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SUMMER MELT OF RURAL FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

A Dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the Department of Higher Education The University of Mississippi

by

D. FINÉE RUFFIN

May 2020

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## ABSTRACT

For many rural students, the future seems limited, and immediate dreams of college attendance appear to be just out of reach. Rural college bound students are often faced with parental figures with lower educational attainment than the national average, geographic isolation, declining community infrastructure, and negative social dynamics tied to race, class, and income inequality. In this qualitative case study, I will examine the perceived barriers which contribute to summer melt of rural students. *Summer melt* is a term applied to students that apply to college, are accepted to college, but melt away from the enrollment cycle in the summer months prior to the fall term for various reasons (Castleman & Page, 2014). Specifically, this study will seek to understand what factors influenced college bound students in a rural, eight-county district in southeastern Mississippi to elect not to attend college the fall semester after high school graduation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Summer Melt of Rural First-Year Students

Manuscript One

D. Finée Ruffin

## **Problem of Practice**

A significant portion of Americans define the success of a recent high school graduate, at least in part, on their immediate plans of college enrollment (Norris, 2014). Seven in ten Americans believe that a college education is essential and linked directly to higher lifetime earnings (Newport & Busteed, 2013). In many ways, both socially and culturally, a college degree has become associated with the *American Dream*. Coined by the writer James Truslow Adams in 1931, the notion of the *American Dream* was founded in an idealist vision “of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (p. iix). The understanding of the *American Dream* has experienced modification over time, however, maintaining the connection to higher education has been consistently linked to achieving it.

Higher education’s capacity to support the *American Dream* is evident in the ability to assemble both economic mobility, social mobility, and in its support of the production of a democratic and educated citizenry (Labaree, 1997). The impact of college attendance is demonstrated through the link between increased educational attainment and higher lifetime earning potential (Tamborini, Kim, & Sakamoto, 2015). With increased earning potential, individual economic and social mobility is positioned to grow over time.

## **College Participation Rate**

Despite data and experience to support the impact of a college education and the pursuit of a better life, many high school graduates choose not to pursue college enrollment. College participation rate is the percentage of all eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds enrolled in two-year

and four-year colleges or universities (National Center for Education and Statistics, 2010). The total college participation rate increased from 32% in 1990 to 40% in 2013 (National Center for Education and Statistics, 2016). More recently the National Center for Education and Statistics noted that from 2003 to 2013, the total participation rate increased by two percentage points. In 2013, the college enrollment rate at four-year colleges was 28% compared with 12% at two-year colleges (2016).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that three-million people ages sixteen to twenty-four graduated from high school between January and October 2016. It is estimated that 69.7 percent, enrolled in college by October 2016 (2017). The remaining thirty percent of high school graduates chose not to enroll and participate in college. Included in this group are students who graduate from high school, apply to college, are accepted, but never attend college. Of particular interest for this study are the students that fit the prior description, but make the choice not to attend college in the summer months between high school graduation and the start of the fall term. The term summer melt has been applied to this group of students (Castleman & Page, 2014). *Summer melt* is a term applied to students that apply to college, are accepted to college, but melt away from the enrollment cycle in the summer months prior to the fall term for various reasons (Castleman & Page, 2014). In order to provide clarification for the definition of summer melt as used in this study alternative definitions should be addressed. The secondary education system defines “summer melt” as the learning loss suffered by students over a summer break (Reed, 2017). It is important to understand that there are two definitions in the focused field of education, however, the definitions are applied differently for secondary and postsecondary institutions.

Summer melt is a common problem facing higher education institutions. Among low-income and first-generation students, summer melt has a dramatic effect. Students with little assistance often do not make it through the processes and deadlines surrounding first time college attendance (Castleman & Page, 2014). Many high-school graduates who have been accepted to college and say they plan to enroll stop their pursuit of higher education when they do not obtain sufficient financial aid, miss administrative deadlines, or lack the support from family and friends throughout the processes surrounding college enrollment (Castleman & Page, 2014).

Getting to college requires both the technical and emotional capacity to cope and adapt within the path to attendance. Financial aid can often be confusing and create an uncertainty for potential students while colleges validate qualifications and finalize aid packages (Norris, 2014). Many low-income students are first-generation college students, and parental guidance is limited in their path to attending college. These students move through the payment of fees, securing housing, and enrolling for classes without the guidance of a parent or guardian (Castleman & Page, 2015). This lack of support can lead to self-doubt and fear, creating emotional barriers to taking the next step of college attendance (Castleman & Page, 2012).

### **Rural Student College Participation in Higher Education**

The United State Department of Agriculture (2016) explains the identification of rural regions as

The study conditions in nonmetropolitan (non-metro) areas, defined on the basis of counties. Counties are the standard building block for collecting economic data and for conducting research to track and explain regional population and economic trends. Non-metro counties include some combination of open countryside, rural towns (places with

fewer than 2,500 people), and urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas).

As of July 2015, rural locales represented 14 percent of the population, and 72 percent of the nation's land area (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2017).

Residents of rural locales typically experience lower household incomes, lower levels of educational attainment, limited access to health care providers, and only remote access to colleges and universities (Rural School and Community Trust, 2014).

College participation rate statistics reveal that college participation varies by race, gender, and location. High school students from rural areas are among the population sub-groups experiencing lower rates of college participation. Studies reveal that students who graduate from high schools located in the South, in a rural community, or in a small town are less likely to attend college than their peer groups in other settings (Norris, 2014; Rural School and Community Trust, 2014). The Rural School and Community Trust reports a significant gap in college participation rates between graduates of rural low-income/low-minority schools where just 48 percent enrolled in college in the fall of 2013, as opposed to high-income/low-minority suburban schools, where 73 percent of students enrolled in college (2014).

**Mississippi students.** The state of Mississippi currently has the fourth largest rural population in the United States, with 52 percent of the population identified as living in a rural location (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2017). Mississippi is known for its rurality and its deep roots in an agricultural economy. Nationally, Mississippi has historically rated low in educational attainment, median income, and lack of upward mobility (Rural School and Community Trust, 2014). However, in 2014, Mississippi high school

graduates applied at two and four-year colleges at a rate of 72 percent (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016).

### **Mississippi Higher Education**

Within Mississippi, there are two organized forms of public higher education. The first is the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, which as a constitutionally created organization represents the eight four-year public universities. These universities are overseen by a governing body responsible for policy and financial oversight (Mississippi Public Universities, 2018). The Mississippi Community and Junior Colleges compose the second form of public higher education. This system is comprised of fifteen community colleges operated autonomously by legislative mandate through a locally appointed board of trustees (Young & Ewing, 1978). Each community college serves a prescribed area of the state identified by county jurisdictions. In the academic year 2017, Mississippi community colleges served more than 74,000 Mississippians through credit-based learning (Gilbert & Smith, 2018).

Jones County Junior College (JCJC) is an open-door, two-year institution, granting Associate in Arts degrees, Associate in Applied Science degrees, Career and Technical certificates, Adult Education credentials, and Workforce credentials (Jones County Junior College, 2018). The college district includes eight Mississippi counties: Clarke, Covington, Greene, Jasper, Jones, Perry, Smith, and Wayne (2018). Appendix A offers a geographical representation of the JCJC eight county district. The U.S. Census Bureau classifies each of the eight counties served by Jones County Junior College as rural (2017). Rural is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area (2017). Urban is defined as having a population of 2500 or more (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Within the eight

counties, there are twenty-two high schools that serve as feeder schools to the college in traditional high school graduate applicants (Jones County Junior College, 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the fall 2018 enrollment cycle, over 5000 admissions applications were submitted to Jones County Junior College. Within that application submission, an estimated 2800 were identified as being submitted by recent high school graduates. Of the estimated 2800 applications, roughly 1900 of those were submitted from a high school graduate located within the college's eight-county district. Of those 1900 applicants, only an estimated 714 students attended JCJC in the fall of 2018 (Jones County Junior College, 2018). Many of those applicants who did not attend JCJC participated in no college or university in the fall semester after high school graduation.

This research project seeks to identify the variables reported by students that account for the summer melt by rural first-year students who applied to attend Jones County Junior College after high school graduation but did not participate in any college or university in the fall following high school graduation. Better identification and understanding of these variables are necessary to create programs and initiatives that assist rural students through the summer months following high school graduation and lead to an increase in student college participation. At this time, there is limited literature regarding the summer melt in rural first-year students.

Manuscript one is the first of three manuscripts presented to discuss this study. Having introduced and identified the problem of practice to be addressed, manuscript one continues with a statement of positionality, articulation of connection to the principles of the Carnegie Project

on the Educational Doctorate, description of the conceptual framework utilized, review of the literature, discussion of methodology, and concluding statement.

### **Statement of Positionality**

The problem of low college participation by rural high school graduates is personally significant to me. The following section describes the ways my personal and professional experiences, as well as my future career plans, impact how I view this problem of practice.

#### **Personal Positionality**

I was born and raised in a rural Mississippi community where the closest town had a population of just over 300 people, and the most common profession was a self-employed farmer. I am the youngest of four children, each of us being the first generation in our family to complete post-secondary degrees. Three of the siblings, including me, have Master's degrees with coursework toward terminal degrees, and the fourth and oldest sibling has her Bachelors of Science in Nursing.

Attending college was a topic of discussion in our home as far back as I can remember. However, college choice was not a topic that garnered discussion in conversations about college. The assumption that we would all attend our local community college was common knowledge and the established plan for higher education. The local community college was a critical part of my journey toward college success and offered me an affordable and realistic option for postsecondary education.

College participation provided access for me to travel the United States with student organizations and course-based internships that otherwise would not have been available to a girl from small-town Mississippi. After completion of college, I married a rural Mississippi farm boy that also attended a Mississippi community college and went on to complete a Bachelor's degree



in Civil Engineering. After living and working in Dallas, Texas, Denver, Colorado, and Charleston, South Carolina, we chose to move back to the rural farm town where I grew up. Today we are working and raising our child in the same rural farm environment that we both understood and appreciated as children.

### **Professional Positionality**

Higher education was not a professional intention that I considered before it found me. My early professional experience was in economic and business development and public relations. However, once I saw a connection to higher education with my professional background, I found the place that I could make a difference and offer help to the student and child that I use to be.

For the last 12 years, I have found my professional home at Jones County Junior College located in Ellisville, Mississippi. I started as a full-time instructor in the business division, moved into the role of Vice President of Marketing and Administrative Services for seven years and most recently taken the position of Executive Vice President. In my current role, it is one of my allocated responsibilities to lead the team of enrollment specialists in recruiting and onboarding high school graduates.

### **Future Career Positionality**

In consideration of the future, my interest in rural student college participation is vital because I plan to work in the Mississippi community college environment as long as I can add value to the institution, the community, and those students we serve. From a personal perspective, I am vested in this research because I am the mother of a rural student. I want to ensure that the path to college participation is one paved with potential and realistic achievement for her and those like her.

## **Assumptions**

My professional and personal experiences guide my concepts and ideas regarding this research study in various ways. The added participation in doctoral studies within the area of higher education has linked an advanced understanding of rural high school graduates and subsequent college participation. I have identified three general assumptions throughout the initial development of my problem of practice. My first assumption is that the rural high school graduate that applied to attend college but did not attend college in the fall semester following high school completion maintains a desire to attend college. Numerous activities in preparation of attending college take place in the months between high school graduation and the fall of a student's freshman year of college. Identification of a common set of barriers would lend assistance to addressing the lack of college participation. Secondly, I presume that a common set of variables will be revealed that produce logical reasons for the lack of continuation in college participation by rural students. I suspect that those variables will be identified as both direct and indirect to the student population. Finally, I propose that this study will inform ways to improve rural student college participation at Jones County Junior College. I anticipate that this study will support the development of new policies and approaches to assisting a rural student through the process of becoming a participant in college at Jones County Junior College.

### **Link to the Principles of the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate**

This research project is being conducted in part to fulfill the requirements of a higher education doctoral program affiliated with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). As part of that affiliation, dissertations for the higher education doctoral program must address CPED's three principles for scholarship: equity, ethics, and social justice (CPED, n.d.). This research project identifies the lack of equity surrounding Mississippi rural high school

graduate's continuation into college participation in the fall following high school graduation as a focused problem of practice. Statistical data and workforce demand support the need for more college participation within the state of Mississippi to encourage social mobility and economic stability. In addition to social mobility and economic stability, ensuring that there is equal access to participation in college among rural and non-rural students is vital in the pursuit of ethics and social justice for students in the state of Mississippi.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study relies on a conceptual framework to examine why rural students who have applied to college, have been accepted to college but chose not to matriculate to college the fall semester after completing their senior year of high school. The conceptual framework that will shape this research project has three theoretical elements. The three elements are the enrollment management theory of summer melt, social cognitive career theory, and rurality.

#### **Enrollment Management Theory of Summer Melt**

Hossler and Bean (1990) defined enrollment management as "an organizational concept and a systematic set of activities designed to enable educational institutions to exert more influence over their student enrollments. Organized by strategic planning and supported by institutional research, enrollment management activities concern student college choice, the transition to college, student attrition and retention, and student outcomes. These processes are studied to guide institutional practices in the areas of new student recruitment and financial aid, student support services, curriculum development, and other academic areas that affect enrollments, student persistence, and student outcomes from college (p. 5).

Enrollment management established the institutional control of the departmental areas that usher students toward the established success model of college completion. However, the summer melt theory evaluates a more focused field of enrollment management. Summer melt is the phenomenon of prospective college students' motivation to attend college melting away during the summer between the end of high school and the beginning of college (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). Multiple studies (Castleman et al., 2012; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008) indicate various reasons for summer melt in first-time college students. The broad categories identified from other research projects that attribute to summer melt are financial concerns, social anxiety, lack of parental and familial support, and trouble navigating the enrollment process (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). However, most research surrounding summer melt focuses specifically on low-income students (Black, Lincove, Cullinane, & Veron, 2014; Brock, 2010). This research study will focus on the summer melt of rural students in eight southeastern Mississippi counties. Appendix A provides a geographical map of the area under study.

### **Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is aimed at explaining three interrelated aspects of career development, "how basic academic and career interests develop, how educational and career choices are made, and how academic and career success is obtained" (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). The theory incorporates a variety of concepts (e.g., interests, abilities, values, environmental factors) that appear in earlier career theories and have been found to affect career development. Developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett in 1994, this theory is related to Albert Bandura's general social cognitive theory.

The SCCT has three linked variables. The first is self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's personal feelings about his or her capabilities to perform particular behaviors or courses of action (Lent, Sheu, Singley, Schmidt, Schmidt, & Gloster, 2008; Lent et al., 1994). The second variable is outcome expectations. Outcome expectations refer to beliefs about the consequences or outcomes of performing particular behaviors (Lent et al., 1994). The last variable in SCCT is personal goals, referred to as choice or performance goals.

A substantial body of research (Lent et. al., 1994; Lent et al., 2008; Lent, Ezeofor, Morrison, Penn, & Ireland, 2016) suggests that social cognitive career theory and its major elements offer a useful framework for explaining educational and vocational interest development, choice making, and performance. Extensions of the method to many subpopulations have appeared. The theory has been applied to the study of career behavior in some countries and cultural contexts (Lent et al., 2016). The most recent research models of SCCT increase the focus on process aspects of career development, such as the means by which people help to regulate their effort, adapt to changing circumstances, and direct their goal-relevant behavior at school and work (Lent et al., 2016).

### **Rurality**

Rurality has a set of unique characteristics that include location, population density, and agriculturally based occupations but also include having a close contact with nature, population homogeneity, standards of social interaction, rigid social mobility, cultural values that link directly to family, and joint family systems (Bitz, 2011; Holder, et al., 2016). Educational institutions often classify locale based on the population of residents. There are multiple organizations and ways to define populations and rurality. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has established one classification for population characteristics. Population

categories are divided into city, suburban, town, and rural, and each group is subdivided into three sections (2014).

The ESRI System provides a framework to organize, communicate, and understand the science of a population. The Geographic Information System (GIS) uses a framework for gathering, managing, and analyzing data (ESRI, 2017). Rooted in the science of geography, GIS integrates many types of data. The ESRI system provides more profound insights into data, such as patterns, relationships, and situations for decision-making purposes. Within the ESRI is a segment of measurement labeled the *Tapestry Segmentation*. This segmentation classifies neighborhoods and communities into 67 unique segments, based not only on demographics, but also socioeconomic characteristics (ESRI, 2017). It describes US neighborhoods in easy-to-visualize terms, ranging from Soccer Moms to Heartland Communities.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2017) also classifies rural communities as having 2,500 or fewer residents by subdividing them into *fringe*, *distant*, and *remote* in location. *Fringe* is five miles or less from an urbanized area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). *Distant* as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2107) is between five to twenty-five miles from an urbanized area and *remote* is over twenty-five miles or more from an urbanized area. In contrast, the U.S. Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas. An urban area is labeled as 1,000 people per mile, a population of 50,000 or more, or as an urban cluster (2017).

Tom Gjelten's body of work also provides a framework to understand rural communities (1982). Gjelten defined rural communities into five typographies. His research indicated that the type of rural community a student originates from could influence that student's access and exposure to postsecondary educational institutions and opportunities. Gjelten's (1982) study established the following rural settings:

1. Stable rural community: The stable rural community is considered peaceful and productive. There is employment in the region and poverty is not commonplace. The *Farm Belt* in the Midwest is an example of this type of community.
2. Depressed rural community: A depressed rural community is a community of high unemployment with few opportunities for growth and opportunity. In these types of communities, young people often leave, and there are high levels of out-migration. There is a heightened sense of economic insecurity within depressed rural communities.
3. Reborn rural community: The *reborn rural community* consists of residents who have fled the congestion of the city to seek a permanent sense of tranquility in a small town. A *reborn rural community* consists of former stockbrokers, factory workers, artists, or executives who choose the small, quiet nature of the town. They tend to defend traditional customs and institutions.
4. High growth rural community: Possibly a *boomtown* in the West where the community benefits from natural energy sources, a high growth rural community has opportunities for employment, growth, and new industry. A revitalized hope exists within the region.
5. Isolated rural community: The community can exhibit characteristics above from several different types of rural communities, as listed above, but isolation is the factor that overrides all others. The distance from other communities affects transportation, commerce, cultural activities, and communication. Physical barriers such as mountains, forests, water, or grassland contribute to the isolating factor (p. 5-6).

Being rural as opposed to urban is an attribute that people easily attach to a place based on their perceptions. Those perceptions may include geographic isolation, low population density, or an abundance of farmland (Bitz, 2011; ESRI, 2017; Gjelten's, 1982). As with most evaluations, the characterization of rurality becomes deeper than population and location as one begins to examine the commonalities established within rurality.

A college education can provide economic opportunities, increased lifetime earnings, career possibilities, and the ability to have job flexibility (Wang, 2014). Due to the benefits of college degrees, it is increasingly relevant for all students including rural students to understand the pathways and benefits of postsecondary educational attainment.

### **Review of Literature**

The previous sections introduced and identified the problem of practice to be addressed, organized the statement of positionality, connected the principles of the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate, and established the conceptual framework. This section will focus on the review of the literature as it relates to the problem of practice. This research project seeks to identify the reasons for summer melt in first-year rural students who applied to attend Jones County Junior College after high school graduation but did not participate in any college or university in the fall semester following their high school graduation.

### **Historical Review of Higher Education**

Higher education has changed substantially over the past seventy years, specifically in the types of students attending college and the number of students attending college (Brock, 2010). Students that participated in college in the 1940's were considered a member of the elite class. Those individuals were most often white males from middle to upper-class families (Brock, 2010). Before the 1940s, few individuals pursued a college education because a college



degree was not necessary to earn a sustainable living and provide for a family (Thelin, 2011). After 1950, however, the link of educational attainment and increased earning potential was introduced and was accelerated by the increase in the demand for a highly skilled workforce. In 1975, year-round workers with a bachelor's degree earned one- and one-half times the annual pay of workers with only a high school diploma, by 1999 that had risen by an additional 40 percent (Brock, 2010).

