A GAZE ON BELONGING: INVESTIGATING

RURAL PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AT A

FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITY

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

A GAZE ON BELONGING: INVESTIGATING RURAL PRESERVICE
TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AT A FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITY

presented by Stephanie Lynn Woods,

candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Tony Castro

DEDICATION

To my boys, Ethan & Lucas. Dream big, work hard, and never forget that momma loves you.

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I extend my sincere and heartfelt thanks to my academic advisor, Dr. David Bergin, for his advice, encouragement, and editing; I could not have completed this difficult journey without him. His time, patience, and caring dedication to my work accompanied me throughout this process. No words can describe my gratitude. I would like to extend my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Stephen Whitney, Dr. Matthew Easter, and Dr. Tony Castro, for all their advice and support. Their valuable perspectives highly contributed to the quality of my work. Dr. Whitney supported me not only by making sure I had a place to call home away from home but assigned me the best undergraduate, Sam White, to mentor. Dr. Easter, who grew up in the same rural region that I did, challenged me to present the struggles of rural students in an accurate yet unique light. Dr. Castro inspired me to code (and recode) the data to truly allow the participants' voices to emerge and honor their journey. Tutors, especially Ruth, at the On-line Writery read my manuscript more times than anyone, and I could not have done this without their help.

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A GAZE ON BELONGING: INVESTIGATING RURAL PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AT A FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined rural undergraduate students' process of developing a sense of belonging in a teacher preparation program at a large Midwestern public university. Eleven undergraduates, each having completed at least one semester of study on campus, participated in the study. Perspectives of college belonging were explored by gathering data from both rural students (8) and urban students (3). Multiple data sources included student interviews, online public documents, and NCES data of participants' high schools. Three waves of data collection were utilized: a digital story submission and two semi-structured interviews conducted via video conferencing. Constant comparison analysis (Corbin & Straus, 2015) of the participant's experiences within the campus system and at home resulted in the emergence of five dimensions of belongingness development: stressors associated with rurality, reconceptualizing community by integrating goals, considering contributions to campus through reflection on their sense of purpose, finding fit to get comfortable on campus, and dynamic relationships that stimulate development. Interpretation of the findings indicated the importance of recognizing rural community values and supporting new relationship development for rural preservice teachers. Based on these findings, this study suggests adding the dimension of reconceptualizing community goals to college student success models, especially for those students who are cultural minorities and considered on the fringes of campus culture.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Rural students experience lower rates of college graduation than their non-rural peers. Researchers have reported an urban/rural higher educational achievement gap dating back to the 1970s. However, few studies have explored the college-going behaviors of rural students (Wells et al., 2020). Investigating college students' sense of belonging is important because the higher education attainment disparity is an issue of equity and higher education administration, faculty, and staff should take measures to connect rural students with the university. Rural communities are missing benefits such as greater economic prosperity and higher civic engagement rates that are associated with college degree attainment. Further, earning a college degree is associated with higher rates of happiness and healthier lifestyles, such as being less likely to smoke and more likely to maintain exercise (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). While challenges associated with college attainment are widely researched, missing from this research is a focus on rural students' barriers to connect with their campus community (Morton et al., 2018). It is essential to understand the transition from rural culture to an urban-centric college campus in order to understand how to support rural college students' academic success and well-being.

In this constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study, I explored how rural preservice teachers (RPSTs) developed a sense of belonging at a flagship university. Belongingness is a critical area of study because it is related to student well-being, academic achievement, and degree completion. This study is important because the urban/rural disparity in higher education is an equity issue. Rural students are underserved in research and in higher education attainment. Using a CGT approach, this

study aims to describe how rurality influences RPSTs' sense of belonging development. I specifically focused on the subgroup, RPSTs, because there is a rural teacher shortage and because teachers are highly likely to return to their home community after graduation (Wells et al., 2018). This research will benefit rural communities as well as higher education institutions because it will inform efforts to recruit and retain RPSTs.

College Student Sense of Belonging

A well-documented predictor of success in higher education is the development of a sense of belonging, or connectedness, to the university; however, the construct of college belonging is a relatively new area of research (Ryan & Deci, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2016). Belonginess is considered foundational to student well-being and success. Researchers have asserted that belongingness is a basic human need (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Maslow, 1970). Further, Baumeister and Leary (1995) assert that sense of belonging has a far-reaching impact on human motivation and behavior; their systematic review of empirical studies found that desire for interpersonal attachments is a fundamental human motivation. Anderman and Freeman (2007) assert that students' school sense of belonging influences many adaptive outcomes; however, few researchers have focused on college-age populations. Based on empirical evidence collected and quantitatively analyzed at a large public university, Slaten et al. (2014) posited that group involvement, meaningful personal relationships, environmental factors, and interpersonal factors were salient to college belonging and called for more research to develop an appropriate measure of school belonging at the collegiate level.

Strayhorn (2012) is one of the few researchers to develop a model of college student belongingness; his work was with marginalized populations in higher education.

The model includes a working definition that focuses on students' beliefs that they matter to the group, that they are indispensable, and that their group identity leads to positive feelings, and they also feel accepted, valued, and encouraged. Strayhorn's (2012) model provided the framework to analyze RPSTs' experience in the current study, and I searched for any aspect of belongingness that might have been missing from his model.

Urban/Rural Disparity in Higher Education

Rural students remain significantly unrepresented in higher education. The Pew Research Center (2018) reported that "35% of urban residents and 31% in the suburbs have a bachelor's degree or more education, compared with 19% in rural counties" (n.p.). It is important to address this gap because the graduate and society feel the benefits of a college degree. "Through volunteer work, leadership, and philanthropic contributions, public university graduates enrich the civic and economic lives of their communities." (Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities, 2021, n.p.).

When rural students attend large universities, they often feel cultural and social tensions between their rural community norms and their college experiences and often experience culture shock in part due to their non-rural counterparts' lack of knowledge of rurality (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Further, rural students face unique barriers at universities, stemming from social issues that are consistently found in rural communities. Common barriers for rural students include lack of academic preparation, including advanced college preparation courses, family problems, lack of information for first-generation students, financial problems, lack of family support to leave home, and fear of failure to succeed outside a rural community (Allen & Roberts, 2019, Battle et al., 1995; Goldman, 2019). Finally, studies have found that rural students identify more

barriers than assets in attaining a college degree (Morton et al., 2018). An investigation is needed to understand how the perceived barriers impede rural students' ability to forge a sense of belonging.

Teacher Shortage Disproportional to Rural Areas

Rural preservice teachers (RPSTs) are a subset of the rural population that is under-represented in scholarly research (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018); this subset is important because they often return to their rural communities to teach. Attending to the specific needs of this population at flagship universities will support positive relationships and views that RPSTs will bring back to their communities when they return to teach. It is important to encourage and support rural students in teacher education programs at large public flagship universities, so they are able to take advantage of the type of exposure to diversity and multi-culturalism that is typically found on large campuses. Congruent with the rest of the nation where 80% of all teachers are White, most teachers in rural schools are White; thus, RPSTs would benefit from learning in a diverse environment to better serve their multi-cultural communities.

Further, currently, there is a teacher shortage in both rural and urban areas. Recent federal data shows that teacher supply is declining nationwide. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs decreased by 39% from 2010 to 2017, and completion of teacher preparation programs decreased 31%; the shortage disproportionately affects rural communities in part because rural teachers are paid less (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017). Additional challenges to recruitment are poverty, geographic isolation, and a lack of community amenities characteristic of many rural communities (Azano & Stewart, 2016).

Additionally, in their commentary on rural identity, Theobald and Wood (2010) posited that "…the curriculum in U.S. schools tends to feed the cultural assumption that…bigger is better. Big cities are better than small towns. Big farms are better than small farms. Big schools are better than small schools" (p. 28), and they further claim that teachers measure their success by the size of the school in which they come to be employed. Explaining that rural locales are a culturally permissible joke, they cite several references of negative cultural messages of rurality found in media, such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Dukes of Hazard*, *Joe Dirt*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Deliverance*. In part, due to the cultural bias against rurality, it is more difficult to recruit and retain teachers, especially for those who did not grow up in a rural community.

