teach for America to Lori as an option she might consider if she wanted to pursue this interest further, and she seemed to want to learn more about the program, even asking questions to obtain more information. “Well, I’m up to travelling,” Lori says. “I want to get out and see new things.” But, Lori also acknowledges her living a significant distance from Hamden might be difficult for her family. “Living far away would definitely be a change for my mom,” Lori concedes. “But...and, it would be really hard for her. She would have to get used to it, and I don’t think where...if I went far away, I think I would always come back eventually.”

Conclusion

While the comfort of Hamden, her family, and all that is familiar are strong influences on Lori, she acknowledges that she may be ready for a change as she prepares to transition from her college career to her professional one. “I don’t think I want to be around Hamden,” Lori shares. Instead, she is considering another area of the state altogether, one where her mother is from. “I’ve always loved it and wanted to be down there. So, that’s where I would like to be, but I don’t know.” Whether continuing with a sport she grew to love in high school; adjusting some of her academic plans to study in a field where she felt more comfortable; or transferring to a school with which she was familiar and where she had a built-in network of friends, Lori has cautiously taken limited risks during her college career and generally remained with that which is comfortable to her– or at least as much as higher education would allow. The larger world awaits Lori, but only Lori can determine if and when she is ready to explore it.

Rick

Introduction

Although each graduate takes her or his own distinct path following high school graduation, the particular journey that Rick has chosen could be what Robert Frost (1924) was referring to in the final lines of his famous poem, “The Road Not Taken,” when he wrote “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – / I took the one less traveled by...” (p. 11). Compared to many honor graduates of Hamden High School, Rick has certainly taken the road “less traveled.” Although Rick took many traditional courses in high school, participated in a diverse array of extracurricular activities, and was well-liked by his peers – even being voted “Best All Around” male his senior year in high school, many of the decisions Rick made both during and after high school are ones that have set him apart.

Rick is tall and lean and would be even taller if he stood up straight; instead, he slouches ever so slightly through his shoulders. He has the ideal frame to play basketball, a sport he has enjoyed since he was quite young. In each of our meetings, Rick wore attire one would see on many other young men around his age on any given college campus: brown shoes or sneakers, faded blue jeans, and either a long-sleeved plaid shirt with the shirt tail out and sleeves rolled up or a comfortable, un-tucked t-shirt with some vintage logo or print. The effortless look that takes some effort. He has a fair complexion and perfectly straight teeth, revealed through his frequent smiles and generally happy demeanor. While Rick’s Texas accent is heard occasionally in conversation, his is not the thick twang demonstrated by many of his family members or

friends. Instead, his is more subtle, perhaps in part because he has not spent the last four years in Texas.

Since Rick attends college out-of-state, both of my meetings with him occurred during times when he was visiting family in Texas. The first visit occurred when Rick was home for winter break during his senior year of college sitting at the kitchen table in his parents' home. While he and I had privacy during the interview, several of his family members were in and out of the kitchen during our visit and would make a teasing remark or comment each time they passed in an attempt to create a comfortable environment. The second interview took place a couple of months after Rick graduated from college but before he had secured a full-time job. He had returned to live with his parents until he could obtain employment and was house-sitting for his brother and sister-in-law when the follow-up meeting occurred in their home. This time, the only distraction was Hope, his sister-in-law's dog. Regardless of the environment, the themes that emerged from the two conversations remained the same as Rick discussed his ability to make a new home for himself at college (or wherever he may go in the future); his comfort with and interest in taking risks; and the life lessons he has learned along the way.

“A New Home”

Of the students with whom I visited, Rick was the only one who had lived in Hamden since he was born rather than moving to the area at a young age or at some point after starting school; in fact, his family's roots in the Hamden community run quite deep. During the course of our first conversation, Rick shared that he had lived in Hamden his “entire life...up to 18 years, I guess,” but his aunt was quick to interject during one of

several interruptions to our discussion that it was “longer than your entire life, actually.” Considering Rick’s family history, his aunt’s assessment is probably a more accurate statement.

Rick’s parents’ story is similar to that of many other baby-boomers from Hamden: each was born in Hamden, attended Hamden schools from first through twelfth grades, began dating in high school, and married shortly after Rick’s mother graduated with her bachelor’s degree from a private university about an hour from Hamden and began teaching elementary school. Rick’s mother stepped away from her career in teaching for approximately 10 years, beginning a couple of years before Rick’s older brother was born; she did not return to teaching until after Rick began school. When Rick’s mother returned to the classroom after her hiatus, she taught at the same school her sons attended. Rick’s father completed enough credits at the local community college so that he could become a fireman, and he recently retired from the fire department of a major metropolitan area in Texas after more than 30 years as a fireman and paramedic. He now spends most of his time helping run Panther Manufacturing, a company that designs truss systems and creates the connector plates that hold trusses together; he and a high school friend started the company in the 1980s and still co-own it today. Rick’s older brother is currently an engineer-in-training at the family-owned company after having received his civil engineering degree from one of the state’s large public universities a couple of years ago.

Aside from the professional pursuits of his parents as a business owner and a schoolteacher in Hamden, Rick’s family has historically been civically engaged in the

community as well. His paternal grandfather is a former mayor of Hamden, and his maternal grandfather sat on the city council as did Rick's father. At one point, one of Rick's uncles was on the school board. His grandfathers and father are also members of the Masons, and his grandmother, mother, and aunt are all members of the Order of the Eastern Star. Rick's maternal grandmother, in particular, was heavily involved in a number of community organizations; he describes her as being, "...a member of everything. She was Salvation Army, Eastern Star...more than I can remember," he says. Rick's family has also been members of the Methodist church in Hamden for over 65 years. Needless to say, Rick has strong roots in the area, and as the only home he knew until he went to college, Rick appreciates much of what Hamden has to offer; however, he also recognizes that the town has some drawbacks as well. "It was great the way that everybody knew each other, but that was also challenging at the same time," Rick says. "And, you have a lot of closed-mindedness in small towns, and you have a lot of people not open to new experiences or changes." While Rick's comments may describe many in Hamden, they are certainly not applicable to Rick. His choice of a college in New York City is indicative of his open-minded and adventurous spirit.

As Rick began contemplating potential schools to attend following high school graduation, he admits, "I wanted something a lot different from what I was used to, and New York was certainly different." The stark contrast between Hamden and New York City was apparent to Rick from his first day there. According to Rick, "[New York City] was polar opposite of the town I moved from. I came from a small, conservative...for the most part...town and ended up in a big place where nobody knew who you were, and for

the most part, nobody cared.” Although the distance from Hamden and the size of New York City were concerns for Rick’s family, he could not wait to experience everything that the city had to offer. “I think the number one thing I did freshman semester was just explore New York City,” Rick reminisces. “I mean, my friends and I...my roommates and I...we all just went out and we found random places to go. We’d google, ‘Fun things to do in New York City,’ and we’d go do them. And, it was crazy. It was expensive. We got lost a lot, but it was a lot of fun.” Some of the things Rick experienced as a college student in New York City were Broadway plays, “all the best places to eat,” Fifth Avenue, F.A.O. Schwartz, Mets’ games, and Madison Square Garden, making Hamden seem like a world away. “I think when you’re there [in New York City], the small town thing just sort of fades away if you let it,” Rick says. “Because, you know, it’s always going to be your home, but if you embrace where you’re going and you like it, it’s just like a new home.” Indeed, as Rick quickly adapted to his new environment and New York City, the college he was attending and Rick’s friends soon became his “new home.”

“Worth taking the risk...”

Perhaps because Rick was so far away from Hamden, he sought connections quickly in order to acclimate to his “new home.” He soon became friends with students from all over the United States (U.S.) while in college and made friends with many from outside the U.S. as well. “I think we all just kind of bonded based on similar interests, similar backgrounds. It didn’t so much matter where we were from,” Rick says. One interest of Rick’s that helped connect him with many students was his involvement in the student newspaper. “Well, I knew getting started and meeting people...one of the easiest

ways for me would be to go to the newspaper,” Rick says. “Because I’d always written, I’d always done the newspaper in high school. So, I went there. And, pretty much immediately became a part of that, and you know, that’s helped me. I still have friends that I met freshman year that I meet today that worked for the newspaper.” In addition to writing stories for the paper, Rick has been the managing editor and general manager for the publication at various points in his college career as well. He is also a member of other student organizations, including the business honor society and a freshman honor society. While Rick found making friends in college easy, he admits that making the kinds of connections with his college friends that he had with his friends in Hamden has been more difficult. “It wasn’t hard to make friends at all,” Rick acknowledges. “But, it was hard to make ones that you trusted, that you felt you could rely on.” This was a significant difference for Rick coming from Hamden where he had lived his entire life and where he had known and spent time with generally the same people the majority of his life; in fact, he still makes a point of seeing these long-time friends when he returns to Hamden during school breaks. “Especially in a small town, you’ve grown up with the same people forever,” Rick shares. “You knew them, you hung out with them. It was almost like you...it was that way from birth. And, once I got to college, it wasn’t quite the same.” This did not stop Rick from continuing to make attempts to meet new people and form relationships, however, including one with a young woman he dated throughout college. “She was just standing there alone [during a session of icebreakers shortly after classes began their first year], so I went up and talked to her...” Rick shares. “I like to take risks. So, that was what I did, and a few weeks later, we started dating.” Rick and

his girlfriend dated from that first encounter to shortly after his girlfriend graduated in December of their senior year.

Risk-taking is a theme that permeates many aspects of Rick's college career, including his college choice process. While there was never a question that Rick would attend college, his own background and the various forms of support he received from his family afforded him the opportunity to take risks as he contemplated his college-going options. In particular, the financial support Rick received from his family allowed him to make choices and engage in risk-taking that many of his Hamden classmates could not consider because of their own financial situations and limitations. Although Rick received a couple of scholarships from civic organizations in Hamden as well as a scholarship from the college he ultimately chose to attend, most of his college education was financed by his parents, either through government loans they were able to obtain or through direct payment to the school itself. Rick says that having the financial support of his family, "...helped because I didn't have to worry about [financing for school]." In retrospect, however, Rick expresses some regret that he did not earlier take into consideration the financial burden his college choice might put on his parents. Although Rick finished well in the top ten percent of his high school graduating class, he feels that if he had done better academically in high school resulting in a better class ranking, he might have received more scholarships, which would have eased the burden on his family a bit. "That's what I regret," Rick says. "I think it would have put less financial pressure on my family if I had done [better academically]." But, finances were not something

Rick had to worry about; he understood there were no limitations on where he could go to school and he made decisions about his future with that understanding.

As the college choice process neared for Rick in high school, he developed selection criteria to evaluate colleges. While many students look at a college's academic rigor, variety of majors, and student life opportunities, Rick added to that list his religious beliefs, which became a factor for him as he considered his college options. Because of Rick's family's religious heritage, he grew up in the Methodist church and identifies as Christian. "I knew I wanted to go to a Christian school because I really like that they put that background in everything that they teach," Rick shares. "It wasn't essential...but it was something I considered strongly." Rick feels as though the Christian founding of the university he selected also has an impact on the course offerings and approaches. For example, one of the classes he has been required to take as a business major is "Moral Theology of the Marketplace," a class Rick does not believe would be taught at a public institution. "They really try to show you ways you can help and issues that need to be addressed that I think are left out at a lot of state schools and more secular schools because they just don't see it through that lens," he says.

Aside from his own religious convictions, another factor – and perhaps one of the more unique ones – that Rick considered in his college choice process was the strength of the school's basketball program. In fact, the three schools at the top of Rick's list were ones that have traditionally had appearances in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Men's Basketball Tournament. Of these three, Rick ultimately chose to attend the private school in New York rather than the other two, which were

located in North Carolina, for very personal reasons. “I’d always wanted to play basketball [at the private school in New York] since I saw [a particular basketball player] play...cause he was a left-handed shooter, and that’s exactly what I was.” Although Rick did not play basketball for the school or even try out for the team, his love of the game of basketball and his identification with the famous shooting guard played a role in his decision.

As he contemplated his college choice options, Rick was also interested in being in a different environment from what he had experienced in Hamden, and once again, he took some risks. “I was just...I was 18. I was ready to experience something new, and I didn’t hesitate,” he says. “If you never take a risk in life, you’re never going to get anywhere. And, maybe that’s just who I am. Maybe that’s just what I’ve been taught. But, I knew it was worth taking the risk and not ending up stuck in the same spot for the rest of my life.” In this frame of mind, Rick only applied to out-of-state colleges. “I didn’t finish any of the Texas schools’ [applications] because I didn’t want to have acceptance letters,” Rick shares. “I held off on all Texas applications because I didn’t want to get accepted because I knew my mother would make me go to one of them.” Rick was accepted to all three schools to which he applied, but he did not share his college decision process with a lot of people because he says he simply wanted to decide for himself and didn’t want others’ opinions to “sway” him. Rick ultimately selected the school in New York because he felt like the college “...was more what I was looking for.” While many members of Rick’s family had concerns about him going so far away to school, his father was the one person who supported his decision all along. “He

always told us, ‘You know, you do whatever you want, and we will back you,’” Rick remembers. “And, even when everybody else in my family didn’t want me to go to New York, [his father] said, ‘Listen, I don’t want you to go, but if that’s what you want to do, you have my full support because it’s your life.’” With his father’s – and eventually his entire family’s – support, Rick made plans to leave Hamden and attend his school of choice in New York City the fall following his senior year of high school, and he remembers having only one moment of pause when the time came for him to leave. “There was one point right before I left that I was kind of like, ‘Oh my God. This is a giant mistake. Why did I do this?’” Rick says. “But, as soon as I got there, I realized I made the right decision.” After this brief hesitation, Rick never looked back and forged ahead in his new environment.

Rick originally planned to major in journalism in college; however, when he met with an academic advisor to register for classes before his first semester and shared his plans for his major, the advisor responded by asking Rick if he knew how to write. When Rick answered that he did indeed know how to write, the academic advisor told him, “Don’t spend four years learning something that you already know.” Rick took this advice and decided to pursue business instead. At first, he thought marketing sounded interesting and then changed to management when he took his first management class as a sophomore. “After my first management class, I realized...that’s what I want to do,” he says. “We talked about entrepreneurship. We talked about all the things you can do to be a leader. And, it didn’t take very long for me to be like, ‘You know, that’s who I want to be. That’s what I want to do.’” Today, Rick speaks of his dream to become a “serial

entrepreneur” one day, where he would start business after business. “If that means six businesses, seven businesses going at a time, that’s great with me,” Rick says. “Once again, the risk...you’re always at risk for failure, but I think that risk propels you forward and keeps you working hard.”

“Moment of truth”

While Rick’s comfort with and interest in taking risks has influenced many aspects of his college career, his decision-making has also been impacted by his position in life and the vantage point he enjoys. Generally speaking, Rick had the luxury of making decisions based on his preferences rather than on what may have been practical at times. This was demonstrated beginning with his high school course selection, has been carried through to many of the opportunities he was afforded in college, and ultimately is influencing his long-term goals as well.

In high school, Rick originally took primarily Advanced Placement (AP) courses since he had plans to attend college but soon switched to “regular” classes when he realized he was only learning how to take the AP test in these classes instead of the material on its own merits. He also felt as though he was not learning as much as students in the “regular” courses were. Rick remembers, “And, the moment of truth for me was...I was in an AP English class, and I’d already taken college English, so the credit wasn’t really what I was in it for. And, the more we went through the class, the more I realized we weren’t writing. We were just learning how to take the AP test, which is what they’d been teaching us in all these classes. So, I switched to a regular English class after the first six weeks of school, and we just wrote all the time and I loved it.

And, I honestly think that's really one of the things that sort of helped me grow as a writer was that class...much more than the AP class did." Rick stopped taking AP courses during his junior year and began taking "regular" courses exclusively, with the exception of calculus. "I took a range of everything," Rick says. Indeed, he did. After he stopped taking primarily AP courses, Rick enrolled in a variety of classes – from the traditional math, science, and history courses to art, newspaper, and several computer classes. With fewer AP courses to now have to fit into his schedule, Rick's course options grew tremendously.

Aside from worries about whether he was actually learning anything in his high school courses other than what he needed to do in order to pass a test, Rick also had general concerns about his academic preparation for college. "I don't want to knock Hamden High School, but...I felt like the classes went a little too slow, and I was very worried about taking [math and science] in college," Rick says. Some of Rick's concerns about college preparation turned out to be unfounded, but unfortunately, not all of them were. "I was a little hesitant with science, but...that turned out pretty well. But, math...there were definitely...definitely some problems there." In particular, Rick remembers experiencing struggles in his calculus class in college perhaps due to his lack of preparation in high school in the AP calculus class; Rick also attributes some of the challenges with his calculus course in college to a "language barrier" between the instructor and himself. Rick felt more confident as he approached other college courses. "I felt very prepared in English, history...every core subject," he remembers. Rick had been given tips on writing essays for college applications in his high school English

classes and had also been taught how to write college essays in his “regular” high school English classes.

Discontinuing enrollment in AP courses meant that Rick also lost out on the extra points that students who took AP courses were awarded. Oftentimes, these extra points help to improve a student’s grade point average, which in turn can help to improve a student’s class rank. To Rick, however, “...the points never really mattered cause I should have cared about that stuff long before, but I didn’t think about it until I was already a senior.” Rick is quite open in sharing that he feels he should have been more conscious of his grades and class rank earlier in his high school career; in retrospect, he now realizes that discontinuing the AP courses may have impacted not only his high school grade point average and class rank, but scholarships he might have received as well. Although finances do not appear to have been an issue as Rick made his college decision, he acknowledges he did not even consider these factors as he elected to take classes in which he felt he could learn rather than classes that added points to his grade point average. “I mean, high school was high school in Hamden, Texas,” Rick shares. “And, I was more concerned with sports and other things than I was with my grades.” Indeed, Rick was quite involved in extracurricular activities at Hamden High School, representing the school on the track and field and basketball teams and participating in a number of student clubs, including art club, Business Professionals of America, and student council, to name just a few. Even though Rick ultimately graduated in the top ten percent of his class, he was “towards the bottom of the top ten percent” and blames his not finishing better as simply a “lack of effort.”

Outside the classroom, Rick feels as though the guidance counselors and other faculty and administrators in Hamden High School supported students in the college-going process. “I think our high school did a great job of trying to get us ready for college,” he says. “Particularly my senior year, they...you know, they were posting acceptance letters on the walls, they were encouraging everyone to apply, they notified us about scholarships...it seems like every five minutes. And, they were very supportive, very helpful to myself and everyone who was interested in applying...giving us recommendations and ideas on where to go and just helping in any way that they could.” Rick has also been a part of helping prepare future generations of Hamden High School students for college as he has been invited to participate in college information sessions and fairs at the high school when he is home during breaks.

Despite the high school’s efforts at college preparation, Rick and his classmates still experienced challenges from time to time on their respective destination campuses; however, Rick’s intrinsic drive to complete his college degree played a significant role in his retention. “I’m the type of person where if I start something, I really, really want to finish it,” Rick admits. “And, I really want to do it as best as I can...I don’t want to just, you know, go in there and half-heartedly attempt something. And so, I wanted to finish. I wanted to finish as well as I could, and I wanted to have a good time doing it.” Some of this internal motivation may have also been influenced by Rick’s father, for whom Rick worked in the summers during high school as well as in college when he has been back in Hamden. “I think working for my dad helped prepare me for college as much as anything,” Rick confesses. “It wasn’t like you were getting a lot of praise. You were

getting as much negative reinforcement as you could just because he wanted to test you, and you had to learn...I had to learn things that I didn't really know about...and, there wasn't an option to take a day off unless you absolutely had to." Rick found the work environment his father created to be similar to the one he encountered in college, and his experiences and comfort level in his father's work environment helped him adapt to the more stressful atmosphere he found on campus as well, which may have aided in his ability to persist in college.

While Rick knows that he wants to complete his college education, he did contemplate leaving the university to which he originally matriculated at one point. Toward the end of his first year, he along with several of his classmates considered transferring to another private school in New York City "...because they just wanted to be right in the City;" however, this feeling was only fleeting and Rick is happy he continued at the institution where he originally began. Additionally, several of Rick's college friends did not return for their second year because they did not make their grades, and ultimately, they lost their scholarships.

Perhaps unlike some of his friends, Rick's self-motivation served him well when it came to academic matters, particularly since he no longer had the supportive environment of his hometown. "If you weren't willing to do it on your own, you were kind of stuck," he shares. "Nobody was going to push you along. Nobody was going to help you." Rick goes on to explain that while he missed the nurturing atmosphere of Hamden, the separation that going to college required was also important in that he was forced to be more independent. He shares that "...it was definitely tough in the aspect

that you didn't have that support network of everyone pushing you forward. But, at the same time, that's as important as anything because if you had that your whole life, at what point are you going to stand on your own?" While Rick perceives the environment of his hometown to be much more supportive than the one he encountered in college, his background in Hamden served as additional motivation to continue with his education and influenced the trajectory he chose during college and is considering beyond college as well.

Although many of the students from Hamden choose to pursue higher education in order to have better lives than their parents or to provide a home environment that is financially more stable than the one in which they were raised, part of Rick's motivation to continue with his education has been simply not to end up in the financial situations he witnessed of others he grew up around in Hamden. "I mean, you grow up in a small town and not really economically-advanced town. I mean, a lot of poverty around here," Rick says. "And, it definitely carries through when you're going through college because that [poverty] is not where you want to be." While he may not have experienced the first-hand effects of poverty himself, Rick has seen enough to know he does not want to live in poverty. A college education is viewed as a way to ensure that does not happen.

While witnessing poverty helped motivate Rick to continue with his studies, his vantage point is also something that has affected his long-term goals. While Rick's path to becoming a "serial entrepreneur" is not completely clear at this point, he knows that he would eventually like to make a living that would allow him to give back to his community. "I guess my whole thing is that...it's always been...I want to do something

good in the world. And, college is just a stepping stone of that,” Rick says. “If I can do a little more with a college degree than I could with a high school degree, then might as well get that because the further you can go, the more influence you can have...I wanted to finish and get my degree so I could do more things.” For Rick, this includes helping others, and he attributes his own Christian beliefs as well as the Christian mission of the institution he is attending with compelling him toward a higher calling. “It really helps you because you understand that your goal in being a business person or being whatever you choose to be isn’t just to help yourself, it’s to help others,” Rick shares. While making millions through creating and developing companies would allow Rick to “help a lot of people,” he realizes that he will need to work for a few years to obtain the capital necessary to begin a business. For now, Rick is interested in technology, e-commerce, and software as well as operations management and production. He would also like to work internationally but understands that may not be an option for him for several years. “Very few companies are looking to hire a 22-year-old fresh out of college to be their international business liaison for obvious reasons,” he admits. Rick has strong convictions about the type of company he would want to work for as well. In fact, he has chosen not to apply to work at certain companies due to his own personal beliefs. “I have a real problem doing something that I think isn’t going to help the world in a good way,” he acknowledges. “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem. So, that’s really where I want to be...where I can be part of the solution.” If nothing else, Rick plans to continue learning. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in college, it’s that as much as you...the more you know, the less you...you realize you know,” he says. Rick

would like to return to school in the near future to obtain a master's degree in business administration (MBA), potentially from an Ivy League school, but he also realizes he'll have more options if he works for a few years first. "I feel like I'm ready to tackle anything thrown at me," he shares. No matter where his future may take him, Rick is prepared for the challenge.