The mid-to-late 1960s was a significant turning point for higher education. The changes to federal policy, coupled with changes in public attitudes and expectations, opened up access to higher education as never seen before (Brock, 2010). Beginning in 1963, the federal government launched targeted programs for facilities construction, investing in institutions like community colleges and historically black colleges and universities as an attempt to develop access for all to higher educational opportunities (Davidson, 2017; Brock, 2010). From a policy perspective, the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 was one of the most critical changes, extending need-based financial assistance to the general population for the first time (Davidson, 2017). Near the same time, federal spending on higher education increased from \$655 million in 1956 to \$3.5 billion in 1966 (Davidson, 2017; Brock, 2010).

Changing laws and attitudes were evident by the dramatic rise in college enrollments. Total fall enrollment increased from just over five point nine million students in 1965 to an estimated 17.5 million students in 2005, nearly a 300 percent increase (Brock, 2010). As can be seen, by the rise in enrollment numbers, access to college has improved significantly over the past seventy years. However, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be underrepresented in higher education. These levels of underrepresentation are problematic due to the increased need and importance of postsecondary education and credentials. The disparities

related to rural student access and participation in higher education continue to exist. These disparities indicate that more work in the area of increasing college participation for rural students is needed.

**Community and junior colleges.** In the United States, community colleges, sometimes called junior colleges, technical colleges, two-year colleges, or city colleges, are primarily two-year public institutions providing freshman and sophomore level courses as well as program specific career and technical education training (Cohen & Florence, 1996; Young & Ewing, 1978). In recent history, community and junior colleges have grown tremendously in number and have changed to meet the needs of students (Cohen & Florence, 1996). Few segments of postsecondary education have been more responsive to its community's workforce needs than community and junior colleges (Brint & Jerome, 1989). At community and junior colleges, students can access learning at any point in their lives, while taking advantage of low tuition, accessible campus locations, open admissions, and comprehensive course offerings (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Brint & Jerome, 1989; Cohen & Florence, 1996). Community and junior colleges have long granted associate degrees that require two years of fulltime study to complete. These programs offer students the traditional college-level courses that lead to an associate degree and prepare students for further study toward a bachelor's degree (Cohen & Florence, 1996). Community and junior colleges also offer vocationally oriented career and technical education associate degrees that prepare students for immediate entry into careers (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Cohen & Florence, 1996). In recent decades, workforce development and career certifications have been added to the community and junior college offerings.

During their earliest years, community and junior colleges were an extension of high schools. In 1901, Joliet Community College in Illinois, the nation's first junior college, added a fifth and sixth year of courses to a high school curriculum (Brint & Jerome, 1989; Cohen & Florence, 1996). During the Great Depression of the 1930s, however, community and junior colleges began to provide job training programs as a way to ease widespread unemployment that continued into the 1950s (Brint & Jerome, 1989; Cohen & Florence, 1996). In the 1960s, baby boomers entered college, and the number of community and junior colleges' enrollments soared (Brint & Jerome, 1989). Due to the influx of enrollment, new public community and junior colleges were built around the country to meet demand. The enrollment boom slowed in the 1980s through 1999 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Today community and junior colleges are seeing the rebirth of blending college and high school credits through dual credit, early college high schools, and middle colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018).

The American Association of Community Colleges (2018) reports that there are 1,103 community and junior colleges in America, enrolling more than twelve million students annually at the average tuition rate of \$3,570 annually. The community and junior colleges enroll 51 percent of the incoming freshmen in American higher education (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Nearly 53 percent of minority students enroll in the community and junior colleges due primarily to their open-door policy, accessibility, low cost, and their focus on the students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). America's community and junior colleges have a rich heritage. These institutions have and will continue to provide the opportunity of higher education to all Americans. These institutions provide the opportunity for many underrepresented populations to pursue the *American Dream*.

## **Barriers to College Participation for Rural Youth**

Potential college students consider attending college for a multitude of reasons. Some prospective students know from their youth that attaining a college degree is expected of them from their family and attainable by the support offered from their family system (Chetty et al., 2014). Still there are others that consider college at the end of their high school education track with many questions left unanswered (Krause & Reeves, 2017). As students consider leaving their rural communities and choose to pursue post-secondary educational options, various factors influence students' choices to leave their home base. The students' culture of being rooted in a rural community, the social standing of a student within the rural community, student's overall preparedness, and students' social mobility each impact a students' choice to pursue college participation (Chetty et al., 2014; Krause & Reeves, 2017). In this section, a number of barriers to college participation will be identified and discussed as they relate to rural student populations.

**Parental and family expectations.** Many rural regions are rich with cultural values that include strong family ties and a sense of responsibility to family first (Fan, 2001). As a result, rural youth often feel torn between their loyalty to their family and their pursuit of a college education (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). These conflicting feelings often limit a student's choice in their pursuit of a college degree. In previous studies, first-generation college students viewed their parents to be the most important source of support in their college planning process (Hallett & Griffen, 2015; Wang, 2014).

Furthermore, first-generation students who feel supported and encouraged by their parents show an increased interest in attending college along with a higher likelihood of college enrollment (Hallett & Griffen, 2015; Perna & Titus, 2005). The National Postsecondary

Education Cooperative (2007) suggested that parents play the most substantial role in the college decision-making process of traditional-aged college seeking students. Research supports this by demonstrating the impact that parents can have on various college-going outcomes, specifically in disadvantaged populations, such as students from rural, low-income, low-education households (An, 2010; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hallett & Griffen, 2015; Sandefur, Meir, & Campbell, 2006). Parental and family expectations have also been shown to be the most powerful predictor of college attendance for rural students (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Fan, 2001). However, the fact remains that educational attainment remains low in rural areas. The lack of parental college attainment often produces a lack of positive influence on college participation within the rural household (Entwisle et al., 2005).

**Financial constraints.** For many underrepresented student populations, socioeconomic status plays a significant role in college participation. Direct factors such as the price of tuition, the total cost of attendance, and distance from home, impact if a student can afford to attend college (Cabrea & La Nasa, 2001). There are also indirect factors that influence college participation such as, obtaining accurate information about the college, resource availability within the college, college personnel and student interaction, and the exposure to individuals with the knowledge needed to guide the student through the enrollment, financial, and attendance processes (Cabrea & La Nasa, 2001).

Family income contributes to college attendance for rural students significantly (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). Rural students from families making \$50,000 per year earn a college degree at higher rates than students from families making \$25,000 or lower per year (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). When rural students have the financial support required, they are more likely to attend and complete college (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Cabrea & La

Nasa, 2001). Within the literature reviewed about rural students and financial solutions to college costs, little research exists to support significant policy, scholarship, or institutional strategies that have increased college attendance and completion for the rural student population.

**Home base of a student.** As previously stated, many rural students find it difficult to choose between family and the pursuit of higher education outside of the family structure and rural culture. In evaluating previous research, the consideration of the home base of a prospective student is essential in identifying the barriers to access for those students (Blitz, 2011; Morris, 2008). Rural communities rely on low-wage, labor-intensive economic opportunities for their citizens (Blitz, 2011). Low wage jobs create a smaller tax base for rural counties. The lower tax balance often results in secondary schools that offer narrow course offerings, outdated facilities, and less technological advances than those found in urban or suburban locales (Morris, 2008). The lack of underfunding and exposure to advancement in educational offerings may create the feeling of under preparedness when the rural student is evaluating their participation in postsecondary educational opportunities (Morris, 2008).

In comparison to urban schools, rural schools offer a connection with the community and in turn the social capital that is structurally supported by the greater rural community (Mactavish & Salaman, 2006). Rural communities utilize public school as a critical connection to both culture and resources. Rural secondary schools become the base for social development within the rural community. Within rural schools, the social barrier is more defined due to the *small towns*' rigid and close-knit hierarchical structure (Mactavish & Salaman, 2006). Some rural low-income families face a reality of social class stigmatization. Students in rural communities have to work to breach the barriers between rich and poor within the community (Mactavish &

Salaman, 2006; Morris, 2008). The rigid social structure formed in rural areas can lead to difficulty in social mobility within its population.

**Social mobility of rural youth.** By many measures, rural, isolated residents appear to be in worse shape than their urban counterparts with little gains in social mobility. *Social mobility* is defined as the shifting from one social status to another, commonly to a status that is either higher or lower than one's current status (Krause & Reeves, 2017). Most rural, isolated areas provide lower incomes for the residents, lower levels of educational attainment overall, little room for social mobility within the current community, lower life expectancies, and limited access to health insurance and health care providers (Krause & Reeves, 2017). Additionally, educational opportunities are often limited for residents considered geographically isolated.

In a study conducted by Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saex (2014), they noted that upward mobility for rural adolescents was driven by factors that affect children while they are growing up rather than after they enter the labor market. Within the same Chetty et al. study (2014) they evaluated 741 rural counties in the United States. Of those 741 rural counties, five Mississippi counties were rated with the lowest social mobility rates within in the country, with the average mobility score of less than thirty-four and the national average at 55 percent. This study reveals that the lack of upward mobility is interdependent on five factors: segregation, income inequality, secondary education quality, social capital, and family structure (Chetty et al., 2014; Krause & Reeves, 2017). Consideration of programs for rural, isolated individuals who wish to migrate out should be considered.

Promoting increased social mobility requires a reexamination of a wide range of economic, health, social, and educational policies. Higher education has long been a key to poor Americans finding opportunities to transform their circumstances. In a time of rising inequality

and low social mobility, improving the quality of and access to higher education has the potential to increase equality of opportunity for all Americans.

## **Mississippi**

Mississippi includes 82 counties and covers 48,430 square miles (Mississippi Development Authority, 2015). Mississippi has a widely spread population with a density of just 63.2 people per square mile and a total population of two point nine million in 2018 Census projections. For many generations, people have been leaving the rural areas of the United States and concentrating in urban areas, with only one in five people in the country classified as rural (Mississippi Development Authority, 2015). Mississippi is a sharp contrast, with 51.2 percent still living in rural areas, which is the 4th largest rural population in the country (Mississippi Development Authority, 2015). The median age of Mississippi's population is approximately 36.7 years of age, and the gender ratio is split at 51.5 percent female and 48.5 percent male (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The racial diversity in Mississippi is spread across approximately 59 percent Caucasians, 37 percent African Americans, 1.2 percent of two or more races, one percent Asians, point nine percent other races, and point four percent Native North Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

## **Jones County Junior College**

Jones County Junior College is the second oldest two-year college in the Mississippi community college system (Young & Ewing, 1978). It is located in Jones County specifically in the city of Ellisville. The college legislatively serves eight rural counties within the geographic region: Covington, Clarke, Greene, Perry, Jones, Jasper, Smith, and Wayne counties (Young & Ewing, 1978). However, on average the college has students in attendance that represent 60 plus counties outside of the eight in-district counties each year (Jones County Junior College, 2018).



The U.S. Census Bureau classifies the JCJC eight county district as rural territories according to most recent statistics (2017). Appendix A geographically pinpoints the eight-county district of JCJC.

### **Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) Demographics**

Jones County, the central campus location of JCJC, is located in the southeastern portion of Mississippi with the population of 67,000 (Development Authority, 2017). The median household income is \$37,800 with a poverty level of 20.5 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). ESRI Demographics reports all of Jones county as falling under the *Rustic Outpost Tapestry*, with the highest sub-segment falling within *Rustic Outpost* at 36.57 percent *Southern Satellites*, followed by eight-point eight percent *Rural Rooted*, and six-point seven percent *Salt of the Earth* (2017). An ESRI *Rustic Outpost Tapestry* is defined as communities that offer

- a country life with older families in older homes;
- own affordable, older single-family or mobile homes;
- vehicle ownership is a must;
- residents live within their means, shop at discount stores and maintain their own vehicles (purchased used) and homes;
- rustic outposts depend on manufacturing, retail, and healthcare, with pockets of mining and agricultural jobs;
- outdoor enthusiasts, who grow their vegetables, love their pets and enjoy hunting and fishing;
- technology is cost prohibitive and complicated. Pay bills in person, use the yellow pages, read newspapers, magazines, and mail-order books (ESRI Demographics, 2017).

Appendix B provides a snapshot of the JCJC eight-county district ESRI's classification as provided by ESRI Demographics measure of 2017.

Within each county, there is a grouping of secondary schools that primarily feed the traditional student population of JCJC. There is a total of twenty-two high schools within the eight-county district that JCJC serves (Jones County Junior College, 2018). Appendix C provides the listings of high schools by county within the district (Mississippi Department of Education, 2018).

### **Summer Melt**

Some students who walk across the stage at high school graduation with plans to attend college never actually make it to college. Navigating the transition from high school to college can be challenging for many students. Castleman and Page (2014), share that in the summer months, some students overlook the letters and emails colleges send, asking students to complete financial aid forms, turn in important health-documents, sign up for orientation, or notification of eligibility to register for fall classes. Students can miss critical steps in the college enrollment process and end up unenrolled and not attending college the fall after their high school graduation and become one of the students who are a part of the *summer melt* (Castleman & Page, 2015).

Summer melt affects many students from various demographics. According to studies, up to one-third of all students who leave high school with plans to attend college never arrive at any college campus the fall following high school graduation (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012; Castleman & Page, 2015; Castleman & Page, 2014). Summer melt appears to impact first-generation and low-income students the hardest (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012).

## **First Generation Students**

Overall gains have been experienced nationally in the percentage of students attending college. However, educational attainment differs for students by demographic characteristics and by geographic location. Individuals with certain characteristics are substantially less likely to enroll in higher education. One leading characteristic identified in research literature is first-generation status (Castleman & Page, 2015; Castleman & Page, 2014; Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). According to Choy, first-generation means neither parent of the prospective college student attended college (2001). Other definitions of first-generation vary somewhat in their descriptions. NASPA (2017) defines first-generation is simply those students who are the first in their family to attend college. Within the context of this study, first-generation will be recognized as the “possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their parents did not attend college” (NASPA, 2017).

Prospective college students whose parents did not attend college may find the college enrollment process especially difficult. Parents of first-generation students are often unable to guide them through the college enrollment process due to a lack of experience and expectations (Castleman & Page, 2015; Choy, 2001). Parents who have not attended college may lack the information necessary for active involvement and may even provide less assistance with college-going activities such as planning for participation in advanced academic courses in high school, preparing for the ACT/SAT, and completing college applications (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon & Perna, 2009; Choy, 2001).

## **Low-Income Students**

For a substantial proportion of low-income high school graduates, the traditional college enrollment pattern of application, college acceptance, college choice, and matriculation does not

happen. In spite of a broad call for holistic educational reform, most high schools cease to serve their students at the point of high school graduation (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, Castleman, & Wartman, 2009; Castleman & Page, 2014). Colleges provide few students with formal bridge programs during the summer transition between secondary and postsecondary education (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, et al., 2009). This situation opens a large gap for low-income students to navigate the enrollment process of higher education alone and without support resources.

Finances are a major stumbling block during the post-graduation summer for low-income students. Most students from low-income households are keenly aware that paying for college is uncertain and perhaps unachievable (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, et al., 2009). Students and family members find financial aid offers, paired with some conditional college acceptances, are difficult to decipher by those individuals making decisions over the summer to attend college (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). Research studies stated that students receive mixed, confusing, or unfriendly signals during the summer from colleges about admission verification, housing deadlines (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012), and other areas of enrollment and onboarding that often lead to the lack of matriculation in the fall semester following their high school graduation (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, et al., 2009; Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012; Castleman & Page, 2014).

### **Minoritized Students**

A variety of standards and conditions contribute to the limited access of minoritized students to higher education. The ASHE Higher Education Report (2015) defines being minoritized as groups that are different in race, religious creed, nation of origin, sexuality, and gender and as a result of social constructs have less power or representation compared to other members or groups in society. Research suggests that minoritized students are more likely to

experience problems of alienation, marginalization, and loneliness in the college going and college attendance processes (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017). There appear to be factors shaping the precollege experience and college choice for minoritized students that are complex and multilayered. Some of the factors introduced through existing research are parental education, inequitable school funding, state policies, college preparatory resources, cultural and social capital, and the availability of financial aid (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017).

### **Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) establishes an understanding of how individuals develop educational and career interests, make educational and career decisions and achieve educational and career success (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT explains how individuals develop career interests, make and remake occupational choices, and achieve varying levels of career success and stability. SCCT also indicates that an individual's career development occurs through a reciprocal interaction of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000; Lent et al., 1994).

Significant career development takes place during youth and adolescence. Adolescent students begin to clarify their career identity (LaMorte, 2016), develop an awareness of vocational interests and realities, and undertake career-related tasks, such as career planning and career exploration, as they increasingly think about their future career (LaMorte, 2016; Rogers & Creed, 2011). According to SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), a variety of person, environmental and behavioral variables influence the career choice process. Self-efficacy, beliefs about capabilities to organize and execute courses of action, promotes favorable outcome expectations (Lent et al., 1994). Outcome expectations are the expected consequences of actions taken by the individual

that reinforce and foster career interests and career goals, and intentions to engage in a specific activity (Lent et al., 1994; Rogers & Creed, 2011). In turn, these social cognitive variables spur possible career choice actions which are necessary for a young person to make progress towards career goals.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy is the belief in one's abilities, specifically the ability to meet the challenges ahead and complete a task successfully (LaMorte, 2016; Lent et al., 1994). General self-efficacy refers to the overall belief in our ability to succeed, but there are more specific forms of self-efficacy such as academic, parenting, or athletic (Lent et al., 1994). It has proven to be a popular topic in general psychology and has been most studied within the context of education (LaMorte, 2016; Lent et al., 1994).

Albert Bandura proposed that perceived self-efficacy influences what coping behavior is initiated when an individual is met with stress and challenges, along with determining how much effort will be expended to reach one's goals and for how long those goals will be pursued (1977). Students with high self-efficacy tend to have high optimism, and both variables result in positive outcomes: better academic performance, more effective personal adjustment, better coping with stress, better health, and higher overall satisfaction and commitment to graduate (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Lent et al., 1994). Although these effects are enhanced for students with high GPAs, self-efficacy can also improve performance for students with less than a natural aptitude for academics.

**Outcome expectations.** Personal beliefs about probable response outcomes are what SCCT refers to as outcome expectations (Lent et al., 1994). Self-efficacy is concerned with response capabilities, (*i.e. can I do this*) outcome expectations, however, involve imagined consequences of performing a particular behavior (*i.e., if I do this, what will happen*). Within

Bandura's research, he identified a variety of outcome expectations. The three main outcome expectations are the anticipation of physical, social, and self-evaluative outcomes that affect career behavior (Bandura, 1977; Lent et al., 1994).

**Goals.** SCCT identifies goals as having an essential role in the self-regulation of behavior. While environmental events and personal history assist in the shaping of their behavior, individuals are more than just mechanical responders to deterministic forces (Lent et al., 1994). By setting goals, individuals help to organize and guide behavior, to sustain it over long periods of time without reinforcement and to increase the desired outcome (Cameron, Lee, Anderson, Byars-Winston, Baldwin, & Chang, 2015). Goals function through people's capacity to represent desired outcomes and react in a self-evaluative manner to their behavior based on internally identified standards (Tokar, Thompson, Plaufcan, & Williams, 2007).

Goals are a critical element of career choice and decision-making theories (Lent et al., 1994; Tokar et al., 2007). Fundamental concepts such as career plans, decisions, aspirations, and expressed choices are all goal mechanisms (Cameron et al., 2015). Within each concept, the difference is related to their degree of specificity and proximity to actual choice implementations (Cameron et al., 2015; Tokar et al., 2007).

**SCCT contextual influences.** Also, SCCT proposes that career choice behaviors are also shaped by contextual variables, such as supports like financial support from the family and barriers like having to leave home for further education (Lent et al., 1994; Rogers & Creed, 2011). Contextual influences facilitate or impede the development and pursuit of an individual's career path as they have a direct influence on choice goals and choice actions, and they can also influence the relationship between choice goals and choice actions (LaMorte, 2016; Lent et al., 1994; Rogers & Creed, 2011).

According to SCCT theory, youth, within their given social class, family, and peer groups, have a large number of experiences that lead to the development of career-relevant self-efficacy and outcome expectations for a diverse set of activities (LaMorte, 2016). Increased self-efficacy and outcome expectations can, in turn, develop career-related goals (LaMorte, 2016; Lent et al., 1994; Rogers & Creed, 2011). Studies have reported that self-efficacy beliefs influence student GPA and persistence rates (Raque-Bogdan and Lucas, 2016).