Gap in Literature

There is ample research identifying the importance of students developing a sense of belonging, including the most influential model of student persistence (Tinto, 2016), which posits that students must come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, faculty, and staff who value their membership, so they come to know that they matter and belong. However, there is relatively little work that focuses on how rurality influences belonging at large public flagship universities. Further, there is little research identifying how RPSTs view belonging in terms of persistence. There is a lack of research on rural students and specifically the interaction of rurality on college-going behaviors. The gap in research identifying the college-going behaviors of rural students is significant, as the urban/rural disparity in higher education is an issue of equity. More information is needed to support rural students in higher education, specifically at the most esteemed flagship universities.

Extant literature is sparse in describing how geographic location influences educational destinations (Hillman, 2016). Early research in the 1970s recognized the urban/rural disparity in higher education. Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) hypothesized the disparity was due in part to the assumed difference in the intelligence of rural students but subsequently found no significant difference in urban/rural intelligence and college persistence. Research is needed that considers enhancing diversity at large universities by increasing rural student success. Sense of belonging is related to college students' cognition, affect, and behaviors (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). If rural students feel like they belong, they will be more likely to engage in class and with extra-curriculars. This research provides suggestions to accommodate rural students to their new environment, rather than excluding the rural population based on their differences.

Problem Statement

Historically, higher education has been concerned with suburban and urban college students. It has been a recent phenomenon that colleges are paying more attention to rural students, as pointed out by the *New York Times* article published January 31, 2017, "Colleges Discover the Rural Student." College students from rural areas form a considerable minority on college campuses and because a "sense of belonging may be particularly significant for students who are marginalized in college contexts" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 17), it is important to understand how they develop belongingness. Further, Strayhorn (2012) posits that college students experience belonging differently based on their identities and experiences. Rural students bring unique educational experiences with them to college; for example, in rural schools, there is generally an emphasis on a strong sense of community, which is an important leverage for school success. Thus, rural

students are generally accustomed to feeling connected with their school, but when they transition to college, especially large public land-grant institutions, they face barriers; they do not feel the same sort of support they had always experienced.

The urban/rural higher educational gap is growing and is an issue of equity that must be addressed. Rural students graduate high school at a higher rate than urban students, but they attain higher education at a lower rate (Figure 1). Even though the overall educational attainment of people living in rural areas has increased markedly over time, the share of adults with at least a bachelor's degree is still higher in urban areas (USDA, 2020).

According to the USDA (2020), from 2000-2018, the number of urban residents that hold a bachelor's degree increased by almost 9%, while rural residents increased by less than 6%. Further, fewer rural students attend large universities than urban students (Byun et al., 2012). McDonough et al. (2010) posit that rural students are hesitant to move away from a community they love. Often, to seek higher education, rural students have to travel long distances to go to college. Because they do not have a college nearby, their transition is generally harder in terms of facing more logistic, financial, and emotional harder barriers (Turley, 2009). Additionally, rural students experience culture shock with transitioning to large universities (Tieken, 2016). Further, little is known about college students who moved from rural areas to attend a flagship university.

Figure 1

Educational Attainment in Rural and Urban Areas, 2000 and 2018 (USDA, 2020)

Educational attainment in rural and urban areas, 2000 and 2018

Percent

Category	Rural 2000	Rural 2018	Urban 2000	Urban 2018
Bachelor's degree or higher	14.9	20.2	26.2	34.7
Associate's degree	5.7	9.4	6.4	8.5
Some college, no degree	19.6	21.6	21.3	20.0
High school diploma or equivalent	36.1	35.6	27.2	25.4
Less than high school diploma or equivalent	23.6	13.1	18.8	11.4

Note: Educational attainment for adults 25 and older. Urban and rural status is determined by Office of Management and Budget's 2015 metropolitan area definitions.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census 2000 and 2018 American Community Survey.

For universities to know how to create culturally relevant pedagogy and provide support for RPSTs, more needs to be known about the RPST experience. Faculty, staff and administrators in teacher preparation programs largely ignore rural perspectives such as cultural influences like strong community bonds and opportunities to complete practicums in rural schools, which positions RPSTs peripherally to the values in higher education. Thus, recently, rural researchers have begun to investigate the impact of marginalization of rural students because without a substantial knowledge base of how rural students connect to their college environment, rural students will remain underserved.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to explore how rural students' experiences and attitudes influenced sense of belonging development in a College of Education (COE) at a flagship university after at least one semester of sustained study. One influence on sense of belonging is enrollment in diversity courses. In most universities, preservice teachers are required to take diversity courses that teach how systems of power and privilege perpetuate inequality and teach the required skills to challenge systems (McIntyre, 1997; Schmidt et al., 2019). In preliminary studies, I examined RPSTs' experiences with diversity education and found a mismatch between the expectations of the rural preservice teachers and their experiences with diversity discussions. The mismatch of values and goals resulted in feelings of a lack of connection to the subject matter and to some of the faculty and peers (Woods, 2019).

The current study informs about how rurality influences educational experiences of RPSTs at a flagship university. I explored their barriers to feeling connected on campus and their process of eventually feeling school belonging. Understanding the stressors and the supports that RPSTs experience is key to improving the rural/urban gap in higher education. Attending to rural students' needs is an issue of equity, as rural students have been on the fringes of educational research and, until recently, on recruitment and retention.

For institutions committed to inclusivity both on campus and to support the benefits of creating a more inclusive nation, especially in education, it is important to understand the experiences of rural students; it is important to recognize the needs of rural students to improve inclusiveness and equity on campus and beyond. Public

flagship universities aim to provide access to higher education statewide, so they must consider how to close the urban/rural disparity. Already disadvantaged by place, once a rural student overcomes that geographical barrier to higher education attainment, support is needed as they are a minority cultural group on campus; Strayhorn (2012) posits that minority cultural groups are more prone to feeling alienated or isolated. Therefore, if their need to belong is not properly attended to, there will continue to be an increased likelihood for rural students to be less motivated or to drop out of college.

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant for several reasons. First, it examines the influence of rurality on sense of belonging in college. Educational research informs conversations about multiple and complicated influences of rurality on college experiences. Influence of rurality on sense of belonging is important because research has shown that rural students often feel like outsiders when they transition from a sparsely populated safe space to a densely populated strange campus. Sense of belonging is an important area to consider in student development because supportive campus environments and psychological interventions support student belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). While students may have a shared emotional connection and recognize the group's importance to them, their needs to experience relatedness are not always addressed; Osterman (2012) calls for descriptive and analytic studies that focus specifically on this phenomenon in schools. Further, there is a growing need for school belonging studies that are culturally sensitive (Guiffrida, 2006). Thus, as researchers develop more robust models of student development, administrators, faculty, and staff will be better informed about how to foster belonging and improve the higher education experience for RPSTs.

Second, this line of inquiry is important, as the urban/rural higher education gap persists. Thus, it is imperative that we investigate environmental factors that may be thwarting rural college student development. Currently, there is a deficit mentality of rural students and rural life (Theobald & Wood, 2010), and rural students are a cultural minority at large flagship universities. Instead of feeling appreciated for the funds of knowledge that they have to offer, rural students often feel stereotyped and marginalized. Looking for ways we can enable their success through supportive relationships and positive feelings of belonging is one way to address rural student under-representation at flagship universities.

Moreover, an increased number of rural graduates earning a baccalaureate degree could help reduce the teaching shortage in rural America and enrich rural communities. Rural schools that suffer a greater teacher shortage is an issue of equity. Further, the current study is significant because it contributes to current models of college student development by considering the influences of cultural transitions on belongingness.

Positionality

I grew up in a small rural town and had limited access to explore opportunities to attend college and few models of high academic achievement. Growing up in my small community had advantages, like being able to enjoy nature, growing up with relatively less pressure to compete for grades, and more community support. However, when I eventually decided to attend a flagship university, I noticed the difficulty in transitioning from a rural culture to an academic culture. I considered ways in which a rural upbringing had influenced my meaning making of my own academic development. I noted the most salient themes of my experience: considering the values of types of work, comparing

cultural capital, perceptions of privilege, lack of opportunity, perceptions of pretentiousness, stereotypes, resilience, and loss of feeling grounded. I decided to research this topic, in part, because I wanted to give back to underserved communities like mine. I hope that my efforts will help improve educational experiences for my extended family, my community, and others growing up with limited access to become acquainted with or develop urban-centric values that are common at flagship universities.