Conclusion

Of the students with whom I visited, Rick is the outlier in many regards. Rather than feeling compelled to remain close to home due to family concerns, experiencing significant worries about finances, or focusing on a career that would enable him to lead a more stable life than that of his parents, Rick ventured far from Hamden for college, took risks on campus that may have resulted in a more robust college experience for him, and pursued opportunities that ultimately proved beneficial for him in achieving both educational and long-term goals. No matter where Rick ultimately lands professionally or personally, he acknowledges, "...it's nice that I didn't stay in one place, and I think it helped me to keep an open mind about things that I normally wouldn't understand." Rick's mind is definitely open, although it is not clear whether this is a result of his own interests or his time in New York City. Regardless, Rick has most certainly taken Frost's proverbial road less traveled. What remains to be seen is whether "that has made all the difference."

Stephen

Introduction

While Stephen was accommodating and open to visiting more about his experiences related to higher education when I first contacted him, getting him to an interview proved to be a bit of a challenge. Our first meeting had to be rescheduled because the timing did not work well for Stephen; he forgot the second meeting altogether, but we were able to find another time that worked for both of us that same week instead. As I would soon learn, however, what I perceived as “minor obstacles” in getting Stephen to a meeting were simply indications of Stephen’s demeanor: laid-back, casual, and go-with-the-flow.

Stephen is a tall young man with an athletic build; he has short blond hair and patches of facial hair on his otherwise youthful face. For our first meeting, Stephen arrived to the student center where we had decided to meet ready to return to Hamden; he had finished his last final for the fall semester the day before our meeting and he showed up in a tight, long-sleeved white t-shirt, jeans, and sunglasses that he did not remove the entire hour or more that we talked. For our second visit, Stephen arrived in his work-out gear: an old high school t-shirt with the arms and neck cut out, gym shorts, and sneakers, revealing his muscular arms and chest. There were no sunglasses this time.

Although Stephen and I visited just twice for approximately one hour each time, his individuality and complexity quickly became obvious. On the one hand, Stephen tosses around slang words and phrases while wearing sunglasses during a lengthy, indoor conversation, and yet, on the other hand, some of the subject matter we discussed reveals a humble, sensitive, and highly intelligent young man who is influenced by his upbringing in Hamden, Texas, and all that is there: his family, his faith, and his friends.

Our conversations centered on these topics, and more specifically, the role of his family – and especially his paternal grandmother – in not providing Stephen an option other than to pursue higher education; the role of his faith in sustaining him through difficult times prior to and during his college career; and the role of his friends in giving him an important and reliable support network both in and away from Hamden.

“Classic Hamden, Texas”

Stephen describes his childhood and adolescent years as “Classic Hamden, Texas...I don’t know...Hamden, Texas. High school football.” Stephen’s own story is that of many other young people in the town: his family has deep roots in the community, going back several generations; his family makes their living ranching and teaching school; they regularly attend church and worship with their neighbors and friends; and Stephen and his brother were high school athletes – football being their sport of choice. “Classic Hamden, Texas.” Admittedly, there may be facets of Stephen’s background that are typical for many young people in Hamden, but there is much more to Stephen than these “classic Hamden” traits might suggest.

Stephen and his older brother Jason were raised by their paternal grandparents, “salt of the earth” people who themselves attended and graduated from Hamden High School, as did their only child, Stephen’s father. Their home is in the country about 10 miles outside of Hamden, where Stephen’s grandfather raised cattle until his death in 2003. Stephen’s grandmother had been a “school teacher forever,” according to Stephen; she taught for 34 years, 22 of those being at the elementary school in Hamden until she

retired in the early-1990s. The family attended a small, country church a few miles from their home.

Everyone around Hamden, including Stephen and Jason, knows their grandmother by her first and middle names: Mary Jon. Throughout our conversations, Stephen never referred to his grandmother as Granny or Mamaw or Nana or any of the other names traditionally given grandmothers; when Stephen mentions her (as does everyone in Hamden except perhaps former students of hers), she is Mary Jon. Stephen's and Jason's friends call her Mary Jon, too. In fact, Stephen's facebook page is full of comments made by friends of his teasing him or reminding him of something Mary Jon said or scolded him about previously.

Although Mary Jon was a small woman, she was tough; she grew up during the Great Depression. Some would describe her as a "tomboy" as a child and an "old maid" school teacher until she married in her late-20s. She gave birth to her only child, Stephen's father, in her early-30s; however, nothing could have prepared her for his drowning in 1993. According to Stephen, his father had been fishing in the reservoir of a nearby town with friends when he attempted to untangle his lure from some of the pipes in the lake and fell in. His friends were unable to save him. Stephen was not quite two years old when his father died; Jason had just turned three. Neither son remembers his father.

At the time of their father's death, Stephen and Jason were living with their parents in the Dallas area. While their family was in tact, their home environment was not always a stable one. Stephen's mother had two daughters from a previous

relationship, which meant there were four children for whom she had responsibility, and “she wasn’t an angel,” according to Stephen. His mother had legal problems that included writing hot checks and drug use, and her difficulties were compounded with the sudden death of her husband. After his father’s death, life for Stephen and his older siblings became even more unpredictable. Stephen remembers that living with his mother “...was cool sometimes. It was always cool sometimes, but I mean, you’d never know. You know? Just unreliable, I guess.” Around the time Stephen was ready to start kindergarten, he and Jason moved in with Mary Jon and their grandfather. “I guess [we moved in with Mary Jon] just to start school and stuff, you know. Actually, like, get on our stuff. Cause my mom was probably, like, doing bad,” Stephen shares. Today, Stephen’s mother lives in a half-way house in the Dallas area, and Stephen goes to visit her when he can. “I e-mail her,” he says. “Talk to her on the phone.”

After assuming custody of her grandsons, Mary Jon encouraged them to make good grades and do well in school. “She would be happy when I got good grades and sad if I got bad grades. So, I made good grades,” Stephen says. Whether it was simply the desire to make his grandmother happy or another motivating factor, Stephen excelled academically in high school and was ranked number ten in his graduating class. “Yeah. Slipped in the top 10,” Stephen offers humbly and follows up with, “Had to give the benediction at my graduation.” Mary Jon also spoke to her grandsons of college as if there were no other options. “I always just assumed I was going to college, you know....She never, like, told me I had to go or like...she just kind of, like...unwritten, like...I just thought I was supposed to,” Stephen explains. In order to prepare for college,

Stephen took primarily Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP) and Advanced Placement (AP) courses throughout high school, although he feels as though these classes were all “easy” and that he and his classmates didn’t really “do anything in those classes.” “My AP class...I’d walk in, everybody would be messing around. Teacher wouldn’t do anything. We did nothing.” As a result, he “failed horribly” all of the AP tests he took. “I mean, we did stuff [in class]. But, like, even to be prepared for those AP tests, you have to be like crazy prepared,” Stephen shares. “So, even if we did try, we wouldn’t have made it. I mean, it sounds...it kind of sounds bad, but like, literally even if we did...like Spanish IV...you have to speak, like...just Spanish...like just speak it off the top of the head. And, we’re in Spanish IV, but all we know is, like, verbs and conjugations and stuff.” Stephen feels as though the only AP class where he learned course content adequately was his calculus course. “[Calculus] was probably...like...the only class that taught from bell to bell, and everyone actually learned stuff,” Stephen remembers. Regardless, Stephen says he still felt academically prepared to do college-level work, and this has proven to be the case. At the conclusion of his sophomore year, Stephen’s grade point average remains above a 3.0.

During Stephen’s senior year of high school as he began contemplating where he would like to pursue his education, he knew he wanted to study business and he knew he wanted to go to a large university; however, his grandmother wanted him to stay closer to Hamden and go to the local community college to “keep me out of trouble,” he says. His older brother Jason who had also graduated in the top ten percent of his high school class had gone to a nearby, religiously-affiliated four-year institution on a football scholarship.

Despite Mary Jon's concern about Stephen going far away to a large school, he was accepted into and enrolled in the state's flagship institution. "I wanted to go to a big school," Stephen says. "Just a big school and a good business school, so [the flagship institution] was like 'it,' you know. It's like the only...the biggest business school, the best business school, like, outside of the northeast or Cali." In addition to being admitted to the university, Stephen was also immediately admitted into the flagship institution's business school, not a simple feat for a first-year student, but Stephen dismisses his direct admission to the business school as simply being due to his own self-described "sob story;" Stephen included his family background as part of his admissions essay, which he believes helped him in the admissions process. As proof of his hypothesis, Stephen shares the example of a friend of his from Hamden High School who was also in the top ten percent of his graduating class but was ranked 11th in the class behind Stephen at number 10; Stephen's friend did not get into the business school right away. "I think I just kind of got in with like a sob story just because of my essays, you know," Stephen speculates. "I just wrote about like my family and stuff. So...but, I don't know...I got in." Stephen receives a considerable amount of aid in the form of grants and scholarships to attend the flagship institution as well. His high school guidance counselor made him aware of financial aid forms he needed to complete and helped him adhere to deadlines related to scholarship applications and other financial aid paperwork. "I went to see [the high school guidance counselor] every once in awhile, probably about once a month," Stephen recalls. "I talked to her about how I was doing, scholarships...like scholarships and stuff like that. Mostly scholarships...I pretty much knew what I was

going to do...but, she helped a lot...like, getting everything together...like, what to do...like, when to get deadlines done, like when the deadlines are. Keeping me up-to-date on stuff like that.” This allowed Stephen to take advantage of some of the financial aid programs the flagship institution offers. “They give me a lot of money,” Stephen says. “Yeah. They pretty much pay my tuition.” Currently, Stephen is not taking out any loans because the financial package he has at the institution is so substantial.

“Talk to God”

Stephen’s transition to college was “pretty much just what [he] expected.” In fact, he indicates that he felt prepared for the academic rigor of college when he graduated from high school and that generally, the academic requirements have really not been surprising for him. “Most of my classes are pretty easy, but there’s been like a couple that are hard...and really hard.” Some of the math and business classes have been particularly challenging for Stephen. “Macro-economics and calculus is hard...but not that hard...but pretty hard. And, accounting. Oh my God. It’s a lot. It’s just that stuff is a lot to learn at once,” Stephen shares. Despite the difficulty of some of the coursework, Stephen has done well academically; however, this has not come without work on Stephen’s part. “Most classes, I’m fighting for an A, and if I try hard, I can get an A, and if I don’t try, I probably get like a B+, maybe A-,” Stephen admits. “But something like...macro- and accounting, it’s like...just fighting to pass.”

The way Stephen describes his transition to college and the difficulty of his coursework is similar to the way he describes a number of topics; he indicates he is not worried about or invested in anything too much, yet he obviously cares about his

schooling based on his grade point average and some of the choices he has made in college. For example, the day before our first meeting, Stephen completed a difficult accounting exam, and he describes his preparation for that exam as having been one of the most stressful times for him in college. But, after sharing the stress the accounting exam created, he quickly backs off that claim. “No, it wasn’t that hard,” Stephen says. “I literally didn’t study for it until yesterday.” Stephen also acts a bit nonchalant when he speaks of his plans for his major – supply chain management, which he has not yet declared. At the university Stephen is attending, a student cannot declare a major until earning 60 credits (or junior standing), but at the time we visited, Stephen was in the middle of his second year and had not quite completed 60 credits. He was also waiting on the community college near Hamden to send his transcript to the flagship institution so that the six credits he had earned there would transfer and count toward his total. “So, I mean, I can declare it, but whatever...just waiting,” he shares. Stephen also describes his out-of-classroom activities with aloofness. “Yeah, I go out a lot,” he says. Since he is not yet 21 years of age, Stephen is not able to get into many bars and clubs that are quite (in)famous in the college town where the university is located, but he says he regularly attends concerts and the parties of friends near campus.

For all of his seeming indifference, however, the time when Stephen seems to speak most passionately is when he talks about his involvement in his high school church youth group and his relationship with God, which began at an early age. While Mary Jon took Stephen and Jason to the church she attended from the time the boys were young, Stephen and Jason began going to a different church with their friends as they got older

because "...the youth pastor was really cool," and as they continued to attend, the size and popularity of the group grew tremendously. "Like, we started it," Stephen describes with pride and excitement. "Whenever we started going, there was like nobody that went there....it was like one person who showed up every Wednesday. There was like 50 by the time we left." At one point, the boys were so committed to the youth group that they were attending services twice each week – every Sunday morning and every Wednesday night. "We were going pretty hard for awhile," Stephen says, and as Stephen continues to share additional details about himself throughout our conversation, the role that his faith plays in his life – even while in college – becomes apparent. In fact, Stephen says that although he has not considered dropping out of school at any point in his undergraduate career, he feels that if he ever did, he would turn to God for guidance. "I never really thought about quitting," Stephen says. "But, if I did...if I did think about, like, quitting, I would just talk to God."

"Keeping your old friends close"

Although Stephen's faith has helped sustain him through personal challenges before he started college, he has also been faced with adversity in the short time he's been at the flagship institution, including the loss of Mary Jon. Between my first and second meetings with Stephen, Mary Jon passed away. She had been sick for quite some time, and lost her battle with cancer shortly after Stephen completed his second year and Jason graduated from college. Stephen returned to Hamden for the funeral, and he and his brother have Mary Jon's house and his family's land that they will now be responsible

for maintaining. “It’s still home base,” Stephen says, and he, Jason, and a cousin of theirs will “...still be looking after cows and stuff” in Mary Jon’s absence.

Perhaps as a result of this loss, Stephen’s friends from Hamden have become even more important to him. “I mean, I figured I would kind of grow away, but like, definitely keeping...keeping your old friends close...definitely I found that’s...the importance of that...which, I never really thought about, but I’ve learned a lot about that,” Stephen shares. “Like, keeping your old friends close because...you can definitely count on them, for sure, because they’ve known you forever.” Stephen admits that many of these loyal friends have remained in Hamden. “Everybody’s still there,” he says. “There’s still a lot of people like in Hamden...all my friends are down there.” Fortunately for Stephen, however, a number of his friends are also enrolled at the university he is attending, and several were attending prior to Stephen’s own matriculation as well. In fact, prior to Stephen’s enrolling at the flagship institution, he sought the advice of one of his friends who was attending there. “So, I talked to him about [the flagship institution]. But, I mean, that didn’t really influence my decision,” Stephen acknowledges. “But, it was still...still cool to know him.” Now, even after having been at the flagship institution more than one year, Stephen still appreciates having his friends from Hamden at the university. “One thing that’s cool is, like, having small town friends here.” They clearly watch out for one another and help one another in their college environment, as was demonstrated during the course of Stephen’s and my first meeting. While we were visiting, Stephen’s phone rang, and he answered it. On the other end was a friend of his from Hamden who also attends the flagship institution and who was getting ready to

drive the four hours home to Hamden following his last final exam. Because Stephen was having car trouble, he had hoped to caravan with his friend to make sure his car made it all the way back to Hamden; his friend was calling to check in with Stephen before starting the trip himself. Based on Stephen's end of the conversation, the care and concern the friends from Hamden have for one another was evident, as Stephen frequently referred to his friend affectionately as "son" and "boss" throughout the conversation.

According to Stephen, this friend, along with several others from Hamden who are also attending the same institution as Stephen, frequently spend time together. Stephen recruited many of them to participate in a flag football team he formed his sophomore year, and many of them frequently lift weights together as well. The hometown friends also accompany one another on trips home to Hamden. Stephen remembers from his first year in college, "It was like the three of us. So, every time one of us went home, we all went home. So, we were going home like every other weekend last year. And plus, I guess it was like my first year here...my first semester here...so I guess I didn't know a lot of people." Stephen certainly knows more than just his friends from Hamden at the institution he is attending, though. Although Stephen maintains a number of close friendships with his peers from Hamden, he has also expanded his social circle in college.

Most of the new friends Stephen has met in college are through the business school, although he has pursued other opportunities to branch out of his Hamden network as well. As a first-year student, he joined the Freshman Business Association and

immediately became a part of their flag football team. Since Stephen played football in high school, this provided a familiar outlet for him. (Stephen's sophomore year in college is when he put together his own team comprised of many students with whom he went to high school and who are now at the flagship institution themselves.) In addition, Stephen is refereeing intramural flag football. Stephen also joined a freshman interest group when he arrived on campus his first year, and he has been able to meet a number of people through this opportunity as well. "I met a lot of cool dudes there," he says. Stephen also chose to be paired randomly with a roommate his first year despite his knowing a number of people from Hamden who are attending the flagship institution, and the choice has proven to be a good one. He's living with his first-year roommate who is from Vietnam again his sophomore year in an off-campus apartment, but Stephen plans to live by himself his junior year. By Stephen's own admission, he has "...a lot of new friends," but he also "...still hang[s] out with some old friends."

Whether due to the strong relationships Stephen still maintains with friends from Hamden or to the relatively new responsibility of taking care of his family's land and cattle, Stephen believes he may want to return to Hamden some day to start a family himself. "If I, like, raise a family, I definitely want to be in the country. Like, [Hamden] would definitely be cool for me. I like it up there," Stephen shares. "Everybody always rags on it. I like it." Stephen has also considered spending some time in the military. "It'd be definitely good for me. Just to...just it's good for you," he says. And, while it may be necessary for Stephen to spend some time in the city to begin his career in business, he believes Hamden is home and where he would like to return.

Conclusion

Stephen's roots in Hamden, his faith, and his friends did not change between the two meetings that we had; however, Stephen seemed different the second time we met. For all the casualness he displayed during our first visit, he seemed more focused during our second. More grounded, more mature. He even has a new part-time job off-campus that he believes could be a possible entrée into a career for him after college graduation. For all the nonchalance and indifference in our first meeting, Stephen seemed more genuine and authentic in the second encounter. Perhaps this change is coincidental. Perhaps it is due in part to the recent loss of Mary Jon. Or, perhaps the change is simply because Stephen realizes he is now half-way through his college experience. Toward the conclusion of the second visit, he comments, "Ah...two years left. Just scared me....Goes by so much faster, every semester. You can...you can literally feel a difference...how much faster it goes by." Whatever the reason, Stephen is a more serious young man these days with life experiences under his belt that many who are years older than him have never known; however, each challenge only seems to make him an even stronger individual, one who will go on to make his hometown – and Mary Jon – proud.

Chapter Five: Presentation of Results

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education, including factors that affect students' enrollment and persistence in postsecondary institutions; the nature of their academic and social interactions; and the way students perceive that colleges and universities respond to and meet their needs. Following the detailed portraits of each student that are offered in the previous chapter, a cross-case analysis is presented here.

In analyzing the interviews of the study participants, the four research questions were considered while using the conceptual framework that merged social capital theory and critical standpoint theory. Through an in-depth analysis of the data across cases, five themes emerged, all of which had application to the four research questions. In other words, each of the five emergent themes addresses each research question. The five themes are: (1) the varying degrees of tacit knowledge among the study's participants and the impact of this knowledge on their college experiences; (2) students' comfort levels with and embracement of new and different experiences related to higher education; (3) the financial considerations of the participants; (4) the role of relationships in students' postsecondary pursuits; and (5) participants' intense focus on goal achievement. Each of these themes will be explored more throughout the chapter.

Theme One: College Knowledge

In his book, *College and career ready: Helping all students succeed beyond high school*, David Conley (2010) described four dimensions of college- and career-readiness. These included "key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors

[self-management], and contextual and awareness skills” (p. 31). These contextual and awareness skills are what Conley termed, “college knowledge.”

Contextual factors encompass primarily the privileged information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture. This lack of understanding of the context of college causes many students to become alienated, frustrated, and even humiliated during the freshman year and decide that college is not the place for them. (p. 40)

Some of the key contextual skills that Conley cited are “...a systemic understanding of the post-secondary educational system, combined with specific knowledge of the norms, values, and conventions of interactions in the college context and the human relations skills necessary to cope within this system” (p. 40). Specific examples of “college knowledge” include how to apply to an institution; how to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and navigate financial aid forms; and how to access resources and support services on campus.

For all study participants, this tacit, or “college knowledge,” played a role in their enrollment, persistence, experiences in higher education, and utilization of college and university resources, affecting their comfort levels, ease, and success with each of these. The following sections will describe this impact in more detail.

Enrollment considerations

One of the key elements of “college knowledge” according to Conley (2010) is an understanding of the college admissions process, and each of the students who was interviewed had varying degrees of access to information related to this topic. Naturally,

those students whose parents had completed bachelor's degrees displayed greater levels of comfort with completing college applications than those students whose parents had not. Of the students in this study, only Adrienne's and Jessica's parents had not completed undergraduate degrees. Since Jessica chose to attend the local community college after high school graduation, she was not required to complete an application; however, Adrienne's decision to begin her college career at a four-year, state university created considerable anxiety for her. In particular, completing her first college application was an especially intimidating process for Adrienne, which "freaked [her] out so badly." Fortunately, she had the assistance of high school teachers who helped guide her through the application process.

While most of the students indicated that the high school guidance counselors and teachers provided abundant information to help them navigate the college application process, the two students whose parents did not have college degrees and who also happened to be the only students in the study whose parents were not teachers in the local school district, found the support inadequate. In fact, the descriptions of the assistance provided by the high school guidance counselors were starkly different between the students whose parents had college degrees (and were teachers in the school district) and those who did not. Rick, whose family had been in the community for generations and whose mother had taught in the school district for over 20 years, found the principal and counselors especially eager to help students pursue a college education in any ways they could. Stephen, whose grandmother had taught in the school district for several decades, received assistance from the counselors related to obtaining financial aid; they also made

sure he met deadlines in order to qualify for the aid. For these students, the high school personnel were “very supportive, very helpful” in assisting them with the pursuit of their postsecondary goals. On the other hand, Adrienne described the counselors as “...terrible. Like, they were the worst,” and Jessica also said, “They weren’t much help.” Regardless of whether the guidance counselors were providing comparable support to all students in the school district, for students with limited “college knowledge,” the perception was that the guidance counselors were not effective in helping students prepare for college.

Even the guidance counselors were limited by their own experiences and exposure to resources for their students, however. Although Lori mentioned the considerable assistance she received from them in helping her register with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Eligibility Center as a student-athlete so that she could play volleyball in college, Cameron had more difficulty accessing information related to pursuing a degree in musical theatre. He speculated, “I was kind of the first musical theatre student I think ever to maybe come out of [Hamden], certainly in the last couple of decades.” While Cameron used the internet to find out as much as he could about musical theatre programs and how to pursue that field of study, he felt he was at a disadvantage compared to those students from larger communities who had access to more information and opportunities. He explained:

The students that I find most prepared coming in as freshmen...and I hate to crush this on the city, but they are from bigger cities like Houston or Dallas simply because the theatre districts there are so vibrant and alive, and there’s 10

professional theatres on every block. And so, they can grow up going to those internships and those programs. And so, by the time they get to college, they've had several professional auditions and that's great, and they know what they need to do.

Without these resources available to him, Cameron turned to adults who volunteered with the local community theatre and who had connections to professionals in the arts for advice and guidance about the steps he needed to take in order to pursue musical theatre as a major in college.

Persistence factors

Aside from the "college knowledge" necessary for students to navigate the college admissions process successfully, Conley (2010) suggested that students also need to have a sense of what to expect when they arrive on campus in order to persist to completion. All study participants mentioned messages that they received from their high school to help prepare them for the rigor of college coursework, and some students admitted these messages could be rather intimidating. Cameron recalled:

But, we were always told it's going to be super difficult and you're going to have to manage your time really, really well, and just stay on top of things. And, so I was always given the, "It's going to be extremely difficult, and you're going to work your butt off and you're going to pray for the days you were back in high school." So, that's kind of the general idea we were given.