### **Research Questions and Methodology**

The previous sections introduced and identified the problem of practice to be addressed, organized the statement of positionality, connected the principles of the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate, established the conceptual framework, and presented an overview of research and literature. This section will identify the specific research questions that will be answered within this study and describe the methodology this research will follow.

#### **Research Questions**

This research project seeks to identify the variables reported by students that account for the summer melt by first-year students who applied to attend Jones County Junior College after high school graduation but did not participate in any college or university in the fall following high school graduation. Specifically, this study will answer the following questions:

1. What variables do recent high school graduates, who were college accepted, college-bound students in the fall of 2018, report as being the critical point in their decision whether or not to attend college?
2. What parts of the enrollment process, if any, after application do recent high school graduates, who were college accepted, college-bound students in the fall of



2018, report as having played a role in their choice whether or not to attend college?

3. What was the timing of the decision whether or not to attend college for recent high school graduates, who were college accepted, college-bound students in the fall of 2018?

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research approaches are used throughout many academic disciplines, focusing mainly on the human elements of both social and natural sciences. Qualitative research can supply information as to why and how rural students choose not to matriculate to college the fall after their graduation from high school (Beasley, 2011; Maltzan, 2006). Social factors such as the interdependence of originating from rural culture, financial security, and parental expectations influence rural students' journeys to attend college (Beasley, 2011). The interdependency of these social factors can best be understood by qualitative inquiry that describes the complexities of people's lives within a specific context.

**Participation.** The possible participants of this study will be the applicant pool of traditional first-time freshman students that completed and submitted an application for admission to attend Jones County Junior College in the fall of 2018 after their high school graduation, whose application was granted acceptance, but participated in no college or university within the fall semester after high school graduation. These students were at the time of application residents of one of the following eight rural counties: Clarke, Covington, Greene, Jasper, Jones, Perry, Smith, and Wayne. Of the possible participants, the mean age of the applicant was 17.9 years at the time when the participant should have matriculated. The group is

made up of 54 percent females and 46 percent male and racially split at 32.9 percent African American, 63.9 percent Caucasian, and 3.9 percent Hispanic.

Of this group that did not attend college in the fall of 2018 after their high school graduation, interviews will be conducted until the point of saturation. Saturation will be determined when the data reaches a point in the analysis that sampling more data will not lead to more information related to the identified research questions (Barriball & While, 1994). Any interviews scheduled with participants will be completed even if saturation is reached prior to the interview date.

**Study recruitment.** To recruit participants to this study, a series of three email correspondences will be initiated by the researcher to all students that are traditional first-time freshman students that completed and submitted an application for admission to attend JCJC in the fall of 2018 after their high school graduation, whose application was granted acceptance, but participated in no college or university within the fall semester after high school graduation. The recruitment emails will be sent to all listed email addresses on file with the student application. Each email correspondence will be sent within five to seven business days after the last correspondence. Interview appointments for this study will be scheduled and completed until the study reaches the point of saturation. Saturation is defined as no additional data being found whereby the researcher can develop properties of the category (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs, & Jinks, 2018).

**Procedures.** Data for this study will be generated through semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is an interview that is open, allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interview based on what the interviewee says (Barriball & While, 1994). By using semi-structured interviews as the method of inquiry, individual personalization and open dialog

can be provided. The ability to discuss the different journeys these students had toward post-secondary education attainment will afford the researcher some insight into their reflection of the process with each participant.

There are three main characteristics of semi-structured interviews, the first being that the interviewer and respondents engage in a formal interview. Next, the interviewer develops and uses an interview guide. This guide serves as a list of questions and topics that need to be covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order (Barriball & While, 1994). The semi-structured interview guide for this study can be found in Appendix D. The final characteristic is the interviewer follows the guide but is able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when he or she feels this is appropriate (Barriball & While, 1994).

Participants will be contacted by both email and phone for the semi-structured interview scheduling. After agreeing to participate in the study, participants must consent to participate in a non-treatment study, grant permission to audio record the telephone interview, and acknowledge that they have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

**Data analysis.** At the end of the data inquiry, each interview recording will be transcribed into interview transcripts and individual identities will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The researcher will begin the data analysis by reviewing each transcript in order to code the results. Coding in a qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, prominent, essence-capturing, or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data (Saldaña, 2016). Data that can be coded consist of interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journals, documents, websites, and email correspondence (Saldaña, 2016). Once coding is completed, the researcher will begin the

categorization of themes within the codes. Themes are defined by Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove as the organization of a group of repeating ideas that enables researchers to answer study questions (2016).

To ensure accuracy in the review of data when initial themes are identified, the researcher will share the interview transcripts with a colleague for an independent review. At the completion of the independent review, the researcher will compare the findings to complete the data analysis process. In addition, once the data presentation is completed a draft will be shared with several individuals interviewed to perform member checking. Member checking is a technique used by qualitative researchers to help improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of a study (Saldaña, 2016; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016).

**Institutional Review Board.** The Institutional Review Board plays an important role in the academic research process by reviewing the methods of research design and protecting the ethical principles of research. This research proposal will be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Mississippi for study review and approval. A copy of the IRB request is provided in Appendix E.

### **Concluding Statement**

Once analysis is completed, a data overview and presentation of the findings will be presented in manuscript two. In the third manuscript of this dissertation in practice, the presentation of ideas toward application, formal recommendations, and a plan of dissemination will be presented. The remaining manuscripts, two and three, will complete this study.

Transitioning more students to college is essential to improving the quality of life for individuals and society. The results of this study will provide both institutional and educational policymakers with information about the rural student transition process needed to create

effective practices for increasing postsecondary participation. Currently, in Mississippi, there are over 50,000 job openings that require additional training, certification and post-secondary degrees (Mississippi Works, 2018). The workforce of the future requires individuals with more skill development and educational training (Mississippi Works, 2018). To support economic growth and stability in the state, more Mississippians with post-secondary degrees and credentials are needed to fill the growing gap in the workforce. An increase in educational attainment for states often lead to higher wages; an increased pool of talent; increased benefits to the population's health for generations; increased productivity in businesses output; and less poverty impacting the state's poor (Busteed, 2014; Deloitte and Manufacturing Institute, 2012).

This research may assist colleges and other regions of the state in addressing the gap in educational attainment that exists in many rural counties across Mississippi. The advantages from such an undertaking will benefit many well beyond the individual students. By identifying the needs of rural students much consideration can be given on how to address those needs.

Summer Melt of Rural First-Year Students

Manuscript Two

D. Finée Ruffin

### **Problem of Practice**

Higher education practitioners in the field of enrollment management have discussed the phenomenon of summer melt and the impact it has on different student groups. Summer melt is a common problem for many low income and rural student populations (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, Castleman, & Wartman, 2009). However, rural-student summer melt has little focused research to address the circumstances of this subpopulation of students. Rural Americans make up 19 percent of the U.S. population, but rural locales cover 97 percent of the nation's land area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The significance of addressing the gap in rural educational continuation after high school completion is important to regional and local economies alike due to the changing needs of the U.S. labor force, the connectivity of the U.S. population both domestic and international, and for the basis of access to a college education for rural populations.

This Dissertation in Practice originated from the practitioner's interest in assisting rural students with accessing higher education offered in a variety of formats in the U.S. and internationally. This research seeks to identify variables that account for the summer melt in rural first-year students who applied to attend Jones County Junior College (JCJC) after high school graduation but did not participate in any college or university in the fall following high school graduation. Better identification and understanding of these variables are necessary to address the college attendance gap by rural students.

### **Research Questions**

The study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What variables do recent high school graduates who were college-accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as being the critical point in their decision whether or not to attend college?
2. What parts of the enrollment process, if any, after application do recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as having played a role in their choice whether or not to attend college?
3. What was the timing of the decision whether or not to attend college for recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018?

### **Definition of Terms**

There are a number of key terms used throughout manuscript two. *Admissions* refers to the area of campus management at JCJC responsible for new student application processing, transcript requests, obtaining proof of residence, issuing letters of acceptance, and requesting, receiving, and entering ACT scores into the student information system. *Enrollment* is the process of obtaining a class schedule and other class specific items related to attending class at JCJC. *Enrollment processes* are institutional processes supporting the successful enrollment of a student. Enrollment processes may include financial aid, student accounts, campus housing, academic advising, and schedule creation.

### **Data Presentation**

This research project was approved by the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board; documentation can be found in Appendix F. Semi-structured interviews were conducted



by the researcher to gain a better understanding of variables that account for the summer melt in rural first-year students. The data presented within this manuscript reflect the personal experiences of 14 prospective students who completed high school within the eight-county district of JCJC. The district includes the counties of Clarke, Covington, Greene, Jasper, Jones, Perry, Smith, and Wayne. The prospective student group examined in the following section applied to attend JCJC in the fall semester of 2018 but did not enroll at any college or university in the fall semester immediately following their high school graduation.

Outreach began to the 706 unique prospective study respondents in February 2019. The prospective pool had a total of 1,765 email addresses on file for use in potential correspondence. Email correspondence for study inquiry was designed to attempt delivery to each email address listed for the individual. There were three email correspondence attempts contacting the respondent pool. 61.9% of the prospective respondents produced a verified email delivery and 38.1% reported an unsuccessful delivery. 269 prospective respondents were removed from the recruitment list after the unsuccessful delivery response was reported. If a respondent had more than one email address that produced a type of delivery response that respondent was not counted twice in the total unique prospective respondents. Appendix G provides a detailed report of correspondence data in the recruitment of study participants.

Interviews took place in the spring and summer of 2019. All respondents were informed of the purpose of the interview and encouraged to speak freely when responding to questions. The researcher audio recorded each phone interview and took field notes during each session. The personal interviews of the 14 prospective students are the sole source of the direct quotes and paraphrased examples presented in this manuscript. The individual interviews were compiled into formal data. The data were analyzed, organized, and themes were identified. Themes were

then presented to two of the interview participants for member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the section to follow, the respondents are introduced as individuals through personal interview profiles.

### **Personal Interview Profiles**

The semi-structured interview protocol included questions which revealed personal characteristics, post-secondary educational intentions, and information about the respondents including their family backgrounds, levels of involvement in the enrollment and admissions process, and perceived barrier identification for college going. Due to the number of prospective students who participated in the study, descriptors which could potentially harm anonymity are not included in the reported data. Additionally, each participant is assigned a pseudonym to protect anonymity. Appendix H shows participants assigned pseudonym, gender, ACT score, county of high school location, application status, and the enrollment status at the time of the respondent interview.

The average ACT score of the respondents was 18.53 and the average age of the respondents at the time of the interview was 18.8 years of age. Eight of the respondents identified as female while six described themselves as male. None of the respondents attended a college or university in the fall of 2018, however, twelve of the 14 respondents were currently enrolled in a form of higher education at the time of the interview. The twelve respondents that continued college enrollment and attendance after the fall of 2018 enrolled in community colleges, public four-year universities, historically black colleges, online colleges, and for-profit colleges all located in the United States. The study participants are introduced in brief narrative form in this section.

## **Some Commonalities**

A set of common characteristics exist between the 14 study respondents. All completed high school in the spring of 2018 from one of JCJC's eight district counties (JCJC, 2019) and completed a college application to attend JCJC in the fall of 2018. However, none of the respondents attended college in the fall of 2018. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 20 and they each self-reported their race as African American.

The most interesting common characteristic discovered was that participants appeared to be functioning successfully, whether they were currently enrolled in a form of higher education or not. None of the respondents discussed on-going hardships, discouraging situations, or feelings that their current situation was at a dead end. This common characteristic while interesting, leaves more room for discussion on those prospective respondents that might have feelings of hardships and discouragement who did not elect to participate in this study.

## **Susan**

Susan graduated high school in Jones County. She described living with her grandmother due to her mother leaving when she was a child. Susan self-identified as a first-generation college student but shared that she was currently enrolled and attending a historically black college in Mississippi for the spring 2019 academic semester.

## **Sherry**

Sherry graduated from a high school in Smith County and stated that she was a first-generation college student. Sherry was enrolled in dual credit classes at JCJC while she was in high school. Sherry is the oldest child of four children in her family. She was enrolled and attending class at one of Mississippi's 15 community colleges at the time of the interview. She began her college coursework in January 2019.

**Gerald**

Gerald graduated from a high school located within Perry County. He identified as a first-generation college student that delayed college enrollment in fall 2018 to pursue his career. His employer offered a plan for employees that assisted with paying for college. This program allowed him to enroll in classes after he was employed with the firm for six months. Gerald enrolled at an online, accredited university that is not located within the state of Mississippi after his post high school graduation employment choice. His choice in college was limited to the colleges approved in the organizational college program listing. The online university offers bachelor's and master's degree programs. Gerald is currently majoring in an information technology related program.

**Tim**

Tim graduated from a high school located within Clarke County. Tim expressed his admiration for his older brother, who plays the central parental figure within his life. He stated that he is the first in his family to attend college and therefore makes him a first-generation college student. Tim enrolled in college at one of Mississippi's fifteen community colleges in the spring of 2019. Tim is majoring in nursing.

**Jessica**

Jessica is a first-generation college student. She graduated from a high school located within Wayne County. Jessica enrolled in January part-time at a for-profit, unaccredited online university not located in the state of Mississippi.

**Clarke**

Clarke is a former high school football player, from Covington County, Mississippi. Due to high school state testing guidelines in Mississippi, his admission to college was delayed. He

shared that his passing grade allowed for college enrollment in welding classes at JCJC in March 2019.

### **Cara**

Cara graduated from a high school in Clarke County, Mississippi. At the time of the interview, Cara was enrolled at a historically black college within the state of Mississippi. She started her classes there in January 2019 and was majoring in Elementary Education.

### **Kelly**

Kelly graduated from a high school in Jones County, Mississippi. She labeled herself as the first in her family to attend college and stated that her family was supportive in her pursuit toward higher education. Kelly was enrolled at one of Mississippi's four-year public universities at the time of her interview.

### **James**

James is a graduate from a high school located in Jones County, Mississippi. He identified that he was a first-generation college student at his time of application submission to JCJC, however, he did not express in his interview that characteristic. At the time of the interview, James was not enrolled at a college or university.

### **Thomas**

Thomas graduated from a high school located within Greene County, Mississippi. He submitted his application for admission into the paramedic program at JCJC in the fall of 2018. In January of 2019, Thomas enrolled at another Mississippi community college in their paramedic program. He also identified as a first-generation college student.

**Bret**

Bret is a resident of Covington County and graduated from high school located within the same county. Bret is currently working at a local discount store while attending classes part-time at one of Mississippi's 15 community colleges. Bret indicated within his JCJC application for admission that he was a first-generation college student, but he did not discuss the status within the interview.

**Emily**

Emily is a native of Smith County and graduated from a high school located within the that county. At the time of her interview, she was enrolled in one computer programming course through an online, accredited institution, not located within the state of Mississippi. She began her class in the spring 2019 semester. Within her interview, she expressed interest in enrolling and attending JCJC after she completes her online course. Emily would like to major in a technology related field.

**Tasha**

Tasha is a high school graduate from Jasper County, Mississippi. She stated that both of her parents did not attend college, but that they had a desire for her to be the first to attend. Tasha was not enrolled in any college or university classes at the time of her interview.

**Sarah**

Sarah, the final student that was interviewed, graduated from a high school in Jones County, Mississippi. Sarah has a self-stated hearing disability. Her interview was conducted via Google chat at her request. Sarah was successfully enrolled and taking classes online at one of Mississippi's public four-year universities at the time of her interview.

## **Presentation of Findings**

The following section will discuss the three formal research questions related to the study of summer melt. The study's research questions were introduced and described in manuscript one and will be addressed through respondent responses within this section.

### **Research Question 1: What variables do recent high school graduates who were college-accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as being the critical point in their decision whether or not to attend college?**

A number of themes emerged related to rural student perceptions of variables that were critical in their decision on whether or not to attend college in the fall of 2018. The compiled themes are described within this section. Respondents in this study discussed details surrounding timing; the impacts of distance and transportation, the need for on campus housing; financial obstacles; scholarships and financial assistance; the impacts of being first-generation college students; family support; technology resources; and JCJC leaving the student behind in their journey toward college attendance.

**Timing.** Respondents Susan, Cara, Kelly, and Emily all shared similarly in the referencing of time as a variable in not attending college at JCJC in the fall semester after high school graduation. Susan shared this about timing and college attendance,

I don't really feel like I had a choice. I feel like my time ran out to figure out my problems. I still wanted to go to school, but I had to figure out how. Really my grandmother and I had to figure it out.

Cara stated her issues with time and college attendance related to her financial aid request. Cara said,

I know we tried to get everything with financial aid worked out the week classes started at JCJC. A nice lady that tried to help me at JCJC, told me to drop my classes so I wouldn't owe money to the school.

Kelly and Emily shared similar experiences about timing although their descriptions used time as one element among several other variables that contributed to their choice on college attendance.

Interestingly, all students that referenced time as a variable were female respondents. It was unclear if the respondent statements on time and college attendance were perceived as not being given enough time to complete the prescribed tasks or if they had ample time but did not have the continued assistance to complete those tasks. Further inquiry could be beneficial in determining more about prescribed time and college attendance.

**Transportation, distance, and the need for on-campus housing.** The data revealed that recent high school graduates, that were college accepted, college-bound students in the fall of 2018, identified distance from the main college campus, a lack of personal transportation, and the need for on-campus housing as possible considerations in their decision whether or not to attend college in the fall following their high school graduation.

***Transportation and distance.*** Respondents Sherry, Tim, Kelly, and Bret each identified lack of personal transportation, along with distance from campus impacting their ability to attend college at JCJC. Bret described that he and his father shared the family car. He noted that “his dad worked in Jackson during the day and that didn't allow for Brett to get to the campus in Ellisville for enrollment needs or to meet classes.” Sherry, “the oldest of four children, had to figure out not only how to pay for college, but how to obtain transportation to and from her home base.” She stated that she had a “hard time reaching anyone by phone” and that a visit to the campus could have provided her with more access to enrolling in classes. Tim shared that “his



home is over an hour away, one-way, from the Ellisville, Mississippi campus and that he was required to save money in order to buy a car for travel back and forth for the required class attendance.”

***On-campus housing.*** Respondent Kelly recalled that on-campus housing was important in her choice to attend college at Jones. She stated that in order to enroll and attend classes at JCJC, on-campus housing was a requisite. She explained that she lacked a personal means of transportation and did not plan to work toward obtaining personal transportation. Her need of on-campus housing was the variable that she could not manage to overcome in order to attend in the fall of 2018. While Kelly explicitly states that on-campus housing offered a solution to her transportation and distance related needs, other respondents saw on-campus housing as a possible solution to their primary issues. Distance, financial support for gas and meals while traveling and a lack of familial support were all mentioned as primary issues. On-campus housing could help alleviate and in turn promote college attendance stated by Kelly.

In rural community colleges, on-campus housing allows colleges to serve students who live a long distance from the campus. Housing is offered in order to increase the number of full-time enrollments, attract minority students, and assist low-socioeconomic students with access to higher education (Moeck, Hardy, & Katsinas, 2007). Without on-campus housing availability, many of the rural students served by community colleges will miss the opportunity to enroll and attend college due to distance related issues.

Sherry, Tim, Kelly, and Bret’s examples revealed that distance, transportation, and on-campus housing were major concerns when the students considered the possibility of attending college. Without overcoming the perceived obstacle as described above, students appeared to

believe that college attendance was not an option for their future. Additional research could be conducted to examine ways to overcome distance related barriers.