Overview of Design

I employed qualitative methods to develop an emerging theory of how RPSTs studying at a flagship university develop a sense of belonging. The interdependency of social factors that influence higher education attainment of rural students can best be understood by qualitative inquiry that describes the complexities of people's lives in context; qualitative research examines the meanings people give to their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Thus, qualitative research is utilized in the current study to understand how environmental influences support or thwart RPSTs' sense of belonging development. To examine RPSTs' acceptance and analyze their perceptions of the saliency of belonging, I used a three-stage interview process that focused on their beliefs and efficacy about friendship at home and on campus, connecting on campus (such as connections with faculty, student organization involvement, identity formation) (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019) and perceptions of mattering (feeling integral to the institution) (Schlossberg, 1989). In addition to asking how they build friendships and their motivation to become a teacher, I probed for information regarding their interactions on campus and at home. I also asked about their general perceptions of how rurality is valued by their non-rural peers, campus administrators, and faculty. Further, I also

interviewed urban students to include their perspectives on how rural students fit in on campus and their acceptance of rural students.

Theoretical Framework

I used Bronfenbrenner's (1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological systems model as a theoretical framework because this model examines the fit between the individual and their environment. By utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecological system concepts as a tool to clearly consider interactions between and within RPSTs' systems, I was able to discover factors that influence or thwart RPSTs' belongingness development. With the aid of this model, I was able to simultaneously emphasize both individual and contextual systems and the interdependent relations between these two systems. Further, from a higher education perspective, ecological thinking is appealing since it encompasses several contexts in a very broad sense, including trends such as urbanization, curriculum change, social media usage, and environmental change, together with attributes and behaviors of individuals. This model was particularly useful because it also takes into consideration unwritten rules and norms of campus life, which are salient factors to analyze the transition from a rural community to a flagship university. A key issue for rural students is the change in environment between their rural background and campus life at a large university. McDonough et al. (2010) explain that rural students who attend large universities transition from a seamless environment in which the schools and community are interdependent to an environment with few ties to their community. Additionally, in higher education, rural students find an incongruence of their specific money, lifestyle, and academic preparation concerns. The power of this model was evident with the illumination of influences that previously had been missed in studies on

rural student development, such as tensions that developed from awkward community

comparisons like "Midwestern hospitality expectations," which were thwarting variables

to student belongingness. By using this theoretical framework, I could provide

recommendations that are most useful for guiding higher education policy and practice.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review describes the gap in research addressing rural students in higher

education, focusing on how rurality influences college student development. I also

discuss the limited research available on sense of belonging in higher education. I begin

this review of literature on rural student development with a summary of components of

rural student identity, including definitions of the term "rural." Then, I explain

challenges that rural students face like feeling peripheral to campus culture and a lack of

academic preparation are presented to show the effect that systematic disadvantages have

on rural students in higher education. These challenges are significant because feeling

unimportant thwarts sense of belonging development. Research describing outsider

status is also included, as feelings of alienation are also a threat to belongingness

development. Finally, I include a review on rural students' experiences in Colleges of

Education; however, research in this area is extremely limited (Moffa & McHenry-

Sorber, 2018).

After presenting various implications of rural identity in higher education, I

review the theoretical framework that guided this study, focusing on the psychological

construct of sense of belonging and the ecological model used to analyze student

belongingness. I begin with research on belongingness as a basic human need at its

application in education. While numerous studies have examined constructs broadly

similar to sense of belonging (e.g., research related to Tinto's (1993) model of social and

academic integration), this review focuses specifically on studies that directly define and

investigate 'sense of belonging' in higher education. I focus on Strayhorn's (2012, 2019)

work on belongingness to outline challenges for marginalized college students in

developing school sense of belonging. Finally, I provide an overview of the theoretical

framework that guided the research questions and analysis in this study,

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner &

Morris, 2006).

Defining Rural

In order to study rural students in higher education, it is necessary to be aware of how

rurality is commonly defined and characterized in educational research. According to the

Washington Post (2013), the federal government has fifteen different definitions of rural

("The federal definition of 'rural' — times 15," 2013). The complexity of characterizing

rural Americans has long been noted, even in the twentieth century:

> rural America is far too heterogeneous and complex to be
>
> amenable to simplistic definitions or comfortable stereotypes.
>
> Remembering that fishing villages in Maine, coal company towns
>
> in Appalachia, farm communities in Iowa, Delta counties in
>
> Mississippi, recreation communities in Colorado, Indian
>
> reservations in South Dakota, small college towns in Minnesota,
>
> migrant settlements in Texas, retirement communities in Florida,
>
> and Alaskan native villages are all "rural" leaves one feeling less
>
> than sanguine about sweeping generalizations (Sher, 1977, p. 2).

Despite the many changes to the rural landscape over the past four decades, little

has changed in the complexity of defining this population. Generally, rural education

researchers use rural development by The National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES), which was revised in 2006. The NCES created an urban-centric classification

system with four major locale categories—city, suburban, town, and rural—each of which is divided into three subcategories. Rural includes subcategories fringe, distant, and remote and differentiates towns and rural areas based on their proximity to larger urban centers (NCES 2015). For purposes of this research, I use this definition (see Appendix A for more details): Rural areas are those areas that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster (NCES 2015).

Rural Students on the Fringe

It is essential to examine the changes in rural education over the past century to better understand the inequities of rural education. Compared to urban education, rural education at primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels all get shorted; rural education receives little attention in education research, and rural students are marginalized because historically, they have received less attention than urban students. Therefore, they are viewed as less important or peripheral to urban students.

There is a lack of attention to rural student needs and rural teacher training (Todd & Angelo, 2006). Since feelings of mattering influence sense of belonging development, it is necessary to review how rural marginalization influences education. Rural inequities persist because rural students are viewed through a deficit lens (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Acknowledging that rural students are seen through a deficit lens is important because psychological horizons affect rural peoples' motivations, values, aspirations, and scope of personal and social awareness (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

Research shows that some rural students lack a social network on campus and rely on friendships in their rural communities. Goldman (2019) investigated rural students' access and barriers and supports at a flagship university. The fourteen rural (according

to NCES guidelines) participants were enrolled in a TRiO program, a federal college support service. Participants described access to on-campus resources, family support, self-efficacy, and finding a place to belong in college. The researcher used digital stories (3-5 minutes each) collected at a one-time point as a primary data collection method for her grounded theory study. She found that rural students face unique challenges at university stemming from several social issues. Common barriers for rural students are as follows: lack of academic preparation, family problems, challenges, lack of information of being first-generation, financial problems.

Specifically exploring college belonging, Goldman found one participant who relied on her rural community by surrounding herself with her friends from home to adjust to college and expand her college network. This research is important, as it explores barriers to higher education that are influenced by rurality. However, the data is extremely limited because data were collected at only one time point. Further, little detail on the context of the study is given. For example, the geographical region of the university is not described. Also, there are few details on the data analysis, which is problematic in that it would be challenging to follow an iterative process of data collection and coding and reach saturation with limited data.

Disadvantage of Place

Rural students lack experience dealing with universities because they have limited access to them, and there are fewer college-educated rural community members, which may lead to less adult encouragement of higher education (Ganss, 2016). According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, new patterns of behavior can be acquired by direct experience (Bandura, 1971). However, many rural students are deprived of the

opportunity to observe academic environments or have direct contact with those involved in higher education, thus experiencing difficult transitions to college.

The urban-rural completion gap is widening. Between 2000-2018 the number of urban residents that hold a bachelor's degree increased by almost 9%, while rural residents holding a bachelor's degree increased by less than 6%. Rural students face barriers to higher education attainment that are influenced by rural culture. Allen and Roberts (2019) demonstrated the influence of rural culture on student access in their study, where they utilized theories of place and space to understand how early college programs impact rural schools. They studied a program aimed to offer underserved students the opportunity to earn college credit in their junior and senior years of high school. As part of a state-wide evaluation team, the researchers evaluated the program in two schools: a rural school district and a small-town school district on the fringe of a large city. Findings show that even though both districts were of similar size and SES, the district situated near a larger city had more advantages, like easier access to college campus facilities and faculty. They found that the spatial relationship to local colleges, transportation, and even neighboring school districts created opportunities for the district that were not available to the rural district, as these students were not able to access campus resources. This research illustrated rural disadvantages for higher education attainment that were linked to rural values; the students in the rural district did not have an opportunity to visit the campus, as the administrators used the allocated resources for technology in their school and a neighboring school instead of funding college visits. The researchers demonstrated that space and place accounts for very different opportunities and challenges in the districts they studied. The findings are another

example of the challenges like lack of access for rural students to attend a flagship university.