Adrienne concurred. She specifically mentioned that the high school guidance counselors indicated that students from Hamden High School would be admitted to

colleges without too much difficulty but that persisting to completion would be a much more significant challenge for them. Fortunately, her teachers encouraged her that she would be able to do college-level work, which increased her confidence level as she approached her first college classes.

Aside from messages that the high school guidance counselors provided to students specifically related to persistence, the study participants reported that they did not receive much other information from high school personnel that would help them navigate college cultures and processes successfully. For example, Jessica experienced considerable challenges in knowing the intricacies of how to withdraw from a class, and she blamed this lack of understanding on the poor advice she received from her guidance counselors in high school. She shared:

The thing that high school lacked in was explaining the specifics of college...like, planning...like, I don't know. I was under the impression that if I got my associate's degree from [the local community college] that I would be core complete when I transferred to a university, and that's not true. I had completed many, many...when I was going for my actuary degree, I had completed many classes that were not necessary and not needed, and I still wasn't core complete. [The public, four-year university in Dallas to which she transferred] almost made me take chemistry again...chemistry and a lab and a second chemistry and a lab. And, I had already taken physics at [the local community college]. And, so that was really...horrible. It tore me down inside. 'Cause I didn't want...I don't like chemistry. [The high school guidance counselors] just didn't explain a lot. They

didn't explain how to go about it. They didn't explain what you need to do to prepare. They didn't emphasize deadlines, and I've learned it the hard way....I feel like I was cheated.

When Jessica was pursuing a degree in actuarial science, she ended up with 18 credits that did not count toward her degree when she transferred to the public, four-year university in Dallas. She attributed the mistaken "extra" credits to the poor advice she received and followed from her high school guidance counselors who had advised her to obtain an associate's degree because that would help her complete the basic, core curriculum requirements of a bachelor's degree from any public university in Texas; however, this was not the situation Jessica encountered when she transferred to the public, four-year university in Dallas. Instead, after two years of coursework at the local community college, Jessica had an associate's degree that included 18 credits that she could not count toward a bachelor's degree. While she was able to overcome this challenge, Jessica described this realization as being an especially difficult and discouraging time for her in college that almost resulted in her withdrawal from higher education altogether.

Nature of experiences

The nature of rural students' academic and social experiences was also affected by the ideas and beliefs they had about college as they entered their respective institutions of higher education. The literature indicates that a deficit discourse is often used to describe individuals from rural backgrounds (Marx 1967; Theobald & Wood, 2010), and as a result, rural students' confidence in their academic abilities and ease in social

situations when they arrive on college campuses can be quite low. Not surprisingly, these misgivings may be magnified further when students' "college knowledge" is also limited. The way "college knowledge" affected the nature of rural students' academic and social experiences in higher education is described more fully in the following sections.

Academic. Generally, the female students in this study experienced the most apprehension about their academic abilities coming into college, and they shared challenges they encountered in how to "study" or "teach themselves" in classes where they were learning material that was new from what they learned in high school. Jessica mentioned a math class that was required for her original major in actuarial science that she took the first semester after she transferred to the public, four-year university in Dallas; she specifically described her difficulties in learning some of the material. "I've never not been able to learn it, and I wasn't able to learn in that class," Jessica remembered. Lori had similar experiences as early as her first semester at the community college she attended. As a nursing major originally, she enrolled in several science courses her first semester but quickly discovered the effort required was different from what she experienced in her high school classes. Lori soon began doubting whether she had the study skills or academic abilities to be successful in the courses. "And, I actually...like, I had to teach myself how to study since I never knew how to take notes," she acknowledged. Lori described an anatomy course she took at the community college that was particularly difficult for her. "I struggled in that class because I didn't want to study and I didn't know how," she explained. Perhaps due to these challenges, both Jessica and Lori ultimately changed their majors. Lori shared that she changed her major

to one that she had been told was “easier,” and fortunately, that proved to be the case. “You have to maintain a 2.75 [grade point average], which at that point, I didn’t really know how hard that would be. Cause I...I just didn’t know like the classes or whatever, but I mean, obviously...it’s really easy to maintain that,” she said. With minimal “college knowledge,” Lori was not fully confident she would perform better in the courses for her new major until she had been in the classes for several weeks.

For both Jessica and Lori, having limited “college knowledge” as to the academic rigor and effort required in their classes affected their self-confidence and had implications for their college careers; however, both acknowledged that attending a community college prior to enrolling at a four-year institution aided in their transition to higher education. In retrospect, Jessica and Lori shared they were more prepared for college-level work since they attended a community college before transferring to a university to complete their schooling. “It was [an] adjustment going to just [the community college],” Lori explained. “So, I don’t think I was fully prepared for [college-level work], and I for sure wouldn’t have been prepared at all if I would have gone straight to [the flagship institution].” For both Lori and Jessica, attending a community college improved their levels of “college knowledge” so that they were more fully prepared for a four-year university. Although they continued to experience setbacks after they transferred, they may not have been able to overcome these challenges had their “college knowledge” not increased after attending community colleges.

While the women in this study were as academically successful as the men, their confidence levels and adjustment issues appear to have been somewhat different.

Generally, men in the study said that they felt prepared to do college-level work. Cameron, Rick, and Stephen all acknowledged that they felt as though they were ready for college classes in most subjects when they graduated from high school, although Rick expressed some concerns about his preparation in the hard sciences. Cameron's and Stephen's experiences in college seem to support this initial impression of their academic preparation. Cameron shared, "The classes themselves, in terms of the core, are not exceedingly difficult. If you can do it in high school, you can do it in college because it's just a step up with more time management needed." While Cameron and Stephen said that even in retrospect, they still felt as though they had been academically prepared for college when they left high school, Rick acknowledged he thinks otherwise since he completed college-level work and had second thoughts about the academic preparation he received in high school.

I know my AP Calculus class...that stuff we learned that entire year, we ran through the first three or four weeks of my pre-Cal class in college. I mean, we spent so much time on that [in high school], and we complained about it at the time. I thought it was hard. Everyone did. We complained. But, when you get into college, it's ten times harder. And, I guess it's one of those situations where you've got to get...teach [high school students] what you can because they're only willing to learn so much at that age. But, once I got into college, it was a different ballgame....

Aside from Rick who admitted to finding the coursework in college more difficult than he expected, the male students indicated they felt prepared to do college-level work and were generally successful in their pursuits.

Social. While the “college knowledge” of rural students related to their academic experiences was somewhat varied when they entered college, the information they had in order to anticipate their out-of-classroom experiences appeared to be uniformly scarce. As a result, students did not always know the best ways to go about making connections on campus. For some students, such as Cameron and Lori, who entered college with “built-in networks” of other students pursuing musical theatre or playing on the college volleyball team, respectively, developing relationships and finding friends did not appear to be difficult. Likewise, Stephen was part of an academic program – a freshman interest group – that allowed him to make friends quickly; he also joined the flag football team that his freshman interest group put together, which was an opportunity for him to enjoy a sport he played in high school as well. Rick sought out the student newspaper to make friends since that was a familiar and comfortable environment for him; he acknowledged that many of the friends he made through his involvement in writing for the newspaper remained friends of his throughout his undergraduate experience.

Not every student made new friends quite so easily, however. In particular, the two students whose parents did not have college degrees and who were the first among their siblings to attend college did not connect as quickly or easily with students at their new institutions. Jessica did not make considerable efforts to interact socially with students at either of the schools she attended; she was content to have her fiancé and his

friends and family comprise her social experiences in college. Adrienne, on the other hand, had reservations about not knowing anyone at the college she was attending. She recalled a high school friend who had plans to be involved with the band at the college where she enrolled. Adrienne shared the story of her friend:

She knew where she wanted to go, and she knows...she kind of has...she kind of had, you know, “Oh, I’m gonna be in color guard.” So, that means she automatically knew like what clubs she was going to be in and where she was going to make her friends at...so, she’ll have like that social network right there...be that kind of social support. And then, she had other people going to college with her, and I did not know anybody coming down here.

As a result, Adrienne made deliberate attempts to get involved in activities that would help her meet new people on campus. Almost immediately, she joined the rugby team, an activity in which she had never before participated, but she was unable to develop any meaningful friendships within the group. She soon quit and joined the Residence Hall Association, where she had more success in connecting with her peers; however, she was well into her first year at the state university and had already started to contemplate her departure before those friendships were formed.

Students who lived in residence halls on campus encountered a variety of experiences related to their roommates as well. None of the students lived with someone they knew from their hometown in their first semesters on campus; however, some connected better than others with the person to whom they were assigned. Stephen and his roommate, who was from Vietnam, were randomly paired together their first year in

college but also chose to live together their sophomore year based on the positive relationship they had developed. Adrienne and her first-year roommate did not connect quite as well, which contributed to some of Adrienne's feelings of isolation her first semester. Although Rick got along with the roommate he was assigned his first year, he expressed that this was an area about which he would have appreciated having more information before he went to college. He said, "I wish I had known just how weird your roommates can be. That...that's probably the number one thing it takes for kids to get used to that go to college and live in the dorms." Regardless, the living experiences and roommate situations of students from Hamden contributed to their feelings of connectedness in their first semesters in college.

College support

One of the specific examples of "college knowledge" that Conley (2010) mentioned was an awareness of the support structures available to students within a college or university. Participants in this study had varying levels of knowledge regarding the resources available to them as students at a given institution. Once again, those with less experience with college due to family background expressed a more difficult time in knowing how to connect with these resources. Adrienne specifically mentioned that she knew of resources that were available but was unsure how to access them.

I know they have career counselors somewhere on...campus, but they are not very easily accessible, and you...I don't even know how to reach them. I know it's one of those services they offer, but I don't know how you get in touch.

Jessica also described her challenges in withdrawing from a class and having to “teach herself” how to perform this task since she either did not know how to find assistance or chose not to utilize the resource. Generally, Jessica learned how to withdraw from classes through the information that was available to her on the internet rather than visiting with someone about an issue. “I’ve gotten help from the college before, but you have to go through so many people to get to the right one. That’s the hardest thing about getting help from them,” she shared. Certainly, understanding and navigating the bureaucracy of an institution was frustrating and discouraging for Jessica.

Whether a student took advantage of resources provided by the college seems to have been dependent upon how individualized students perceived these resources to be. In other words, when students perceived they were a “number” or became overwhelmed by the complex processes of a college or university, they grew discouraged or chose not to utilize certain resources. Perhaps the best illustration of this phenomenon was Stephen’s experience. While he attended the largest university among the study participants, he did not find the flagship institution’s resources to be particularly helpful; rather, he found the individualized attention of his college beneficial. “[The flagship institution at-large] doesn’t really step out that much, but [the business school] will do a lot for you,” he said. Adrienne used resources provided by the state university she attended as well but found that the volume of students who also sought this assistance made the personal help she preferred more difficult to obtain. She shared an experience when she sought academic assistance through group tutoring:

If you can't figure it out, either your neighbor already got that problem and they can show you how to do it or you can raise your hand and somebody'll come over. It just kind of sucks because there's one person that covers like, you know, 30 people on the really busy times.

Once again, the less personal attention proved to be an impediment to some of the students taking full advantage of the resources offered by an institution.

Theme Two: New and Different Experiences

Acclimating to life on a college campus is an adjustment for almost every student and has been the subject of study for many researchers in higher education; however, for students from rural backgrounds, like that for other minority groups (Theobald & Wood, 2010), the adjustment to college life may be more difficult and complex. Occurrences that may seem “normal” for students from more urban or suburban backgrounds are often “new” or “different” for rural students who may be more sheltered or limited in their life experiences. As a result, rural students may undergo a version of “culture shock” during their acclimation to college life as they encounter novel situations, opportunities, and people. Oberg (1960) defined “culture shock” as “...anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p. 142). He went on to acknowledge, “...when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed” (p. 142). Therefore, as a reaction to the “culture shock” they experience in matriculating to postsecondary institutions, rural students may be more likely to seek opportunities that are already familiar to them and to elect to remain in their “comfort zones” as much as possible.

Throughout the conversations with the students who participated in this study, the concept of encountering something “new” or “different” in their experiences with postsecondary education was pervasive. Beginning with the admissions process and progressing through to the way the unique attributes of the college environment affected their persistence and academic and social lives, students shared the positive and more challenging aspects of their acclimation to “different” settings and the ways they perceived colleges to meet their needs in these “new” environments.

Enrollment considerations

As researchers have noted, rural students who choose to pursue a college education experience the “push-and-pull” of leaving their home environments (Atkin, 2003; Howley & Howley, 2010). On the one hand, students from rural environments are often taught that they must leave home in order to obtain an education and pursue a “better” life (Howley & Howley, 2010); however, they may also experience pressure to remain in their communities from their families and friends, “...some of whom have a deep reluctance to encourage, or even tolerate, learning ‘beyond your station’” (“Rural students,” p. B14). This “push-and-pull” was demonstrated in the enrollment decisions of the students who participated in this study; while some made the conscious choice to look for a college environment that was comfortable to them or that had involvement opportunities that were familiar to them, others deliberately sought experiences that would be different from their home or high school.

In search of the familiar. As students considered the wide array of colleges available to them, many made deliberate decisions to find settings that were similar to

their home environments or that would allow them to pursue interests they had developed in high school. For example, while Rick ultimately chose to attend college at a geographic distance from Hamden, he was specifically interested in attending a faith-based institution. He acknowledged that attending a college or university that was founded on Christian principles was not imperative to him in selecting a college, but he found himself considering those schools more seriously than non-faith-based institutions. “It’s not to say I wouldn’t have gone somewhere else, but most of the schools I was interested in...they were Christian schools,” he said. “So, it wasn’t essential for me, but it was something I definitely took into consideration.” Likewise, Lori was only interested in schools that allowed her to maintain involvement in the sport she had grown to love in high school: volleyball. Because only community colleges recruited her to play, her options were quite limited, and she ultimately chose to attend a community college. Jessica chose to remain in not just familiar surroundings, but quite literally, the exact same place she had lived in high school when she elected to go to the local community college rather than a four-year institution immediately following high school graduation. While she briefly considered a school in San Antonio that offered a degree in actuarial science – her original major, she soon dismissed the idea because personally, she wanted to be in a relationship with her fiancé Chip, and financially, living with him in Hamden was better for her.

Although some students included traits that would be familiar to them on their required list of criteria during their college searches, others discovered through happenstance that they found familiar aspects appealing. In particular, the small size of

the communities in which colleges and universities were located became especially attractive to some individuals. Several students commented that they felt more comfortable in communities that were similar in size to Hamden. Lori shared that she liked the “small town feel” of the communities where both the community college and the flagship institution she attended were located. Cameron also mentioned enjoying the atmosphere of the town where the regional, four-year public university he attended is located. He elaborated:

I love it. It's a small town, but it's still...people call it a small town. Let's clarify. It's still maybe five times bigger than [Hamden]. And...not that that's difficult, but I mean, it gets a lot of rap from students from Houston or the bigger cities saying there's nothing to do. And, to some extent, that's true. There's not as much as there is to do in Houston or in Dallas. But, it's kind of like...it's like the college experience in general: you'll get out of it what you put into it... Go out and do things, find things. It can be a great town, and I love it. And, the atmosphere is so great because...it's a really symbiotic relationship in that the students kind of help the city thrive and the city helps the university thrive....And so, I love the fact that I can go to school and feel safe walking around because I walk most places trying to save on gas and everything's close enough to campus that I can. And, I never have to worry about my safety; there's always students around. And, I love that there's so many apartments surrounding campus that you're just surrounded by the student body so much. And then, the town and

everything you need to access is still right there and you're not more than five minutes away from a Wal-Mart or a CVS if you need it.

Whether part of their conscious college decision-making processes or not, some students found the familiarity and comfort of the size of the community where an institution was located appealing nonetheless.

In search of different. Although some students sought experiences that would be similar to those of their high school or hometown as they contemplated their college options, many also intentionally looked for experiences that would be entirely different. While there were some aspects of college life that Rick wanted to be familiar to his home, generally he searched for a college environment that would be “polar opposite” of that found in Hamden, which resulted in his moving to New York City for school. In fact, Rick did not even complete an application to any Texas college or university for fear that if he were accepted, his mother would force him to attend, and he was adamant about wanting an experience so different that he did not even want to remain in the same state as Hamden.

Interestingly, both Lori and Cameron indicated that they liked the “small town feel” of the communities where they ultimately chose to attend college, but they acknowledged that they did not want an experience similar to what they had in high school, either. Lori shared that she was specifically looking for a “college experience” when she left the community college since she did not feel as though she had one as a student-athlete. “So, I think that’s why I chose not to play [after her two years at the community college] because I...I got to play for two years, and so, the other two years I

wanted to experience like a real college student,” Lori shared. Cameron wanted a different experience than what he had known in Hamden as well:

I do love [Hamden] and I love going back and visiting, because...I don't know...the people never change and it's always really nice and hospitable. And, I remember going to high school there, I would get so bored just...because there doesn't seem to be anything to do there....in terms of the city, I was just ready to get out as soon as I could.

While Lori and Cameron confessed that they enjoyed going to college in towns that offered the same sense of community that Hamden did, they also admitted that they desired different experiences than what Hamden could offer, particularly as college students.

Persistence factors

Tinto (1993) considered acclimation to college life in terms of its influence on a student's persistence. He wrote:

At the very outset, persistence in college requires individuals to adjust, both socially and intellectually, to the new and sometimes quite strange world of the college. Most persons, even the most able and socially mature, experience some difficulty in making that adjustment. For many, the period of adjustment is brief, the difficulties they encounter relatively minor, but some find it so difficult that they quit. (p. 45)

For the six students who participated in this study, all either persisted to graduation or were enrolled in college courses at the times of the interviews, and their successful

persistence seemed to be tied in part to their abilities to maintain or find connections to that which was familiar to each of them.

While all students either graduated or were enrolled in higher education during data gathering, only two of the students – Rick and Stephen – remained at the institutions where they originally enrolled. One of the reasons they persisted at the schools where they began their college careers seemed to be their abilities to make connections quickly using their unique backgrounds and interests. Rick shared that he immediately pursued involvement in the student newspaper when he arrived on campus because that had been an interest of his in high school and he knew he would be able to make friends through that opportunity. Likewise, Stephen also became involved in an activity that was familiar to him from high school: football. He joined an intramural flag football team during his first semester and also became a referee for recreational sports. This helped provide immediate connections for him on a campus that was much larger than the town from which he came.

The other four students in the study all transferred at some point in their college careers, although they ultimately either completed college or were enrolled and making progress toward degrees at the time of this analysis. In all four cases, connections to the familiar (or lack thereof) played roles related to their persistence in postsecondary education. For instance, Jessica and Lori both transferred after they finished two years at a community college. While each maintained close ties to friends and family in Hamden while enrolled at her respective community college, the situation each encountered upon transferring was quite different and impacted her experience. When Lori transferred to

the flagship institution, she immediately connected with friends from Hamden and family members who were also attending the institution; she lived with friends and family she already knew and became friends with others on campus through her pre-existing networks. Jessica, on the other hand, had much more difficulty when she transferred to the public, four-year university in Dallas. Her transfer to a four-year university resulted in less time with all that was familiar to her, including Hamden, her fiancé Chip, and her friends and family. Jessica's transition was so difficult and the environment so different from anything she had experienced before that she seriously considered not only transferring from the four-year university but halting her higher education pursuits altogether. Fortunately, she made more connections on campus following her first semester there, her outlook improved, and her determination to persist returned.

Adrienne and Cameron transferred from the institutions where they originally began their college careers as well, and their decisions to transfer were also impacted by being away from the familiar and confronted with new environments. Cameron chose to transfer from the private, two-year college where he began his college career due to his concerns related to campus safety. Cameron readily acknowledged that he may have been a bit sheltered when he left Hamden, and thus, experienced some "culture shock," but at a minimum, he had expected to feel safe at college. When he transferred to the regional, four-year public university, he quickly connected with students whom he already knew in order to become comfortable in his new environment. He described the assistance he received in adjusting to a new campus after transferring:

And, so I knew some students coming into it, but only like one or two, and they ended up not being, you know, in my circle of friends anyway, which is fine. But, they were definitely a good help when I was first getting acclimated.

Following her marriage, Adrienne also transferred from the state university where she was originally enrolled; however, she acknowledged that she never felt strong connections to the institution and had considered transferring not long after arriving on campus. In retrospect, she realized that she had enrolled in the state university not knowing anyone and without involvement in some of the activities she had grown to enjoy in high school. Everything about her college experience had been new, and she had a hard time making connections her first semester. After encouragement from a family member, she remained at the state university the second semester of her first year as well. She shared:

I ended up liking it a lot more my second semester because my best friend that goes here...we met and became, you know, best friends, I guess....And then, me and Amy and Laura got closer, and so I started to develop more relationships. And, that's what made me think, "Well, you know what? I'm gonna...I've actually had a good run this semester."

By the time Adrienne began to develop stronger connections to the campus, she had already met the man she would eventually marry and had made the decision to transfer. Certainly, the lack of familiar experiences and her difficulty in finding friends contributed to this decision.

Nature of experiences

Perhaps the most frequent uses of the words “new” and “different” in the interviews occurred when the study participants were asked to describe the nature of their academic and social experiences in their college environments. While many actively pursued opportunities or remained friends with those already familiar to them, most of the experiences that students encountered were novel and unlike anything they had faced previously. Following are descriptions of some of these academic and social experiences.

Academic. A number of studies have demonstrated that students from rural backgrounds do not perceive their academic preparation for college equivalent to that of their suburban or urban peers (Howley & Howley, 2010; Theobald & Wood, 2010), and that often, rural students are at a disadvantage in terms of academic preparation when entering college (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Despite these less-than-promising indicators, all six students experienced academic success in college; however, all of the female students shared difficulties related to their academic coursework that they had not encountered in high school, most notably the amount of effort required. Jessica described a particularly challenging class she took as an actuarial science major in which she simply could not learn the material, a stark contrast to her academic experiences in high school. “If I don’t understand something in class, I can generally teach myself, and I couldn’t teach myself,” Jessica remembered. Lori had a similar experience related to an educational statistics course she took at the flagship institution. Although she enjoyed and mastered the content of math courses in high school to the extent that math became her favorite subject, the educational statistics course she was required to take for her major in college challenged this notion as she experienced considerable difficulty and

even wanted to withdraw from the course at one point. Adrienne also described her college coursework as “harder” than previous classes she had taken, requiring more effort than that to which she had grown accustomed in high school. Another classroom challenge that was new for many students involved faculty members or teaching assistants whose native languages were not English. Adrienne, Jessica, Lori, and Rick all had a faculty member or teaching assistant whose English-speaking skills they believed interfered with their abilities to perform well academically in a particular class.

Aside from the new level of difficulty of college courses and challenge of understanding non-native-English-speaking instructors, the sizes of the classes, campuses, and college towns also impacted some students’ experiences. Cameron explained, “There’s a different dynamic with high school teachers and college teachers because it is such a small classroom setting in high school. Then, you go to college where you have maybe 300 students in one classroom...plus...and so, the dynamic is different.” Lori and Stephen, who both attended the state’s flagship institutions, reacted differently to the larger sizes. One of Stephen’s favorite classes was his introductory psychology course, which had around 500 students enrolled; although he acknowledged that the instructor was particularly interesting and entertaining, he actually found comfort in the large number of students. He told himself, “Somebody’s dumber than me. I’m sure half these people are dumber than me, so I ain’t really worried about it.” Lori, on the other hand, experienced anxiety as she acclimated to a larger campus. “I was really nervous my first day – I can remember – on this huge campus,” she shared. Aside from the campuses themselves, the relative large sizes of the towns and cities where

institutions were located could also be challenging for students. In fact, Adrienne mentioned that she found the size of the college town where she initially moved intimidating at times. These findings are consistent with those of Schultz (2004), whose study participants lacked experience with large towns or large campuses, which made their transitions more difficult as well.