**Financial obstacles.** The data revealed that recent high school graduates, that were college accepted, college-bound students in the fall of 2018 found financial obstacles as a central point in their decision about whether or not to attend college in the fall following their high school graduation. Various areas in the path toward college attendance were identified as having impacts from a lack of financial support or awareness. Housing, transportation, tuition, fees, meals, gas, and books were all variables related to education that had to be addressed from a financial standpoint. Sherry, Tim, Jessica, Cara, Kelly, James, Thomas, and Tasha all acknowledged that they were not prepared for the financial impact attending college would have on them individually. James actually stated in his interview that “only rich people go to college and if he makes enough money one day, he wants to go to college.” Sherry was concerned with the unexpected costs related to college since she was the oldest of four children. She knew everything that she would pay would be required to come out of her own pocket. Kelly qualified for a partial ACT scholarship at JCJC, and still had trouble finding ways to make a payment to attend classes last fall. Tasha admitted she was unaware of the cost associated with attending college. She stated that “she just could not figure out how to pay for school. She guessed she really didn’t know what college was going to cost.” It appears that little research and financial planning in relation to college attendance took place before college enrollment for many of the respondents. This notion is displayed as noted by James,

I didn’t know how to get money to pay. I guess I never thought about it. They always said college was important and everyone needs to go. I just didn’t think about all that part. It was a little weird. My teachers back in high school talked about everyone going to

college. But we didn't know what to do to really get there. You know. I mean no one really went to college before in my family. So, I didn't have that help. I was just trying to figure it all out.

A lack of prior financial commitment and planning is sometimes seen in individuals who originate from a home where they are the first to attend college in their family (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012; Cabrea & La Nasa, 2001).

**Scholarships and financial assistance.** Many respondents held the cost of college attendance in an area of unattainable reality. None of the students in the study mentioned student loans or college payment plans as a possible answer to the lack of their financial support structure. Scholarships, including institutional, public, private, and local, were only discussed by a few of the prospective students when addressing their inability to pay. Kelly specifically discussed that she qualified for a partial ACT scholarship at JCJC, but she stated that those funds were not enough to overcome her financial needs surrounding college attendance.

**County aid and assistance.** County-based aid at JCJC is offered through a partnership with select county boards of supervisors. This aid provides students with scholarships in Greene, Jasper, and Smith counties, that three of the respondents would have qualified for as first-time-fulltime freshman students at JCJC (JCJC, 2014). These county scholarships would have paid for all of tuition and fees while students were enrolled in fifteen or more hours at JCJC (Jones County Junior College, 2014). Sherry from Smith County, Thomas from Greene County and Tasha from Jasper County all would have qualified for the tuition assistance program set up in their respective counties. Sherry's interview did not reveal if she was aware of the tuition assistance program. Thomas was aware of the tuition assistance program available to him and shared he was disappointed that he was going to miss the opportunity to use the county aid.

Tasha, however, was not aware of county aid available to her as a resident of Jasper County but she was interested in learning more after the option was discussed. The county scholarships would not have paid for all the cost associated with attending JCJC. However, in addressing the concerns of financial preparedness and the ability to pay, these scholarships should be considered. With the complexity of paying for college, navigating the financial process can seem challenging.

**First-generation college student.** Ten of the 14 respondents indicated verbally within their interview that they were a first-generation college student and shared how that status impacted their pursuit of higher education. Two additional interview respondents indicated on their college application that they identify as a first-generation college student. The data revealed that recent high school graduates, college accepted, and college-bound in the fall of 2018, found that the impacts of being a first-generation college student played a central role in their decision whether or not to attend college in the fall following their high school graduation.

**Family involvement.** Susan, Sherry, Gerald, Tim, Jessica, Clarke, Cara, Kelly, Thomas, and Tasha shared various ways that being the first member of their family to attend college impacted how they completed or did not complete admissions and enrollment processes. Some respondents recalled a lack of involvement and support in their college attendance by family members. Of those same students, some specifically cited parental lack of support as a major influence on not attending college themselves. Susan recalled her father's reaction to her pursuit of college enrollment like this "He [her father] didn't want me to go to college. He wanted me to go to work. He didn't go to college and he didn't and still doesn't understand why I would want to go to college." Similarly, Sherry recounted an interaction of a lack of concern from her

parents. The situation described was in relation to Sherry's own frustration due to the lack of understanding on how to secure admission to college. Sherry stated,

It all seemed hard to me. My parents didn't go to college so they just kept telling me to figure it out and when I would get frustrated, they would just say I didn't have to go to college.

Despite the desire to attend college by the prospective students, parental figures discouraged and often times removed themselves from a parental support role often needed for prospective students that are actively seeking to enroll and attend college as a first-generation student.

*College processes.* Not all respondents perceived their parents as playing an unsupportive role in their pursuit toward postsecondary education. In fact, some respondents recalled active participation from their parental figures, but their lack of experience and understanding created additional hardships in navigating the college going process. Cara recalled her mother's support and frustration in the processes surrounding college attendance. She explained,

I really struggled with the tax transcript part of the [financial aid] application. It is just me and my mom, and she had a hard time understanding everything I would ask for. She always wanted me to go to college because she missed her chance to go. She got pregnant with me and ended up not making it to college.

Other respondents shared similar recollections of parental figures struggling to navigate the complex processes, forms, and notifications that surround the admissions, enrollment, and attendance process. Thomas shared this about his parent's lack of understanding concerning the processes surrounding college-going, "I had to have some help with it. That was hard! Nobody in

my family had done one before. Well, it makes sense. No one in my family had gone to college before but now, me.”

*Non-parental assistance.* The seeking of help outside of parental figures was introduced in various ways throughout respondent responses. For example, Clarke was encouraged and aided by his high school football coach. Clarke shared, “He [his football coach] helped me when my parents didn’t. I mean they didn’t know better, I guess. They never went to anything like college.” Other first-generation college student respondents found help with college going processes from their former high school guidance counselors, individuals from their churches, grandparents, older siblings, girlfriends, college personnel, and neighbors. It was apparent that the students who identified as a first-generation college bound student were open to assistance from a varied group of individuals. What was not clear from the responses was whether the college bound students sought the assistance of others or if their parental figures played a role in finding their additional assistance.

*College jargon.* Going through the processes of college admission and enrollment can be hard on a first-generation student but navigating those processes without understanding college jargon proved to be even more difficult for the respondents of this study. All but three of the 14 respondents mentioned examples of not understanding a term, a related name of a process, or did not recognize an actual process they took part in while attempting to attend college at JCJC. Sherry shared difficulties she had understanding what the admissions process requested, “I wasn’t sure exactly what some of the questions meant. There were so many texts, letters, and emails that told me I was missing something from a checklist or application, and I got confused.” She continued to explain about confusion when working on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid that led her to seek assistance along with her mother at her high school.

Tim, Jessica, Clarke, Cara, Kelly, James, Bret, Emily, and Tasha all struggled to connect interview questions that used college terms related to the admission and enrollment process at JCJC. Often the questions would have to be rephrased or the terms explained to the respondents. A typical exchange for this interview question, how would you explain the admissions and enrollment process in your own words, would go as follows, “Um. I am not sure I know what admissions or enrollment is. Is that the same thing as the application? I don’t think I did that part.” Even still, after additional explanation and discussion, respondents sometimes struggled to grasp the terms commonly used with college admissions and enrollment processes.

**Family support.** The data revealed that recent high school graduates, that were college accepted, college-bound students in the fall of 2018 found that support of family in the college going process indirectly impacted their decision whether or not to attend college in the fall following their high school graduation. Positive encouragement, assistance in troubleshooting as well as negative criticism, and a lack of concern shaped the recounts of many of the respondents as they recalled how their family played a role in their path toward college attendance.

**Unsupportive family.** Five respondents recalled from their perspective, family being hands-off in the college going process. Each of the respondents referenced that the lack of a supportive family caused them difficulty in the college going processes. Respondents also discussed the difficulty of completing forms required for college attendance without the understanding and support of their parents or family. Clarke shares briefly about his memory of going through the process of college admissions without a parent or family member to assist him, “My coach, he is really good to me. He helped me when my parents didn’t. I mean they didn’t know better, I guess.” Susan’s situation was different from that of Clarke. Susan shared that she was caught between her father, that she rarely spoke with and who did not want her to go to

college, and her grandmother that was doing everything she could to ensure that her granddaughter had the opportunity to attend college. Yet, each of three remaining respondents shared similar stories of how the lack of family support decreased their confidence about attending college, heightened the reality of a lack of financial assistance from family for required items for use in college, and the lack of emotional support to question what they did not understand or what brought them frustration in the college-going process.

***Supportive family.*** The respondents that experienced a supportive family environment in the college going process revealed less factors that impacted their success in enrolling and attending college. The respondents with a strong family support system shared their frustrations of not achieving enrollment and attendance in college together as a family. They navigated the uncharted areas of college-going together, and they approached college-going together in a family mindset. After the failed attempt with JCJC in the fall of 2018, not every respondent shared about their supportive family continuing to support them in their college going journey. However, three of the respondents did experience the continued support and all three are now enrolled in college at some level.

Through the respondent accounts it is evident that emotional and process support from a family structure plays an essential role to college going outcomes. Higher educational institutions should continue to make their employees increasingly aware of and create policies that are responsive to the various family constellations of their prospective student population. As evidenced by the respondents, the journey toward higher education from each family structure was approached in a multitude of ways.

**Technology resources.** The data revealed that recent high school graduates, that were college accepted, college-bound students in the fall of 2018 found that the lack of technology



resources in the home impacted their ability to complete required forms and processes. This lack of technology access directly affected their decision whether or not to attend college in the fall following their high school graduation. Participants cited a lack of home computers, no access to home internet, never having created or used a personal email address, and difficulty using digital applications to submit needed admissions requirements as perceived roadblocks toward college attendance. Cara shared about her lack of technology and how it impacted her moving through the admission's process,

I just got so confused about my financial aid. I didn't have any help with filling it out. It was all online, and we do not have the internet at home. I had to bring all of my information to the school to try and work on it. I really struggled with the tax transcript part of the application. It is just me and my mom, and she had a hard time understanding everything I would ask for.

Cara went on to explain that it took longer for her to complete her online items because she had to work back and forth between her mom and school, where she had access to the needed technology. Brett shared in the frustration of not having access to the technology needed to complete forms at home. He said,

[FAFSA] I did that in school too. That was tricky. I had to get my dad's information and take it to school to complete the things I needed to. It was kind of hard not having a computer at home.

While respondents did not go into deep details in regard to their lack of technology, it is apparent that technology played a role in individual narratives.

**JCJC left them; they did not choose to leave JCJC.** The respondents revealed that many planned at the time of application, and throughout the admission and enrollment process to

attend college at JCJC. However, for various reasons those same students felt as if they did not have a choice on whether they could attend college at JCJC in the fall of 2018. It appears that the students perceived that JCJC left them behind in the processes that were required for college attendance.

Of the 14 respondents that melted away from college attendance in the fall of 2018, twelve respondents were enrolled in some form of higher education in various degrees at the time of their interview. The respondents describe different reasons for their continuation toward their pursuit of college attendance, but most stated that they did not make a choice not attend college in the fall of 2018, it simply just did not happen. Clearly the continued desire of attendance existed even after the attempt to start college at JCJC in the fall of 2018 failed.

Various examples existed in the data on how college employees could have assisted the prospective students with available resources or mitigated a perceived barrier that would have allowed students to stay on task in their pursuit of college attendance. Assistance specifically related to financial aid appeared to be missing to some degree for this student group. Numerous respondents discussed how difficult the financial aid process is to navigate and understand. Sherry shared about her experience with completing the financial aid process,

We completed the FAFSA application in [high school] school. Some ladies were there to help us complete the application. I didn't have my FAFSA results back before it was time for classes to start. I kept getting emails about things I was missing from the financial aid office at JCJC.

Sherry appears to understand from the communication being sent from JCJC that she had items missing that would stop her from attending college. However, she did not appear to understand how to complete those items. Sherry did not share about additional communication from JCJC

on how to address her missing items. Other respondents shared similar experiences when they discussed financial aid processes throughout the series of interviews conducted.

Emily's link to JCJC leaving her behind arose while she discussed her timing in not attending college in the fall of 2018, she recalled this about her choice not to attend college,

I got a job to help pay for things and college kind of got put on hold. I guess I never really decided I wasn't going, it more or less just happened. I guess if I am honest, I didn't take care of my business so I could come to JCJC.

From Emily's recount it appears that JCJC and college attendance fades away in her daily thinking and actions. She did not share if JCJC continued to contact her or encourage her completion of items required to attend, only that the process appeared to stop. Susan had a similar experience as she remembered the ending of the summer and her choice not to attend college in the fall of 2018, "I don't feel like I really had a choice. I feel like my time ran out to figure out my problems. I still wanted to go to school, but I had to figure out how." Susan rationalized her lack of college attendance as not being able to address her "problems". As she discussed her thoughts, she internalized her personal situation as something JCJC identified as a problem. Susan did not express that she felt JCJC could help her with her problems and move her through the processes into to college attendance.

**Research Question 2: What parts of the enrollment process, if any, after application do recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as having played a role in their choice whether or not to attend college?**

Three main themes emerged related to parts of the enrollment process after application that were identified as essential in the decision on whether or not to attend college in the fall of

2018, federal financial aid, admission processes, and financial obligation. The three identified themes will be discussed in the following section.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid.** Overwhelmingly, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) was a central theme of the admissions and enrollment process that caused respondents difficulty in navigating. Each of the 14 respondents appeared to be familiar with FAFSA to various degrees. Six of the respondents, Susan, Sherry, Gerald, Thomas, Bret, and Tasha, stated that they completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. However, only two respondents recalled having their award response from financial aid at the time of making their choice on whether to attend college or not. The remaining four students noted that items were missing from their financial aid checklist and that those items were communicated by text, email, and mail from the JCJC financial aid office in order to complete the FAFSA award process.

Respondents agreed that FAFSA caused both student and parent confusion and frustration. Jessica shared her experience,

My mom and I worked on it together, but we never really got it finished in time to start school. I got a lot of texts from JCJC about it, but I had no idea what all that was. It was hard for me to keep up with it.

Jessica appeared to be in progress with FAFSA but still having difficulties even with the assistance of her mother and JCJC personnel. Respondent Cara shared that her experience was also difficult to manage,

I just got so confused about my financial aid. I didn't have any help with filling it out. It was all online, and we do not have the internet at home. I had to bring all of my information to the school to try and work on it. I really struggled with the tax transcript

part of the application. It is just me and my mom, and she had a hard time understanding everything I would ask for.

The general agreement on FAFSA was that students felt as if the forms and paperwork were not understandable. As a higher education professional, it was evident that the respondents not only struggled with the forms and paperwork, but they also appeared to not understand the aid process. None of the students discussed their Expected Family Contribution (EFC) score, their Pell grant availability, or the concept of a student loan to pay for college. Research supports that financial aid improves a student's likelihood of success in higher education (Lee, 2019) by removing financial barriers. With most respondents discussing their inability to pay for college as a central reason for not attending college in the fall of 2018, one must consider the reasons why aid of any type did not play more of a central role in the respondent conversations.

*Non-traditional family structure.* There is a small segment of respondents that cited that their family structure did not fit the standards of a recognized family model in many college admissions procedures, specifically the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid. Absentee and single parents, extended family in parental roles, and complete lack of family structure are all described within the recounts of many of the respondents. Susan recalls how her family structure played a role in her pursuit of higher education,

I got my letter of acceptance in the mail, but it went to my Dad's house. I lived with my grandmother then, but everything from my school was sent to my Dad's and he didn't tell me I got it until I went to visit after it was too late. He didn't want me to go to college. He wanted me to go to work. He didn't go to college and he didn't and still doesn't understand why I would want to go to college. My mom left when I was little, and my

grandmother really raised me. She has told me all my life that she wanted me to go to college. That a college degree is a key to making a better life for me.

This passage explains how difficult it was to navigate the path toward college attendance while trying to live in the middle of the battling between her father and her grandmother. Tim remembers similar issues regarding his family structure. In his recollection he describes his family structure and his pursuit of college attendance as difficult,

Looking back, I didn't really have a good plan to go to college. I didn't really have anyone to help me with college. My brother didn't go to college he just went straight into the oilfield. He helps me out with everything. My parents are not in the picture and he's who I go to for advice.

Cara however, had a different memory regarding the disappointment both she and her single mother felt on not being able to figure out how to work through the processes for Susan to attend college,

I was working part-time, but I needed that money for gas and stuff. I ended up just canceling my classes and not going to school. It was really hard for me and my mom. We were both so upset and disappointed.

Non-traditional family structures, as represented by some of the study respondents, represent a growing segment of college and university prospective student populations. More students than ever before are coming to the admissions process from a non-traditional family structure (Perkins & Milsted, 2010). Non-traditional family structures can be loosely defined as single parenthood, cohabitation, same-sex families, and polygamy (Perkins & Milsted, 2010). Additional research could be conducted to address this growing segment of prospective students and their needs.

***Scholarship application.*** Scholarships appeared in limited conversations with respondents. It was not apparent if the notion of a scholarship was not a conceived possibility for individuals or if the respondents pursued the scholarship application process and decided that they did not qualify for institutional aid. In the few instances where scholarships were discussed, respondents referenced them as monies that they wished could have been awarded to them to mitigate a barrier to the cost of college attendance.

**Admissions and enrollment processes.** The lack of understanding regarding admission and enrollment processes was a theme that presented clearly in the review of the data. The respondents demonstrated difficulty in navigating the processes due to a lack of knowledge surrounding how to complete a process, when a new process would take place, and how the overall admission and enrollment process bleeds into the first day of classes for many prospective students. As discussed under the section of first-generation students, processes built around admissions and enrollment appear to cause disruption to process of attending college. Various respondents had to have the admissions and enrollment process explained to them in order to take part in the interview questions. Often times the prospective student actually participated in the admission and enrollment processes explained even though they were not aware that they had taken part in these processes.

Respondents acknowledged at times that they themselves appeared to not understand what was going on with processes surrounding college attendance even as they appeared to continue to pursue college attendance. James shared this about processes surrounding admissions and enrollment,

I'm not sure what enrollment is unless that is the loan or grant thing to pay for school.

You did say enrollment, right? I definitely didn't do that. I am not really sure what that is.

Gosh, I feel weird. I don't know what a lot of things are you are asking.

James, however, was not alone. Respondents with different backgrounds and outcomes shared in the same lack of understanding or confusion regarding the process's colleges and universities construct to on-board prospective students to their college.

**Financial obligation.** Respondents in their recounts of college going preparation appeared unprepared to manage the financial obligation that is associated with enrolling in college courses. In fact, three students specifically cite their lack of knowledge surrounding the financial obligation of attending college. James recalled his experience on the financial obligation of college,

I didn't know how to get money to pay. I guess I never thought about it. They always said college was important and everyone needs to go. I just didn't think about all that part. It was a little weird. My teachers back in high school talked about everyone going to college, but we didn't know what to do to really get there. You know. I mean no one really went to college before in my family. So, I didn't have that help. I was just trying to figure it all out.

James even shared that he was enrolled in classes and planning to attend college in the fall of 2018 as late as the month of August; until he received his first student bill, "It was after I got my first bill. I saw the cost. Wow! It's was too expensive for me. Now I know why no one goes to college." Tasha shared a similar recount of her experience with the financial obligation of college attendance,



I didn't get any help with paying for school. I was supposed to pay everything out of pocket. It's why I didn't end up in college. I just could not figure out how to pay for it. I guess I really didn't know what college was going to cost.

While other respondents hinted in responses at being alarmed at the cost of college attendance, Tasha and James listed it as a major reason for not attending college in the fall of 2018.

Jessica shared her experience of receiving her bill before the first day of fall classes. She stated she did not have the money to pay the bill and she ended up simply not attending class at all in the fall of 2018. She also appeared to not be aware of the costs associated with college attendance. Cara explained that she could not attend due to the financial needs placed on her surrounding college attendance. She said that she could not get everything taken care of for school regarding payments and that led her to cancel her classes that she was enrolled in and not attend school. Kelly and Thomas both mentioned the cost of college attendance as well as a list of other issues they each faced in their pursuit of higher education.

**Research Question 3: What was the timing of the decision whether or not to attend college for recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018?**

The timing of respondent decisions on whether or not to attend college in the fall of 2018 varied across the group of respondents. This section presents these findings. The collective group made their choices on college attendance in May after high school graduation through August of 2018. Appendix I presents a table showing the respondent, their timing, and reason for the college choice.