Consequences of Deficit Perceptions of Rurality

Theobald and Wood (2010) explain how negative perceptions of rurality present challenges to rural students in their chapter contribution, which describes how politics, urbanization, and the media have influenced perceptions of the rural identity. They posit that rural students learn that their teachers and schools are inferior compared to urban schools, asserting that "Rural equals backward is an old cultural message, but its age hasn't diminished its utility" (p. 31). Their contribution is relevant because feelings of inferiority influence acceptance within the campus community. Research has shown that rural students' feel inferior compared to their non-rural counterparts during their transition to college; for example, in their qualitative study, Morton et al. (2018) examined perceived barriers, anxieties, and fears in prospective college students from rural high schools. Their phenomenological study gathered data from focus group interviews with ten high school students participating in a pre-college program located at a large university. Findings show that in addition to confronting all the anxieties, difficulties, and dislocations of any college student, their experiences involve substantial academic, cultural, social transitions. Despite their strong academic record, the students in the focus groups underestimated their strengths and potential to succeed in a college setting. Moreover, the students indicated that their rural high schools did not offer the type of educational resources they needed to prepare for college. They lacked computers, textbooks, advanced courses, and access to school counselors. The results highlighted the need to design programs and supports for students who successfully enroll in college.

Additionally, because many rural youths have a strong desire to remain connected to their home communities, rural students must have access to programs and experiences focusing on rural places and people. The limitations of the study are that metropolitan and rural views were not compared, and urban students face similar challenges. They also suggest that future studies on the perceptions and experiences of rural students are needed to strengthen the findings.

Perceptions of Rural Teachers

Because mattering is an important aspect of belonging, understanding how academics see rural teachers is critical when analyzing RPSTs' college belonging. Burton, et al. (2013) analyzed 48 peer-reviewed articles on rural teachers from 1970-2010 to investigate how rural teachers are portrayed in educational research. They found narratives that portray rural teachers as professionally isolated, are different from urban teachers, lack professional knowledge/teaching credentials, and are resistant to change. The studies often included "researchers acting as protagonists in their quest to change or save rural students and teachers" (p 7). They report that only one journal article presented a counter-narrative, recognizing the importance of relationships and community identity in rural schools. They called for counter-narratives to contribute to a better understanding of rural schools. Additionally, they noted that rural education research is largely absent from general education publications. A suggestion of framing rural education research within equity and social justice discourse might receive more attention from general education researchers. These findings are relevant to the current study because the review demonstrates a lack of attention to rural teachers, indicating they are less significant or less important than other populations.

Rural Teacher Shortage

A shortage of teachers in the United States has intensified in recent years, disproportionately affecting rural communities. The more rural the school, the more challenging recruiting and retaining a qualified teacher becomes (Reininger, 2012). Thirty-nine percent of remote schools struggle to fill positions in every subject. (Latterman, & Steffes, 2017). Reininger (2012) found that throughout the country, the majority of young teachers live within 20 miles of the high school they attended. Recruiting and retaining rural students to teaching programs is vital to address the shortage.

Rural Students in Higher Education

The culture of rurality differs in quantitative and qualitative ways from the "overall culture" of the United States (Keller & Murray, 1982). Rural students are more likely to attend small institutions. Most public college students enroll within 50 miles of home, which reinforces existing inequalities (Hillman & Weichman, 2016). Given the challenges RPSTs face in attaining higher education, it is important to understand further what it is like for rural students to transfer from rural culture to immersion in a large college campus culture, especially since rural students are a minority at flagship universities. Heinisch (2017) investigated first-generation rural students' transition to a large Midwestern university by looking for both barriers and positive aspects of their first year of university study. This qualitative study of eight first-year students found themes of protracted adjustment period, contextual dissonance, and unrealistic expectations for college. The study found the rural students experience an incongruence of social norms and college life and suggested that administrations implement outreach activities to help

rural students develop a sense of belonging. In line with a phenomenological study's purpose, he provided details of how rural students experienced college transition. Although this study identified a few barriers to sense of belonging development, the study did not explain the process. The limitations of this study include the narrow focus and limited number of participants, and data collection limit the potential to generalize the findings. The data was limited to semi-structured interviews, consisting of nine open-ended questions, limiting a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Further, all participants in this study identified as first-generation, as this study's focus was on the intersectionality of rurality and first-generation.

Rural students face unique barriers in higher education because of a lack of understanding of campus culture, making them feel like outsiders. Ganss (2016) also explored the lived experiences of ten rural students transitioning to college from rural Oregon communities. Narrative inquiry was utilized; emerging themes indicated rural students experienced barriers associated with rurality like unexpected emotional and social transition, lack of social and co-curricular involvement, and exposure to diversity leading to consciousness of a rural identity. This study's limitation includes the limited number of participants, and only one wave of interviews was conducted during the seventh and eighth week of their first enrolled semester. Also, Ganss's study approached rurality with a deficit lens and described limited positive experiences or attributes to build upon. Further, while this study increases awareness of rural student barriers, more studies still are needed to understand how rural students persist despite their unique challenges.

The relationships formed at home and their rural community support are important to take into consideration when planning student support. Rural students are accustomed to being supported in their community and look for similar social supports when they go to college; finding social support is one way to determine school fit (Strayhorn, 2012). Byun, et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative study to examine the rural-nonrural gap in postsecondary attainment using large-scale, longitudinal data; prior research did not examine disparities in college completion from different geographic locations. The study takes into consideration the added value of community social resources. Using data from NELS administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), they found that rural students had a stronger sense of community compared to non-rural students. Rural students benefited from community social resources, which may reflect strong kinship bonds and close social ties among families and religious institutions. However, the results confirmed that rural students lagged behind their non-rural counterparts in college enrollment and degree attainment primarily because of their lower socioeconomic background, such as parents with lower levels of education, expectations, and involvement in their children's education. Therefore, even though this population has strong community support, rural students will be at a disadvantage to attain a four-year degree without the advantage of family social resources. This research supports outreach and support to rural communities.

Additionally, rural students' lack of experience dealing with universities is due to the lack of universities found in rural areas and a lack of college-educated community members. According to Tieken (2016), rural students are not familiar with campus culture, as they have little experience on college campuses. In her ethnographic study,

she investigated the way that community stakeholders represent college goals to rural

high school students. As a part of a larger study, she interviewed high school guidance

counselors, college admissions officials, and the staff of community-based organizations.

She found that college-going messages focused on the necessity of higher education for

gainful employment as an investment in one's future. An administrator described rural

students as having a 'jobs mindset' (p. 210). And have a more specific career focus

compared to urban students.   The stakeholders in the study appeared to cultivate and

support the direct connection to higher education and work, so they 'can be in charge of

your own life' (p. 211) and they explain students are interested in saving money by going

to a two-year institution because they 'understand the value of a dollar' (p. 213). With

messages that a college degree is a direct translation of getting a job, students hear

limited messages to go to college for intellectual curiosity, exposure to a global

perspective, and personal growth. The implications of this study suggest that the focus

on jobs potentially reinforces social inequities, as educational options with the lowest

cost and highest utility are usually found at community colleges and technical programs;

thus, students may be pushed from four-year degrees, causing more social stratification.

Outsider Status

Rural students have concerns about social isolation because they perceive that

they are outsiders. For example, Dunstan and Jaeger (2015) examined the influence of

speaking a stigmatized dialect on academic experiences for rural White and African

American preservice teachers. They found that speaking a stigmatized dialect can result

in students feeling they have additional barriers to overcome, both inside and outside the

classroom. They conducted a qualitative study that included 26 college students from a

rural background who attended a large research university in an urban Southern city. They conducted 40-minute semi-structured interviews and used sociolinguistic analysis techniques for the language used by participants in order to better describe and understand their experiences in relation to the dialect they speak. The findings indicated that rural students worked felt they were perceived as less educated and less credible. Participants perceived that faculty made negative assumptions, pointed out the "country" person, and had pretentious attitudes, which caused the participants to feel ill-prepared, avoid classes, and have difficulty developing an academic identity (sounding like a scholar). For example, when responding to the interviewing about times when he was asked to represent rural people, one participant explained, "I took a course in race and ethnic relations in the U.S., and that was miserable. That was awful, 'cause I was the enemy basically of the entire class. And we had [mock-imitating instructor], "a prime example of somebody who's 'country' sitting right here." It was bad' (Rural Student Representation in Colleges of Education, p. 789).