Social. In Guiffrida's (2008) review of retention literature related to students from rural backgrounds, he suggested that high school guidance counselors encourage students to become involved in co-curricular experiences while maintaining strong connections to members of their home communities in order to ease their transitions to college. All of the students from Hamden who participated in this study did just that with the exception of Jessica who did not become involved in out-of-classroom opportunities primarily due to time constraints since she had significant work commitments throughout her college career. As was mentioned previously, many specifically pursued activities that were familiar from high school. For Cameron, this was involvement in the university's theatre program; for Lori, the volleyball team; Rick, the college newspaper; and Stephen, intramural flag football. While Adrienne also attempted to make connections through co-curricular experiences by joining the rugby team, her attempt at involvement may have actually "back-fired" as she did not connect with any of her teammates in significant ways and was not able to make friends elsewhere due to the amount of time required to practice and travel for games. As a result, Adrienne did not develop substantial friendships until several months after she began college, and by that point, she had already contemplated her departure.

Although Adrienne made repeated earnest attempts to develop friendships while in college, she admitted that choosing to attend the state university where she did not know anyone was intimidating.

I did not know anybody coming down here. Well, I mean...I knew two guys.

There were two guys, but I was not friends with them. I was just so intimidated by the fact that I did not know anything, and it was just this vast, unknown void.

And, I did not like thinking about it.

Jessica also used the word “intimidating” to describe her experience in transferring to the public, four-year university in Dallas where she knew no one as well.

[The public, four-year university] is very academic, and people who go there don't go to have fun. You don't get a college experience from [the university]. So, it's very intimidating knowing that before going into it. I feel a little better now that I've gotten a semester under my belt and I kind of know my way around and have a couple people that I know, but it's very different.

While all six students in the study eventually developed new relationships and experienced new social situations in college, many students commented that finding friends like they had in high school was difficult for them. Rick and Stephen, both of whom had lived in Hamden most of their lives, specifically spoke to the challenge of developing relationships in college as strong as those they had with friends from high school in Hamden. This is consistent with Atkin's (2003) findings, which demonstrated that individuals from rural backgrounds may have values and beliefs that are significantly different from their urban or suburban peers, making the development of social networks

on campuses challenging for rural students. The vast majority of students in this study maintained strong connections to family and friends from Hamden, either through frequent visits to the town itself or through their relationships with friends from Hamden who were attending the same higher education institution. While all students made friends through either classes or student organizations, most of the students' substantive relationships in college remained with friends from Hamden.

Another new social experience for many of the students on their respective campuses involved their interactions with individuals from different cultures. Guiffrida (2008) and Schultz (2004) found that rural students became overwhelmed or were uncomfortable with issues related to diversity, and the experiences of several of the students from Hamden would support these findings. Jessica's interactions (or lack thereof) with international students at the public, four-year university to which she transferred created a sense of isolation for her since she was unable to connect with them. She shared:

Generally, white people will talk to you and kind of get to know you and make friends with you and want to have study groups and do homework together and stuff like that. Whereas the foreigners...they kind of just keep to themselves, and the people they know is who they know and that's all they're talking to.

At times, Jessica's inability to connect with international students – a significant population at the public, four-year university to which she transferred – affected her attitude toward remaining at the institution. Lori also mentioned difficulties in relating to students of different ethnicities, many of whom were student-athletes and lived in her

residence hall or attended classes with her. She specifically described behavior that was uncomfortable to her. “Well, okay...they [African-American men] just walk by, and they’ll whistle or say something...a nasty comment, and you just, ‘I’ve never heard this before,’” she offered. She experienced similar behavior by these student-athletes in her classes where she was made to feel “stupid” by some of the comments or gestures made toward her in an academic setting. Although Jessica and Lori faced significant challenges in relating to students from different cultural backgrounds, Rick and Stephen embraced these differences; Rick acknowledged that his college friends were from various countries and ethnic backgrounds and Stephen shared that he was randomly paired to live with a student from Vietnam his first year in college and they chose to live together again their sophomore year. Undoubtedly, some of the participants struggled with the diversity of their campuses more than others.

College support

Research suggests that students from rural backgrounds are less likely to take advantage of support services offered by a college or university (Guiffrida, 2008), and the experiences of students from Hamden seem to support this notion as well. With the exception of Adrienne, the students did not seek assistance from any support services that an institution offered, and the only indication as to why this might be is once again related to size. While Adrienne took advantage of some of the academic support services, she commented that waiting to get the attention of the tutor or instructor for assistance was challenging and frustrating due to the number of students the individual was assigned to help. Meanwhile, Lori mentioned that she generally felt as though her

academic and social needs were met at the institutions she attended, and the only area that might be improved was related to one-on-one support at the flagship institution:

I guess maybe something...would be more one-on-one help...from the professors, which I know that's so hard because they have so many students. But, in my bigger classes...which, there was probably...I could...I mean, probably two that I didn't feel like the professors really wanted to help...or cared if you failed or succeeded.

For students from small towns who are accustomed to individualized attention and to a community invested in their success, feeling as though a tutor or instructor knows them, has the time to help them, and wants them to succeed is particularly important.

Theme Three: Money Talks

Financial considerations were frequently mentioned by study participants and pervaded a number of areas as well. Perhaps this is no surprise given that the rural population in the United States experiences poverty rates that are disproportionately higher than those in suburban or urban areas (Lichter & Johnson, 2007). Although not all students in this study came from a background of poverty, finances played a role in all of their educational pursuits nonetheless, including students' enrollment decisions; students' abilities to persist at their given institutions; the nature of students' academic and social experiences; and the support students perceived that colleges and universities provided.

Enrollment considerations

A recent study conducted by Holsapple and Posselt that was highlighted in Education Insider News Blog (2010) found that, "Rural students who indicated that the

availability of financial aid was ‘very important’ were more likely to attend a two-year college and an unranked four-year institution” while their urban or suburban peers who responded similarly were more likely to attend a two-year college or a top-100 school rather than a non-ranked institution. These findings suggest “...that financial concerns have a very different effect on rural students” (Education Insider News Blog, 2010). The data analysis in this study would also support these claims. For many of the study participants, finances were a major factor as they decided which college or university to attend and influenced whether they started their college careers at two-year rather than four-year institutions or whether they enrolled in public rather than private universities (or even less expensive publics rather than more expensive publics). While these may seem like cost-effective decisions initially, college choice has other implications on a student’s postsecondary experiences. As Tinto (1993) points out:

Financial considerations may also induce persons to enter institutions in ways which over the long run may increase the likelihood of departure prior to degree completion. For instance, they may lead persons to initially enter relatively low-cost public two-year institutions as a means of lowering the overall cost of completing a four-year program, or to choose a second-choice, less expensive public institution rather than the more expensive preferred private institution. (pp. 65-66)

Holsapple and Posselt’s findings as well as Tinto’s observations are supported further by the financial factors that impacted the enrollment decisions of the students in this study, in particular those of Lori and Jessica.

Due in large part to cost, Lori decided to attend a community college immediately following high school graduation rather than enroll in a four-year institution initially. Lori's older sister had attended the local community college after high school; therefore, Lori felt as though she should begin her college career at a community college as well so that her parents were not "burdened" with the higher cost of a university for four years. As a result, she elected to attend a nearby community college to play volleyball, but even which community college to attend hinged on financial considerations. Lori was offered a partial scholarship to play volleyball at one community college but chose to enroll in the one that offered her the full scholarship instead. "I mostly ended up choosing [the community college where she enrolled] because...well, [another community college] wasn't offering me a full scholarship. It was just partial. So, that kind of counted them out because I wanted a full scholarship," she shared. Although Lori completed two years at the community college on a full athletic scholarship, she remained concerned about transferring to the flagship institution since she felt as though her parents would be financially burdened. Only after her parents encouraged her to attend the flagship institution did she do so; her parents paid for her two years at the flagship institution in full. In other words, neither Lori nor her parents used any financial aid to pay any of Lori's college expenses at the flagship institution.

Jessica, a high school valedictorian, also chose to enroll in a community college directly following high school graduation since that was a less expensive option than attending a four-year university. However, Jessica was upset that she had not been made aware of a program used by a number of colleges to allow students who come from

households that make less than \$40,000 per year to qualify for free tuition. She indicated that she might have gone to a four-year school right away rather than a community college if she had known about the program's existence in high school. Jessica believed that sharing information about the program more broadly with students from Hamden would encourage others to pursue higher education since a number of students meet the income limitations. She elaborated:

Cause [Hamden] is a very...has a very high poverty level of students going there. A lot of them want to go to college but don't know how they can. And, it'd be nice to know that here's this program out there, but if you miss it your first year, then you miss it forever.

Since Jessica was unaware of the program's existence, she enrolled in the local community college following her high school graduation instead and then transferred to a public, four-year university in Dallas after completing two years. Even after she transferred, Jessica continued to entertain the idea of transferring yet again to another institution that was less expensive. Ultimately, she chose to remain at the public, four-year university in Dallas since the number of scholarships she received there offset the lower tuition cost of the other school to which she considered transferring. For Jessica, financial considerations were at the center of all her enrollment decisions.

Persistence factors

The persistence of students was also impacted by financial considerations. Fortunately, for most of the students in this study, their financial needs were met at their given institutions, which both comforted them and often served as motivating factors that

led to their persistence. Even so, since each student had a different set of financial circumstances, the impact upon each student's persistence was different as well.

Several of the students in this study had the full costs of their college educations covered by the institutions or by their parents, or a combination of the two; needless to say, these students did not have to worry about paying for their postsecondary pursuits while they were in or after they left college. For example, the flagship institution that Stephen attended covered the full cost of his education through government grants and a scholarship from the university's business school. While Stephen would have assumed responsibility for paying for his education had the flagship institution not done so, these financial circumstances allowed him to focus on his studies and other aspects of his college experience. As a result, he never considered transferring to another institution nor did he ever consider quitting higher education altogether. Lori also had her education covered in full through a combination of financial assistance and her parents' contribution. Although Lori was on an athletic scholarship her first two years at the community college, her parents were able to pay for her education at the flagship institution in full. Likewise, Rick received a partial scholarship at the private university he attended in New York City, but he was able to rely on his parents to pay his tuition directly or to take out loans to make up the difference in tuition that the scholarship did not cover. Each of these three students, who did not have significant financial worries, shared that they never entertained the notion of not completing their college degrees.

Not every student was quite as fortunate to have the entire cost of his or her college education covered. Adrienne, for one, received considerable financial assistance

from the state university where she originally enrolled. “I’m here solely on financial aid and scholarships from the State of Texas and other scholarships...like, little scholarships throughout [the state university],” she shared. When she transferred to the commuter school, she received a transfer scholarship (“the Outstanding Transfer Student Scholarship”) that was actually a bit less than the one she had been receiving at the state university; however, because the tuition at the commuter school was considerably less, the scholarship covered a higher percentage of her tuition, making the transfer a better financial decision for her. Regardless, Adrienne still took out approximately \$5,000 each year to cover educational and living expenses, and she anticipated accumulating approximately \$20,000 in student loan debt by the time she graduated. Similarly, most of Jessica’s educational costs were covered through grants and scholarships, but she maintained at least one and sometimes two part-time jobs while she was enrolled in college to pay her bills and living expenses. At times, she was tempted to quit college altogether and simply work full-time at the local bank because she believed she would be able to live a more comfortable lifestyle in the short-term. She explained:

There’s plenty of room to move up at the bank, but I’ve been a teller the whole time because I can only work part-time. And, that’s been tough knowing that I can make so much more money if I could go full-time, but...I don’t know...[staying in college] will pay off.

In spite of these momentary doubts, Jessica persisted and remained enrolled in higher education. Both she and Adrienne shared that they gave serious consideration to quitting

college at times; their financial hardships were sometimes discouraging enough for them to contemplate departure.

Cameron was somewhere in between the two extremes of having college fully-funded and experiencing significant financial challenges. He started out with a partial scholarship at a private, two-year college, which was going through financial difficulties of its own, and Cameron worried that some of his financial aid may have been mishandled. “Not to mention, it was just extremely expensive to go one semester there because it’s a two-year private school,” he shared. For a variety of reasons, including some that were financial, he transferred to a regional, four-year public university after his first semester at the private, two-year college, and while he received additional scholarships at the regional, four-year public university since he first began there, the financing of his college education was a family affair. His parents contributed what they could each semester, and his grandparents also helped pay for his education. As a family, they took out several small loans as well. For his part, Cameron held down a part-time job at the regional, four-year public university with the theatre center’s box office and also maintained a fairly frugal lifestyle to keep his living expenses low. With this type of financial backing, team effort, and support, Cameron never considered not completing his college education.

Nature of experiences

Aside from enrollment considerations and persistence factors, finances also influenced students’ academic and social experiences in college. Certainly, a student’s financial situation could impact his or her need to be employed while in college in order

to earn additional income, and a part-time job (or multiple jobs, in some cases) could affect the way a student was able to spend his or her time. In addition, finances sometimes limited the types of out-of-classroom activities in which a student was able to participate, particularly if a cost was involved, which ultimately, impacted his or her academic and social experiences as well.

Academic. While most of the students in the study held jobs while they were in college to help pay their living expenses, many specifically selected jobs that supported their academic pursuits and that they felt would help them long-term or help them reach their post-college goals. Although Stephen originally worked on campus in the recreational sports area as an intramural referee, he took a job off-campus at a local department store after his sophomore year. As a business major, he was optimistic that this position might lead to future employment opportunities at the company. “[The department store], too, like...we’ll see where I’m at in [this company] then [when he graduates], you know, cause I’ll be moving up and...it’s...it’s a pretty cool place to work, like...the people there are pretty cool,” he shared. Likewise, Jessica also specifically sought opportunities in the field she was studying – accounting – so that she could gain practical experience while earning money she needed to pay her monthly bills. During her junior year, she obtained a part-time position at a local certified public accountant (CPA) firm, which fit well with her ultimate career goal of becoming a CPA.

Aside from students who pursued part-time job opportunities that supported their academic and long-term career goals, other students had traditional campus jobs that allowed for some flexibility in their schedules. Cameron worked part-time at the

University Theatre Center at the regional, four-year public university he attended; similarly, Stephen worked part-time as a referee through the recreational sports program of the flagship institution his first year in college, as mentioned previously. Other students worked off campus because those jobs typically paid better. Jessica worked part-time at a bank most of her college career and held down a second part-time job at one point as well. Regardless, whether on- or off-campus, these jobs impacted the time a student was able to commit to his or her studies outside of class. Because Jessica commuted to school two days each week and worked the other three days, she devoted most of her Saturdays to completing homework. After quitting her second part-time job, she explained how she spent her weekends:

Saturdays are weird for me now because I used to have to work 8 to 12, but tax office hours isn't [sic] open on Saturdays. So, I don't work, and I kind of get to sleep in that day. And, that's another day I use for homework.

Being disciplined during non-scheduled times was particularly important for students with jobs. Like Jessica, Cameron described his need to be scheduled in order to balance his many commitments, including his job, and for him, technology helped him remain organized and focused on the task at hand in spite of his busy schedule.

Social. Aside from necessitating on- and off-campus jobs, students' financial situations affected their abilities to become involved in non-academic college activities. After Stephen obtained his position with the department store, he gave up his on-campus intramural refereeing job. Cameron shared that he would have enjoyed participating in summer repertory theatre at the regional, four-year public university he attended, but the

cost was prohibitive. “It’s expensive,” he said. “Just to pay \$1,000 to do summer rep at [the regional, four-year public university] for one semester.” Jessica acknowledged that she would have enjoyed living on or closer to campus, but this was not a possibility for her due to finances. “I would love to live closer to school,” Jessica acknowledged. “I would love to be on campus every day. But, like...like I said, it’s just not financially possible.” Jessica was not the only one whose living situation was affected by finances. Although Lori completed two years of coursework at the flagship institution, she had one semester of student teaching remaining before she could graduate. Rather than stay in the college town to finish this final requirement, she chose to return to Hamden and live with her parents because this living arrangement would be less expensive. “It would just save my parents a lot if I lived at home or lived with my aunt or...you know, somewhere around here where they didn’t have to pay for that living and extra spending money or whatever,” Lori shared. Even though Lori’s parents paid in full for her to attend the flagship institution without any financial assistance, she made the decision to live in Hamden with them to complete her student teaching so as not to burden them with additional expenses.

College support

Aside from impacting a student’s academic or social experiences, finances also played a role in whether a student utilized resources available on campus. While Lori felt as though the flagship institution she attended provided a number of services to students, she recognized that many of them came with a cost on top of the tuition and fees she was already paying. “They [university personnel] do provide you with so much,” she said. “I

mean, it might cost you an arm and a leg, but they do have so much that I never really needed anything.” Lori specifically pointed out the cost of tutoring; while she did not feel as though she needed additional assistance with her classes, she indicated that the cost of tutoring or supplemental instruction services would have been a deterrent. Lori elaborated:

And, like, all the tutoring systems...I never...since I was done with my basics...the classes I took...didn't offer tutoring because they weren't those kind [sic] of classes, you know. So...but, those services I never used. And those were expensive, too.

Instead, Lori took advantage of services that she felt were “free,” such as the university’s health center. Lori described her use of this service:

Well, actually, I take...you can go to the doctor, and it doesn't cost...And, I...I went there like three or four times. I had strep throat, and...and it was really cheap...really fast. You got in there and got out. They had like the little pharmacy there, which it wasn't really expensive.

More than likely, the student fees that Lori paid included a fee specifically to cover her services at the health center. In other words, that particular resource was not necessarily at “no cost” to Lori or her family; however, Lori may not have fully understood the services that her tuition and fees included. Adrienne expressed concern about not knowing how a university uses her tuition and fees. “I think they should explain where your tuition goes more, too,” she said. “That’s any college in general. I want to know where I’m spending all that money.” Considering Lori’s and Adrienne’s lack of

awareness related to on-campus services covered by tuition and fees, students may not be taking full advantage of the resources offered on campus simply because they do not understand they have already paid for many of them. This lack of knowledge may not only cost the student more money if they seek off-campus services for items already covered by their tuition and fees but may also result in the perception that the college is not fully meeting the student's needs.

Theme Four: Relationships

Of the themes that emerged during the interviews with students, the influence of relationships quickly became apparent. Whether discussing parents, peers, romantic interests, faculty members, or others, students repeatedly shared ways individuals in their lives played roles in various aspects of their college careers, including their enrollment decisions, their persistence in higher education, the nature of their social and academic experiences, and their perceptions of the ways colleges support them.

Enrollment considerations

Much research has been conducted on the roles that parents, teachers, and others play in regard to a student's educational aspirations and subsequent college enrollments (Boyle, 1966; Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995; Yan 2002), and the experiences of the students in this study support previous findings. In particular, students described the influence of individuals in their lives – namely, parents and grandparents – who influenced their educational pursuits. For all study participants, college was either an “unspoken rule” or “drilled into their heads” by a family member. In the cases of Cameron, Lori, Rick, and Stephen,

college enrollment and degree completion were expectations, although the sentiment may not have been explicitly stated. “It was definitely an expectation of my family,” Rick shared. Adrienne and Jessica, on the other hand, identified specific family members who encouraged them to pursue higher education. Jessica’s grandmother “pushed college into her brain,” and Adrienne’s mother “drilled college into her head.” Whether implicit or explicit, all students received emotional support from family members to go to college and complete their degrees.

Aside from loved ones who influenced a student’s general educational aspirations, other members of students’ social networks impacted their decisions to attend college as well. Although students generally had access to information through the internet, printed materials, and college visits, many were heavily influenced to attend a given institution based on the first-hand information available to them through their personal connections. For example, Adrienne’s aunt was an admissions officer for the state university Adrienne ultimately chose to attend, which provided her with direct access to information and answers to her questions. Certainly, this information channel had a considerable impact on Adrienne’s college choice. Lori also was influenced by others to attend the flagship institution to which she transferred. Namely, Lori credited her best friend from high school as being the primary influence on her decision to attend the flagship institution since her best friend matriculated there immediately following high school graduation two years earlier. Her cousins were attending the flagship institution as well, and her sister was also an alumna. Through conversations with these individuals, Lori gained the confidence she needed to feel as though she could be successful at the flagship

institution, and thus, she matriculated. Stephen also acknowledged that having a good friend of his from Hamden who was attending the flagship institution when he was considering enrolling there was helpful. Stephen was able to ask his friend questions and learn about life on campus to increase his comfort level with the flagship institution before he ever arrived there.

While some individuals impacted a student's college enrollment because of the access to information they provided the student, others influenced where a student chose to attend college (or not to attend college) for more personal reasons. Most notably, some students elected to attend a particular institution in order to maintain a specific relationship. One of the reasons Lori initially enrolled in the nearby community college was because of its location, which was near enough to Hamden for her parents to attend many of her volleyball matches. "I guess I ultimately chose [the community college] because it was closer cause [another community college I considered] is like three or something hours away," Lori pointed out. "And, I wanted my parents to be able to come watch [my matches] as much as they could." Jessica also made the decision to attend the local community college so that she could live in Hamden and remain in a relationship with her then-boyfriend (now-fiancé) Chip. She explained that living with Chip in Hamden was a better option for her financially, and that if she wanted to "be with Chip," she knew she needed to enroll in the local community college. Interestingly, because some students recognized the significant influence others could have on their college enrollment, they chose not to share their struggles in decision-making with anyone until after they had determined where they would attend. Rick was case in point; he chose not

to share his college options with anyone until he knew exactly where he wanted to go. “I felt like it was something that I didn’t want other people’s opinions to sway me on,” he said. “I wanted what I...what I came up with, I wanted to stick with. That’s what I wanted to do.” Although many of Rick’s family members were initially nonplussed about his decision to attend college so far away from Hamden, Rick recognized that without their eventual support and blessings, he would not have been able to pursue the higher education pathway he took. While he wanted to make the decision that was best for him without others’ opinions complicating matters, he also needed and obtained his family members’ approval to attend the private university in New York City where he ultimately enrolled.

Students’ relationships with college and university personnel also affected where some chose to attend. Cameron initially matriculated to the private, two-year college where he began his college career due to the recruitment efforts of faculty and students. “I was in a show at the [local community theatre] spring of my senior year, and somebody came and recruited me to [the private, two-year college] to audition,” he remembered. He credited these individuals as being “people-people” who can “talk you into anything.” They played a considerable role in his choosing to attend the private, two-year college upon graduation from high school. Lori also shared her experience of committing to attend a community college originally so that she could play volleyball for a particular coach, even though the college was a substantial distance from Hamden. “I think I chose [the community college] because the coach was awesome, and he was really good to me and everything,” Lori acknowledged. In fact, he was so influential in Lori’s

decision that when the coach left the community college prior to Lori's enrollment there, she went through the somewhat arduous process of being released from her commitment and sought an opportunity to play volleyball elsewhere at a community college closer to Hamden instead.

Persistence factors

Relationships also impact a student's persistence in college, as Astin's (1993) and Tinto's (1993) research supports. Specifically, Tinto's (1993) study regarding student departure pointed to two factors that affect a student's decision to remain at or leave a given institution: (1) difficulties in integrating with the college community and (2) isolation from the college community. Notably, each of these circumstances is connected to the development of relationships, and each was present and had an impact on the persistence of the participants in this study as well.