**May.** Tim was the only respondent that stated his choice was made in May on whether or not he would attend college in the fall of 2018. He had this to say about his timing, "Pretty quick

after graduation [high school]; I had to go to work to help my brother pay bills and get a car. I guess I knew by the end of May.” Tim’s choice appeared to be motivated by the need to work and contribute to the overall family income.

**June.** Gerald and Emily stated that they made their choice on whether or not to attend college in the month of June. Gerald recalled this about the timing of his choice, “When I got my job offer, for sure. It was a deal-breaker.” He was a member of a career and technical program in high school that focused on technology and that led him to his current career choice. Gerald opted to start his career after high school graduation and is now enrolled in an online college that his employer is supporting by paying the tuition for him to earn a degree. Emily, however, was not as clear about the timing of her choice. She stated this about her timing,

I am thinking maybe like, June or early July. I know I graduated in May and didn’t work for like a month...maybe two. Then I got a job to help pay for things and college kind of got put on hold.

Both respondent choices on timing in the month of June appear to be related to the need of the prospective student to begin working due to financial stress.

**July.** Thomas and Bret provided the month of July for the timing of their choice on whether or not to attend college. Thomas shared this about his choice timing,

I guess late July. They send out a letter when you don’t make it into the program. I was upset...really upset. But my friend, he told me there are other options out there. It was too late for me at Gulf Coast and PRCC last fall. They already had their program set too. I just knew I would get in at JC and didn’t even put my applications in anywhere else.

Thomas' choice was triggered by not being accepted into the paramedic program at JCJC. His choice not to attend college at any location in the fall of 2018 appears to be linked directly to his desired major and the limitations of program acceptance.

Bret on the other hand had a completely different experience unrelated to his program of study. He explained his timing on college attendance, "I guess [it was] maybe July. That's when I got my job at a discount store. When I realized I couldn't figure it all out...I just hit a dead-end, you know." Bret appears to give up on his journey through the admissions and enrollment process. He like other respondents indicated that he had a need to go to work to generate income and therefore stopped the process of college going.

**July into August.** Four respondents, Susan, Jessica, James, and Emily did not recall the exact timeline that they made their choice not to attend college in fall of 2018, but they did recall that it happened between the months of July and August. Two of the four respondents, James and Jessica, recalled receiving their first bill for college attendance and indicated that amount played a role in their choice. James recalls his choice timeline, "I guess July or August. It was after I got my first bill. I saw the cost. Wow! It was too expensive for me." James appeared surprised and unaware of what the cost of college attendance for him would be until he viewed his first invoice. Jessica shared a similar reaction to receiving her first student bill and explained it as follows, "I guess July or August. I didn't have the money to pay the first bill, so I didn't go to class." Jessica did not indicate if she was shocked by the amount of the invoice, or if she was unprepared to pay the invoice.

Susan and Tasha's choice did not appear to have a link to receiving a student bill. Susan stated that her choice was related to the time given to complete admission and enrollment processes. She explained her timeline like this,

It was July into August, but I don't really feel like I had a choice. I feel like my time ran out to figure out my problems. I still wanted to go to school but I had to figure out how.

Tasha, however, discussed events surrounding her choice much of which did not involve anything that surrounded processes, payments, or events that link to college attendance. Tasha shared this,

I guess it was July, if not it was early August. It was definitely in the summer. All of my friends stayed together and doing stuff right after high school and through most of the summer. Then everyone started going off to college and getting jobs. It all kind of changed at the end of the summer.

Tasha's timeline centered on her activities and friends from high school. In her description it seems as though she had not given the processes and choice part of attending college considerable thought when she made her actual choice not to attend.

**August.** Sarah, Kelly, Cara, and Clarke four of the respondents provided August as their timeline in deciding on whether or not they would attend college in the fall of 2018. Each of these respondents appeared to plan to attend college up until the day that they realized they could not make the details in the college process work for them individually. Each of the students were still very much in an active role of seeking college attendance throughout the summer months.

Cara explained her choice and timeline as follows,

It was August. I know we tried to get everything with Financial Aid worked out the week classes started at JC. A nice lady that tried to help me at JC, told me to drop my classes so I wouldn't owe money to the school. That really saved me from getting in trouble with bills I couldn't pay. So, yea, I think it was August.

Cara appears to be enrolled in classes the first week of school, but still attempting to work through how she could pay for college. Kelly's experience was similar to that of Cara. She stated that she made her choice in August because she had to get a job and decided that college "just wasn't going to happen for her."

Clarke and Sarah, however, had unique situations that surrounded their choice not to attend college. Clarke was attempting to complete a failed high school state test in order to gain acceptance at JCJC in the fall of 2018 for the welding program. He described his timeline and frustration with the process like this, "It was after school started, so August. I couldn't get my paper on the test to the school. I was very mad at the time." It was not clear at the time if Clarke had his passing test score in his possession or if he was waiting on the Mississippi Department of Education to submit it on his behalf. Sarah's circumstances surrounding the timeline of choice not to attend college were not seen in another respondent. Sarah stated that she was hearing impaired and that the campus environment played a role in her choice and timing. She explained her timing like this,

I took a tour of my classrooms right before classes were supposed to start in August. I kind of freaked out and dropped all of my classes and did not start school in August. I have a hearing disability and the campus was so big. I just didn't think I could do it.

For Sarah, it did not appear that processes or cost stopped her from attending classes at JCJC. It would seem that it was the environment that she perceived that caused her pause in her pursuit of higher education.

For each of the 14 respondents it appears that their choice on whether or not to attend college in the fall of 2018 occurred in the summer months prior to the 2018 fall semester between May and August. Only a few details were discussed related to the timing of their choice.

One respondent mentioned that their former high school guidance counselor was on vacation in the summer months and was not available for assistance. Another respondent discussed the summer months between graduation and the start of the fall term as fun and full of friends. Overall, there was no particular month that played a more significant role than another in respondent choices on whether or not to attend college.

### **Additional Findings**

Throughout the compiled research data, additional topics and themes emerged that were unrelated to the research questions directing this study. Even though the study was not designed to address these areas, the data is interesting and should be noted. The following section will discuss the additional findings grouped into two themes: Persistence and delayed college attendance and outreach and assistance.

**Persistence and delayed college attendance.** Grit and determination were reflected within the respondent data in their continuation in the pursuit of college attendance. In the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, persistence is defined as a firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition (2019). Of the 14 respondents that melted away from college attendance in the fall of 2018, twelve respondents were enrolled in some form of higher education in various degrees at the time of their interview. The respondents describe different reasons for their continuation toward their pursuit of college attendance, but most stated that they did not make a choice not attend college in the fall of 2018, it simply just did not happen.

Five of the respondents that persisted to enroll and attend college were male and seven were female. Of the twelve respondents that were enrolled in a college course at the time of their interview, five were enrolled at a Mississippi community college, four were enrolled at a four-

year university in Mississippi, and three were enrolled at an online college located in various states. Sherry who was attending a Mississippi community college, shared this about continuing her pursuit of college attendance,

I never stopped wanting to attend. I even tried to enroll at another community college when I gave up on JCJC. I ran into some of the same problems with them. So, I didn't go to school [college] then [fall 2018] but I finally got everything worked out to go to school. I am going to a Mississippi community college now.

Sherry attempted to work through issues with college access at two different Mississippi community colleges in the fall of 2018. Through her persistence and work she enrolled and was attending one of her initial college choices in the spring of 2019.

Kelly continued her postsecondary enrollment and attendance at one of Mississippi's public four-year universities, in the spring of 2019. She describes her actions toward college attendance as follows,

I decided I couldn't go to JCJC in August. Well, really in August I thought I wouldn't go to college at all. I got a job and really just said it wasn't going to happen for me. But then the admissions specialist called me from an in-state university, and kept calling me, and helping me, and I decided I could do it. No one else in my family had gone to college so I wanted to try. And now I am here, and I feel proud.

Kelly reflected on her doubt that she could attend college. However, she did enroll and attend with the help and encouragement of an admissions specialist from her current university.

Jessica, Gerald, and Emily all were taking courses from online universities at the time of their interviews. There were three unique circumstances for each student's choice to attend an online college. What was consistent with the respondents that chose to attend an online

university, was access and assistance offered to the student from the university. The students voiced their observation of caring admissions employees, helpful instructors, and staff that addressed any perceived barrier with a positive outcome for the student.

The respondents were successful in transitioning from a high school graduate to a college student. Unfortunately for the students, postsecondary was delayed by a semester. The students appeared to value their need for postsecondary education enough to persist through some uncertain and even demanding scenarios. The guidance shared by individuals who possessed knowledge of college processes, shared opportunities and offered support to students with missing parental figures were expressed as valuable by the respondents. The students displayed a certain firmness of mind and spirit to overcome major setbacks in their overall goal of attending college.

**Outreach and assistance.** Overwhelmingly, study respondents shared about outreach and assistance offered by various individuals that assisted the prospective students in their pursuit toward postsecondary education. Not each instance was identical in nature. However, the theme of outreach and assistance was evident within the data.

Susan, Sherry, Gerald, Clarke, Cara, Kelly, Thomas and Bret all remembered assistance in some form as they pursued postsecondary education. Those individuals that assisted the respondents were connected to the prospective student in various ways. Some found assistance from individuals in their church, others from a family acquaintance, and still others played a mentor role in the prospective student's life. Without further investigation, some individuals that played a role in assisting prospective students appeared to be in the path of the student strictly by coincidence. The coincidences could be found in the respondent knowing someone, that knew someone, that might be able to help the prospective student solve a problem related to college-



going, it was in a parent searching for help in networks like work or church, and sometimes the respondent happened to be in the right place at the right time and connect with someone that assisted them in the college-going process.

Cara described how she made a connection with her guide and how the individual provided her assistance in the college going process,

My mom asked everyone she knew if they could help me get into college. We finally found help from one of my grandmother's friends from church. She had a daughter that taught at a Historically Black College in Mississippi and she is the reason I am in school today. I even managed to get a scholarship with her help. Getting to college was so much harder than I thought it would be. [I am in classes now] Because someone helped me.

When it all got really hard, and we didn't know how to move forward having someone to trust and help me really made it possible for me. Going to college is hard. I really had no idea how hard it would be.

Cara expressed her surprise in the difficulty surrounding the process of attending college, but she also shared the comfort that came from having someone she trusted to assist her in her journey.

Thomas' situation is based in a mentor relationship. His self-described mentor and neighbor played a key role in assisting Thomas with the college going process. He recalled,

[Who helped with applications and aid paperwork?] It was a family friend that helped me. He's the reason I wanted to be a paramedic. That's what he does for a living and he is really good. He actually lives next door to us, so I guess he is my neighbor too. He helps me when I have any questions about school or papers.

Thomas' mentor was in place when he hit a roadblock at JCJC. Thomas was not accepted in the paramedic program at JCJC. However, his mentor kept him on track to pursue acceptance at

other Mississippi community college paramedic programs. He was delayed in starting his college education by one semester, but he is pleased that he continued with applying to other colleges after his attempt at JCJC was unsuccessful.

Bret's assistance with college enrollment manifested itself in the form of a girlfriend. He described her assistance in aiding with his transportation concerns and working through the processes together,

[The girlfriend he met after he started working.] She helped me get into some classes at a Mississippi community college. I am taking two classes with her now. With that and my work schedule, it's why you and I are having to talk so late at night. I ride with her to school on Mondays and Wednesdays.

The respondents shared stories of how former athletic coaches, high school guidance counselors, a relative's college band advisor, and even a director of housing at an in-state university assisting them in moving toward a college enrollment, even if it was a semester behind. The individuals that students discussed offered clarity to the prospective students in times when attending college seemed hopeless, difficult, and even confusing. Numerous colleges and universities today use a formal student mentoring program to assist underserved students while they complete their college education (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011). The difference between the current theory of college mentors and what the respondents experienced is, there was no formal mentorship arranged that assisted the prospective students in the college going process. The respondents all encountered their guide through life and family circumstances.

### **Discussion and Implications**

A review of responses from study participants yielded several interesting observations. The variables that respondents listed as critical in their decision whether or not to attend college

were timing, transportation, distance, the need for on-campus housing, financial obstacles, first-generation college student status, family support, technology resources, and feeling left behind.

Respondents identified with the concept of rurality without stating this label within the discussions. Rurality characteristics include location, population density, and agriculturally based occupations, but also include having a close contact with nature, population homogeneity, standards of social interaction, rigid social mobility, cultural values that link directly to family, and joint family systems (Bitz, 2011; Holder, et al., 2016). The data presented results linked to rurality that include distance from campus, need for on-campus housing, lack of technology, and family support.

Enrollment management theory of summer melt framework centrally identifies categories that attribute to summer melt as financial concerns, social anxiety, lack of parental and familial support, and trouble navigating the enrollment process (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). Each of these categories have been identified through respondent interviews and discussed through themes. The most noted area of concern was FAFSA processes. Rural college student populations appear to struggle with the completion of needed items related to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Not all students identify the same issues with the process of FAFSA but rather they struggle with how the federal aid process applies to them as an individual.

Admissions and enrollment processes, as well as, financial obligation also seems to cause issues for rural students who are working toward successful college attendance. Processes for college attendance vary for each individual circumstance. Understanding how these processes impact all sub-populations could be difficult, however, addressing major areas of impact like student accounts, billing, and scheduling, could be addressed for greater success in attending

college. Again, not all prospective students identify the same reasons why FAFSA, admissions, enrollment processes, and financial obligations cause the college going process disturbance, but it is clear that areas specific to enrollment management present major roadblocks for rural students.

A tenant of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), self-efficacy, was displayed by various respondents in different areas of their experience. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's abilities, specifically the ability to meet the challenges ahead and complete a task successfully (LaMorte, 2016; Lent et al., 1994). Respondents questioned at various times, if they lacked the ability to complete processes that would lead to college attendance. Particularly, rural first-generation college students struggled to identify if they possessed the needed skills and knowledge to be the first in their family to attend college.

The timing of college choice concludes that the students interviewed did melt away in the summer months following high school graduation. Respondents revealed that all choices whether or not to attend focus on the months between high school graduation (May) and the start of the fall term (August). There is data to link college choice on attendance, timing of choice, and the individual need for financial income to support the prospective student. Respondents were treated and expected to live as adults after high school graduation, with the main requirement being to financially support themselves and their needs. With this assumption, an individual would be forced to seek employment and not focus on the processes of college attendance.

### **Summary of Manuscript Two**

Rural students who are recent high school graduates within the JCJC district have made the choice not attend college immediately following high school graduation at a rate of over 53 percent (Jones County Junior College, 2018). This alarming statistic demanded an investigation

of why rural prospective students make the choice not to attend college. Rural students face a unique journey toward college attendance often with a lack of technology, their home base being an extended distance from college campuses, and many times being a first-generation college student with little to no support in the college going process within their home. The following questions were formalized and addressed throughout the research conducted. The questions were then summarized in themes within this manuscript.

### Research Questions

1. What variables do recent high school graduates who were college-accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as being the critical point in their decision whether or not to attend college?
2. What parts of the enrollment process, if any, after application do recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as having played a role in their choice whether or not to attend college?
3. What was the timing of the decision whether or not to attend college for recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018?

Manuscript two organizes the data collected from 14 interviews with participants from all eight counties that are legislatively mandated as Jones County Junior College's service district. Through the respondent interviews, data were discovered that identify variables believed to impact college attendance of rural first year students. Those variables are arranged in themes and organized as follows: timing, transportation, distance, and on-campus housing, financial

obstacles, scholarships, first-generation college student, family support, feeling left behind, and technology resources.

Respondents credited transportation, distance, and on-campus housing as a cause for concern in planning to attend college. Respondents internalized the lack of access due to distance and travel as a variable that was not easily addressed by them, the prospective students. Respondents also discussed financial issues, the impact of being a first-generation college student, family support, and technology access as variables that impacted their access and attendance in higher education. Even still, the respondent sentiment was as if JCJC left the prospective student in the processes surrounding college going, and not that the student left JCJC by choice.

The respondents in this study perceived different processes that caused concern in the enrollment and admissions phases of college attendance. Three themes were identified as playing an important role in their choice concerning college attendance. The themes related to enrollment and admissions processes were organized as follows: Free Application for Federal Student Aid, admissions and enrollment processes, and financial obligation.

Respondents also identified the timing of their choice whether or not to attend college in the fall of 2018. The respondent population focused on the months of May, after high school graduation, throughout the summer months leading to the fall semester in August as the critical time of choice for college attendance. A variety of reasons for their timing choice were identified throughout the interviews. The most prevalent reason for timing was the need for financial income to support the student and often the family unit.

Overwhelmingly, the students who were a part of this research managed to overcome the delayed enrollment in fall of 2018 and were successfully enrolled in a form of higher education

at the time of the interview. The realization of enrollment and attendance continuation was not directly apart of this research study's design; however, data was uncovered through discussions with the respondents. Outreach and grit were the major veins of themes that were discovered from the students that continued to overcome summer melt and apply, enroll, and attend some form of higher education in the following spring semester.

The processes, timing, and variables discussed were individualized to the respondents' circumstances. Despite the individual situations of the respondents' accounts, the shared needs, frustrations, challenges, and opportunities that were identified offer a road map of rural first year students. Those identified themes were outlined in this manuscript. A third and final manuscript will use the themes identified to propose solutions to the problem of practice, a presentation of ideas toward application, formal recommendations, as well as a discussion of plans for dissemination of the study findings.

Summer Melt of Rural First-Year Students

Manuscript Three

D. Finée Ruffin



### **Problem of Practice**

The Rural School and Community Trust reports a significant gap in college participation rates between graduates of rural low-income/low-minority schools and that of their peers (2014). Rural prospective students face a variety of obstacles that could impact college attendance. Typically, rural residents experience lower household incomes, lower levels of educational attainment, have limited access to health care providers, and only remote access to colleges and universities due to their location (Rural School and Community Trust, 2014).

As the fourth largest rural population in the United States, Mississippi has 52 percent of the population living in rural locales (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2017). Recent reports show that interest in college attendance by Mississippi students is increasing with 72% of recent high school graduates completing a college application each year (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). However, college attendance by recent high school graduates in Mississippi remains flat at 48% (National Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis, 2016).

Jones County Junior College (JCJC) a two-year, open-door institution is one of Mississippi's fifteen community colleges (Jones County Junior College, 2018). JCJC is regionally accredited to grant Associate in Arts degrees, Associate in Applied Science degrees, Career and Technical certificates, Adult Education credentials, and Workforce credentials (Jones County Junior College, 2018). JCJC like many Mississippi community colleges has experienced a small but steady enrollment decline since 2010 (Mississippi Community College Board, 2018).

In the fall 2018 enrollment cycle, JCJC had over 5000 admissions applications submitted. Within the application submissions, roughly 2800 were identified as recent high school graduate applicants and 1900 applications were submitted from recent high school graduates located within the college's eight-county district. 714 in-district high school graduates attended JCJC in the fall of 2018. 480 attended a different college or university and 706 of those applicants who did not attend JCJC participated in no college or university in the fall semester after high school graduation (Jones County Junior College, 2018). The 706 in-district, recent high school graduates, prospective students that applied to attend JCJC in fall of 2018 but attended no college or university were the center of this dissertation in practice.

### **Research Questions**

This research aims to point out the variables identified by students that account for the summer melt of first-year students who applied to attend JCJC after high school graduation, but did not participate in any college or university in the fall following high school graduation. Better identification and understanding of these variables is important in developing ways to address the college attendance gap by rural students. Three research questions played a central role in the identification and examination of perceived barriers for rural students in attending college immediately following high school graduation.

1. What variables do recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as being the critical point in their decision whether or not to attend college?
2. What parts of the enrollment process, if any, after application do recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as having played a role in their choice whether or not to attend college?

3. What was the timing of the decision whether or not to attend college for recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018?

### **Review of Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework composed of three components guides this research inquiry: Enrollment Management Theory of Summer Melt; Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT); and Rurality. The conceptual framework's combined theories were helpful in understanding the data given by respondents. SCCT was introduced most often as an indirect connection in the student's choice about college attendance. Self-efficacy and established goals (Bitz, 2011) were displayed by a variety of respondents in the form of continuing toward college attendance even after their original failure of attendance in college had taken place.