Rural Student Representation in COEs

Research indicates that rural preservice teachers experience a lack of connection to faculty, classmates, and course material. Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) qualitatively investigated the perceptions of rurality of five first-year teachers as influenced by their teacher preparation program. They discovered tensions felt by preservice teachers between their rural community norms and their college experiences. Their participants reported discomfort when discussing farm duties and reported that rurality was ignored or misunderstood by outsiders. The pre-service teachers perceived that their teacher preparation program included deficit views of rural life and/or

stereotypical beliefs. In order to support RPSTs' connection to the university, proximal connections must be supported. Learning about RPSTs campus experience will help understand, appreciate, and include RPSTs, which will increase positive school interactions. This study is important, as it contributes to the very limited literature that explains RPSTs college-going experiences at large, public universities. However, this study's limits include its limited data collection. They interviewed five participants at one time point at one university. Also, the participants were enrolled in a graduate studies program; thus, their initial transition as an undergraduate would have been more than four years ago. Also, only four of the participants had completed their undergraduate degree at the same university.

Even though rural schools have trouble recruiting teachers, consideration of rural school practicum placement and inclusion of rural school characteristics, such as the funds of knowledge of rural students, are routinely neglected in teacher preparation programs. Todd and Agnello (2006) examined a structured field trip of preservice teachers to a P-12 rural school with a population of 173. Two questions guided the researchers: "How does an organized class field trip influence preservice teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward rural school communities? And in what ways does the experience contribute to developing relevant curriculum in an elementary school social studies program?" Prior to the field trip, the university students assumed that the teachers would lack qualifications, the schools would lack technology, and students would have little expectation for academic success. The researchers reported a broadening the understanding of rural communities for pre-service teachers; Based on the participants' observations and interactions with members of the community, they modified their

negative attitudes towards rural schools. The study suggests the need for Colleges of Education to commit to emphasize the knowledge and skills needed by teachers to work in a diverse society. The findings appeared to be primarily derived from lesson plans created by the participants. The researchers had assigned the lesson plans and graded the lesson plans according to their expectations for their university student outcomes. While this research addresses the attitudes and misperceptions of rural schools, the findings lack significant detail because findings are derived from assignments rather than interviews. Thus, the findings are subject to interpretation and may not represent an actual change in mindset about rural education.

Theoretical Framework

These research findings influenced the theoretical framework for this study; the literature indicated that rural students are under-researched, und-represented, and viewed with a deficit lens. Thus, the framework needs to be appropriate to consider marginalized populations. I evaluated the different uses of the terms that describe college student sense of belonging. There are various ways in which people derive a sense of belonging. In order to operationalize the concept, I had to consider the background of how the construct of sense of belonging has been developed in general, in education, higher education, and with marginalized groups. In this section, I provide a background of sense of belonging research contextualized in educational settings and provide support for Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to be used as a tool to understand student development in context.

Sense of Belonging

The importance of sense of belonging for both psychological and physical well-being has been well established (Ostrove & Long, 2007; Baumeister & Leary 1985; Maslow, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000). While research has established a strong theoretical and empirical base showing the importance of addressing students' needs for relatedness within the context of the school, there is still much to be learned (Osterman, 2007). For example, considering the complexity of sense of belonging development in various settings, there is a lack of conformity in language to describe sense of belonging. I operationalized the term "sense of belonging" as a psychological construct built upon the assumption that belonging is a basic human need and is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive human behavior. To operationalize "belongingness" I considered extant research on basic human needs, general studies on belongingness development, belonging in schools, and research specific to sense of belonging development in higher education.

For this study, the construct of belonging was derived from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which puts forward that people are motivated by five basic categories of needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. According to Maslow (1987), a sense of belonging can be satisfied only interpersonally, and we must differentiate the quality of a relationship by the degree of satisfaction of the basic needs brought about by the relationship. Maslow (1970) explained that we have little scientific information about the belongingness need and that, "We still underplay the deep importance of the neighborhood, of one's territory, of one's clan...one's class...one's familiar working colleagues" (pp. 43-44). Certain conditions are prerequisites to developing a sense of belonging, such as freedom to express oneself, freedom to

investigate and seek information, justice, fairness, honesty, and orderliness in the group (Maslow, 1970).   Researchers have continued Maslow's work on psychological needs to explore how belonging needs impact well-being and motivation.

One of the dominant current theories of motivation is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which claims that humans have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This model emphasizes the desire to belong as a fundamental psychological need. Ryan and Deci (2000) posit that in order to facilitate internalization, the process of assimilating beliefs and behaviors that are originally external to the self rather than being intrinsically motivated (Anderman & Freeman, 2004). Thus, to encourage students to accept social norms, values, and regulations, schools should first provide a sense of belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture, referred to as relatedness in SDT. To be motivated, students need to feel cared for and respected in order to accept school values. Considering the basic psychological need of relatedness, investigating how rural students perceive their educational experience at large universities is crucial.

Further, SDT suggests that human beings function best when interactions are governed by choice and place emphasis on socio-cultural conditions. They found that having social connections is related to better academic outcomes and, conversely, feeling isolated (i.e. having unmet belonging needs) has negative consequences on academic outcomes. According to Markus and Krumpnik (2017), the several factors that are associated with a lack of relatedness are cited as barriers for rural students who go to college: Rural students suffer from culture shock when they leave their small towns where they are familiar and move to large universities where they are surrounded by

strangers. Students feel intimidated at college, as students from bigger places surround them and find it difficult to connect with people. Some disdain rural people, stereotyping them as stupid.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) extensively reviewed the concept of belonging; they reviewed over 300 articles and determined that the need to belong is associated with differences in cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavior, health, and well-being. To support this conclusion, they argued that to satisfy the need to belong, one must have frequent, pleasant interactions in a temporally stable context that includes an affective concern for each other's welfare. The need to belong should apply to all people, operate in a wide variety of settings, and affect emotional and cognitive patterns. Considering the effects of feelings of belongingness on cognition, emotion, and physiology, they supported the assertion that belongingness is a fundamental human need and fundamental to motivation.

Belongingness in Education

Belongingness is widely studied in education, and a focus on school belongingness emerged in the early 1990s. Focusing on K-12, Goodenow's (1993) investigation found that gaining membership, feeling accepted, valued, included, and encouraged in the classroom were predictors to school belongingness. Alternatively, when students are not valued or welcomed, they were less likely to engage academically. Additionally, this study noted that sense of belonging development has critical periods. For example, adolescents and young adults must understand where they stand in a particular social setting or face difficulty with the task at hand, such as studying or retaining in the school context.

Further, Osterman (2000) reviewed research about students' sense of acceptance in the school community to add to the limited research on the construct of school sense of belonging in general, like student interaction within classrooms and friendship groups; we know very little about interaction among students outside of these boundaries (Osterman, 2000). Her search of peer-reviewed journals included "belongingness," "relatedness," "support," "acceptance," "membership," or "sense of community," which are student psychological outcomes associated with a school sense of belonging. The search also included friendship, peer acceptance or rejection, and dropout. The review sought to investigate the importance of belongingness in an educational setting, how students might experience school as a community, and how schools influence students' sense of community. She found that belonging is a fundamental concept that has a far-reaching impact on human motivation and behavior.

Further, Osterman, (2000) asserts that findings on school belonging are strong and consistent: acceptance in the school community influences motivation and commitment to school, performance, and quality of learning. She found that students' experience of acceptance influences multiple dimensions of their behavior but that schools adopt organizational practices that neglect and may undermine students' experience of membership in a supportive community. Additionally, if the norms and values of the social context encourage positive student interactions, individuals feel accepted, which improves the quality of relationships beyond the school setting. However, her review also discovered that students and researchers describe schools as alienating institutions. For example, certain groups of students experience rejection from peers and adults as

well through harassment and bullying, and many students fail to feel a sense of community.