Both Jessica's and Adrienne's experiences at their respective postsecondary institutions are appropriate examples of the influence of relationships on persistence. Not long after Jessica transferred and began attending classes at the public, four-year university in Dallas, she began contemplating her departure since she was experiencing frustrations in her classes and had not connected with anyone – faculty or students – on campus. “I didn't feel...comfortable or wanted or like I belonged,” she said. In fact, during our initial interview that followed Jessica's first semester at the public, four-year university, she shared that she planned to transfer to another institution because she was so unhappy with the university in Dallas; however, by the time of our second interview, approximately six months later, she had decided to remain at the university specifically

because her situation had improved through the development of relationships with others on campus. Adrienne also seriously considered transferring after her first semester at the state university since she had difficulty integrating into the campus community as well. Although she attempted to get involved in student organizations, she simply did not connect with anyone. She and her roommate did not get along, either, which only made her feelings of loneliness and isolation worse. She shared:

When I came into college, my first instinct was, “Oh, I’m going to stay at this place for four years.” But, once I got into college, it was like, “No, I’m only staying here for two, maximum. I’m going to end up transferring somewhere.”

One reason Adrienne did not transfer after her first semester was the friendship she developed with another young woman who was involved in the Residence Hall Association with her. Adrienne elaborated on her decision to postpone her transfer:

I ended up liking it a lot more my second semester because my best friend that goes here...we met and became, you know, best friends, I guess...and so I started to develop more relationships. And, that’s what made me think, “Well, you know what? I’m gonna...I’ve actually had a good run this semester...I’ll give it another try.” But, I very nearly left after first semester. I was like, “I hate it.”

Although Adrienne ultimately transferred following her marriage, that decision was considerably delayed after she made connections with others on campus.

While the development of relationships with others in a college community can influence whether a student persists to completion, the relationships a student maintains from home can have an impact as well. Tinto’s (1993) research supports this notion:

Individuals who seek to retain past friendships while attending college may find the transition to college especially problematic...In the same sense that external peer groups may hinder social integration in the college, so too may family pressures influence college persistence. (p. 62-63)

For several of the students in this study, pressures from friends and family in Hamden affected their integration into the campus community and desire to remain at a given institution. Adrienne's family put considerable pressure on her to move closer to Hamden so that they could see her more often; her engagement to Mitch finalized her decision to leave the state university. While the relationships Adrienne developed delayed her transfer, she ultimately chose to do so in order to be geographically closer to family and to play a larger role in their lives. Being away from family was hard on Jessica as well, particularly during the first semester she commuted to the public, four-year university in Dallas and stayed with her aunt several nights each week. She described these challenges:

So, I started out going to school on Monday and staying with my aunt until Wednesday after school, and that was really tough....That's almost half the week.

So, that was really tough, and that's another reason why I kinda switched gears.

Jessica ultimately chose to remain at the public, four-year university in Dallas, but the time away from loved ones was especially difficult for her and almost resulted in her transferring to a different institution altogether.

Despite the challenges and potential negative impact on persistence that being away from family had for some of the study participants, many of the students also

credited relationships in helping them remain focused on their goals of college completion. For Jessica, the experiences of her grandparents “inspired” her to finish her degree. In addition, her family offered continued reminders of why she should persist. “I’ve been through where I was like, ‘I don’t know if this is for me.’-type things,” Jessica shared. “And, I had my family there to tell me, ‘You’re stupid if you don’t go to college. You’ve gone this far.’” Adrienne acknowledged her grandmother played a significant role in encouraging her to “stick it out” when she contemplated transferring following her first semester at the state university as well. Similarly, Stephen pointed to his relationship with God in helping him persist. While he said he did not believe he would ever quit higher education altogether, he would “turn to God” should he feel discouraged at any time. Aside from encouragement, the expectations of loved ones also had an impact on students’ persistence. Adrienne said that the expectations of her fiancé and family propelled her toward completion. “If my drive ever leaves, it’s the expectations of others that makes me keep going,” she said. Stephen also said that his grandmother always expected him to obtain a college degree, so he never thought of doing otherwise.

Nature of experiences

Students’ academic and social experiences were impacted by the relationships they maintained from home as well as the relationships they developed at their respective institutions. A considerable body of research exists regarding student-faculty interactions and the benefits these relationships can have on a student’s college experience (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Likewise, there is also evidence to suggest that the connections a student develops with his or her peers can have positive

effects on a student's integration with the institution (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). These findings from previous studies are supported by examples of the ways relationships impacted the nature of the academic and social experiences of the students in the current study, which are described more fully in the following sections.

Academic. Through the course of the interviews, several students described personal conversations with faculty members or individualized attention from professors at various points during their college careers that had positive impacts on their academic experiences. At the community college she attended as a student-athlete, Lori found the faculty members to be accommodating and assisted her in making up assignments she missed when traveling out of town for volleyball matches. Following her transfer to the flagship institution, she found many instructors there also interested in her academic success. "They take the time to get to know me...individually...and each student. And, they know us by name," Lori explained. Cameron had a similar experience at the regional, four-year public university to which he transferred. Due to the hectic pace he maintained between academic coursework, rehearsals, and his part-time job, one of his faculty members expressed concern that he was not getting enough sleep, and he assured her that he was. Nonetheless, her personal interest in his well-being was important to Cameron. Rick also developed a relationship with a faculty member who provided challenging, yet honest and helpful advice to him related to his desire to pursue a master's degree in business administration (MBA) immediately upon graduation from college, which played a significant role in Rick's post-college plans.

I did have a professor...he wasn't trying to talk me out of [pursuing an MBA], I don't think...but flat out told me...he said, "You know, I get why you'd do it [go to graduate school immediately following college]. Just get it out of the way. But, at the end of the day, hiring a 24-year-old MBA with no experience isn't the most comforting thing in the world because of how much you have to pay them versus how much experience they actually have in the workforce." And so, that hit home a lot.

Rick ultimately chose to work following college graduation, due in large part to the advice of his professor. Personal, faculty-student interactions similar to the ones described by Lori, Cameron, and Rick have shown to have significant positive correlations with every educational outcome, including grade point average, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate or professional schools (Astin, 1993). Certainly, these experiences with faculty members were encouraging and benefitted the students from rural backgrounds in this study who were pursuing postsecondary education.

While the faculty-student interactions obviously affected students' academic experiences in college, their peers impacted those experiences as well, often proving to be detractors from, rather than supporters of, rural students' academic success. This was especially the situation for those students who maintained close, personal connections in Hamden. Case in point, Jessica's friends and fiancé had difficulty understanding what was expected of Jessica by her professors or the stress she might be under due to her course load simply because they did not have comparable experiences. More often than

not, they were oblivious or indifferent to her educational and career goals. “They don’t really know what’s going on so they can’t really be there for me 100%,” she said. “But they can’t really be, like, be there for me because they don’t know what’s happened...they’re not going through it with me.” Although Jessica’s friends tried to include her and invited her to accompany them to activities or events, she often had to decline because of schoolwork. “[I]t’s even harder when they’re like, ‘Hey, let’s go so-and-so.’ And, I’m like, ‘I can’t. I have to stay home and do homework.’ That’s the hardest thing. Cause I just want to have a social life, too,” she acknowledged. In order to balance the lifestyles and priorities of her fiancé and hometown friends with those of herself as a college student, Jessica attempted to schedule time to do her schoolwork when she knew her fiancé Chip would not be at home. She explained:

[Saturday’s] another day I use for homework, and Chip works from 8 to 2-ish, so I’m kind of at home alone and that’s when I really get to focus on school. Cause when he’s home, he distracts me. Because if he’s out having fun, I want to be out having fun.

Adrienne had similar experiences with Mitch, her then-fiancé and now-husband. She described one particular evening when she had an important biology test the following day, and Mitch called her for what Adrienne thought would be a brief visit. She shared what transpired:

We talked on the phone for like three hours. And finally, I was like, “Mitch, I really have to go. I have a biology test...I have a genetics test in the morning.”

So, he's like, "Oh my gosh." And, I was just like, "You are a distraction. I love you to death, but you're a distraction."

While Adrienne indicated that her college roommates could also be diversions to her schoolwork, "boyfriends" were the most significant "distraction," she said. "A boyfriend's good for you. Also, a boyfriend is definitely a distraction to class and stuff...If you're a serious student, don't get a boyfriend. Just stick with friends," she advised. Certainly, the examples of Adrienne and Jessica provide evidence that the relationships students maintain outside the college environment have an impact on their academic experiences, too – sometimes in ways that are not helpful and interfere with rural students' progress toward their higher education goals.

Social. Naturally, relationships also played a role in students' social experiences while in college. Although all students developed friendships with peers at their given institutions, their connections to home, or Hamden, had significant impacts on their motivations and abilities to develop relationships on their respective campuses. For students who wanted to maintain their ways of life and specific relationships in Hamden, developing meaningful friendships on campus while nurturing relationships from home was a particularly difficult balance to strike. In these situations, the individuals who prioritized their relationships in Hamden – primarily female students in this study – either lived in or made frequent trips to the community. For example, Jessica lived in Hamden with her boyfriend (and eventually fiancé) the entire time she was enrolled in college because cultivating that relationship was particularly important to her. The one semester that she stayed several nights in Dallas each week with her aunt was especially

challenging for her, and following that semester, she chose to commute every day thereafter in order to make the emotional toil of being away from loved ones a bit less. Therefore, she commuted every day she had class, which was as much as an hour and a half each way when she was attending the public, four-year university in Dallas. As a result of her limited time on campus, most of her social experiences remained in Hamden with Chip and their high school friends, and she developed few relationships on campus.

Adrienne and Lori were also students who maintained extremely strong ties to home throughout their college careers, which affected the time they were on campus as well. Although Adrienne's ability to visit her family was hampered due to the physical distance between where she was going to school and Hamden, she never fully integrated into her college environment emotionally because she maintained such strong connections to loved ones in Hamden. As she shared about herself, "my life is up there [in Hamden]." Lori, on the other hand, saw her parents often while she was in college. When she played volleyball at the community college, at least one of her parents attended every match. "I saw [my parents] a lot. So, I wasn't really homesick at all," she said. During the off-season, she made frequent trips home as well. "I didn't have class five days a week, so if I had like a few hours here or there, I would come home and see [my parents]," she remembered. Lori's schedule that included fewer than five days a week of classes continued when she transferred to the flagship institution, and while her trips to Hamden became less frequent, they were longer in duration, often lasting at least four days each time since Lori only had class Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Of

course, regular trips home impacted the types of social experiences she was able to have on campus as well.

Although the female students in the study appeared to maintain closer relationships to those in Hamden than the men did during their college careers, the two students in the study who attended a flagship institution – Lori and Stephen – drew from their Hamden friends while on their respective campuses to develop their social networks. In fact, both had a number of friendships that started in high school but continued in college. For instance, Lori’s best friend from high school had been attending the flagship institution for two years before Lori transferred there, and they continued to spend a lot of time together after Lori arrived at the flagship institution, even living together while Lori was in school there. Likewise, Stephen also spent a considerable amount of his social time with his friends from Hamden who were also attending the flagship institution. “Still hang out with some old friends...I go over there a lot, play ball...play basketball, lift weights,” he shared. For Lori and Stephen, seeing and knowing familiar faces seemed to aid in their transition and helped make the large institutions they were attending feel smaller and more manageable to them.

Aside from maintaining significant connections to home, most of the students also continued or developed a romantic relationship while in college, which impacted their social experiences as well. Rick met the woman who became his girlfriend during some of the opening activities prior to the first semester of his freshman year, and they dated throughout the time he was in college, breaking up only when his girlfriend graduated a semester early and returned to her hometown to work. Aside from Rick, the students in

the study who were in relationships initially met their significant others through their Hamden or family connections. Lori began dating someone at the flagship institution whom she met through her family members, and in turn, she developed a number of other friendships on campus through her boyfriend. They broke up not long after she left the flagship institution. On a more long-term and serious note, Adrienne reconnected with someone she had known from middle school, and they married one year later. She acknowledged that prior to dating Mitch, she “filled her time with activities on campus,” but that after meeting him, she spent “a lot of [her] spare time...driving back up towards [the suburb where Mitch lived] or having Mitch come down [to the college town where she was living].” Another serious relationship involved Jessica and Chip, whom she met in high school and with whom she lived in Hamden throughout the time she was in college. Jessica recognized that her social life primarily revolved around Chip and his friends. Only two students in the study did not acknowledge being in a relationship at all; neither Stephen nor Cameron indicated any interest in pursuing a romantic relationship while they were in college. Although Stephen simply said he did not have a girlfriend, Cameron provided an explanation as to why he did not want to date in college:

I don't like dating on campus simply because it's...everybody here has dated everybody because the theatre people have all dated themselves, and I'm not a big fan of sloppy seconds in that sense. And so, I've also come to terms with the fact that I'm not going to meet the love of my life here.

Regardless of the reason or the eventual outcome, having a romantic relationship (or not) had an impact on the social experiences of rural students in college.

College support

Feeling that no one on their respective campuses “cared” about their personal success was mentioned by several students in the study. Since students from rural backgrounds often come from small, close-knit communities, this sentiment expressed by some of the study participants may not be surprising. Atkin (2003) contends that leaving a community where there is “shared social space” brings considerable risks for students from rural backgrounds when they step out of that space to attend a college or university. Their home communities may have nurtured values and beliefs or provided a support system different from what a student encounters on a college campus. This was Rick’s experience when he attended the private university in New York City. He described feeling as though he was in a big place “where nobody knew who you were...and nobody cared.” For him, this was a different environment from the one he left in Hamden where he had a “support network of everyone pushing you forward.” Although Rick acknowledged that stepping out of this comfortable and safe environment was important for his own growth and development, the initial difference he noticed in the level of support was shocking for him. Similarly, Lori described her experience with one particular faculty member in a class in which she was having difficulty. “This stat class is just...the professor...he’s like the only professor I could complain about that I’ve had. He just...he just doesn’t care, and he just...you know, he’s not very helpful,” she explained. While Lori ended up doing well in the course, the feeling that the professor did not “care” was a challenge for her. This sense of “caring” impacts rural students’

perceptions as to whether a college or university is supporting them in attaining their educational goals and could impact their ultimate success.

Theme Five: Eyes on the Prize

The fifth theme that emerged from the interviews with rural students was the intense focus they had on accomplishing their goals with the hope of achieving a “better life.” As Poole and More (2001) acknowledge, “Attaining a college education can greatly impact a person’s future” (p. III). In fact, many students choose to attend college in order to improve their long-term career and financial prospects. Wood’s (2012) study of factors affecting the enrollment of first-generation students from rural Appalachia in postsecondary education supports this assertion. Wood found that for the students in her study, “enrollment in college appears to be a deliberate attempt to improve one’s self and future social and personal status and well-being” (p. 88). Wood’s study concluded that rural students saw college as a way to improve their future financial standing and “have a better life than their parents” (p. 88). The students interviewed as part of the current study also indicated that the pursuit of a “better life” was a factor that affected their decisions to enroll in college, their persistence in higher education, the nature of their academic and social experiences, and the support they perceived an institution to provide to them.

Enrollment considerations

Although the students from rural backgrounds in this study did not explicitly state that they initially enrolled in a college or university in order to pursue a “better life,” they all indicated they generally expected a college degree to help them obtain a good job

following graduation. For the two students whose parents did not have college degrees, however, they began thinking about their specific paths to a “better life,” including their potential college majors, very early in their high school careers. This affected their college-decision processes significantly. Jessica’s college choice was originally dependent on her plan to pursue a degree in actuarial science. According to Jessica, only two universities in the State of Texas offered this degree, and the public, four-year university in Dallas to which she transferred was one of those. Due to the university’s proximity to Hamden, Jessica chose to matriculate there rather than the other institution, which was located at a considerable distance from Hamden. Jessica’s college enrollment decision actually supports another of Holsapple and Posselt’s findings: rural students are more likely to attend universities in close proximity to their homes rather than ones further away (Education Insider News Blog, 2010). Similar to Jessica, Adrienne also selected which college she would attend based on her choice of major. “I figured if I...I should pick my major before I pick my college because that, you know, kind of dictates where you go,” she said. For both women, their first steps toward “a better life” began when they selected their majors, which in turn, dictated the institutions where they chose to enroll.

Some rural students in the study focused their college-search process on the goal of enrolling in a university that was “prestigious.” This is actually in contrast to the findings of Holsapple and Posselt who discovered that students from rural high schools are 53.1% less likely than their suburban peers to enroll in one of *U.S. News and World Report’s* top-100 institutions (Education Insider News Blog, 2010). The two students

from Hamden – Lori and Stephen – who enrolled in the state’s flagship institutions specifically did so because of the “prestige” of these two schools, which are listed among the top-100 in the *U.S. News and World Report* (2013) rankings. Lori said that she chose to enroll in one of the state’s flagship institutions because she wanted “...to graduate from a good, prestigious, four-year school like that.” Stephen also shared that he chose to attend the other flagship institution in the state for “...the business school pretty much.” He went on to say:

It’s like one of the top business schools in the nation. Everything’s in the top, like, five. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do in business, but all their stuff is like top five in the nation...in the country.

While Cameron did not ultimately enroll in a top-100 institution, his original “first choice” school (where he was not accepted) was in the top 100 of the *U.S. News and World Report* (2013) rankings. After being turned down for admission to the more prestigious university, he remained focused on the reputations of the other schools he was considering, and eventually, transferred to the regional, four-year public institution, which also had a strong musical theatre program. The only student from Hamden who had the opportunity to attend a top-100 institution but chose instead to enroll at a less-prestigious school was Rick. Of the three out-of-state universities to which Rick was admitted, he matriculated to the one that was ranked lowest, well outside the top-100; of the other two schools where he was admitted, one was ranked within the top-50 and one even within the top-10. Rick’s selection actually supports Holsapple and Posselt’s assertion that rural students are less likely to enroll in elite institutions (Education Insider

News Blog, 2010). While the decision to attend a less-prestigious college is not necessarily wrong for students from rural backgrounds, the choice can impact students' futures nonetheless. As Holsapple and Posselt point out, "Although elite institutions aren't the be-all and end-all of quality education, they can have a positive impact on graduate school placement, career outlook and long-term economic health" (Education Insider News Blog, 2010). Needless to say, for the students from Hamden, their decisions to enroll or not to enroll in "prestigious" institutions had or will have consequences on their pursuit of a "better life," some of which may not have been realized yet.

Persistence factors

The pursuit of a "better life" impacted rural students' persistence in higher education as well. This was especially true for the women in the study who frequently pointed to the goals of financial stability and a comfortable lifestyle as reasons they persisted toward the completion of their college degrees. Adrienne was quick to attribute her desire for a particular way of life as explanation for why she was motivated to continue. She described the life to which she aspired in vivid detail with a focus on a "good, secure job;" the ability to take annual family vacations; and her children working at part-time jobs not to help the family make ends meet but to help them learn responsibility instead. For Adrienne, "a college education is the way to earn that [life]" she explained. Jessica's idea of a "better life" was startlingly similar to Adrienne's; she believed a college degree would help her achieve her long-term dreams, too. However, while Jessica and her fiancé shared a vision for their future, Jessica felt that the

responsibility to create a better life for her and her family rested solely with her. “[Chip] is not educated that way to be able to get the highest-paying job in any company, so it’s going to come and go, I think,” Jessica acknowledged. “So, I just have to do it myself.” In other words, if Jessica and Chip wanted a better life, Jessica felt as though she had to be the one to make that happen. Lori also felt compelled to pursue her higher education goals in order to create a comfortable life for her family one day. She elaborated on her reasons for not quitting school:

Probably just knowing that I need to do something I want to be able to provide for a family some day...and be better for them and be able to give them everything. So, I need to have a degree and a job...a good job. And, go from there.

Like Adrienne and Jessica, Lori wanted a future that included material comforts, and in her mind, completing a college degree was the way to achieve that.

Rural students’ desires for “better lives” were sometimes due in part to observations of their parents’ struggles or their own experiences as children in households with financial challenges. This was especially true for Jessica and Adrienne who openly shared the financial difficulties they endured growing up in Hamden; they were also the only students in the study whose parents or guardians had not completed college degrees. Perhaps as a result, they were quick to link their parents’ education levels to their lack of financial resources. Jessica specifically mentioned that she did not grow up with an “ample amount of money” that allowed her to take part in fun pastimes with her friends. Jessica connected her inability to participate in these activities with a lack of access to finances, which in turn, she connected to the absence of her parents’

college educations. Hence, Jessica was motivated to persist toward the completion of her own degree so that she would not have to “do without” again. On the other hand, Adrienne acknowledged that her desire to earn a college degree was due in large part to her parents not having bachelor’s degrees themselves. In fact, at the time of our interviews, her mother was still working to finish a college degree, which had taken her more than 10 years to complete. Witnessing her mother’s struggles to complete her college education and the on-going financial hardships of her family were motivation enough for Adrienne to continue making progress toward her degree. She, too, connected a college education with a lifestyle different from what her parents experienced and she observed growing up. These findings are consistent with research conducted by Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) who found that “rural students who may be turning toward college education as a pathway to a different future from their parents may be especially dedicated to college education” (p. 480). Certainly, a desire for a “better life” – a life different from their parents – was a strong motivator for some of the rural students in the study to persist.

Although the concept of pursuing a “better life” supported study participants in completing their degrees, there was one “outlier” whose reason for continuing was dissimilar from other rural students who were interviewed. In portraiture, when the experience of one individual is different from the majority, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) refer to this as a “deviant voice.” In the current study, the “outlier,” or “deviant voice,” was Rick, a student who had a very comfortable life growing up; therefore, a desire for a “better life” for himself was not so much his motivation to

continue as was his future contribution to society. For Rick, completing a college degree that would propel him toward a lucrative career would allow him to help others enjoy “better lives.” Rick’s experience growing up around poverty in Hamden created an awareness in him that he did not forget while he was in college. Studying business at the private university in New York City that was faith-based reinforced the notion that he should use his own privilege to help others. “You understand that your goal in being a business person or being whatever you choose to be isn’t just to help yourself, it’s to help others,” Rick explained. His desire to do “something good in the world” motivated him to finish college in order to expand his influence and allow him to impact more people’s lives in positive ways. While Rick was the only student to express this type of altruistic sentiment as an underlying reason to complete a college degree, his desire to help others live “better lives” was congruent with the goals of other students to live “better lives” themselves.

The pursuit of a “better life” was an extremely strong motivator for many of the rural students in the study to persist; they were committed to the pursuit of a life that involved financial stability and the “trappings of success,” and a college degree was perceived to be the means to that end. They wanted to “succeed” and would not settle for anything less. This intense desire of the students to “succeed” and to achieve their goals supports Tinto’s (1993) observation related to student persistence in higher education. He wrote:

Individual commitments, whether expressed as motivation, drive, or effort, also prove to be centrally related to departure from institutions of higher education. It

is obvious, research findings aside, that a person's willingness to work toward the attainment of his/her goals is an important component of the process of persistence in higher education. Conversely, the lack of willingness or commitment proves to be a critical part of the departure process. The unavoidable fact is that college completion requires some effort. Even in nonselective colleges, it calls for a willingness to commit oneself to the investment of time, energy, and often scarce resources to meet the academic and social demands which institutions impose upon their students. (pp. 41-42)

Almost all of the students in the study attributed their continued persistence in higher education to some version of an "internal drive." Adrienne acknowledged that she is "driven...I want to succeed;" Cameron also described himself as "self-driven;" and Rick attributed his desire to finish as being "sort of intrinsic." Similarly, Jessica shared that she was tired of being in school but that there was something "in me that keeps me going." The students in the study did not see themselves as "quitters," either. Rick admitted that he was simply the type of person who wants to finish something he begins. Adrienne concurred. "So...and for staying in college...I'm not a quitter. Once I've started, I have to finish. So, that's mostly been my motivation," she said. Regardless of how students described this quality, the innate desire to complete what they began and obtain a college degree in order to "succeed" and live a "better life" were especially strong inducements for these rural students to remain in school.