Rurality data played a central to this research study. Each of the respondents of this study were considered rural residents based on the location of their home base as well as the location of their respective high school. Tenants of rurality were also introduced throughout respondent descriptions of hardships that were related in some way to the respondent's pursuit of higher education. Some of those difficulties included their distance from campus, the lack of personal transportation, and a lack of access to technology resources.

### **Data**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 prospective students that applied to attend JCJC in the fall of 2018 but did not attend any college or university immediately following high school graduation. Respondents were asked to participate based on their home and high school location, enrollment status in the fall semester of 2018, and the fact that they applied to attend JCJC in the fall of 2018. Thirteen interviews were conducted via phone and one via text chat on the campus of JCJC. Twelve of the fourteen respondents were currently enrolled

in a form of higher education at the time the interviews were conducted. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 20, and they each self-reported their race as African American. Of the respondents there were eight that identified as female and six identified as male. The interview participants appeared to be functioning successfully, whether they were currently enrolled in a form of higher education or not. None of the research respondents discussed hardships or life stopping events within the dialog of their interviews.

### **Summary of Findings**

The previous sections reviewed the problem of practice, research questions, conceptual framework, and data used for the study. This section will present a summary of the findings. Within the findings a discussion of deeper meaning will be provided.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the perceived barriers of college attendance by rural students. Students were asked to reflect on their experience throughout the admissions and enrollment process. They were asked to discuss their experience applying and describe the processes in their own words. Additional inquiry was conducted concerning their college plans at the time of application submission; the Free Application for Federal Student Aid process and understanding; and the timing of their choice to attend college in the fall of 2018. After sharing of their remembered experiences, additional time was given for anything related to the college going process that the respondent wanted to share for research purposes.

Identifying variables, if any existed, for rural students was the major issue considered when conducting the interviews. Throughout the inquiry there were a variety of perceived barriers identified by the respondents. Many of the respondents not only identified the barrier but also shared why they found the barrier difficult to overcome, and how they persisted toward

college enrollment and attendance only a semester behind their planned attendance. Respondent data that appeared throughout the respondent interviews was organized into themes.

### **Research Question One: Critical Decision Variables**

In response to research question one, what variables do recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018 report as being the critical point in their decision whether or not to attend college, respondents identified variables such as timing; the impacts of distance and transportation and the need for on campus housing; financial obstacles; scholarships and financial assistance; the impacts of being first-generation college students; family support; technology resources; and JCJC leaving the student behind in their journey toward college attendance. These identified variables were critical issues that in the mind of prospective students and also contributed to the summer melt for rural prospective students in the fall of 2018 at JCJC.

**Timing.** The first theme recognized through interviews was timing. All timing concerns did not center around the same issue; however, what was common about timing was that not enough time existed for the student to complete a required process. Susan shared this comment related to timing when she was asked about her choice of whether or not to attend college, “I don’t really feel like I had a choice. I feel like my time ran out to figure out my problems.” The sentiment of a lack of time was shared by three other respondents.

**Transportation, distance and on-campus housing.** Transportation, distance, and the need for on-campus housing was the next theme identified from the respondent interviews. A lack of personal transportation and the distance from campus was discussed by four respondents. On-campus housing was also discussed within the context of distance and lack of transportation. A variety of scenarios existed concerning transportation and distance. Some students did not have

access to any transportation, while other students shared family transportation. In situations of shared transportation needs, the prospective students found themselves in circumstances that could not support the time needed to both travel to campus and attend classes. On-campus housing did not appear available to any of the students that identified transportation, distance, and on-campus housing as a barrier to college attendance.

**Financial issues.** Financial obstacles, scholarships, and financial assistance were additional themes identified throughout the data. Overwhelmingly, financial situations were the most directly discussed; with ten of the fourteen respondents identifying them as barriers. Financial topics existed in various forms: prospective students not understanding that it would cost money to attend college; not knowing how to access support funds; a lack of preparing for college costs; and the timeline setting when the cost of college would be due. When Tasha was asked about her college admissions experience, she shared this about the cost of college, “I just could not figure out how to pay for college. I guess I didn’t know what it was going to cost.” A lack of understanding of the financial commitment, financial resources, and actual cost were the most commonly introduced areas of financial issues regarding college attendance.

**First-generation college student.** Being a first-generation college student was a dominate theme that surfaced from the study. Of the participants ten self-identified as first-generation college students and described their experiences from that perspective. The first-generation students shared issues surrounding family involvement, college processes, non-parental assistance, and college jargon as areas of impact on college attendance. Overall, students admitted that they did not understand many of the college-going processes because they were the first in their family to attend college.

**Family support.** Family support appeared in the data as having an impact on college attendance. Family support was broken down by unsupportive and supportive family sections. Eight of the fourteen respondents referenced family support as impacting their college attendance process. Students who had unsupportive family units appeared to have more difficulty in navigating the college going process than those students with supportive families. In fact, the three students that expressed the existence of family support continued toward college enrollment and attendance in the spring 2019 semester.

**Technology resources.** Access to technology resources was discovered throughout the interview data as having an impact on college attendance. A lack of home computers, internet access, and personal email addresses were all identified by study respondents. Many institutional processes require technology to complete forms or submit needed items. Without the access to technology, many students fell behind in the college going process and in turn did not attend classes in the fall following high school graduation.

**JCJC left them; they did not choose to leave JCJC.** Respondents felt that JCJC left them; they did not choose to leave JCJC. This theme was mixed throughout the respondent responses concerning college attendance. Institutional assistance, specifically throughout the financial aid process, was discussed by numerous respondents. While JCJC did a good job of communicating that items were missing from processes surrounding college attendance, students felt as if there could have been additional assistance beyond the reminders of missing items. Overall, students felt that JCJC could have offered more assistance in the college going process.

### **Research Question Two: Enrollment Process**

In response to research question two, what parts of the enrollment process, if any, after application do recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students

in the Fall of 2018 report as having played a role in their choice whether or not to attend college, study respondents identified three areas that impacted the prospective student's ability to attend college. Those three areas are Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); admissions and enrollment processes collectively; and financial obligation. These three areas identified had a broad reach across respondent experiences as recounted in this study.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid.** Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) appeared to impact most of the respondents in some way during their pursuit of college attendance. Not all respondents had the same experience, but the majority found frustrations with some or all of the FAFSA process. Most commonly, respondents struggled to understand how their family structure, specifically those of a nontraditional nature, fit into the FAFSA process.

**Admissions and enrollment processes.** The admissions and enrollment process collectively caused issues for the respondents interviewed. The respondent issues ranged from students not understanding how to achieve what was asked of the applicant, to student thinking they completed an enrollment process that actually had not been completed and still needed the student's attention. There appeared to be a lack of understanding of what the student was actual working toward from a process standpoint, short of simply going to college.

**Financial obligation.** Financial obligation was the final theme that emerged as an impact on the student's choice to attend college as part of the general enrollment process. Three students directly stated that they were unaware of what college would cost and that they were not prepared to pay when it was required for college attendance. It was unclear if paying for college was the only obstacle, or if it was one of a few obstacles that existed between these students and college attendance.



### **Research Question Three: Timing of Decision**

In response to research question three, what was the timing of the decision whether or not to attend college for recent high school graduates who were college accepted, college-bound students in the Fall of 2018, respondents confirmed that the summer months between high school graduation in May and the start of classes in August were critical periods of time in the student's choice on whether they would attend college. This critical timeframe for prospective students provided confirmation that summer melt was experienced by all fourteen respondents. Respondent data also concluded that the most influential reason involved in a student's choice not to attend college in the summer months after high school graduation was the requirement to establish financial support for themselves. As a high school graduate, not yet in college, these students were expected to work a full-time job to assist with personal and family expenses.

### **Additional Findings**

This study also produced two additional findings that were not directly related to the defined research questions. Additional themes were determined were respondent persistence to delayed college enrollment and outreach and assistance to respondents.

**Persistence and delayed college enrollment.** Twelve of the fourteen respondents persisted to college attendance at some point in the spring semester of 2019. Even after difficulty surrounding their initial plans to attend college, these respondents continued to display grit and determination to attend college and achieve their original goal. They did not give up and stayed focused on moving through processes that would lead them toward college attendance, although often times with the assistance of a guide.

**Outreach and assistance.** The most interesting finding surrounds the outreach and assistance data. Of the students that persisted to delayed college enrollment in the spring

semester of 2019, most experienced a form of outreach and assistance from individuals along their path toward college attendance. Not all respondents had the same experience, but they did have someone in their corner assisting them in getting through the hard times surrounding college processes. Often times in the scenarios detailed, assistance for the students was found in what could be described as *Angels*. An Angel was identified as someone who assisted the student with determining how to navigate the college processes, pushed the student when the student felt like they might give up, or someone who had experience going to college and could offer advice to overcome roadblocks that impacted college attendance. The student did not always know the individual that provided support, but they did feel as if the Angel had the same goal of the student attending college at heart.

### **Deeper Meaning**

The themes discerned from the data may be organized in to three categories that provide deeper meaning and context for rural summer melt: systematic failures; a lack of understanding regarding the population that appear to be under served by JCJC; and the impact of the *Angels* that assisted the prospective students in their journey toward college attendance.

**Systematic failures.** Through the mere existence of a college that has an established structure of well over 100 years, one can expect a set of systematic measures that take place around processes and policies. Additional oversight and policies from the federal, state and local level impact internal processes that cause both internal and external failures that impact students. By operating with long held established standards and various agencies for oversight, it is easy to understand how systematic failures that are understood internally by employees as common practice, could be confusing for students enrolling and attending college for the first time (Levesque, 2018). Addressing the structural barrier requires rethinking the organization of

common practice to reduce the confusion and frustration that contributes to a lack of understanding from a prospective student.

Of the organized themes from the respondent data, timing; distance from campus, transportation, and on-campus housing; and admission and enrollment processes all displayed systematic failures in the recounts of the student's journey toward college attendance. These systematic failures were not always seen by respondents as failures on the system. In fact, they were often internalized as failures of the student's own ability to complete the needed requirements for college attendance. Without the experience of an adult or guide to navigate these difficulties, the prospective student often stopped after various hurdles were experienced. Missing one step in the structured processes identified by the college could impact student attendance in more ways than one (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012).

College attendance processes, for the sake of access, should not be difficult to understand or achieve. By adapting processes and policies that are simple and achievable no matter the student's location, experience level, or support structure, a college can assist students in overcoming the barriers to college that are so often misunderstood (Means & Pyne, 2017; Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). Gains of college access could be experienced with removal of unnecessary systematic structures.

**JCJC's lack of understanding.** Throughout the research, JCJC appears to be naïve to this particular student population that appears through personal accounts to be underserved. Assistance and consideration in the process design is needed for rural, first generation students. While the college openly understands that there is a need to facilitate assistance to the decreasing prospective student population (Mississippi Community College Board, 2018), it seems to have missed the mark when focusing specifically on this sub-population of students. Prospective

students are expressing interest by initiating the first step in the process. Prospective students are completing an admissions application at the institution and starting their individual journey toward college attendance. The college in turn is guiding the student toward their next step in the college going process. However, the support to assist the prospective student in the action of the required steps or processes is where the college appears most lacking in providing support to the student.

**First-generation students.** Numerous research studies have examined first generation student experiences (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995; Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016). However, what makes this research study finding unique is the combination of first-generation students and rurality. A student's rurality statistically adds to the likelihood that the rural student will be a first-generation college student (Wang, 2014). The findings shed light that being a rural first-generation student impacted the student's ability to navigate the processes and attend college. Not only did a lack of parental involvement, for various reasons, impact the student's journey, but so did the lack of barrier mitigation on behalf of JCJC. Without a focused effort on assisting rural prospective students the college cannot hope to increase access to this sub-population of students. At this time, no formal program exists that could qualify as an assistance program targeted for rural-first-generation students.

Consideration to established processes regarding college going also appear to cause issues for the rural-first-generation population. It is unclear if the processes alone are the trouble or if the lack of prior knowledge and expectation of outcomes work together with those processes to form barriers for prospective students. The fact remains, there are barriers for rural prospective students and JCJC has an opportunity to address areas within their institutional control.

**Angels.** As shared previously, the respondents of this study experienced college guides, termed as *Angels*, who assisted the prospective student toward college attendance. These Angels have no common thread that can be identified within the data of this study, other than they were identified as caring about the educational wellbeing of the student in their path. The Angels all appeared to serve each student in a way that benefitted the student. Respondents were found by their Angels in different ways and went on to serve a variety of needs.

In the local context, the counties considered in-district by JCJC have no current coordinated network to assist prospective college students in their journey toward college attendance. These Angels, as experienced by the respondents, were acting out of kindness and individual volunteerism. Encouragement, wayfinding, and networking are all acts provided to the respondents within their experiences with these Angels.

### **Recommendations**

The interviews conducted with prospective students that were rural first-year college students who applied to attend JCJC after high school graduation but did not participate in any college or university in the fall following high school graduation were designed for addressing the defined Problem of Practice. The interviews led to an examination of shared variables reported by respondents that accounted for the summer melt by rural first-year students in the fall of 2018. To address the concerns revealed through this data, this section includes recommendations for improving practice, future research opportunities, and study limitations.

#### **Improving Practice**

A series of recommendations is offered to improve rural student access to college to address the concerns revealed through the data. The recommendations outline efforts that support an institutional commitment to rural student access. Recommendations for improving practice

begin with conducting an institutional review of onboarding processes; developing a comprehensive communication strategy; adding a scholarship and federal aid counselor to assist rural students; creating a summer college program for rural first-year students; developing a community angel network within the district counties; and developing partnerships with in-district high schools. Figure 3.1 offers the concept of an Institutional Rural Student Support Model.

Figure 3.1 : Institutional Support Model – Rural Student Access



**Institutional review of onboarding processes.** The first recommendation resulting from the data analysis is to conduct an institutional review of the onboarding processes that all prospective student types might experience while attempting to enroll and attend college at JCJC. The goals of the review would be to eliminate all nonessential items, reduce duplicated efforts, establish various ways to achieve required tasks that surround enrollment and attendance, and ensure that required tasks could be understood by all prospective students. By addressing these

key areas, the review should better define a broad but understandable process of enrollment and attendance. This initiative should be led by one of the institutional Executive Vice Presidents as appointed by the president of the institution.

The request of an institutional review of the onboarding processes must go before the JCJC Board of Trustees (BOT) for approval before a complete institutional review can take place (Jones County Junior College, 2017). All policies are governed by the institution's Board of Trustees; therefore, any changes, reviews, and modifications require BOT approval (Jones County Junior College, 2017). The BOT meet every third Wednesday of the month and require a 30-day notice of new business requests for all meeting agendas (Jones County Junior College, 2017). A two-meeting window should be allowed for matters that require a full vote (Jones County Junior College, 2017).

Once approval is received from the BOT, the review committee must be selected. The review committee should be comprised of representation from current and former students; internal stakeholders – instructors, admissions counselors, recruiters, financial aid representatives, advisors, business office personnel, and institutional leaders; and external stakeholders – community leaders, area church leaders, in-district high school guidance counselors, and parents of students (Hallett & Griffen, 2015; Krause & Reeves, 2017). A commitment to serve and improve rural student access to higher education will be expected from all committee members. As often as possible, reviews, discussion, and materials will be reviewable in a variety of methods. Once the full committee is assembled, the institutional review will begin.

The structure of the review itself is hard to define at this time. The process and review will be guided by what transpires in the review process and the feedback given by committee

members. Consideration will be given to AB testing, when applicable, for recommended changes in order to provide real time results for policy recommendations. AB testing, often used in the marketing profession, is an experiment where two or more variants of a webpage or visual aid are shown to users at random, and statistical analysis is used to determine which variation performs better for a given conversion goal (Gallo, 2017). Through the use of testing data and the experience of those on the committee, recommendations will be compiled, vetted, and shared with the senior leadership of the college followed by a presentation to the BOT as required. Once approval is granted for the suggested changes, an institutional change leader will be identified, and a change plan will be constructed.

The change plan should be constructed to include a timeline with measurable outcomes, budgetary requirements, and area change leaders that will be a part of any major change expected at the institution. The executive identified as the change leader should begin to build buy-in of internal stakeholders throughout the planning phase of the process (Ingalls, 1995). As the plan begins execution, constant oversight, and measurement of change is suggested.

***Budgeting and timeline.*** The start to finish institutional proposal, review, and change implementation is estimated to take 18 – 24 months to complete. One full academic year will be needed for the change plan implementation to be conducted. A line item will be required to support an institutional initiative of this size. The review committee would not require compensation, but a supply budget for support activities would be needed. A budget allocation of \$20,000 per academic year would be required with additional costs as recommendations are approved. If the institution were to hire a project manager for the change implementation, an additional budget item would need to be added. That cost would be determined on the scope and timing of the work and recommendations.



**Communication strategy.** The second recommendation for improvement in rural student access based on the analysis of the data is for the institution to establish a detailed communication strategy concerning the timing and processes of college enrollment and attendance for recent high school graduates. The communication strategy will begin by identifying all possible areas that the prospective student might encounter. The communication will then be developed along with the coinciding timeline. The understanding of the process and timing for each type of prospective student will be critical to communicating effectively (Castleman & Page, 2015). The communication strategy will be supported by constructing an institutional website that fully assists a prospective student at any point in the enrollment and attendance cycle. The site will be equipped with a fully functioning Chabot (McKenzie, 2018) that will allow for twenty-four-hour assistance. A Chabot is a computer program designed to simulate conversation with human users, particularly in support use over the Internet (McKenzie, 2018). The Chabot will give twenty-four-hour access to additional knowledge and assistance to any prospective student as they navigate the enrollment support section of the institutional website.

By compiling the full efforts of the communication plan the institution will create a printed piece of institutional collateral to serve all students within the eight-county district. This comprehensive booklet will address common questions and troubles, while also walking the prospective student through the processes and requirements of college attendance at JCJC.

***Budgeting and personnel.*** Development of the communication strategy will take time from current personnel resources at the institution to achieve the desired result. Enrollment, financial aid, business affairs, and recruiting teams, working together with the marketing department will be required to develop the communication strategy, support materials, and

design cohesive recruiting and admission collateral that will assist rural first-time college students in the admissions, enrollment, and college attendance process of their college pursuit. No additional budget allocations should be required for this initiative, however, a shift in budget spending will be needed to achieve the new communication strategy.

***Timeline.*** Timing for the development of a communication strategy should take four to six months. The strategy should include complete plan development and supporting designs. The communication strategy and collateral should be updated no less than two times per academic year in order to remain relevant through any institutional changes.

**Scholarship and federal aid counselor.** The third recommendation based on the data analysis is to add one full-time position to assist rural prospective students with scholarship and the federal aid processes. For many of the respondents, being a rural college student combined with a non-traditional family structure and first-generation status made for a difficult process to navigate without assistance. Interestingly, many of the respondents did not discuss scholarship opportunities, even though many of them existed and could have been used by the respondents to eliminate a financial barrier to access higher education. By providing individual assistance for these students, unique circumstances can be addressed and barriers mitigated before college attendance occurs.

***Budgeting.*** In order to support the request to create a new full-time position, a budgetary line item will be requested to allocate a funding expenditure from the institutions general fund. The position will require the full benefits package (health insurance, life insurance, etc.), Mississippi state retirement, as well as the basic funding of a yearly salary ranging between \$65,000 - \$75,000 (Jones County Junior College, 2016). The budget request should be submitted to the Chief Financial Officer of the institution combined with a position proposal. The position

proposal should include a detailed budget request, a proposed job description, and a timeline for the position.

Once the approval of the budget is complete, the position will be announced internally and externally on all job posting platforms. During the open job posting time, a hiring committee will be assembled to support the interview process. Once a candidate pool is generated, interviews will be conducted, and a candidate will be awarded the position. Internal and external training will be required of the new Scholarship and Federal Aid Counselor in order to support rural first year students in their journey to attending college.