Belongingness in Higher Education

A focus on sense of belonging development in higher education emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Chickering and Riser (1993) found that sense of belonging development takes importance for young adults in considering whom they want to be and how they want to spend their time. A sense of belonging in college settings has been defined primarily as perceptions of acceptance, fit, and inclusion on campus (Strayhorn, 2012). Early studies on college sense of belonging are primarily focused on recruitment and retention. Findings indicated that developing a stable sense of belonging at school could stimulate students' persistence to learn and reduce student attrition (St-Amand, et al., 2017). Tinto (1987), a forerunner in studying college student belonging, highlighted the importance of students' peer relationships in terms of their social integration into college. Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure identifies several critical variables, including students' social and academic integration and relationships with families and career decisions. Tinto theorized that student traits from individual degree goals and institutional commitments interact overtime with collegiate experiences to influence one's decision to leave college (Strayhorn, 2019). While this theory informs student attrition, it does not explain sense of belonging development. Strayhorn (2012) posits Tinto's model does not provide enough nuanced information to develop interventions for students who do not develop a sense of belonging and posits that using Tinto's model could confuse sense of belonging with mere satisfaction or involvement because Tinto's work lacks consideration or recognition of contextual variables such as cognitive and

affective evaluations that may influence students' belongingness. Further, Hurtado and Carter (1997) also suggest that students' subjective sense of belonging in college, particularly among those in the ethnic minority on college campuses, is not sufficiently addressed by Tinto's model. There has also been interest in examining the sense of belonging within academic majors and the college classroom, in part because the traditional college academic experience has been situated in the classroom and academic major. Although fewer in number, these studies have reported linkages between classroom and school belonging and greater academic confidence, engagement, and achievement (Zumbrunn et al., 2014).

Examining the influence of background, such as cultural values, is an area of consideration with college student sense of belonging development. Ostrove and Long (2007) studied 327 first-year students and looked at social dimensions of college life, residence, and perceptions of college climate and found that social class background has important implications for students' sense of belonging and adjustment to college. Findings were consistent with the literature suggesting that students from less privileged social class backgrounds are more likely to feel alienated and marginal at college (Ostrove, 2003).

Sense of Belonging for Marginalized Groups

Some of the barriers to developing a sense of belonging for RPSTs stem from feelings of marginalization and insufficient academic and social support. Being accepted, included, or welcomed leads to positive emotions, such as happiness, elation, contentment, and calm, while being rejected, excluded, or ignored leads to often intense

negative feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Studies that focus on marginalized groups in higher education are limited (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, Maestra, 2007). Strayhorn's (2012) first model of college student belonging was defined as, "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness or that one is important to others" (Figure 2). Strayhorn's investigation of marginalized students is the foundation of his initial college belongingness model, which he later revised to clarify nuances among student populations, as addressed further below.

Within the theoretical framework of student motivation, learning, and development, Anderman and Freeman (2004) posit that sense of belonging takes on heightened significance when students were in unfamiliar places where they felt unwelcome or marginalized. For example, college students are generally at the crux of identity exploration and are prone to peer influence (Strayhorn, 2019). Marginalized populations typically have fewer support systems, thus, are likely to feel alienated and isolated, which are detrimental to well-being and college persistence. Further, Strayhorn (2012) reports that belongingness differs for collegians from marginalized backgrounds compared with individuals who hold majority identities because marginalized students might already feel like they do not matter on campus.

Figure 2

Strayhorn's Hypothesized Model
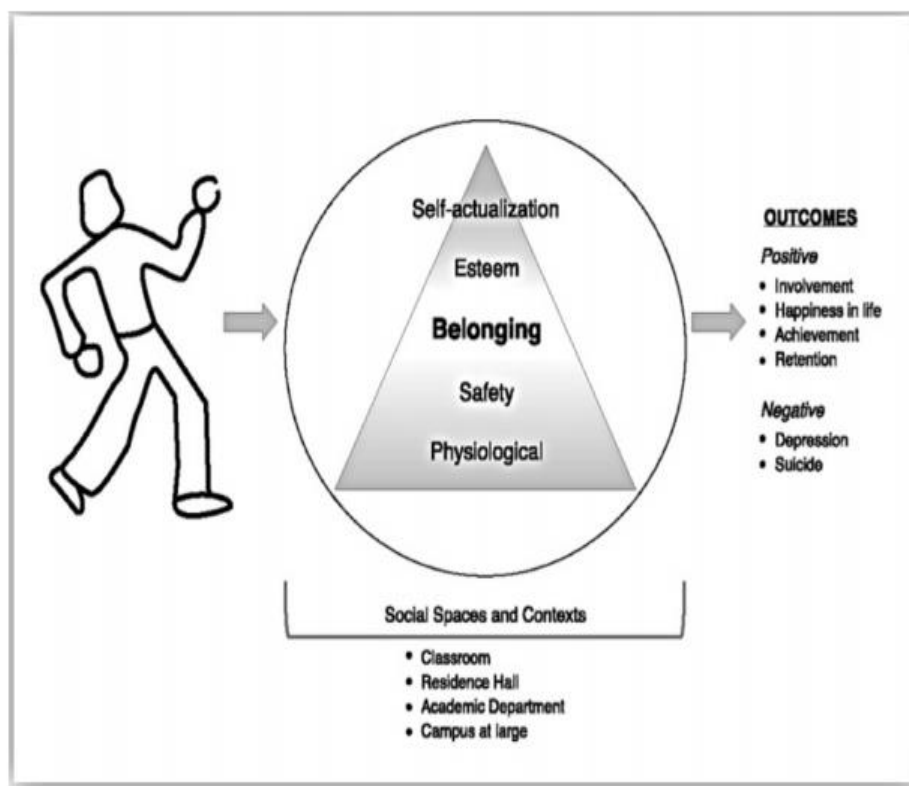
Note: Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.

In his revised model, Strayhorn (2019) clarified his understanding to include feelings of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group. Strayhorn's (2019) model of college student belonging development refined the theoretical concept of sense of belonging for college students, using empirical data of various student groups, shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Strayhorn's Revised Model of College Students' Sense of Belonging
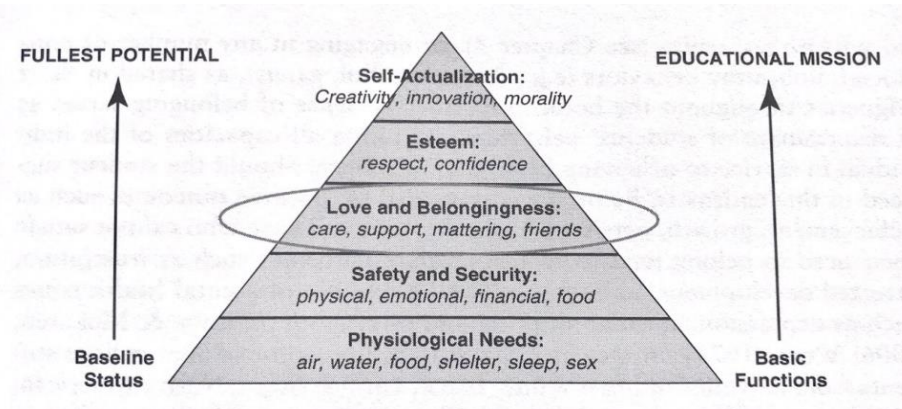
Note: From Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students.2nd ed. Routledge.

Due to its relevance to my research, including rural students as marginalized, I use Strayhorn's (2019) working definition of sense of belonging as it relates to sense of belonging in the university setting:

> In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (p. 41).

While Strayhorn has significantly contributed to understanding college students' sense of belonging, he does not elaborate on how a difference in value systems influences belonging development. The key elements included in his model relate to defining belonging. At the foundation of Strayhorn's model is Maslow's hierarchy of needs, explaining that belonging is a basic psychological need, and without satisfaction of this need, other needs will not be attended to, which will hinder student development.

Building on the concept of basic human needs, he fortifies the foundation of his theory by using Baumeister and Leary's (1995) work that sense of belonging is motivational and, when attended to, will lead to student well-being and success. Next, he uses Hurtado and Carter's (1997) definition of belonging as foundational to his model; a sense of belonging is a cognitive evaluation (thinking about belonging) that leads to an effective response (how a person feels about belonging or isolation), and often behavioral manifestations (actions to belong).