Nature of experiences

The ways students approached their college careers were impacted by their intense focus on a “better life” as well. Achievement was a particularly high priority for them. As a result, they were especially frustrated and discouraged by situations that they perceived as potentially interfering with their goal attainment; however, the students also possessed the resiliency to recover from these momentary setbacks and the resourcefulness to make adjustments in other aspects of their lives in order to continue in their pursuits of “success.”

Academic. Although students’ aspirations included the completion of their college degrees, and ultimately, a “better life,” they often used more short-term achievements to keep them motivated and to make incremental progress toward their long-term goals. For example, many prided themselves on earning high marks in their classes. “I’ve never had a B in my life, and I don’t want to have one,” Jessica shared. Notably, she and Cameron both maintained 4.0 grade point averages during their college careers. Jessica, in particular, was so resolved to make good grades that she planned to graduate “summa...something...honors.” Even when she was not sure of the specific recognition she was working toward, she wanted not only to complete her college education but to finish well, with honors.

For all their intrinsic drive and motivation, there were times when students’ desires to achieve waned. Rick acknowledged that maintaining this focus could be difficult at times, but affirmed that the pay-off was worth the effort. He said:

There are a few times where you just want to shut down, and say, “Forget it. I’ll take the C; I’ll take the B...whatever. I know I’m going to pass.” But, so much of it is willpower. If you’re willing to put in the work, you will raise your grade. Student “willpower,” discipline, and determination were especially important qualities that all the students shared; this became even more apparent when they encountered difficulties that put their goals of a “better life” in jeopardy.

Challenges to goal achievement. Some of the more significant frustrations for students came when they experienced challenges to their long-term plans. These challenges centered primarily around two areas: changing majors and transferring between institutions.

Although the major Rick selected when he registered for classes at the private university in New York City was different from the major he originally planned to declare following high school, he did not change his major after he enrolled in college. Aside from Rick, however, the other rural students in the study who even contemplated a change in major were female, and all of them made some adjustment to their original choice of major that, in turn, created frustrations and challenges for them. Jessica began her college career planning to major in actuarial science, but after taking a number of classes in which she had difficulty with the course material, she changed to accounting. While most of the classes she had taken as an actuarial science major still counted toward the credits she needed to sit for the certified public accountant (CPA) exam, many of them – particularly ones she had taken at the local community college – did not meet any

of the requirements for a degree in accounting. Jessica described her discouragement related to this moment of realization:

I had completed many, many...when I was going for my actuary degree, I had completed many classes that were not necessary and not needed, and I still wasn't core complete. [The public, four-year university in Dallas] almost made me take chemistry again...chemistry and a lab and a second chemistry and a lab. And, I had already taken physics at [the local community college]. And, so that was really...horrible.

Lori also changed her major in college after she took classes her first semester that she did not enjoy and in which she encountered difficulties; she originally began as a nursing major but changed to elementary education. As a result, she was behind almost as soon as she began college, even after taking a full course load one entire summer. This, too, was disheartening and created additional work for Lori that she had not anticipated. In the fall following what should have been her graduation date, she elaborated on the impact of changing her major:

I should have graduated in May. But, because I changed [majors] and I had to take more classes...that's why I'm a semester behind....And, then I had to take...I think the summer before I went to [the flagship institution], I took...or maybe it was the summer after my first year at [the flagship institution]...I had to take like a full load during the summer. Like, a full 12 hours just so I wouldn't have to be graduating next May, you know...I was messed up from changing my major.

Adrienne also readjusted her career goals during her time in college, although she did not officially change her major. Adrienne started her college career majoring in biology and thought she might pursue a career in veterinary medicine, but she began focusing more on occupational therapy as she progressed in her studies; this meant that she ended up taking more classes than were necessary. She expounded on her dilemma:

I'm taking way more classes than I have to, but I'm already so deep into this major, there's no point in me changing....So, I'm only going to have to take like four extra classes, I think, for the curriculum, but I'm taking all these classes that aren't required.

Adrienne explained that spending time and money on classes that were not necessary felt wasteful to her and were obstacles in her pursuit of a college degree. Many of her fellow rural students agreed. Regardless of the derailments and disappointments, however, the setbacks each of these women encountered related to changing their majors were not enough to stop them from continuing to work toward achieving their goals.

Another challenge that caused considerable frustration for over half the students in the study was the experience of transferring between schools. Interestingly, several students began their college careers with the express intent of transferring from their institution of origin. Some – like Jessica and Lori – began by attending community colleges, and they knew they would not be able to complete four-year degrees there; other students enrolled at one college with no intention of remaining where they began. Cameron was one of those students. While he transferred because he did not feel safe, he also acknowledged that he matriculated to the private, two-year college originally with

plans to transfer as soon as he was able simply because he knew the musical theatre program was not the caliber he desired.

I got into [the private, two-year college] program, and I went there for a first semester knowing that I was going to be there for a year, tops, and then transfer because the more time that I wasn't in a four-year program, I felt the less progress I could get. And so, it became very evident as soon as I got there that I needed to transfer as soon as possible.

After Cameron enrolled at the regional, four-year public university, he did not consider transferring again. Adrienne had a similar experience with the state university she originally attended. Although she thought she would spend all four years at the school, she changed her mind just a few weeks into the first semester of her freshman year.

I was planning on leaving after two years. I was like, "That's really just my maximum here."...I never really...like, when I came into college, my first instinct was, "Oh, I'm going to stay at this place for four years." But, once I got into college, it was like, "No, I'm only staying here for two, maximum. I'm going to end up transferring somewhere."

Adrienne's early interest in transferring was due in part to the challenges she experienced finding friends and connecting with others, and in part to the reputation of the state university as a "party school." The combination of these occurrences along with her decision to get married compelled her to transfer after her second year. While Jessica had no choice but to transfer to a four-year institution in order to earn a bachelor's degree after she completed two years at the local community college, she considered transferring

yet again to a different university after her first semester at the public, four-year university in Dallas because she was so unhappy; however, she anticipated that changing schools a second time would only be more frustrating and difficult for her, primarily related to the transferability of academic courses and credits. Jessica explained what transferring between the two four-year institutions would involve: “It’s limited. The classes are different. The classes are called different things. They teach different. At [the potential school], there’s not even a class at [the public, four-year university in Dallas she was attending] that meets the requirements. So, they don’t teach the same things. So, I’m limited.” Ultimately, Jessica changed her mind and chose to remain at the public, four-year university in Dallas after she made more friends and began feeling more comfortable academically; in addition, she determined that remaining at a particular institution was simply easier in the long-term. “Especially switching so much,” she said. “Changing schools is tough.” Although Stephen did not transfer between schools after he began his college career, he did encounter challenges getting the credits he earned at a community college to transfer to the flagship institution. When we met at the end of the fall semester of his sophomore year, he was still waiting on his credits from the local community college that he earned in high school to transfer to the flagship institution.

Social. Students’ focus on a “better life” also impacted their non-academic experiences. Because the students were determined to improve their circumstances by obtaining college degrees, their lifestyles reflected these priorities. As a result, the intensity, pace, and stress they maintained outside of class were affected by their acute desires for a “better life.”

Since many students were convinced that a bachelor's degree was the key to a "better life," the approaches they took to their college careers were impacted. Rather than patiently and methodically making progress toward their degrees and taking advantage of all the out-of-classroom experiences that higher education has to offer, students embarked upon their postsecondary pursuits with a different sort of urgency and efficiency. Adrienne was one of the students whose desire to have a "better life" was especially pronounced. She wanted to obtain a degree as quickly as she could in order to begin enjoying the many benefits that she believed post-college life held. She shared that she simply wanted to "get in and get out" so that she could begin her life, regardless of what the long-term implications might be. Interestingly, at the beginning of her college career, Adrienne was interested in becoming a veterinarian but soon changed her mind when she realized the educational path to that career would take eight or more years. She settled on becoming an occupational therapist instead. She believed this slight adjustment in her career focus would allow her to continue pursuing a profession with "job stability" and she would not have to change her major from biology, which eliminated a likely impediment to her graduating in a timely manner. Consequently, although Adrienne might have been able to earn more money and have an even "better life" from a financial perspective had she spent additional time in school and ultimately become a veterinarian, her short-term desire to finish college as soon as possible outweighed that potential long-term benefit. Jessica was also a student who was intently focused on pursuing a degree in order to achieve a "better life." She planned and organized her class enrollment each semester so that she would complete her degree as

efficiently as possible, often taking a higher-than-average course load to finish within a given timeframe. She explained her plan:

My goal is to be able to quit at the bank when I do transfer...so I can take, like, six classes a semester cause I want to graduate two years from now, and in order to do that, I will have to take six hours...six classes a semester until then.

In other words, Jessica's strategy was to enroll in as many as 18 credits each semester while continuing to work part-time. (The job she referenced quitting was actually the second part-time job she was holding down at the time of the interview.) This meant the time she had available to do much of anything else, including being involved in activities outside her classes, was quite limited. "I was in Phi Theta Kappa at [the local community college], but I just joined," Jessica acknowledged. "I didn't do anything with it. I didn't really have time." Although with a bit less urgency than Adrienne or Jessica in his quest for a "better life," Cameron did not want to waste any time in the completion of his degree, either. He shared that this focus on completion in a timely manner was one of the reasons he decided to enroll in the private, two-year college rather than postpone his college enrollment altogether when he was not accepted into the musical theatre programs to which he originally aspired. He explained his rationale:

So, I go to [the private, two-year college] knowing that I'm only going to be there for a year, tops. But, I go there so that I can go ahead and start studying in my field immediately. I can get vocal, dance, and acting training immediately, and I'm not having to wait.

While Cameron's experience at the private, two-year college was not at all that for which he had hoped and he contemplated departure altogether before the semester was over, he also realized that finishing the semester at the private, two-year college was better than the alternative of withdrawal, which would have resulted in him not making progress toward his degree or toward his career goals.

The intensity with which students approached their college careers had a considerable impact on their lifestyles as well. Because of their focus on achievement and a "better life," the students from rural backgrounds maintained especially busy schedules with commitments and pursuits that they felt would help prepare them for their post-college lives and make them more marketable when the time came for them to look for jobs. During Rick's first semester at the private university in New York City, he took a full course load and was heavily involved in campus activities, which resulted in his maintaining a hectic pace and feeling over-committed at times. "You're tired all the time, you're overworked, and you're completely not used to anything you're doing," Rick described. Although she was not involved in co-curricular programming on campus, Jessica was also quite busy. She enrolled in heavy course loads some semesters to ensure she graduated on time, and she also was employed throughout college to help pay for living expenses. One semester, she even worked a second job in an accounting firm, which allowed her to gain experience in the field she planned to pursue following graduation. These commitments resulted in a busy lifestyle for Jessica, but she acknowledged that this intensity was not unfamiliar to her. "So, I was pretty prepared in that sense cause I'm used to...I'm used to busy...and working. I've been working since I

was in high school. So, [college] wasn't a lot of...it wasn't much different," she said, comparing her lifestyle in high school to that which she maintained in college. Cameron's time was also quite occupied between his classes, rehearsals, work, and student organization involvement. He credited his iPhone, which was where he maintained his color-coded schedule, with helping him remain organized and sane during these particularly intense times. "In terms of handling [multiple commitments], I just kind of buck up and do it because I know that there's a reason that I didn't say no because I know that I can handle it," Cameron explained. Instead, he forged ahead toward his goal, despite having relatively little free time.

While the students hoped to reap the rewards of their very active lives in college by achieving a "better life" ultimately, the paces they maintained and the expectations they placed on themselves resulted in considerable stress for many of them. Cameron mentioned that if he did not feel "stressed out" – which to him also equated to a day packed with back-to-back classes, rehearsals, and appointments – then he felt as though he was wasting his time and training and not getting the most out of the opportunities made available to him. He acknowledged experiencing "a couple of breakdowns" as a result of his demanding lifestyle. On these occasions, he explained that he would take a night off to watch a movie, not think about all his stressors, and just relax; afterwards, he would feel refreshed and able to tackle his many responsibilities once again. Jessica also shared examples when she felt considerable pressure, particularly when she did not understand concepts in class and could not maintain the level of achievement to which she had grown accustomed. She described one especially stressful episode:

I'm a perfectionist and so when I don't know how to do something, it drives me crazy. And, I went crazy. But, I ended up dropping that class when I switched my major. But that was very...a very hard time for me. I stress out really easily, and I got so stressed I couldn't eat, I couldn't....Oh, it was horrible.

Jessica recovered from that difficult time and found other, more constructive ways of coping with stress. Nonetheless, the pressures she placed upon herself to create a "better life" produced substantial anxiety.

Despite their hectic schedules and stressors, most of the rural students in the study were surprisingly cognizant of and good at maintaining some sense of balance in their lives. For example, Jessica always made sure her Sundays were free from her jobs and schoolwork so that she could spend time with her fiancé and his family. She described Sundays as "family day." Stephen also worked out and lifted weights on a regular basis. This was a time for him to see and connect with his friends as well. In addition, almost all of the students mentioned their "need for sleep." Although most of them worked hard and focused on achievement in- and outside the classroom, they typically did not let their determination to "succeed" get in the way of their rest. Lori specifically discussed "needing her sleep." Cameron also indicated he needs at least eight hours of sleep each night, and he would adjust his schedule accordingly in order to make sure he attained this. Stephen estimated he got 10 hours of sleep each night. While the students all experienced stress because of their strong desires to finish their degrees and achieve a "better life" for themselves and others, they also prioritized in ways that allowed them to maintain balance and generally tend to their personal and emotional needs.

College support

While students described their use of college resources in previous themes in more passive or reactive terms (they took advantage of information online when questions arose or sought out the health center when they were ill, for example), when the concept of a “better life” was considered and a college education was viewed as the means to achieve that end, students from rural backgrounds actively pursued the resources available through the institutions they were attending. Most often, the resources to which they availed themselves were academic advisors.

Although Rick acknowledged that his academic advisor was generally helpful and assisted him in determining his major, the women in the study were the primary consumers of academic advising. Notably, this may have been due, in part, to all three women transferring between institutions as well. Nonetheless, either when considering a transfer to another university or when transitioning to a new university altogether, the female students sought academic advisors for assistance and found them especially helpful. For example, when Jessica was contemplating transfer from the public, four-year university in Dallas to another university about 60 miles from Hamden, she met with an academic advisor. Likewise, when Adrienne decided to marry Mitch and transfer to the commuter school, she made two trips to the campus to see an academic advisor. She wanted to make sure she understood what credits would transfer and what she would need to do in order to stay on track to complete her degree in a timely manner. “I want to get it done,” Adrienne said. “And, you know, I don’t want to spend more money than I have to. So, I definitely talked to a counselor [academic advisor] for that.” Lori also took

advantage of the academic advisors available at the flagship institution to which she transferred. In fact, when she arrived at the flagship institution as a transfer student and attended new student orientation the summer before beginning classes, the academic advisor she had been assigned had already determined which courses from the community college would transfer and had developed a potential schedule of classes for Lori. She explained:

That summer, we had...we had to go to a new student conference at [the flagship institution]. And, when I got there...it was...it wasn't a tour really...it was just you met with your assigned advisor. And, when I met with him, he had my schedule done. Like, he knew my degree plan and everything, and I was obviously in the education college and stuff. And, he had all my other classes from [the other community college she had attended] and stuff, and then he just...he knew what classes I needed and they...he gave me my schedule and said, "Does this look okay to you?" And, I was like, "Yeah! Fine!"

Individualized, one-on-one support from academic advisors helped rural students achieve their higher education goals and helped them to feel especially supported by the postsecondary institutions they were attending.

Summary

Students from rural backgrounds who pursue higher education have a number of factors that impact their enrollment and persistence. They also have distinctive academic and social experiences and perceive colleges and universities to meet their needs in different ways. Through conversations with these students and through an analysis of the

interviews with each of them using the concepts of social capital theory and critical standpoint theory, the five themes described in this chapter emerged.

Rural students approach and interact with the college environment in unique ways. They often have different levels of and access to “college knowledge;” higher education can bring experiences for them that are new and different simply because of the more limited opportunities in rural environments; they have special financial considerations; their relationships are especially impactful and critical to their success in college; and their interests in achieving a “better life” often require them to leave that which is familiar and comfortable to them. All of these themes address the research questions of the study. The next chapter will further elaborate on the key findings and implications.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion

While a considerable portion of the U.S. population migrated to more suburban and urban settings throughout the 20th century, a substantial number of students continue to be educated in rural locales today. In fact, one-third of the nation's children are attending and being educated in rural schools (Beeson & Strange, 2003). Despite the size of this group, the number of studies related to the experiences of students who come from rural backgrounds and pursue higher education has waned in recent years. This population remains an important group to study as their college-going and college-completion rates remain behind those of their suburban and urban peers (NCES, 2010b). Because many students from rural locales are white, they are often considered part of the white majority on campuses; however, a number of studies have demonstrated that rural students encounter challenges on campus that are unique to that population. As a result, researchers have advocated that rural students be considered their own distinct cultural group and studied accordingly (Atkin, 2003; Theobald & Wood, 2010). In particular, researchers have encouraged more qualitative research related to this population so that their experiences are understood more fully (Maltzan, 2006).

This study focused on students from rural backgrounds as a unique population and explored the factors that impact their enrollment, persistence, experiences in higher education, and perceptions as to how well postsecondary institutions meet their needs. Following an overview of the study in this chapter, five key findings that emerged from an analysis of the data are presented. These findings include: (1) the impact of social capital on rural students' approaches to and participation in higher education; (2) the

critical roles that relationships play in the persistence of students from rural backgrounds; (3) the effects of tacit knowledge, or “college knowledge,” on rural students’ experiences in higher education; (4) the influence of finances on rural students’ decisions related to higher education; and (5) the additional barriers to college degree attainment that exist for female students from rural backgrounds. After presenting the findings, implications for research, practice, and policy are discussed, and finally, I conclude by sharing my personal thoughts related to the study and findings.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that affect the experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education and was guided by the following research questions:

- What factors influence the enrollment of rural students in institutions of higher education?
- What factors influence the persistence of rural students in institutions of higher education?
- What is the nature of rural students’ academic and social experiences in postsecondary institutions?
- How do rural students perceive that institutions respond to and meet their needs?

These research questions were explored in-depth using an approach involving both social capital theory and critical standpoint theory as the conceptual framework. Social capital theory has been used often in educational research when exploring issues of student success (Coleman, 1988; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001), and critical standpoint

theory is used when attempting to gain a deeper understanding of individual experiences and ways of viewing the world (“Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science,” 2011; Wylie, 2003). Examining rural students’ individual experiences in higher education through a conceptual framework that incorporates social capital theory and its consideration of an individual’s relationships and access to networks, as well as critical standpoint theory, which focuses on an individual’s social location or situation in society, seems appropriate and fitting as I was able to consider generally the access to social capital students from rural backgrounds had through their personal and community connections and relationships, and in turn, to focus more specifically on how this access impacted individual students’ experiences in higher education.

A number of quantitative studies exist related to rural students and higher education, particularly related to their preparation, enrollment, and persistence (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Boyle, 1966; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995; Yan, 2002); however, there is little research that explores these issues as they impact individual students’ postsecondary experiences. Therefore, I used a phenomenological approach to examine individual rural students’ experiences with higher education. Phenomenology focuses on individuals’ perceptions of their experiences rather than on factual occurrences (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990; Willis, 2007), and strives to capture the “essence” of the experiences for an individual or for a group of people (Patton, 2002). Because the goal was to explore more fully the individual experiences of students, portraiture was the methodology selected. Portraiture as a qualitative methodology seeks to capture the “essence” of an individual or group

(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997); this approach merges art and science in order to present a “composite” of an individual or a group and often appeals to a wider audience due to the “story-telling” nature of the methodology (Chapman, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). One of the basic tenets of portraiture is that a relationship between the researcher and the participants often develops, and the researcher herself may appear in the research. Portraiture was especially appropriate for this study given my own experiences as an individual who comes from a rural background, which afforded me a certain “insider knowledge” as I approached the study.

In order to study students from rural backgrounds, a common understanding and definition of what is meant by “rural” is necessary. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) worked with the Census Bureau to define what was meant by the term “rural schools.” The agencies used a location’s proximity to an urban area and, to a lesser extent, its population and county boundaries in determining which areas would be classified as “rural.” In this study, all participants were drawn from one high school that could be classified as “Rural, Remote” by NCES (2010a). The high school is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area that has a population of 50,000 or more and is located in a town that has approximately 2,000 inhabitants. Recent statistics from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2010) indicate low college-going and persistence rates for students from this particular high school.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Study participants were identified through purposeful sampling and through the snowball method. Patton (2002) describes purposeful sampling as a way to identify

information-rich cases for study in-depth. These information-rich cases allow the researcher to “learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230). After a few individual, “information-rich” cases were identified, the snowball method was then employed. The snowball method allows for the identification of “cases of interest from people who know people who know that cases are information-rich” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 28). Therefore, during initial meetings with study participants who were identified with purposeful sampling, additional individuals who would meet the participant criteria were identified.

Since I was most interested in students who graduated in the top 10% of their classes from a particular high school, I was originally able to gather names of possible study participants through a review of past “graduation issues” of the local community newspaper as well as through high school yearbooks and social media sites that provided more in-depth information about students. From there, I contacted several students who appeared to meet the participant criteria and who would add to the heterogeneity of the study for various reasons (age, gender, type of college or university enrolled, major, or other background information revealed through various sources). During my first meetings with these individuals, I asked students for the names of other students from their high school they would recommend I interview. All students were forthcoming with additional names, which allowed for the identification of other “information-rich” cases. While approximately 10-12 individuals were identified through these two methods as possible study participants, a total of six students agreed to be interviewed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each of the six students participated in two, semi-structured interviews. Every effort was made for at least one of the interviews to take place in a student's current "setting," whether that be where the student lived, on the campus where the student was enrolled, or in the home of a student's family. This allowed for field observations to occur in conjunction with the semi-structured interviews; participants were also asked to complete a questionnaire with basic demographic information during the first interview. The two interviews were structured using a modified version of Seidman's (1998) technique. The first interview focused on a student's life history leading up to their current college standing and situation; the interview was digitally-recorded and then transcribed. The protocol for the second interview was developed after reviewing and reflecting on the content of the first interview. The second interview included generally more reflective questions and focused on any life occurrences that had taken place for the student since the first interview. The future plans of the student were also discussed more in the second interview. Following each interview, I created an "impressionistic record" to document my own thoughts and reflections on the interactions with the students; these allowed for capture of other details of the interaction that would not have been recorded orally and to begin identifying emerging themes. Since all six participants were interviewed twice, 12 recordings were produced, all of which were transcribed. The transcripts were then analyzed and coded within cases in order to create the portraits that were presented in Chapter 4 and then across cases in order to produce the themes that were presented in Chapter 5. Following are the key findings that were developed through these analyses as well.

Presentation of Key Findings

Following analyses of the data both within and across cases using a conceptual framework involving social capital and critical standpoint theories, five themes emerged that were discussed in-depth in Chapter 4. These themes helped to answer the research questions expressed at the outset of the study. They also led to five key findings of the study. The following section explains each of these findings in more detail.