Over the period of growth of the Scholarship and Federal Aid Counselor position, knowledge could be shared and practices could be adapted to assist those students that are having difficulty attending college. With a Scholarship and Federal Aid Counselor as the designated individual to assist rural prospective students in the enrollment and admissions processes, new data should present itself as different circumstances arise. A secondary support to the institution with this position would be the sharing of best practices and proposals of changes that could assist more students in accessing higher education. Through this addition of a full-time position, change and progress should be expected.

**Summer College Program.** The fourth recommendation resulting from the data analysis is the development of a Summer College Program for in-district, first-time, rural college students. The summer months between high school graduation and college fall semesters both in other research studies (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012; Castleman & Page, 2015; Castleman & Page, 2014) and throughout this study proved to be difficult for students to navigate toward college attendance. Students who melted in the summer months from the enrollment pool were often faced with pressure from family to begin working, lacked personal

transportation, had little or no access to technology, and had difficulty with completing financial aid processes. Through a Summer College Program many major areas that presented obstacles locally could be addressed. The program benefits to in-district, rural first-time students would include on-campus housing, on-campus work opportunities for students, technology access, supplemental funding, and a first-year experience guide for each student.

Student enrollment in the summer at JCJC is significantly less than fall and spring semesters (Mississippi Community College Board, 2018). The lower student enrollment in the summer months would allow for access to a wide variety of availability of personnel to assist with the development and support of a Summer College Program. JCJC also offers summer tuition at half the price of fall and summer semesters. The half price incentive was developed in 2013, to allow stop-out and prospective students that face financial barriers an access point with less financial burden (JCJC, 2013). Another point of consideration is the ability to access federal aid from the previous academic year (College Avenue Student Loans, 2019). Students who are first time college students that have not used federal aid can access the prior year's federal aid to pay for summer school costs (College Avenue Student Loans, 2019). The request and application for summer aid could be completed prior to high school graduation so that full assistance for the student could be provided between the high school guidance counselor and JCJC.

The Summer College Program would be open to any recent high school graduate from one of the eight in-district counties: Clarke, Covington, Green, Jasper, Jones, Perry, Smith, and Wayne. The Summer College Program student would be required to live in the dorm, be enrolled in 15 semester credit hours for the summer term, and participate in all Summer College Program activities. Prospective students could apply to the program on their own, or they could be recommended by a college admissions counselor, high school guidance counselor, high school

administrator, or by a community leader. All applications would be reviewed and judged based on an approved rubric.

*On-campus housing.* Due to lower student enrollment in the summer months, JCJC would be able to designate one residence hall for the Summer College Program participants. One residence hall offers 74 beds in a shared suite layout. The cost for a summer dorm is \$1650 per occupant with a move-in fee of \$80 (Jones County Junior College, 2019). The move-in fee would be waived for all participants of the Summer College Program. Room and board fees include the room, food and beverage, internet access, satellite TV, free health clinic services, and free access to the campus fitness center (Jones County Junior College, 2019). The resident managers would be selected and positioned to support and promote first-time rural college students. The housing community would act as a student learning community for the Summer College Program. A student learning community is defined as a group of people who share common academic goals and attitudes, who meet semi-regularly to collaborate on classwork and college experiences (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003). Not only would students be learning in the classroom, the students would be learning how to interact with others from different cultures, income levels, and family structures while being guided by the resident managers. The Summer College Program residence hall would operate under a different operational calendar. Due to the family and personal circumstances faced by many of the students, the residence hall would not close on weekends or for any holidays during the operation of the Summer College Program (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). This structure of operation will allow students the stability of a secure home and food source during their time in this program.

Activities outside of class time will be planned and executed by the Summer College Program advisors. These activities will be designed to promote the development of community;

foster the understanding of inclusiveness; provide students with opportunities to serve others; encourage self-discovery; offer an introduction to personal financial management; and establish safety and structure in the learning environment (Means & Pyne, 2017).

***On-campus work opportunities.*** JCJC will offer work opportunities to students in the Summer College Program on the campus. These opportunities may be through the federal work-study program, the campus student-worker program, or as a work-scholarship. The work-scholarship allows students who do not qualify for aid or if there is a gap in their aid the opportunity to work off their student account balance while they are enrolled and taking classes at JCJC (Jones County Junior College, 2018). This program was created in 2016 at JCJC to assist current students with outstanding financial barriers. The program allowed students to continue their college education without financial penalty or being withdrawn from classes. Since 2016 over 120 students have taken advantage of this work-scholarship opportunity (Jones County Junior College, 2018).

***Technology access.*** As this research uncovered, technology access is a major concern of rural students within the JCJC district. By taking part in the Summer College Program students will have access to high speed internet technology both in the dorms and on campus. With a variety of open access computer labs on campus students will have technology access that should meet any need in the college going process. In the Summer College Program, each student will have the ability to purchase a Microsoft Surface laptop. The Microsoft Surface laptop is the student device recommended and available at a discounted rate through the campus book store. The technology device will be added to the required materials for participation in the Summer College Program and included on the Institutional Federal Financial Aid list of covered items in the program. By adding an electronic device to the required program materials, access to

technology will be provided to a student even after they complete the program. The continued access of this electronic device will support a student's technology need through completion of a two-year program.

***Supplemental funding.*** Supplemental funding is important when a student is considering the thought of attending college. If the student is unsure of hidden costs it can be a stopping point for the student. Simple unforeseen costs like bedding for a dorm room, the cost of supplies for class, or even need materials for a class project can be addressed with supplemental funding (Means & Pyne, 2017). This funding can assist the student in providing stability in variety of different circumstances. In order to support rural first-time students, JCJC would offer a \$250 cash scholarship to each participant of the Summer College Program. The scholarship total will be applied to the student account at the time of on-campus housing move-in.

***Experience guide.*** For many students the experience as a first-time college student is overwhelming and even more so for a first-time rural college student (Bitz, 2011). The Summer College Program will provide each student with an experience guide during the summer months of the program. The student will have access to their experience guide's phone, email, and office location. The experience guide will support student growth and development by building a relationship with the student. Every student will have a different set of needs to support. It will be the responsibility of the student and guide to identify how to help the student be successful. The experience guide would also assist students with connecting to licensed counselors. Often times being a first time college student can be mentally and emotionally taxing and care should be given to ensure support exists for this type of need (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012).

The experience guides will be made up of current employees of the college. The additional duties of assisting the Summer College Program students will be added to daily tasks

and job descriptions in the summer months. The experience guide will have no more than two students under their guidance at any given time. The group of experience guides will require additional training both before and during the Summer College Program.

**Budgeting.** The Summer College Program will require an initial investment on behalf of the institution. However, by creating the structure as a summer program there is opportunity for outside funding sources to be added. Both grant and private funding should be considered as part of the build out of this program. Below in Table 3.1, information is provided that includes budget considerations regarding the Summer College Program.

<b>Table 3.1 – Summer College Program Budget Considerations</b>		
<b>Item</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>Revenue</b>
Room and Board Waived Move-in Fee (\$80 per person) <i>\$80 x 74 students =</i>	-	-\$5,920 Lost Revenue
Supplemental Cash Scholarship <i>\$250 x 74 students =</i>	\$18,500	-
Four Full-time Resident Managers <i>\$10,000 x 4 =</i>	\$40,000	-
Student Activities Support Budget for Summer College Program	\$50,000	-
Room and Board (\$1,650 per person) <i>\$1,650 x 74 =</i> <i>*\$850 of room/board paid to outsourced provider.</i>	-	\$122,100 Expected Revenue
Experience Guides Overload Pay <i>37 guides x \$1,150=</i>	\$42,550	-
Tuition Revenue (15 credit hours each) <i>\$937.50 x 74 students</i>	-	\$69,375 Expected Revenue
State Reimbursement (1,110 credit hours total) <i>37 FTE x \$2,300=</i>	-	\$85,100 Expected Revenue
<b>Budget Totals</b>	\$151,050	\$270,655



***Timeline.*** In order to accurately prepare the institution, train employees that will support the program, and recruit students for the first year offering of the program the timeline for the program launch would be 12 to 14 months. The first group of participants would allow for long range planning after program objectives are defined, captured, and measured. The goal would be to start the first Summer College Program in the summer of 2021. The extended timeline would allow for the 2020 completion of any current sports team agreements that use the desired residence hall facility.

***Stakeholders.*** A variety of stakeholders are key to the success of this program. Internally, the area of student affairs (student support, tutoring, library services, counseling, residence management), instructional affairs (courses taught, instructors, and advisors), business affairs (student accounts, billing), and enrollment management (financial aid, admissions, recruiters) are required to make this a success on the campus. Externally, high school counselors, principals, and local superintendents are needed to offer the support and recommendation for this program to be a success. Second tier support is required from local boards of supervisors as well as elected officials.

***Community Angel Network.*** The fifth recommendation resulting from the data analysis is to foster the development of localized Community Angel Networks throughout the JCJC eight county district as well as on the campus of JCJC. These networks would be established to assist citizens of a community in their pursuit toward college attendance similar to how educational or trusted agents support international and university college admission processes (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). The Community Angel Network would be a community lead movement. JCJC would offer assistance in establishing the development of the organization, providing training for

participants of the organization, access to college facilities where available for the needs of prospective students, and even connect prospective students in need to Angels in their area.

*Network development.* Understanding the needs of prospective students and how the future of the community is connected to that development is important for the mission of the Angel Networks. As told through the research respondents in this study, Angels were often the difference in a prospective student pursuing and achieving college attendance. The Angels assisted with needs as simple as knowing who to contact about a dorm room on campus and as a complex as mentoring a student through their rejection into a desired academic program. It is clear that no prospective student has the exact same path toward college attendance, however, the Community Angel Network would be there to assist and encourage students along their journey.

The initial development of a local Community Angel Network will require a minimum of one individual within the county to be the champion of the effort. Webster defines a champion as “a defender or supporter of a cause” (Webster, 2020). Without a champion the efforts will likely fail. The most likely champion is someone who already assists youth in their area (Castleman & Page, 2015). Possible individuals to consider are pastors or youth ministers in an area church, local volunteer sporting coaches, retired educators, principals or teachers, or any local after school activity directors (Means & Pyne, 2017; Castleman & Page, 2015). However, there is no map of how to find an individual willing to invest time and energy into the mission of furthering educational opportunities for communities, but it is critical to this initiative to locate individuals that are supportive of the overall concept. Once a champion is found, JCJC will work together with the champion to begin to build the vision of how to assist local prospective students and recruit others in the community to participate.

Development of support from community leaders and local high school personnel is important to the success of the network. In some cases, partnerships will be required to make the most opportunity available to support prospective student needs. Through the organization of the Community Angel Network, education opportunities will exist for citizens of the local area to learn more on how they can assist prospective college students. Development of the group would originate with the idea of assisting recent high school graduates, but the network would be equipped to assist any individual with going to college. While JCJC has a vested interest to ensure that prospective students are assisted in attending college, there will also be opportunity to add college support knowledge from other institutions. JCJC would connect other Mississippi institutions with Community Angel Network groups close to their region, to make sure a variety of needs are served for individual communities.

*Campus Angel Network.* The mission of the Campus Angel Network is no different than that of the Community Angel Network; identify and understand the needs of prospective students in the college going process and how the future of the community is connected to that development. Anyone affiliated with the campus who interested in furthering higher education access – student, employee, or faculty could be a part of the Campus Angel Network. The Campus Angel Network would provide supplemental assistance for prospective students by serving in a mentor capacity while students are moving through the college going processes. The campus-based group could grow and retract with the size of the campus community.

The Campus Angel Network could be established within 2-4 months with training and development to continue as the organization evolves. The budgetary request would remain limited due to the organizational structure being voluntary for members to participate. Individual stakeholders internally would be administrators, division leaders, and individual buy-in.

**Timeline.** The timeline of development will vary from community network to community network. The main focus will be on establishing the first Community Angel Network. With a coverage area of eight counties and 5,306 square miles (Google Maps, 2019), network initiations cannot begin in all eight counties at once. Jones County, the home seat of the college, has the largest population of students that apply to JCJC each year but do not attend college anywhere. Due to location, access, and student population Jones County will be the initial focus for development of the inaugural Community Angel Network. There are two school districts within Jones County, Laurel City Schools and Jones County Schools (Mississippi Department of Education, 2019). Consideration will be given if more than one network will be necessary to serve the populations efficiently. An initial interest and discussion meeting can be conducted in Jones County within 30 days of the start of the network initiative. Once the initiative is adopted, an estimated six months is needed for development and support to be established within the community. Ongoing support and development will be required to maintain the engagement of the network. Each Community Angel Network should average six to eight months for development and support building. However, even if the network is under development, prospective students could receive help and connect with members for support as available.

**Budgeting.** There is not an immediate budget allocation to be requested for this initiative. The main focus will be to budget time for community development. Institutional leaders working together to connect with vested, community individuals will be the core purpose of all involved with this outreach of rural student development.

**Stakeholders.** Key stakeholders, that will be critical to the success of this program, can be found both internally and externally. Internally, the Board of Trustees, college leaders, and college recruiters are required for successful launch and implementation of the initiative.

Externally, high school counselors, principals, and local superintendents are needed to offer the support and recommendation to help ensure this program success. Second tier support is required from local boards of supervisors as well as local elected officials.

**High school partnerships.** The sixth and final recommendation centrally focuses on the development of strengthening partnerships with in-district high schools. The partnership will place the prospective student as the focus of development. In the last year, JCJC reorganized multiple units into an enrollment management office that places the prospective student at the center. The division of enrollment management was developed as a one-stop shop for prospective students based on the input of three focus groups – in-district high school counselors, students/prospective students, and JCJC employees. The enrollment management division grants prospective students one point of contact for everything related to JCJC.

The enrollment management division's new model of making the student the center of their work has earned early successes both internally and externally. Internally, fall 2019 enrollment increased by three percent and fall 2019 retention showed increased gains of over three percent when compared to the previous two semesters. Externally, positive feedback has been given by in-district high school counselors that worked with the enrollment management team in establishing how the newly organized group could assist prospective students. Additionally survey results from prospective students that participated in the fall 2019 enrollment cycle provided positive feedback in areas specific to financial aid, communication, and class enrollment. Due to the early success from focusing on the prospective student additional ideas will be introduced that keep the prospective student at the center and expand how JCJC works with in-district high schools.

***Peer based leaders.*** Creation of a peer based leadership group at each area high school will expand knowledge and assistance of the college going process, allow individuals to inquiry about college-going in a comfortable setting, and establish a prospective student advocate within the high school community. These peer based leaders will actively attend JCJC, be a part of the student ambassador program, and be offered an institutional scholarship for their time of service. Each peer based leader will visit their home high school campus weekly. Visits should support enrollment, recruiting, financial aid and scholarship activities all while serving the prospective student population within the assigned high school.

***In-district high schools.*** JCJC will work together with each of the in-district high schools to expand the K-12 and postsecondary working relationship. Through development of partnerships between the two segments of education additional barrier mitigation could be established as well as the identification of ways to assist more prospective students in the college going process. Consideration should be given to both K-12 and postsecondary units in how the two segments could address student needs both for current students and for future students.

***Timeline.*** The timeline of development will vary from high school to high school for both the peer based leadership program and the partnership development with in-district high schools. However, JCJC would be prepared to kick-off the initiatives in fall 2020. Growth and expansion could be expected as early as the spring 2021 semester.

***Budgeting.*** The immediate need for a budget allocation exists only within scholarship funding. The peer based leaders would qualify for institutional scholarship dollars for both the fall and spring semesters of participation. The peer based leaders budget is based off of 66 scholarship spots, that allows for three peer based leaders for each of the 22 high schools. A two

semester scholarship will be valued at \$5,000.00. The total peer based leaders scholarship budget would be \$330,000.00 per year.

*Stakeholders.* Key stakeholders, that will be critical to the success of this program, can be found both internally and externally. Internally the Board of Trustees, that is made up of each Superintendent of Education within the JCJC district, and the enrollment management division would be critical in supporting this initiative. Externally, personnel from each in-district high school, including principals, counselors, and career development officers will be key to the initiatives success.

### **Future Research Opportunities**

There is potential to expand research in the future in regards to the summer melt of rural student populations. Nontraditional family structures and the financial understanding of prospective rural college students are both areas that could be considered for future research opportunities.

**Nontraditional family.** Data shared by respondents expressed their frustrations of how existing in a nontraditional family impacted their ability to complete certain processes and move forward with college attendance. Specifically, respondent Susan shared the difficulty of college admission processes when she was living with her grandmother and struggling with her father's unhappiness in her pursuit of college attendance. Cara and Tim also shared about their family structure and how it specifically influenced the college going process.

A specific expansion of research on what changes, if any, should be addressed for the growing population of rural college students who have non-traditional family structures and if those changes would lead to more rural students attending college could be considered.

Additional research is needed to expand upon the non-traditional family structure in the pursuit of higher education and how the family structure impacts a potential rural student's federal aid.

**Financial understanding and rural students.** Another area of possible future investigation is post-secondary financial preparedness and understanding in rural student populations. Throughout the data, financial obstacles were dominate reflections of many respondents. Respondent Tasha admitted that she was unaware of the cost in attending college and could not figure out how to pay for school. Seven other respondents felt as if they were unprepared to pay for the cost of college due to lack of awareness in the cost associated with attendance.

### **Study Limitations**

There are recognized limitations of the study to consider. Interviews were only conducted for available applicants that responded to researcher inquiry. Findings were not intended to be generalized to all prospective students on other community college campuses. Interviews were conducted at Jones County Junior College in reflection of the fall 2018 enrollment cycle. The findings might not accurately depict similar summer melt issues in different academic terms or at other postsecondary institutions.

**Respondent success.** Study respondents appeared to all be successfully moving through their lives with or without attending college. There was no recounting of how the missed opportunity of college attendance immediately following high school graduation had impacted their life in a negative manner. In fact, most of the respondents were successfully attending college and only delayed by a semester. Limitations exist in the respondent data due to only having seemingly successful respondents as part of this research study. Understanding the impact



on prospective students that were not successful in attending college and experiencing stress or limited success in their life should be recognized as a study limitation.

**Position influence.** The interviewer was the executive vice president that oversees the enrollment process for the summer melt applicants that were interviewed. The potential existed for respondents to communicate information they may have thought the interviewer wanted to hear rather than true experiences related to the college going process. Consideration should be given that respondents may have been intimidated by speaking to a college administrator and may not have been able to communicate their experiences as they would have with an interviewer with less organizational oversight.

**Qualitative research.** Finally, as a qualitative research study it should be noted that a limitation of the scope of application exists. The research and findings are not applicable to all community colleges or to all prospective students that could experience summer melt. Additional consideration and adaptation of the study are required in order to apply the outcomes to a different institutional setting.

### **Practitioner Reflection**

The Doctor of Higher Education program gave me a new lens through which to interpret and make sense of theories and situations as they relate to postsecondary education. The content discovery, along with the knowledge sharing of other members of the educational cohort proved to be a well-matched method of education for me personally. Through my experience in the doctoral program, I have a new perspective as a practitioner-scholar in the field of higher education. Understanding and addressing a variety of student needs is my responsibility as leader in higher education. I make a commitment to promote access, social mobility, ethics, and equality to all individuals I encounter. The doctoral program provided me with the tools

necessary to move forward, as a professional, promoting student access, ethics, equity, and social justice, and I will continue to expand these tools as I continue to work in the higher education community.

Throughout this educational journey I have grown in my career advancing to a new position that includes more institutional oversight and personally through the experience of earning a terminal degree. Both achievements are not only significant in my professional journey but also to me as an individual. As a rural first-generation college student, I am a living testament to the support of family, continuous hard work, and those individuals who paved the way for those like me. I do not take my journey for granted and I plan to pay it forward by identifying, supporting and ensuring access to higher education for as many individuals as possible.

### **COVID-19 Considerations**

This research study was designed, conducted, and completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. COVID-19, Coronavirus disease, is defined by the World Health Organization (2020) as an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. COVID-19 has and may continue to impact higher education by forcing distance and online learning for all students, as well as, a redesign of how institutions serve their current and future student populations in every way. In consideration of the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic has on higher education practices it is important to discuss what might be different or discussed further within this study's research or recommendations.