He also includes the dimension context, drawing on the work of Chickering and Reiser (1993), asserting that sense of belonging is variable and takes on heightened importance at certain times, such as late adolescence, when individuals are considering their identity and how and where they want to spend their energies. Strayhorn's model also considers Schlossberg (1985) and Rosenberg & McCullough's (1981) work on mattering, considering mattering as a motive. He frequently refers to implications of belonging development and suggests ways to help students feel like they matter to serve as mediators on the role of marginalization.

Finally, the overarching theme of Strayhorn's work is considering under-represented populations in higher education. He draws on Goodenow's (1993) work that explains the marginal influence on sense of belonging. He also extends that work by using Anderman and Freeman's (2004) findings that sense of belonging takes on heightened significance in contexts where they feel different, unfamiliar, or foreign, as well as where they feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcome in some contexts.

Strayhorn's work influenced my research questions and analysis of my data. His model of student belonging was highly influenced by his studies of populations that were

peripheral to the majority cultural demographic of the college-going population. Rural minority students make up a significant amount of the total rural population (Appendix B). Further, rural individuals, regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, may share with other minority groups the sense of being of a minority culture; thus, this model was a good fit to study RPSTs.

College Sense of Belonging for Rural Students

There have been few studies on the specific development of rural students' development of college belonging. Most published research investigating rural college student belonging development is broad in scope and generally looks at the transition and adjustment to college, providing a general overview. For example, Terman (2020) investigated the role of social identities in young people's relationship to place and the perspectives of college students. The qualitative data was collected from current college students and recent college graduates in West Virginia. Data suggest that there is a tension involved in reconciling rural identity and college belonging and that institutional support can help foster belonging and connection to campus. The findings point to the burdens of social identities that individual young people must negotiate and overcome in order to belong in urban places. Terman concluded that the role that identity-based social oppression plays in community sustainability is vital for scholars and community and institutional leaders to acknowledge and address.

There are unpublished dissertations (Heinisch, 2018), and studies that focus on access, but very few on how rural students experience higher education (McDonough, et al., 2010). Heinisch's (2018) unpublished dissertation utilized Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to conduct a qualitative case study, that included eight students and

three administrators to investigate how rural students experience belonging at a

Midwestern public university. The findings include rural students alienated by rural life

embraced college life, rural students that strongly identified with rural life were

challenged to belong in college, some students could identify with rural life and

experience both positive and negative implications for belonging in college. Heinisch

found that for three of his participants, there seemed to be a direct relationship between

their negative experiences in rural life and their subsequent development of a sense of

belonging within a large campus environment. Various aspects of life, such as the size of

the environment, relate to peers, academics, and opportunities. Findings indicate

students' alienation in rural life and connection to campus environment; supporting

quotes are, "I feel like I belong here more than I did back home. There are things here in

the city and the university that interest me and that I want to be a part of." Additional

support for feelings alienated were documented with quotes explaining the inconvenience

of shopping, lack of academic choices in their rural school, and lack of diversity

exposure. While this study adds to the understanding of the rural college student

experience, more research is needed to understand the cognitive processes of perceptions

for belonging to evaluate how they develop a campus connection.

Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977;

Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) guided my research questions and design. This model

fostered an in-depth analysis of student-school fit and influenced me to ask questions

about values, social interactions, relationships, and mattering. Specifically, this model

helped me analyze the interaction between various systems at the university with

RPSTs. For example, as students began to develop relationships at the university, some students reported neglecting their relationships at home leaving the student with an internal struggle to belong.

Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

According to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), an individual's development depends upon the ecological systems in which the individual interacts. The ecological model examines the impact of the immediate setting, as well as the influence of various levels of social and cultural ideologies. In constructing his model, Bronfenbrenner broke down the concept of environment and identified a number of levels of influence, all operating simultaneously on the individual (Thompson, et al., 2012):

(a) Microsystem—where the individual participates directly,

(b) Mesosystem—where members from different microsystems interact with each other independent of the central individual,

(c) Ecosystem—entities and organizations that might be accessed by the individual or their family,

(d) Macrosystem—the politics, views and customs that represent the cultural fabric of the individuals' society,

(e) Chronosystem—time as it relates to events in the individual's environment.

Of central importance to a development of sense of belonging is an analysis of how students interact with their immediate campus environment (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).   After leaving home, students are likely creating new relationships with peers and faculty to a degree not experienced before. The new immediate relationships found at

large universities bring new influences, new cultures, and beliefs about the world, new challenges to make friends, roommate relationships, et cetera; the changed microsystems bring out development. Further, there are protective factors that were likely developed at home, such as being valued, loved, held in good regard, and high esteem that should that allow students to cope with challenges and setbacks in a new environment. Security provided at home would make change less anxiety-provoking and disturbing. The Bioecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) identifies the forms taken by interconnections between home and the new, immediate campus environment: some of the same people may be active in both environments (such as alumni parents); or there may be knowledge or ignorance existing in one setting about the other (first-generation students) and there may be positive or hostile attitudes from one about the other (possible stereotypes about rurality).

This bioecological model is commonly used to analyze behavior in school settings. For example, Walls (2017) utilized an ecological model to aid in developing a theoretically grounded framework for integrating the scholarship of teaching and learning. Walls asserts that an ecological theoretical framework was useful for synthesizing this research because it draws focus to the dynamic interplay between students' individual characteristics and their learning environments, and how multiple factors (both inside and outside of the classroom) are important to consider as instructors prepare for a productive academic year. I created a similar model applied to my research questions in order to collect data that included details about how each system interacted with other systems and with the individual.

Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT)

According to Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1997; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), proximal processes – regular, ongoing, complex, reciprocal interactions between the developing person and the people, objects, and symbols present within a given microsystem – are the single most important developmental factors that influence human development.

I used this ecological model to examine influences at flagship university and the characteristics of RPSTs to study the influences of rurality on belonging. Since student belonging is influenced by the individual characteristics of the developing person, the range of contexts that surround them, and by the historical time in which they live (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), I also took into consideration the political and sociopolitical events occurring at the time of my study. For example, I considered current events, such as the university's response to racial tensions in the past five years, 2020 election-year issues, and global worries over the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Proximal Processes

Proximal processes serve as mechanisms for actualizing genetic potential, and increased positive interactions lead to advanced student development. However, proximal processes alone do not account for human development, for it is also necessary to contextualize the processes in the environment, considering the magnitude of interactions, the people in the environment, and the nature of sense of belonging development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Thus, to study student belongingness development, this ecological framework is used to examine the quantity and quality of

interactions, the characteristics of the home and campus environment, faculty, staff, students, friends and family, as well as the nature of developing a sense of belonging. Applied to this study, for example, supports, such as Christian Housing serve as mechanisms to advance sense of belonging development for RPSTs, as they described frequent, positive interactions with their roommates and religious leaders in Christian housing. In contrast, the perceived indifference of college recruiters at rural schools made students feel they were not well accepted or desired at flagship universities.

Person

The person level of the model includes how individual characteristics influence proximal processes, such as how age, gender, temperament, intelligence, etc., influence activities and interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). In the current study, participants were mostly the same age and mostly female. I looked for differences in background, including graduating class size, distance from their high schools to urban centers, and whether they grew up on a farm.

Context

The proximal processes of RPSTs interacting with peers, faculty, and student services are the primary focus of the present study. RPSTs' developmental outcome of sense of belonging development was analyzed by taking into consideration the quality and quantity of interactions within the campus environment. Analyzing the context in this study was especially important, given the historical year of this research. I provide specific information about the unique circumstances of conducting a study during 2020 in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the methods and design that I used to collect and analyze the data for this study. In this Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) study I sought to build an emerging theory that explains how rural undergraduates enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a flagship university perceived their school belonging. With rural characteristics in mind, I examined reactions and emotions that Rural Preservice Teachers (RPSTs) experienced with respect to a change in their surroundings when they transitioned from their rural community to a large college campus. My aim was to document the psychological processes of changes in perceptions, emotions, and motivation that rural students experience in higher education.

I begin this chapter with my rationale for conducting a qualitative study, focusing on how a qualitative study adds to current literature on belonging in higher education. Then, I provide an overview of Grounded Theory (GT), with an explanation of how a constructivist paradigm was applied to the research. I detail the role of reflexivity and the researcher's assumptions in the study because transparency in qualitative research is a critical component that creates best practice (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). Next, I provide an overview of the conceptual framework that guided the research questions and analysis. Then, I provide information about the participants that contributed to the study, their recruitment, and selection, followed by a description of data sources, focusing on the iterative process of data collection and analysis. After that, I provide an overview of ethical considerations and present a discussion on the

trustworthiness of the study. Finally, I review the data analysis methods, including how the use of memoing and concept mapping helped me analyze and interpret the data.