Major Finding #1: Rural students' social capital impacts the way they approach and participate in higher education. As demonstrated in the literature review, one singular definition of social capital does not exist, and for the purposes of this study, social capital was defined as the access an individual has to information or networks as a result of his or her formal or informal memberships in groups. While all the students in this study were from the same rural community and had attended the same rural high school, their levels of access to social capital within and outside their hometown were quite different depending upon how long their families had lived in the community; the educational levels and occupations of their parents; and the exposure students had to different educational experiences through their formal and informal networks. In turn, these varying levels of access to social capital impacted the ways in which each of the students embarked upon their college careers and their levels of engagement in their college experiences. In general, Adrienne and Jessica possessed lower levels of access to social capital; Cameron, Lori, and Stephen possessed moderate levels; and Rick benefitted from the highest level of access to social capital among the

group of study participants. The levels of access to social capital for each of these students impacted their enrollment decisions and experiences in higher education.

While the students in the study possessed an internal drive and were highly-motivated young men and women already, the social capital that each of them had access to impacted the particular ways each approached higher education. Generally, students with higher levels of access to social capital did not consider college to be an option; the idea of going to college was a concept they had been exposed to by family members from a young age and one that they never questioned. Many described college attendance as an “unspoken rule” in their homes; college was simply the accepted next step after completing high school. For students with less access to social capital, however, they could recount specific episodes of family members actively encouraging them to go to college; interestingly, the students consistently used metaphors like “drilling the idea of college into their heads” to describe the ways their loved ones pushed them to pursue postsecondary education. Aside from the unspoken understanding they would enroll in college, students from rural backgrounds with higher levels of access to social capital applied to and enrolled in more selective institutions as well. They also seemed more willing to travel greater distances from their hometown in order to pursue a college education; case in point is Rick who did not even apply to any schools within the State of Texas. Rural students with especially high levels of access to social capital such as Rick approached the college-going process as a new adventure and focused on the types of experiences – both academic and non-academic – that a particular college would provide. On the other hand, students with less access to social capital prioritized convenience and

efficiency in their college search process. When compared to their peers with higher levels of access to social capital, they were much less concerned with the types of experiences they might enjoy while in college and much more focused on the ease, transparency, and cost-effectiveness of a college's pathway to a degree.

Just as social capital influenced students' approaches to college attendance in various ways, their levels of access to social capital also influenced the types of experiences in which they chose to engage while they were in college. Although all students were involved in some out-of-classroom activities, students with higher levels of access to social capital were much more socially integrated in their college environments through the friendships they developed, their involvement in student organizations, and their experiences in the communities where the colleges they attended were located. For example, students with less access to social capital – such as Adrienne and Jessica – maintained very close relationships with family and friends from home and had more difficulty making connections on campus. In fact, even though Adrienne initially attempted to integrate herself into the campus culture of the institution where she originally enrolled, she found herself repeatedly being pulled back toward her family who lived some distance away; eventually, she became involved in a serious relationship with a young man she had known while in middle school, and ultimately married him and transferred schools to one that allowed her to be closer to friends and family. Students with moderate levels of access to social capital did not necessarily fully integrate into the campus environment by making new friends, either; instead, they managed to find and maintain or develop friendships on campus most often with friends from home.

Involvement in student organizations was also heavily influenced by a student's level of access to social capital, which in turn contributed to a student's acclimation to college. Once again, students with higher levels of access to social capital were much more involved with co-curricular activities, and thus, more integrated into the campus environment than those with lower levels. And, social capital also played a role in the ways a student interacted with the community beyond the campus. Rick described wanting to soak up the culture of New York City, the location of the school being one of the reasons he chose to attend the particular college he did, whereas both Adrienne and Jessica spoke of the city where their colleges were located as being intimidating and different from the town from which they came. Obviously, varying levels of access to social capital influenced students' experiences in college as well.

Another important point to note is that while all students possessed varying degrees of access to social capital in their home community and school, this did not always mean access to social capital in their college environments. In fact, most of the time, it did not. More frequently, students who enjoyed high levels of access to social capital in Hamden did not benefit from that same level of access to social capital on their respective college campuses, which often made the transition to higher education more challenging for these students.

Major Finding #2: Relationships play a critical role in the persistence of students from rural backgrounds. For those who live in rural locales, attending all 13 years of school (or more) with the same group of people is not uncommon. In fact, some rural dwellers' parents, and even grandparents, also attended school together. As a result,

the relationships that are formed within the community are often strong and close-knit. Therefore, the importance of relationships to rural students in higher education should not be surprising. Indeed, the importance of relationships to the educational success of students from rural backgrounds became evident through the analysis of data, and thus, is another key finding. Relationships – and the doors these can open for students in terms of access to networks and information – are strongly linked to social capital as well. In this study, relationships were highly influential in the decisions rural students’ made related to their postsecondary pursuits; were frequently instrumental in whether students persisted at a given institution; and played prominent roles in rural students’ academic and social integration and experiences on campuses.

As students began contemplating their higher education pathways, including whether to attend college and where to enroll, many of their decisions were clearly impacted by their relationships. Often, students made decisions about where to attend or not to attend based upon the ways their matriculation at an institution would impact their relationships. In some cases, romantic relationships were factors in where students chose to attend (or transfer, as the case may be). Not surprisingly, students’ relationships with their parents and guardians contributed to their higher education decisions as well; however, the parents of the students in this study did not always contribute in positive ways to their students’ postsecondary pursuits. For example, almost every student mentioned comments made by parents or guardians during his or her college application process, and in almost every instance where a loved one provided input about a student’s college choice, the messages were limiting or discouraging, particularly if the student was

considering an institution that was at a geographic distance from Hamden. The effectiveness of these comments in influencing a given student's college choice differed based upon the particular student, but the comments had an impact, nonetheless, and influenced students' decisions about which colleges to attend, what to study, and other important aspects of their college careers.

While parents were interested and influential in their son's or daughter's life, they were not necessarily as informed or as involved as traditional "helicopter parents" are described as being. According to Somers and Settle (2010), "A helicopter parent (helopat for short) is a mother, father, or even a grandparent who 'hovers' over a student of any age by being involved – sometimes overly so – in student/school, student/employer, or student/societal relationships," (p. 19). Rather than being overly involved, the parents and guardians of the rural students in the current study often possessed limited information about their son's or daughter's higher education plans or experiences, and in the vast majority of cases, the students took responsibility for navigating the various challenges and resources on their respective campuses themselves. Often their friends from home were also not particularly helpful since they were not familiar with the experiences their peers who had gone to college were having. While this was sometimes empowering and a learning opportunity for students, more often, parents' and friends' limited understanding of a student's experiences in college impacted that student's decision to transfer from an institution simply because their family's and friends' "lack of understanding" compounded any feelings of isolation or loneliness they were already feeling at a given institution.

Outside of the influence of their parental relationships, students' experiences, and ultimately persistence, at a given institution were impacted by other relationships within the college setting as well. Specifically, the students who attended the flagship institutions mentioned connections at their respective universities with friends from home who were also attending the flagship institutions. These "built-in networks" helped the students make connections and become more comfortable and familiar with the campuses more quickly and easily. Similarly, students who were able to use their interests from home – whether a co-curricular activity like the student newspaper, an athletic team, or their chosen major – to help them meet others and make friends generally reported more positive experiences and reasons to persist at their chosen schools. Students who maintained particularly strong ties to their homes seemed to have more difficulty making these connections on campus, and either seriously contemplated transferring or did ultimately transfer altogether.

Major Finding #3: Tacit knowledge, or "college knowledge," affects rural students' experiences in higher education. Another major finding of the study involved students' levels of tacit, or "college knowledge." Conley (2010) defines "college knowledge" as the "...privileged information necessary to understanding how college operates as a system and culture" (p. 40). Perhaps this phenomenon goes without saying, but when students have access to more information through their various networks, they are more comfortable with college-related processes, are more likely to have more positive college experiences, and thus, are more likely to persist. The students in this study provided ample evidence to suggest this is the case, and the data analysis

demonstrated that students with higher levels of “college knowledge” were able to navigate the college admissions process more easily and make better and more informed choices related to college. Ultimately, higher levels of “college knowledge” enabled students to acclimate to college life more easily and supported their persistence and success in the college environment. Naturally, because “college knowledge” is impacted by a student’s access to information, the possession of this knowledge is related to social capital as well.

As has been discussed here and in previous chapters, social capital involves one’s access to networks and information. In the context of higher education, an individual with high social capital may have access to considerable information and other individuals who have first-hand knowledge of college admissions, classes, and experiences. In fact, simply by virtue of a student’s parents having participated in higher education, he or she will have been exposed to more networks with more information about college. This was certainly the case in this study. Those students whose parents completed a college degree seemed much more comfortable with the college admissions and college choice processes. For students whose parents or guardians were employed by the local school district – providing them even greater social capital in the community – access to information was even more direct. While there were only two students in the study who did not have a family member employed by the local school district, these students were the two who expressed the most frustration and shared the most challenges related to college admissions, enrollment, and registration. They were the only two in the study whose parents did not complete college degrees as well. Nonetheless, their

“college knowledge” was less than some of their college-going peers from the same high school due to their lower levels of social capital.

Aside from college admissions and enrollment processes, “college knowledge” was also valuable to the students once they arrived on campuses. Students with greater levels of “college knowledge” found themselves not only understanding and adapting to academic expectations more easily but they also began making connections outside of class more quickly. They also perceived that colleges met their needs better than those students with lower levels of “college knowledge.” While Adrienne and Jessica struggled to make friends and connect with others on their respective campuses, their Hamden peers were making friends through various pre-existing networks that were available to them. Whether through stories from their own parents or siblings or conversations with friends from Hamden who were attending the institutions where they matriculated, students with higher levels of social capital used their networks so that they had a sense of what living in a residence hall could entail; what their best opportunities and avenues to make friends would be; how to utilize various resources on campus; and even the best ways to structure their class schedules in order to maximize opportunities for trips home. Students with low levels of social capital were learning all of this on their own with no resources to which they could turn. Built-in networks with access to information not only helped students acclimate to life on campuses but also aided in their persistence at various institutions as well.

Major Finding #4: For students from rural backgrounds, finances underlie many fundamental decisions related to higher education. Numerous studies have

demonstrated the impact of finances on a student's higher education goals, choices, and experiences, particularly from a socioeconomic standpoint (Hu & Hossler, 2000; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, 2000). The students in this study are no different in that respect. Finances have a considerable impact on the experiences of students from rural backgrounds as well; however, just as Holsapple and Posselt (Education Insider News Blog, 2010) found in their study, financial concerns may have a different effect on students from rural backgrounds than for their urban and suburban peers. In the present study, finances affected many of the decisions made by rural students related to their higher education goals, including not only their college choices but their experiences when they arrived on college campuses as well.

As could be predicted, finances were quite influential in the college enrollment decisions of students from rural backgrounds. Those students who came from relatively privileged backgrounds seemed to have more options available to them in the college-choice process. They were able to consider a wider array of colleges and universities, including private and out-of-state schools. In addition, students who were from higher socioeconomic statuses in the study were able to incorporate other factors into their college-choice processes, such as whether a school's values were congruent with their own and what sorts of out-of-classroom opportunities the location of a particular college or university could provide. For those students where finances were a concern, their choices were particularly limited and often resulted in their selection of schools being restricted to those to which they could commute, hold down part-time jobs, and maintain ties to home.

Outside of the college choice decisions that were impacted by finances, students' experiences on campus were affected as well. Some students chose majors that would lead to more lucrative careers – whether they thought they would enjoy the careers or not – based in part on their financial concerns. In addition, students' academic performances could be tied to finances as some students elected not to take advantage of particular academic support programs since they entailed extra costs. For students who needed to work while in college, their limited time outside of class and work prevented them from joining student organizations or engaging in opportunities outside the classroom. Depending upon where a student chose to enroll in college and his or her financial situation, opportunities to visit family and friends from home were limited as well. Several of the students in the study mentioned that the price of gas made frequent trips home cost-prohibitive; on the other hand, for those students who did not have to worry about money, they felt less restrained to attend any college because they knew they would be able to come home when they wanted.

Major Finding #5: Additional barriers to college degree attainment exist for female students from rural backgrounds. While each student in the study was different and had unique experiences related to higher education, there were several commonalities among the female students that are important to note. Therefore, the final finding of the study pertains to the additional barriers female students from rural backgrounds encounter as they pursue college degrees. Most notably, romantic relationships, future plans, and self-confidence all significantly impact female students' progress toward their higher education goals much more so than these factors do for men.

At various points in time, all of the women in the study were involved in relationships with significant others that influenced their higher education decisions and experiences. Although Rick was in a relationship with a woman he met while attending the private university in New York City, their relationship did not impact any of his higher education decisions; in fact, he shared that he ended the relationship after his girlfriend graduated in part because he did not consider there to be long-term potential. Likewise, for the other men in the study, romantic relationships did not appear to play a role or have an impact on any of their higher education experiences. This was not the case for the women. While Lori developed a relationship with a young man at the flagship institution to which she transferred that later ended, Adrienne and Jessica were involved in very serious relationships that impacted many of the decisions they made related to their postsecondary pursuits. Jessica shared that she limited her college options to the local community college so that she could maintain her relationship and continue living with her now-fiancé Chip; likewise, Adrienne transferred schools after she married Mitch, a young man with whom she reconnected during her freshman year of college. The other opportunities these women may have declined or missed out on altogether as a result of their involvement in these relationships are unknown, but they obviously impacted and frequently limited their college experiences and decisions. Additionally, the romantic interests of the women in the study did not achieve the same level of academic success that their female partners did, and thus, could not share in their higher education pursuits as fully as if they were going through the experiences themselves. Lori's boyfriend was not accepted to the flagship institution where she attended; Jessica's

fiancé was not pursuing any postsecondary training or education; and Adrienne's husband quit college and enrolled in the police academy following their marriage. Based on these examples, the romantic relationships of the women in the study obviously impacted their higher education pursuits.

While all of the females in the study had fairly detailed ideas of what they wanted their future, post-college lives to be like, they all had some difficulty in determining the best way for them to go about achieving their long-term goals. The three women indicated they wanted to marry and have children, and each took a considerable amount of ownership for providing financially for her future family as well. However, each struggled with the best route to take in order to achieve these long-term goals. Although Adrienne was the only female who did not change her major altogether, all of the women had misgivings and changed their minds at certain points about the specific occupations they wanted to pursue. These doubts impacted their college careers in significant ways, including the delaying of their degree attainment due to their enrollment in courses that did not count toward their ultimate majors.

Another notable challenge for the women in the study was their lack of confidence in their abilities and preparation for college, both in- and outside the classroom. Every one of the females indicated moments before or during college when she felt intimidated; when she questioned her own goals or ambition; or when her confidence was shaken. Perhaps the men in the study also experienced these same feelings; however, none of them expressed these reservations the way the women did. While all the women were justified in being proud of their achievements and were

perfectly capable of completing their college degrees, they all continued to experience doubts and apprehension during their college careers as to whether they could really be successful.

The young women in this study were particularly impressive and inspiring individuals who overcame significant challenges in order to pursue their higher education goals, in some cases, and there were additional barriers they confronted as they worked toward their college degrees that the men in the study did not mention or acknowledge. Therefore, while rural students already experience unique difficulties in enrolling in, acclimating to, and persisting in higher education when compared to their peers from urban or suburban locales, the challenges of female students from rural backgrounds may be compounded even further.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy

While this study produced several key findings related to students from rural backgrounds and higher education, this topic remains one worthy of study and impacts the field of education in several ways. In fact, a number of implications for research, practice, and policy exist based on the findings of this study. The following sections highlight some of these implications.

Implications for Research

The present study examined the individual experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education through a conceptual framework that involved social capital and critical standpoint theories and adds to the body of research that already exists on this topic in three unique ways. First, this study serves to update existing research

related to students from rural backgrounds and higher education. In addition, because of the study's methodology, the concept of social capital is considered qualitatively, which appears to be somewhat unusual. And, finally, the design of the current study allows for institutional "type" and "fit" to be introduced into the conversation about the enrollment, persistence, experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education, and the ways they perceive a given institution to meet their needs.

In the last 10 years, the number of studies related to students from rural backgrounds and higher education has declined compared to research that took place related to this population and topic in the 20th century. In fact, most of the previous studies related to rural students – in particular, the research that focused on social capital theory and students' place of origin – occurred 10 or more years ago and were primarily quantitative in nature (Coleman, 1988; Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Boyle, 1966; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Isreal, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995; Yan, 2002). This is not to say that more recent studies do not exist; on the contrary, they most certainly do. However, the volume of work related to students from rural locales has decreased over time, and the information regarding rural students that exists today seems to be more often in the form of reports from non-profit organizations or governmental agencies rather than research projects aimed at understanding the numbers found in these reports. Maltzan (2006) acknowledged that more studies are needed regarding rural students and specifically recommended researchers undertake more qualitative studies related to students from rural backgrounds in order to understand their unique challenges and needs better. This study offers more

current and qualitative findings regarding students from rural backgrounds in higher education, and timely and detailed information regarding the situations and needs of rural students on college campuses today are provided. This study also serves to affirm the importance of a continued focus on exploring the individual experiences of rural students in higher education.

Although the conceptual framework for this study allowed the role of social capital to be considered, the qualitative research design and the introduction of critical standpoint theory into the conceptual framework allowed the concept to be considered more in-depth on an individual level. While a number of researchers have explored the impact of social capital on students' educational attainment quantitatively (Coleman, 1988; Isreal, Beaulieu, & Harless, 2001), very few, if any, have employed a qualitative approach. Therefore, some knowledge related to the influence of a rural locale's social capital (or lack thereof) on students' educational attainment as it compares to that of suburban or urban environments is available, but little is known about the way individual levels of social capital within a community impact a student's educational pathway and experiences. This study more fully explored the factors that affect rural students' enrollment, persistence, and experiences in higher education through a social capital lens. As a result, more detailed information about the way these unique factors can affect a student's educational attainment was garnered. In particular, the impact of a student's personal networks both within and outside their families was demonstrated. Although this approach can make generalizations difficult, the qualitative design provides more in-

depth information about individual students' experiences that can be informative to future studies and practices.

Finally, the present study also provided an opportunity to consider the impact of an institutional "type" and "fit" on the enrollment, persistence, and experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education, including how well students perceive an institution to meet their needs; however, this connection to institutional "type" and "fit" was not necessarily the focus of this project. Regardless, because the design of this study focused on students who pursued their higher education goals in varied and unique ways from one rural high school rather than a number of different rural high schools, the influence of an individual's social capital on his or her experiences at a given institution could be explored more fully than a quantitative study or a qualitative study of rural students at one college or university could. In other words, a student may have enrolled in a given institution, persisted at a given institution, experienced the environment of a given institution in certain ways, and perceived a given institution to meet his or her needs based on the student's social capital. Designing and approaching the study by considering students from one high school (rather than multiple rural high schools) provided an opportunity to consider the impact of institutional "type" and institutional "fit" on a student with a given level of social capital in more in-depth ways than a similar study designed in a different way might. In addition, the study could be replicated with other high schools to provide a deeper understanding of how personnel should be preparing students from their school for higher education given students' varying degrees of social capital.

Implications for Practice

Aside from implications related to research regarding students from rural backgrounds, there are a number of implications for practice as well. Namely, there are specific strategies that high schools, colleges, and universities can employ to help ease the transition for students from rural backgrounds and ensure their success in higher education. These include specific programs and opportunities that are offered to students in high school and their parents as well as ways colleges and universities can be attuned to and meet the needs of students from rural backgrounds when they arrive on their campuses.

Almost all of the participants in the study commented about the “new” and “different” situations they encountered in their college environments. While many of them quickly embraced these new and different opportunities, many experienced a form of “culture shock,” which then required some time for them to acclimate. Oberg (1960) defined culture shock as “...anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” and indicated that an individual experiences culture shock when he or she enters a new environment and “all or most of these familiar cues are removed” (p. 142). Almost all students in this study encountered some form of culture shock, but students transferred when they could not acclimate or find the type of experience for which they had hoped. In order to assist with the expectations of students from rural backgrounds when they are considering postsecondary education as well as with their acclimation when they arrive on campus, rural high schools should consider offering a “college-going course” for students who are interested in pursuing higher

education. Not only could students learn more about the enrollment process and important factors to consider in their college choices, but situations and issues with which they may be confronted in the college environment could also be introduced. For example, students in the study mentioned experiencing challenges acclimating to the size of the campus, which was larger than their high school and sometimes, hometown. In addition, several students shared difficulties they faced in relating to students from cultural or ethnic backgrounds that were different from their own. A course or opportunities presented by the high school that exposes students to these situations and topics could lessen the culture shock rural students often encounter when they arrive on campuses and aid in their adjustments to college life. Given the important role families play in rural students' lives and educational attainment, high schools might also consider offering workshops to family members that complement a college-going course for students where higher education is de-mystified and parents are counseled about the best ways to support their students as they pursue post-secondary goals.

To assist with rural students' acclimation to higher education, opportunities exist for colleges and universities to institute programs and practices to support these students as well. A number of students – particularly the female participants – in the present study emphasized the prominent role that loved ones from home played in their college experiences – sometimes to the point that the rural student made enrollment decisions regarding where to attend college or transferred from an institution altogether because she was experiencing pressure from or wanted to be geographically closer to family or significant others. In fact, I was often surprised and sometimes dismayed by the

messages that loved ones conveyed to the students, which often served to discourage or limit a student's educational attainment. Previous research has demonstrated that female students from rural backgrounds, in particular, have lower college completion rates and that often this is a result of relational factors in their lives such as getting married or the need to take care of other family members (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Yan, 2002). Considering the unique characteristics and challenges of students from rural backgrounds – especially female students, colleges and universities that have a significant population of rural students might consider creating support programs or offices tailored toward meeting the specific needs of these students. Targeted outreach to rural students' families and significant others that helps them understand and feel a part of the college or university could prove especially beneficial in helping a student feel supported not only by the institution but by her loved ones from home as well and ultimately assist in her persistence and completion.

Implications for Policy

In addition to implications for research and practice on specific campuses, the findings of the current study provide implications for policy as well. More specifically, the present study's findings require that particular attention be paid to state and federal policies and programs that already affect the college enrollment, persistence, and experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Most notably, the findings have implications for the State of Texas' "Top Ten Percent Rule;" policies of the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board; and policies related to the state and federal governments' educator preparation programs and policies.

Arguably, the policy that has had the most impact on the access to and participation of students from rural high schools in higher education is the State of Texas' "Top Ten Percent Rule" that refers to House Bill (HB) 588, which was passed by the Texas Legislature in 1997 (The Texas Tribune, 2013). "This bill was a response to the 1996 *Hopwood v. Texas* decision by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, which prohibited Texas universities from considering race in their admissions and financial aid decisions" (The Texas Tribune, 2013). In essence, the "Top Ten Percent Rule" guarantees admission to any public institution in the state for students who graduate in the top ten percent of their high schools' graduating classes (The Texas Tribune, 2013). The original intent of the bill was to increase ethnic diversity among state colleges and universities in Texas (The Texas Tribune, 2013). Since the law's implementation more than 15 years ago, a number of studies have been conducted to determine the full impact of the law on the representation of students from diverse backgrounds on college campuses. The study conducted by Long, Saenz, and Tienda (2010) specifically considered the impact of the law on the socioeconomic and geographic diversity at the state's flagship institutions. They found that at The University of Texas at Austin (UT):

...the new policy increases the representation at UT of students from high-poverty schools, those with greater shares of minority students, those located in rural areas as well as small and midsize cities, and schools located in regions that traditionally were underrepresented at UT. (p. 101)

Other studies, including UT's internal annual report on the impact of the Top Ten Percent Rule, have indicated the law has had little influence on improving the number of students

from rural high schools at flagship institutions (The University of Texas at Austin, 2009). Likewise, Texas A&M University appears not to have noticed an increase in representation across high schools, in part because the institution had historically drawn from a larger pool of high schools. Regardless of whether the Top Ten Percent Rule has truly impacted the access and participation rates of students from rural locales, many – particularly parents of lower-ranked students from higher-performing high schools – argue that the students who are admitted under the Top Ten Percent Rule and who are from smaller high schools or towns are less prepared when they arrive on campus (Long, Saenz, and Tienda, 2010). This argument is worthy of discussion and consideration, particularly in light of policy implications. While the Top Ten Percent Rule may be having positive impacts on access and participation of students from a more diverse array of rural high schools, this may not be helpful with student persistence and completion if there is not also adequate support at the high school or college levels for the preparation of students from rural backgrounds for college-level work. Although previous studies have not found that students are academically under-prepared for the coursework at the state’s flagship institutions (Fletcher & Mayer, 2013; The University of Texas at Austin, 2009), data from the current study demonstrated that students from small towns struggle socially to acclimate to their new college environments. Perhaps additional policies to ensure a truly “level playing field” for students from all backgrounds who not only are admitted to but choose to attend a state flagship institution would be appropriate.