Access to technology, rural internet connectivity, the potential for increased feelings of JCJC leaving the prospective student behind, and the need for on-campus housing are areas of consideration when discussing the impact of COVID-19 on the rural prospective students

examined within this study. Many of the respondents central to this study expressed difficulty with rural internet connectivity and access to computer technology. COVID-19 has forced higher education into distance and online learning instruction therefore causing a lack of equity in access and participation in higher education for many rural students. Future considerations of how to ensure equity and access for rural prospective students will be critical to the success of onboarding this population of future students.

Due to an increased distance forced between human interaction as a precaution with COVID-19, as well as, newly established remote working environments present the potential for an increased risk of rural prospective students feeling that JCJC is leaving them behind in assisting them through the admissions, enrollment, and attendance process. Rural prospective students placed a high value on their interaction with JCJC employees and any potential decrease in that interaction could have negative impacts with rural prospective students.

Other implications due to the forced distance between humans is the lack of access to on-campus housing for prospective rural students. The need for on-campus housing discussed by respondents in this study could shift in light of COVID-19 to a new set of needs that were not addressed within this research study. Overall, COVID-19 has the potential to impact rural prospective students in various ways, future consideration should be given to these potential impacts.

### **Dissemination of Findings**

Dissemination of research findings is an important part to any research study. Sharing the findings in hopes that others will find meaning and create solutions is essential to solving any problem. My dissemination plan has three components. Those components are internal sharing at

the institution, external sharing to other institutions as well as the community, and sharing through professional organizations.

### **Internal Dissemination**

A primary focus of the dissemination of findings will be internally at the institution. Initially, plans will consist of sharing findings of the study with the leadership team of the institution. The discussion will include an introduction to the problem of practice, a review of the summary of findings, and a discussion of potential institutional recommendations including the resources needed to accomplish the recommendations. After dialogue between the institutional leaders, support will be requested in moving forward on addressing the findings and recommendations.

Once there is established leadership support, further internal dissemination will be conducted. A presentation of findings will be made to the internal divisions of enrollment management, marketing, recruiting, business affairs, student affairs, and instructional affairs. This compiled group of divisions directly interact with the potential student group throughout the onboarding process. This group is critical to collectively make an impact in addressing the needs of rural first-year prospective students.

Once awareness of the research is established internally and permission is granted by the president of the institution, a plan to present a formal request for an institutional review of onboarding processes to the Board of Trustees will be made. The board presentation will include an abbreviated version of the research data and a formalized request for the institutional review. If the Board of Trustees approves the request, planning for the continued sharing of research and data will be developed for the assembling of a review committee.

## **External Dissemination**

Externally, dissemination of the research findings will be organized in a presentation that can be shared both in the local district of the institution as well as with other Mississippi community colleges. Locally, presentations will be given at civic club meetings, area high school organizations, and possibly to area churches. Any availability to discuss the needs of local students should be addressed when the context is appropriate. Awareness and understanding within the community will be key to addressing long term solutions to rural student college access.

In order to support rural student access across Mississippi, knowledge of this research in the form of information sharing and open dialogue should take place with other Mississippi community colleges. Due to the rurality of Mississippi each community college has some form of rural student access that they too must address. By using personal and professional acquaintances, knowledge sharing presentations will be scheduled on each community college campus with particular focus in areas of leadership, enrollment management, and recruiting. However, with any divisional request the presentation can be customized to meet specific group needs.

## **Professional Dissemination**

Lastly, since the body of research directly reflects on the work of enrollment management professionals, the researcher will be submitting a request for proposal to present at the Ruffalo Noel Levitz Conference for Higher Education Enrollment, Marketing, and Fundraising. The conference is held in the United States every year in the month of July (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). This type of conference presentation would allow the findings to reach a broad audience from across the United States.

## **Conclusion**

The Problem of Practice inquiry emerged from the researcher's belief that rural recent high school graduates that applied to attend JCJC who were college accepted, college bound students in the fall of 2018 were experiencing difficulty in their college going experience. Within this study the enrollment management trend of rural student summer melt specifically at Jones County Junior College located in Ellisville, Mississippi was examined. Throughout this research study the foundation was to increase rural student access to higher education, enhance equity, improve ethics, and support social justice.

At the time this research project was undertaken, there was little to no localized data available concerning rural recent high school graduates that were college bound. In order to examine this identified gap in research, this study was designed to identify the perceived variables identified by rural college bound students that played a role in their choice of whether or not to attend college in the fall following high school graduation. The data and recommendations from this study could be used a guide in reexamining the needs of rural first-time prospective students at the institutional level.

Interviews with study respondents demonstrated that their experiences as first time, rural, recent high school graduates that did not matriculate in the fall of 2018 were filled with a variety of experiences when navigating the college enrollment process. The variables were most often perceived by the respondents as clear barriers to college access. The variables as presented, were organized into themes in order to understand how common variables affect rural prospective student populations.

Recommendations to improve the college going process for rural in-district students were provided at the divisional, institutional, and community levels. The suggested recommendations

were a result of the needs expressed by the respondents during interviews. Implementation of the outlined recommendations will require a commitment from the institution, divisions, and the community as well as the rural students themselves. Commitments such as these can result in a positive experience for rural students, lead to more educational access for rural students, and benefit the communities in which the students reside.

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## LIST OF APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Jones County Junior College In-District County Map



## Appendix B

### In-district ESRI Rankings

<b>JCJC Eight County District 2017 ESRI Rankings</b>	
<b>County</b>	<b>ESRI Ranking</b>
Clarke County	Rustic Outpost, 73% Rural Bypasses
Covington County	Rustic Outpost, 56.4% Southern Satellites
Greene County	Rustic Outpost, 42.4% Rural Rooted
Perry County	Rustic Outpost, 56.2% Southern Satellites
Jones County	Rustic Outpost, 36.7% Southern Satellites
Jasper County	Rustic Outpost, 67.5% Rural Bypasses
Smith County	Rustic Outpost, 39.9% Rural Bypasses
Wayne County	Rustic Outpost, 38.7% Rural Bypasses

## Appendix C

### High School and County Listing

<b>JCJC's In-district high schools and corresponding county</b>	
<b>High School Names (grouped by county)</b>	<b>County Location</b>
Enterprise High School and Quitman High School	Clarke County
Collins High School, Mt. Olive High School, and Seminary High School	Covington County
Greene County High School	Greene County
Perry Central High School and Richton High School	Perry County
Bay Springs High School, Heidelberg High School, Stringer Attendance Center, and Sylva Bay Academy (private)	Jasper County
Northeast Jones High School, Laurel High School, Laurel Christian School (private) , South Jones High School, and West Jones High School	Jones County
Mize Attendance Center, Raleigh High School, and Taylorsville High School	Smith County
Wayne Academy (private) and Wayne County High School	Wayne County

## Appendix D

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

#### Introduction

- Name and college affiliations
- Purpose of the study and inquiry
- Consent for study and audio recording
- The audio recording will begin

#### List of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- Tell me about your experience applying at JCJC?
- How would you describe the application and admission process at JCJC?
- At the time of application did you plan to attend JCJC?
- Did you complete the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)?
  - If yes, did you have your results back prior to making a choice on whether or not to attend college?
- When did you make your choice whether or not to attend college?

#### Closing

- Thank you for their time and participation
- Do you have any questions for me or can I assist you in any way?
- I will be disconnecting and ending the audio recording at this time

## Appendix E

### Consent to Participate in Research

**Study Title:** Summer Melt in Recent High School Graduates

#### Investigator

Deidre Finée Ruffin  
Department of Higher Education - Student  
Guyton Hall  
University of Mississippi  
University, MS 38677  
(601) 433-7419  
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#### Faculty Sponsor

George McClellan, Ph.D.  
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By checking this box, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

**The purpose of this study is to evaluate the recent high school graduate's experience with college choice.**

**Upon agreement, you will participate in a scheduled phone interview with the researcher. Throughout the interview you will be asked a series of questions related to your experience on college participation and college enrollment.**

**Your phone interview will be audio recorded. You will be notified when the recording will begin and end.**

**The time required for this interview will be between 15 – 20 minutes.**

**Please see the Confidentiality section for information on how we minimize the risk of a breach of confidentiality, which is the only risk anticipated with this study.**

**You should not expect benefits from participating in this study. However, you might experience satisfaction from contributing to the area of knowledge.**

#### **Confidentiality:**

The researchers will have access to your audio record. They will protect confidentiality by coding and then physically separating information that identifies you from your responses (which is even safer than how medical records are stored today).

- a. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) – the committee responsible for reviewing the ethics of, approving, and monitoring all research with humans – have authority to access all records. However, the IRB will request identifiers

only when necessary. We will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone else without your written consent unless required by law.

- b. Audio recording, is required to allow two researchers to code your responses to check reliability.
  - A. Only experimenters on the research team will have access.
  - B. Tapes will be destroyed after the end of the study – which is expected to be fall semester, 2019)
  - C. Tapes will be locked in a file cabinet in a locked office.

**Right to Withdraw**

You do not have to volunteer for this study, and there is no penalty if you refuse. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, just tell the experimenter. Whether or not you participate or withdraw will not affect your current or future relationship with the Jones County Junior College, or with the University, and it will not cause you to lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

**IRB Approval**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, then decide if you want to be in the study or not.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have been given an unsigned copy of this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and I have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

**“CLICK HERE IF YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE”**



## Appendix F

### Institutional Research Board Approval Notification

January 15, 2019

PI:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, "Summer Melt in Recent High School Graduates" (Protocol #19x-166), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi's human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

- You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.
- Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.
- You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.
- If research is to be conducted during class, the PI must email the instructor and ask if they wish to see the protocol materials (surveys, interview questions, etc) prior to research beginning.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

**Mary K. Jourdan**

Research Compliance Specialist, Research Integrity and Compliance

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[irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu) | [www.olemiss.edu](http://www.olemiss.edu)

## Appendix G

### Respondent Campaign Data

<b>Summer Melts Study Participant Recruitment Communication Campaign Data</b>	
Total prospective participants <i>(Fall 2018 Applicants)</i>	706
Total available email addresses on file for the prospective participants	1,765
Total prospective participants with a verified deliverable email address	437 (61.9%)
Total prospective participants with a verified un deliverable email address	269 (38.1%)
Recruitment email one open results	115 (26.3% email open rate)
Recruitment email two open results	232 (53.08% email open rate)
Recruitment email three open results	69 (15.7% email open rate)

## Appendix H

### Respondent Demographic Data

<b>Interview Respondent Demographics</b>					
Pseudonyms	Gender	ACT Score	County of Graduate's High School Location	Applied and Accepted to Jones in Fall 2018	Currently Enrolled in a College or University
Susan	F	17	Jones	Yes	Yes
Sherry	F	16	Smith	Yes	Yes
Gerald	M	24	Perry	Yes	Yes
Tim	M	16	Clarke	Yes	Yes
Jessica	F	19	Wayne	Yes	Yes
Clarke	M	20	Covington	Yes	Yes
Cara	F	24	Covington	Yes	Yes
Kelly	F	21	Clarke	Yes	Yes
James	M	13	Jones	Yes	No
Thomas	M	22	Greene	Yes	Yes
Brett	M	14	Covington	Yes	Yes
Emily	F	16	Smith	Yes	Yes
Tasha	F	14	Jasper	Yes	No
Sarah	F	19	Jones	Yes	Yes

## Appendix I

### College Choice Timing

<b>Respondent Timing on Choice to Attend College</b>		
<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Time of Choice</b>	<b>Reason Listed</b>
Susan	July-August	Time
Sherry	N/A	Process
Gerald	June	Job
Tim	May	Job/Money
Jessica	July-August	Bill/Money
Clarke	August	Testing Issue
Cara	August	Financial Aid
Kelly	August	Money
James	July-August	Bill/Money
Thomas	July-August	Program
Bret	July	Money/Process
Emily	June - July	Money
Tasha	July - August	Unsure
Sarah	August	Scared

## VITA

**D. Finée Ruffin**

### EDUCATION

#### **Peru State College**

Peru, Nebraska

Master of Science in Organizational Management (MSOM) with an emphasis in Economic Development and Entrepreneurship. December 2010 – May 2013.

*Action Research Topic - Research and Development of a Consultant*

*Based Post-Secondary Community College Entrepreneurship Curriculum Model*

#### **Mississippi State University**

Starkville, Mississippi

Bachelor of Science in Human Science with an emphasis in Apparel, Textiles, and Merchandising. Emphasis minors in Business Administration and Marketing. 2001 – 2004.

*Neiman Marcus Corporate Internship, Dallas, Texas. December 2003 – May 2004.*

### CURRENT POSITION

#### **Executive Vice President and Chief Enrollment Management, Information Technology, and Marketing Officer**

July 2019 – Present

*Jones College, Ellisville, Mississippi*

Directly responsible to the President and perform such specific duties as from time to time may be prescribed or assigned by the President, the Board of Trustees or by any standing or special committee of the Board of Trustees. Primarily responsible for assisting the President in maximizing the college's operating performance and achieving its goals.

- Overseeing the college's strategic plan as it relates to alumni, communications, dual credit, enrollment management, fundraising, information technology, and marketing.
- Provides the President and Board of Trustees with regular updates regarding areas of strategic oversight.

Positions reporting to the Executive Vice President/Chief Enrollment Management, Information Technology, and Marketing Officer include the Vice President of Alumni and Foundation, the Vice President of Information Technology, the Vice of Enrollment Management, the Dual Credit Coordinator, the Director of Digital Media, and the Director of Public Relations.

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

### **Vice President of Marketing and Administrative Services**

**Jones County Junior College, Ellisville, Mississippi**

2012 – 2019

- Acted as advisor to the President in all recruiting, public relations, technology, and marketing matters. Serves as a member of the Executive Cabinet.
- Provided input to the President, the Executive Cabinet, and the faculty that will expand their understanding of trends in higher education and aid in planning for the future development of the college.
- Supervised the development and exercises approval authority of all publications proposed for printing and distribution by the college.
- Effectively managed by providing direct supervision, motivation, training and support to the directors of the following offices: Recruiting, Communications, Public Relations, Publications, Web Development, Information Technology, e-Learning, and Creative Design.
- Coordinated and integrated the activities of the President and Board of Trustees in the development and implementation of established core initiatives for the Office of the President.
- Supported the President in recommending, designing, establishing, and maintaining an effective organizational structure and staffing to accomplish the organization's goals and objectives.
- Oversaw the branding change from Jones County Junior College to Jones College.

### **Information Technology Division 2017 –2019**

Long range planning, project initiation, and execution oversight for all organizational technologies. Led organizational restructuring of cost-effective lean operations through advanced technologies. Established and directed the strategic and tactical goals, policies, and procedures for areas of manageable technology.

### **Marketing Division 2012 – 2019**

Planned, implemented, and managed comprehensive marketing strategies throughout a community environment. Expertise in creation and execution of brand development plans, brand management in products, websites, social media, print media, and public relations in the education and community market. Coordinated multi-level projects with vendors, team members, and management to achieve the overall marketing objectives of the college.

### **Recruiting Division 2013 - 2019**

Forecasted, planned, implemented, and managed the institutional strategic enrollment goals throughout the college. Preparing and submitting input to the college annual budget, and provided the required supervision to ensure that all elements of the recruiting budget were properly and prudently administered.

### **Business and Marketing Instructor**

**Jones County Junior College, Ellisville, Mississippi**

2007 – 2012

Provided competency-based education that aligned with the Research and Curriculum Unit of Mississippi (RCU) model of curricula, enabled and encouraged the successful completion of pre-described exit requirements for student achievement and evaluation by providing instruction which fosters competencies and establishes student performance evaluation, contribute to a learning culture by participating in curriculum and system task forces, support local campus events such as orientation, graduation, homecoming, and participating in various workshops and meetings to expand community and student involvement in education.

**Instructional Courses:** Advertising, Business Planning, Buying, e-Commerce, Event Management, Fashion Marketing, Introduction to Entrepreneurship, Marketing for the Entrepreneur, Personal Selling, Product Knowledge, and Textile Science.

**Institutional Assignments:**

- MSVCC Canvas Learning Management Testing Committee, Mississippi Virtual Community College, Jackson, Mississippi 2011 - 2012
- Career and Technical Student Recovery Coordinator, Jones County Junior College August 2012 – November 2013
- Mississippi State University Research and Curriculum Unit, Curriculum Writing Team for Post-Secondary Education in Business and Marketing Management Technology – Starkville, Mississippi 2012 – 2013
- Mississippi State University Research and Curriculum Unit, Curriculum Development Chair for Post-Secondary Education in Entrepreneurship – Starkville, Mississippi 2011 – 2013
- R.H. Watkins High School Business and Marketing Advisory Board Member – Laurel, Mississippi 2007 - 2012
- National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship Member – St. Louis, Missouri 2009 - 2012
- Coleman Foundation Entrepreneurship Grant Award Recipient – NACCE Conference, Orlando, Florida 2010
- Vision 2020 Leadership Team, Jones County Junior College – Ellisville, Mississippi 2008 – 2009

**Director of Sales**

**Hattiesburg Convention Commission, Hattiesburg, Mississippi**

2006 – 2007

Created a multi-use training system for the sales and marketing teams, held the team accountable to tourism standards while maximizing occupancy in the meeting space, guest rooms, and total rental space revenue. Planned and communicated to both on-site and off-site departments the expressed needs of the customer. Engaged in sales and marketing efforts to ensure that the maximum exposure was achieved within budget capabilities, oversaw and conducted sales calls, advertising, and projected and exceeded all quotas which ensured the quarterly and annual goals were met. Organized and led the integration of a new convention event booking system, Catercase.

- *2008 is the highest grossing year of sales revenue the Hattiesburg Convention Commission has ever achieved*

### **Organizational Assignments:**

- Public Relations Association of Mississippi (PRAM) Member – Hattiesburg, Mississippi 2006 – 2007
- Sales and Marketing Professional Association – Hattiesburg, Mississippi 2006 – 2007
- International Special Events Society – New Orleans, Louisiana 2006 – 2007
- Mississippi Society of Association Executives – Jackson, Mississippi 2006 – 2007
- Convention and Visitors Bureau, Development Advisory Committee – Charleston, South Carolina 2005 - 2006

### **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, AWARDS, PRESENTATIONS, AND ACTIVITIES**

- Mississippi Association of Community College Marketing Executives, Mississippi Community Colleges
  - President, 2019 – 2021
- Mississippi Association of Community Colleges, Legislative and Marketing Committee Member, Jackson, Mississippi 2017 - present
- Economic Impact of Jones College Professional Presentation, 2017, 2018, 2019
- Best of the Pine Belt Award in Marketing and Sales, Hattiesburg, Mississippi 2016 - 2017
- Image and Perception: What are you Telling Others Professional Presentation, 2015 - 2017
- Junior Auxiliary of Laurel Active Member, Laurel, Mississippi 2011 – 2017
  - *First Vice President, 2016 – 2017; President, 2015 – 2016; Second Vice President, 2014 – 2015; Done in Day Project Chair, 2013 – 2014.*
- Awarded “Best Boss in Jones County”, The Chronicle News, 2015.
- Mississippi Economic Development Council Member, Jackson, Mississippi 2011 – 2015.
- Noel-Levitz Enrollment Management Certificate, 2014.
- Peru State College Graduate Studies Advisory Board, Peru, Nebraska 2013 – 2015.
- Coleman Foundation Community Entrepreneurship Coordination Council, Chicago, Illinois 2013 – 2014.
- Leadership Jones County Board Member, Jones County Economic Development Authority, Laurel, Mississippi 2012 – 2016.
  - *Chairman, 2014; Vice Chairman, 2015.*
- Jones County Young Professionals Member, Laurel, Mississippi 2011- 2013.
- Mississippi Scholars Presenter, Jones County, Laurel, Mississippi 2012 – 2013.
- Leadership Jones County Class Graduate, Laurel, Mississippi 2011 – 2012.
- Selling Yourself: What is your Price Professional Presentation, 2011 – 2012.
- Educational Lamplighter Award, Mississippi Community College Board Award,