One of the first steps to ensure adequate and equal preparation for students from all backgrounds who enter higher education is to ensure all high schools are equipped to

support this preparation. This involves work on both the part of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) as well as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). According to their website, “The mission of the TEA is to provide leadership, guidance and resources to help schools meet the educational needs of all students and prepare them for success in the global economy” (Texas Education Agency, 2013a). To this end, the agency has a number of programs targeted toward rural high schools, such as the Rural Technology Pilot (RTECH) program that provides funding to support technology-based supplemental instruction at participating schools and the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), which gives local school districts greater flexibility in their use of federal resources that help them meet their particular academic needs more effectively (Texas Education Agency, 2013b; Texas Education Agency, 2013d). Likewise, “The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) provides leadership and coordination for the Texas higher education system,” according to its website (2013a). The only rural references found in a review of the THECB website are in relation to a rural rotation program for medical students and other programs geared toward physicians and nurses to encourage them to practice in rural locales upon completion of their academic training. While the programs and policies that are geared toward rural populations at these two state agencies are noteworthy, none of the ones mentioned address the needs identified in this study to assist students from rural backgrounds in pursuing and completing their educational goals. The THECB has been focusing on the *Closing the Gaps Plan*, which centers on closing the educational gaps in college participation, success, excellence, and research in higher education in Texas. While the

most recent Progress Report indicates some progress has been made in “closing the gaps” for African American and Hispanic student participation in higher education, the number of white students enrolling in higher education in Texas has dropped for the third straight year (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2013b). The program does not specifically measure the progress of students based on place of residence, which would be helpful. In addition, the THECB indicates support on its website for a number of P-16 initiatives, including state and regional P-16 Councils as well as the Vertical Alignment Project, both of which are designed to support in the seamless transition of students from high school to postsecondary institutions and careers. However, once again, there are not unique programs tailored specifically for rural high schools, and often the districts represented appear to be located in large, urban areas. Increased attention, focus, and coordination between TEA and THECB with policies specifically targeted toward students graduating from rural high schools with higher education goals could have a substantially positive impact on these students’ success.

Finally, the current study provides a number of implications regarding state and federal educator preparation programs and policies. Perhaps one of the best-known federal programs that is preparing future educators is Teach for America (TFA). “Teach for America’s mission is to build the movement to eliminate educational inequity by developing such leaders,” who will help to close the educational quality gap between students from low-income backgrounds and their wealthier peers (Teach For America, 2013). To this end, TFA:

...recruit[s] committed recent college graduates and professionals of all backgrounds to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools...train[s] and develop[s] these corps members so that they have an immediate positive impact on their students...[And] foster[s] the leadership of...alumni as they address this problem from all sectors. (Teach For America, 2013)

While a number of TFA corps members teach in urban schools, a considerable number are placed in rural locales and have made substantial impacts in those areas. For example, in 2011, four of the 13 classrooms that achieved the most single-year growth on the New Mexico state assessment for their respective grades and subjects were led by Teach For America corps members, and all four of these corps members taught at rural high schools serving low-income students (Teach For America, 2011). Given these statistics, think of the difference that could be made in educating students in rural locales, preparing them for college-level work, and encouraging them to pursue higher education if more TFA corps members were placed in rural settings. Fortunately, the number of teachers assigned to rural locales appears to be growing with more placements now in Appalachia, Kentucky, and North Carolina, to name a few (Rhodes, 2012; Snidow, 2012). Although Teach For America offers a number of placements for corps members in Texas, most are in metropolitan or urban areas, including Dallas-Ft. Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. Some placements are also available in the Rio Grande Valley, which is a more rural setting, but there appear to be no opportunities in East Texas, an area of the state with a considerable number of small towns and rural areas and with particularly low levels of educational attainment. Placements of Teach For America corps members in

this area could have profound affects on improving the college-readiness for students from this region. Aside from Teach For America, TEA and the federal government also offer several loan forgiveness or loan repayment programs for teachers who meet certain criteria and teach in designated subject areas at qualified, low-income schools throughout the state with specific teacher shortages (Texas Education Agency, 2013c). While these policies and programs are noteworthy, they too should be expanded further to broaden the types and number of schools that are included, and information about these programs should be more widely publicized so that greater numbers of potential educators are made aware of these incentives. Many of these policies are excellent starting points to address some of the critical needs in rural education, but all deserve expansion in order to have a more significant impact on the higher education attainment of students from rural backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

The number of studies related to students from rural communities and higher education has diminished in recent years; however, the need to study this population has not decreased. In fact, the number of individuals living in rural areas continues to be significant (Beeson & Strange, 2000) as are the educational inequalities in these communities when compared to suburban or urban areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b). While this study attempted to fill in some of the gaps in the research by examining the factors affecting the enrollment, persistence, experiences, and perceptions of students from rural communities in higher education, additional areas to explore became evident during data collection and analysis, including the identity

development of students from rural backgrounds and its impact on higher education attainment; other internal and external influences on the educational experiences of rural students; and the influence of social capital and rural students' higher education pursuits.

Several researchers have used the term “rurality” to describe the identity of individuals from rural backgrounds and the influence of this identity on educational attainment (Atkin, 2003; Maltzan, 2006). Even more have called for the need to consider individuals from rural backgrounds as their own ethnic group (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Because students from rural backgrounds are often part of the white majority on campuses, their unique backgrounds, challenges, and needs in higher education are sometimes ignored. For example, unlike many of their white suburban or urban peers but like members of some ethnic groups, many rural students are discouraged from leaving their home communities to pursue educational opportunities for fear of social exclusion by their families and friends. As a result, some individuals place self-imposed limitations on their educational options or choose not to pursue higher education at all in order to maintain these relationships and their social standing within their homes or communities. Therefore, additional research regarding this notion of “rurality as identity” is recommended and needed in the higher education literature so that the development of this identity and its impact on the educational aspirations and outcomes of individuals from these communities could be better understood.

Aside from “rurality as identity,” a number of internal and external factors impact rural students' educational pathways and successes as well. For the purposes of this study, “internal” refers to a student's own abilities and capacities, and “external” refers to

outside forces that may exert influence on a student's educational attainments. Examples of internal influences on rural students' educational pursuits could include the personal qualities of a student, such as a focus on achievement or his or her level of resiliency. Could these qualities influence rural students' educational attainment more than others, and if so, how can these qualities be cultivated to support students from rural backgrounds as they work to achieve their higher education goals? The unique situations of female students from rural backgrounds deserve more attention as well; obviously, these individuals come with pressures and challenges unlike their male counterparts, but more research is needed to understand this phenomenon better. Aside from these "internal" factors, a number of potential external influences exist. These could include the particular location of a rural community in which a student is reared. For example, do students from rural communities in the southern United States have different experiences or needs from students in rural communities in other areas of the country, such as Appalachia or the northeast or the far west? Similarly, once a student from a rural background arrives on a college campus, the "type" of institution may also have an impact on a student's experiences and persistence. Do certain campus "types" support students from rural backgrounds better than others, and if so, which are those and what types of programs do they offer that have a positive impact? Limited, if any, research currently exists for many of these factors that could influence rural students' educational attainment, and understanding these internal and external factors more could have an impact on the college enrollment, persistence, experiences, and perceptions of students from rural backgrounds.

This study used social capital theory as part of the conceptual framework through which the data was considered, and while there were specific findings related to social capital and its role in rural students' educational attainment, additional research is warranted. While this study was qualitative and additional research related to the impact of social capital on individuals is appropriate, defining and measuring social capital remains a challenge, as Putnam (2001) pointed out. In particular, social capital is most often considered in terms of a family's, neighborhood's, community's, state's, or nation's social capital, which is not surprising given that social capital can be considered a "social" good; however, social capital can and should be considered on an individual level given that one person may belong to multiple networks and organizations, both formally and informally. Therefore, a final recommendation for future research involves continued discussion and study related to social capital – its definition and its impact on individual outcomes, particularly with regard to educational attainment. Perhaps with more precise measurements of social capital for individuals and families, the issues presented here could be considered in new, different, or more robust ways and have a more profound impact on the educational outcomes of students from rural communities.

Reflections on My Role as Researcher

One of the reasons I selected portraiture as the methodology for this study was the opportunity this approach provides for the researcher to insert herself more fully into the research. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) specifically point this out when they write that portraiture "...resonates with the echoes of the researcher's autobiographical journey – those aspects of her own familial, cultural, developmental, and educational

background that she can relate (either consciously or unconsciously) to the intellectual themes of the work” (p. 185). Having been reared in a rural environment and confronted with some challenges adjusting to the college environment myself, I was particularly interested in the higher education journeys of other students from rural backgrounds. Not only did I have first-hand experience as a student from a small town navigating a college campus, but I had also observed students from my hometown and other rural locales struggle to achieve their higher education goals. These experiences and observations motivated me to pursue this topic of study, and while I believe my personal knowledge enhanced my role as researcher, there are times when my own vantage point may have created some biases in the study as well.

Generally, my personal knowledge of growing up in a small town and first-hand experiences of attending college immediately thereafter were beneficial as I approached the research. Most notably, my “insider knowledge” provided credibility for me when recruiting and visiting with study participants. Even though many of the students did not know me or may have never heard my name since I had not lived in the town for almost 20 years, the fact that I had grown up there and attended the same high school from which they graduated seemed to make me a credible and trustworthy source to them almost immediately. They seemed willing to share a considerable amount of information, much of which was quite personal. In fact, one of the students remarked after reading a draft of the portrait I had written about her:

Wow! I had totally forgotten the extent to which I told you my story! Don’t get me wrong, I’m not upset or ashamed, just a little shocked that I would tell all the

juicy details to basically a stranger. You must have done a good job making me feel comfortable.

This type of reaction was not necessarily unusual; the students who participated in the study generally trusted me with the information they shared, which provided richer portraits and more complete accounts of their experiences related to higher education.

Aside from the trust I established with the students, they also seemed to take a genuine interest in my research and in me, which resulted in their full participation in the study; all of the students committed to and participated in two interviews and all reviewed and provided feedback on drafts of their portraits. As I employed the snowball method to identify other potential study participants, they were especially helpful and quick to suggest names of others they knew from their high school who fit the criteria I had developed for the participants. Each time I met with or communicated with the students in the study, they would ask me about the progress I was making on the dissertation, what the next steps in the process were, and if there was anything more they could do to help. Interestingly, all of the students seemed genuinely interested in my completion of the degree program in which I was enrolled, just as I was in theirs. Although I feel they truly were concerned about my own academic success as a fellow small town high school graduate, I also believe they were cooperative and interested because they felt as though the topic was an important and worthy one. Since many of them had experienced their own successes and challenges in higher education as a result of their small town roots, their interest in the subject matter was particularly keen.

Although I believe that my “insider knowledge” was more of an advantage than a hindrance, I recognize that my own experiences with higher education as someone from a small town myself may have created biases that influenced the way I approached the study or in the way I interpreted the data. While I made every effort to design the study and phrase the questions I asked of participants as objectively and systematically as possible, the opportunity for researcher bias remained. There may have been times when I anticipated answers to certain questions or the particular experiences of participants, and these expectations may have inadvertently impacted the information that was elicited from the students or in the way I analyzed the data. Despite efforts to limit my own personal experiences from influencing the study, the possibility remains that bias has played a role. Fortunately, portraiture allows for the researcher and her experiences to be more present than other methodologies do; however, attempts were made to limit this influence as much as possible.

Conclusion

The students I had the opportunity to meet and get to know through my research were smart, motivated, and inspiring young people. While their lived experiences provided data to help answer the research questions of this study, they contributed to the larger body of research available on students from rural backgrounds as well. These young men and women also reinforced my original instinct that there are some amazing students from rural backgrounds overcoming challenges of which many are unaware because the students often present themselves as a part of the white majority on

campuses, if they make it there at all, and that oftentimes, the social capital they do or do not possess can make a difference.

Most importantly, however, the experiences of these students support the notion that students from rural backgrounds in higher education remain a topic worthy of further study. I look forward to continuing to learn from both the students who were a part of this study and to future research in the field from others as they continue to “remember where they came from.”

Appendix A: Prior Field Study Interview Protocol

PROTOCOL...

- Background information about me!
 - Graduated from high school in 1993
 - Education: Southern Methodist University, Indiana University, University of Texas at Austin
 - Professional experience: worked at a number of institutions; currently employed at UT in Office of the Dean of Students
 - *Entire life have noticed that students from hometown go off to college and then return without finishing at the school where they started*
 - *Since I am beginning to think about what my dissertation will be, the idea of looking at students from rural communities who go on to four-year institutions crossed my mind.*
 - *This is an exploratory study since I have one year of coursework left..so, may be following up in the coming year! :-)*
- Would like to visit with you today, get to know you, learn more about you...
- Is it okay if I tape the interview?
- Following today's interview, I'll send you a copy of transcript for your review as well...then maybe we meet again in a month to six weeks to check in and see how things are going?
- Also want you to feel welcome sending me thoughts, comments, etc. about your experiences over the course of the semester.
- Could I add you as a friend on facebook and use some of that content in my research as well?
- Research protocol...
 - Consent form
 - Some of the information I'll be asking you will be fairly personal. Don't want you to feel uncomfortable but will help my study
 - Will be using pseudonyms for everything...name of high school, name of university, student, etc.
 - Will be happy to share copy of final paper following fall semester

PERSONAL INFORMATION...

1. **Classification:**
2. **Major:** What is your major? How did you select this major?
3. **Financial Aid:** Did you receive any type of financial aid to attend this institution? If so, what type(s) of financial aid did you receive?

4. **Co-Curricular Activities:** Did you get involved with activities outside of your classes in college? If so, what were the activities?

5. **Living Situation:**

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND INFORMATION...

1. When did you graduate from high school?
2. What was your rank in your graduating class?
3. What types of classes did you take in high school?
4. Did you feel academically prepared for college when you graduated from high school?
5. What messages about college were you given by the high school?
6. How did you select the college you enrolled in following high school? When did you decide to go there?
7. Did you visit with anyone (teachers, counselors, etc.) in high school as you made your college decision? If so, who was that? What type of advice did you seek?

FAMILY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION...

1. How many siblings do you have?
2. What is your parents' marital status?
3. How many times did you move growing up?

ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE...

Obligations and Expectations

1. What were your father's expectations about your attending college (if applicable)?
2. What were your mother's expectations about your attending college (if applicable)?
3. What were your own expectations about attending college?

Information Channels

1. Prior to attending XYZ institution, did you know anyone who was a student there? If so, did you have conversations with this person? What sort of information did he or she share about the institution that was helpful to you in your transition?

Norms and Effective Sanctions

1. Was the college environment similar to or different from the town you moved from? How so?

MISCELLANEOUS QUESTIONS...

1. What has surprised you about the college environment?
2. What did you do when things got stressful in college? How did you know what to do?

Appendix B: Student Participant Recruitment E-Mail

Hello! My name is Melinda Sutton, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Administration at The University of Texas at Austin. I am writing to request your assistance with a research study I am conducting that explores the postsecondary education experiences of students from small towns. The goal of my research is to produce short, written “portraits” of each student.

A select group of students has been asked to participate in this study, which will include several interactions with the researcher over the course of two to three months. Please know that the identity of student participants will remain confidential, and all identifying information will be masked to protect the identity of individuals. Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and all participants can choose not to participate at any point without any adverse consequences to their current or future relationship with the researcher or The University of Texas at Austin.

Individuals who participate in the study will be asked to take part in two individual interviews. The first interview will last approximately 90-120 minutes and will take place in the student’s current environment (on a college/university campus, in a work setting, or at home). This will occur at a time and location that is convenient to the student participant. The second interview will take place approximately four to six weeks following the initial interview at a time and location of the student participant’s choosing. The second interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

In addition to the interviews, student participants will be asked to allow the researcher to observe them in their current environments for approximately 1-2 hours (not necessarily consecutive). Observations could occur during a guided tour of the campus conducted by the student, while sharing a meal with the student and his/her friends or family, or by attending a student organization meeting or athletic event with the student.

As mentioned previously, this study attempts to provide insight into the experiences of students from small towns who pursue postsecondary education. Through this research, I hope to provide helpful information to high school personnel and college administrators as they support students from small towns pursuing their higher education goals.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions, please feel free to contact me via e-mail or phone. In addition, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have complaints, concerns, or questions about the research, please contact Jody Jensen, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 512.232.2685 or the Office of Research Support at 512.471.8871.

Thank you for your consideration.

Melinda J. Sutton
mjsutton@austin.utexas.edu | 512.560.7074

Appendix C: Consent Form

Remembering where you came from: Portraits of rural students in higher education

Conducted by: Melinda Sutton of The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Educational Administration

Telephone: 512.560.7074

E-mail: mjsutton@austin.utexas.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Edwin Sharpe of The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Educational Administration

Telephone: 512.475.8577

E-mail: esharpe@mail.utexas.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent for your records.

The purpose of this study is to provide in-depth portraits of current college students who entered higher education in the fall following their graduation from a high school located in a rural town more than 50 miles from Dallas, Texas. Approximately four to six participants will be included in the study.

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in one 90- to 120-minute interview and one 60- to 90-minute interview along with one to two hours of observation by the researcher.

Total estimated time to participate in study is approximately 4 hours.

The risk associated with this study is no greater than everyday life.

Benefits of being in the study include providing valuable information to educators to help other students from rural high schools attend college and successfully pursue a degree.

Compensation:

- There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

Interviews will be audio recorded and saved so that no personally identifying information is visible on them. The recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer and will be erased after they are transcribed. The recordings will only be heard for research purposes by the investigator and her associates.

The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.

The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin and members of the Institutional Review Board have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions about the study, please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation, call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of the previous page.

If you would like to obtain information about the research study, have questions, concerns, complaints, or wish to discuss problems about a research study with someone unaffiliated with the study, please contact the IRB Office at 512.471.8871 or Jody Jensen, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 512.232.2685. Anonymity, if desired, will be protected to the extent possible. As an alternative method of contact, an email may be sent to orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu or a letter sent to IRB Administrator, P.O. Box 7426, Mail Code A 3200, Austin, TX 78713.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Student Participant Demographic Information

Instructions: Please complete this form to the best of your ability. All information will be kept confidential. Thank you!

GENERAL INFORMATION

Preferred Pseudonym: _____

ACADEMIC INFORMATION

Year of High School Graduation: _____ Rank in Graduating Class: _____

Student Organization Involvement in High School: _____

Colleges/Universities applied to: _____

Colleges/Universities attended/-ing: _____

Major(s): _____

College Grade Point Average: _____ Credits Completed: _____

Involvement in College: _____

FAMILY INFORMATION

Father's Occupation: _____

Father's Education Level: _____

Mother's Occupation: _____

Mother's Education Level: _____

Sibling Ages: _____

Appendix E: Student Interview Protocol

INTRODUCTION

Interviewer: Thank you again for agreeing to be part of this research study. As you know, I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Administration program at The University of Texas at Austin, and I am conducting this research for my dissertation. My study centers around the higher education experiences of students from small towns. Before we begin with the interview, I would like to review the consent form with you and answer any questions that you might have about the study and your participation.

CONSENT

Review consent form and obtain participant signature. Turn on digital recorder and begin recording interview.

BEGIN INTERVIEW

Interviewer: As I shared in the introductory e-mail, this interview will last between 90 and 120 minutes. I would like to ask you some questions, and I will be audio recording this interview.

Interview questions will be divided into the following categories:

I. PERSONAL INFORMATION

- a. What is your classification?
- b. What is your major? How did you select this major?
- c. Did you receive any type of financial aid to attend this institution? If so, what type(s) of financial aid did you receive?
- d. Did you get involved with activities outside of your classes in college? If so, what were the activities?
- e. Where do you currently live?

II. FAMILY INFORMATION

- a. Tell me about your immediate family.
- b. Father...
 1. What does your father do?
 2. What is the highest level of education he achieved?
 3. What were your father's expectations about you attending college?
- c. Mother...
 1. What does your mother do?
 2. What is the highest level of education she achieved?
 3. What were your mother's expectations about you attending college?
- d. Siblings...
 1. How many siblings do you have?

2. What are they currently doing?
3. Did they complete high school? If so, did they go to college and where? If not, what are they doing now?

III. COMMUNITY INFORMATION

- a. How long have you/did you live in the community where you went to high school?
- b. Describe your time in this community. What did you like? What did you find challenging?
- c. Are you a member of a faith group in the community? If so, which one? How did you become involved in this group?
- d. Are there organizations outside of school of which you or your family are members?

III. ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

- a. High school...
 1. When did you graduate from high school?
 2. What was your rank in your graduating class?
 3. What types of classes did you take in high school?
 4. What kinds of rules did your parents have regarding your schoolwork and activities in high school?
 5. Did you feel academically prepared for college when you graduated from high school?
 6. What messages about college were you given by your high school?
- b. College access/enrollment...
 1. How did you select the college you enrolled in following high school? When did you decide to go there?
 2. Did you visit with anyone (teachers, counselors, etc.) in high school as you made your college decision? If so, who was that? What type of advice did you seek?
 3. Prior to attending XYZ institution, did you know anyone who was a student there? If so, did you have conversations with this person? What sort of information did he or she share about the institution that was helpful to you in your transition?

IV. COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

- a. Pre-college information...
- b. First semester...
 1. Tell me about your first semester in college.
- c. General questions...
 1. Was the college environment similar to or different from the town you moved from? How so?

2. Describe your academic experiences so far, including choosing a major(s), performance in your classes, your successes and struggles in academic work, and your satisfaction with your major(s).
3. Describe your social and out-of-class experiences so far, including your network of friends, involvement in any student organizations and clubs, and your dating life.
4. Tell me about a stressful time for you in college. What did you do when things got stressful? How did you know what to do?
5. How often do you go home? Why is this?
6. Have you ever thought about leaving this institution or transferring? If so, when? Why haven't you left?

V. FINAL COMMENTS

Interviewer: Is there anything you feel will be important for me to know about that we haven't already covered here?

CLOSING

Interviewer: Thank you so much for taking time to visit with me regarding your high school and college experiences. Do you have any questions for me at this point? The next step in my study is to transcribe this interview and begin developing your "portrait." I would like to visit with you once more to clarify any questions that still remain or to follow up on issues that we discussed during our time together today. Would that be okay? I will also want you to review the portrait I develop for factual errors. Thank you once again for your time and help.

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