Type of Study

I chose qualitative research for this study because it can be used to unpack complex phenomena like the process of developing a sense of belonging at school. I utilized this approach to understand the nuances of the sense of belonging that RPSTs develop at a flagship university. Because I was interested in process, I chose to conduct a GT study, which produces an emergent theory of a process, rather than an approach that focuses on descriptions of the lived experiences, such as a phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994). There is a call for more qualitative research in educational psychology because qualitative methods reveal different aspects of human behavior than do the dominant quantitative methods (Hong & Cross, 2020). Qualitative studies examine processes from the perspective of the actors.

To gather rich data on personal experiences, I conducted a three-stage interview process and examined RPSTs' process of developing or not developing a connection to campus. I probed for information regarding their university interactions, such as classroom interactions with faculty and peers, and for general perceptions of how rurality is valued by campus administrators and faculty. I analyzed their beliefs and efficacy about making friends at home and on campus, as well as their feelings of mattering, and their process of connecting to the university.

Research Questions

This study's foundational research questions focus on RPSTs currently attending a flagship university:

1. What do RPSTs at large universities report influences their sense of belonging?

    a. How do interactions with faculty members and peers affect RPSTs' sense of belonging at a large university?

    b. How do RPSTs perceive that their ruralness affects their ability to develop a sense of belonging at a large university?

2. What view do RPSTs have on the relationship between a sense of belonging and persistence at a large university?

Grounded Theory

The research questions were well suited for a GT approach because this type of analysis is used to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior that is relevant and problematic for those involved (Glaser & Holton, 2005). So, while I provided a thick description of the context for transparency, my goal was not to simply describe the experience but rather to explain how rurality influences college student development. Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed GT intending to provide a method of theory construction. According to Charmaz and Thornberg (2020), "Grounded theory is a systematic method of conducting research that shapes collecting data and provides explicit strategies for analyzing them. The defining purpose of this method is to construct a theory that offers an abstract understanding of one or more core concerns in the studied world" (p.1). Most notably, this approach provides a systematic approach to refine coding categories by using constant comparison analysis and provides guidelines for

theoretical sampling (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), which involves revisiting the data to refine the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2000). Through GT, researchers aim to generate substantive theory that is rooted or grounded in the data rather than a theory that is preconceived or deduced by testable hypotheses from existing theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2002). The work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) was considered revolutionary because they challenged the conception that qualitative research lacked rigorous methods and systematic processes, connected data collection and data analysis stages of research, demonstrated the capacity of qualitative research to produce theory, and bridged gaps between theory and research (Charmaz, 2000). Critical applications and evolutions of this work led to the evolution of GT procedures and the emergence of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT).

Charmaz CGT

Charmaz (2000) transformed GT from a positivistic approach of qualitative inquiry to a constructivist approach. In contrast to earlier iterations of the GT method, Charmaz's CGT considers the researcher a co-constructor of knowledge. Most notably, CGT differs from GT because there is an emphasis on the role of the researcher in the research process (Charmaz, 2000). While Glasser and Strauss (1967) provided for ways to reduce researcher influence by providing specific guidance for bracketing researchers' biases in the form of memos, Charmaz (2014a) posits that a researcher's bias will always be present, and by acknowledging this truth, and by attending to transparency in the research, the consumer of the research will be better informed as to how the data could be interpreted and what the consumer chooses to do with the data; thus, the researcher's interpretation of the data is a part of the study (Charmaz, 2014a). Further, with CGT, data

and analysis are created from shared experiences of participants and researchers. Together, the researcher and participants' experience and interpretation create or construct knowledge.

Researcher's Assumptions & Reflexivity

This study utilized a CGT to develop an emergent theory of RPST development that is "grounded" in the participants' words, experiences, and thoughts (Charmaz, 2014a). I primarily refer to Charmaz's CGT (Charmaz, 2000) as a guide to developing theory, as the philosophical foundation of the CGT approach aligns with my constructivist/interpretivist stance, since we both "acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data" (Charmaz 2014a, p. 14).   To provide transparency and shed light on the methods I used to design the study, interpret the data, and construct the findings, I explain my philosophical assumptions.

Ontology

Ontological philosophical assumptions are concerned with the nature of reality and its characteristics. With an interpretivist ontology, I believe that reality is socially constructed, that knowledge is co-constructed through interpretation, and is, therefore, subjective. At the start of this study, I explored my interaction with rural and with flagship systems because this experience influenced my meaning-making of how rurality influences college-going behaviors, and my anticipated role in co-constructing the data from this study. Through extensive reflection and memoing, I considered how a rural upbringing has influenced my meaning making of my own academic development. I noted the most salient themes of my experience: considering the values of types of work,

cultural capital, perceptions of privilege, lack of opportunity, perceptions of

pretentiousness, stereotypes, resilience, and feeling unsettled.

I also consider the construction of reality to be relative to the way people interact

with their environments and may change over time. I have reflected on the ways that

interactions within my ecological systems have changed as my campus roles have

changed from being an undergraduate, graduate student, and instructor. I began

considering how my experience in a teacher preparation program at a Southern university

was positive but was filled with anxiety; campus life was foreign to me because I am a

first-generation student. Like many first-generation students, I did not feel that my

family supported me or understood my educational journey. When I told my parents that

I wanted to study Spanish, they questioned why I would choose something so

foreign. Two years after graduating, and as a novice teacher with a baby, I decided to

pursue a master's degree. Again, my family questioned why I would need another

degree. By the time I decided to pursue a doctorate, my family had stopped questioning

me. However, I still feel the tension between my scholarly work and my relationship

with my parents. Using an ecological systems framework to guide my study allowed me

to build an understanding of what has influenced my meaning-making, and how my

experiences contributed to the co-construction of my participants' meaning-making

within the university setting.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge. I claim a constructivist

stance as I believe there is a truth, but I also accept that truths are constructed; like Crotty

(1998) explains, realities are constructed by individuals in groups. I believe that

individuals create their own realities within different groups, and their overall view of reality is the sum of their interaction within all their associated groups. As an interpretist/constructivist, I believe that there is no single reality. We all bring different experiences, levels of cognition, and biological factors to each interaction. Further, my constructivist stance influences my perception that humans interact with each other is based on their perception of what is real.

Using this interpretist/constructivist lens, I built an understanding of how RPSTs at a large university develop a school connection.   I started examining the process of RPSTs making meaning on campus by researching how they make meaning of diversity conversations in the COE, including perceived psychological costs of engaging in difficult dialogue on campus (Woods, 2019). Examining the lived experiences of RPSTs in my preliminary study influenced my decision to look further into how RPSTs develop a sense of belonging at a flagship university. In the current study, I wanted to examine the same population but on a broader scope. I looked into the influences that affected their interactions on campus, specifically dealing with interactions in their proximal environment, like with roommates, peers, and faculty, and their distal environment, such as administration and support services.

To understand RPSTs' sense of belonging, I largely relied on the participant's perceptions of their process of building a sense of belonging and fitting in by using interviews and observations and looked for patterns of engagement at a flagship university, mainly in the College of Education (COE). Each piece of data contributed to building knowledge to help me discover what it means for a RPST to enter a new learning environment with limited experience in non-rural environments. By

interviewing other subgroups, I could gain more perspective on how RPSTs are viewed by their peers.

Axiology

A researcher's axiology, which is the assumption that researchers bring values to a study, determines what the researcher attends to and how the researcher makes sense of the situation. Including the researcher's reflection and providing transparency in the study is important to allow the reader to interpret the findings. In line with Charmaz's (2014a) values in CGT, I consider that values are always present in research, and rather than bridle or bracket and dismiss values, I try to be transparent about values (Charmaz, 2014). I value fairness and want to help bring attention to the needs of higher educational attainment for the rural population in order to help rural communities educate their population and reduce the teacher shortage. As I prepared the literature review for this study, I realized that rural students are marginalized because they receive little attention in research and are a minority cultural group on campus. I felt an even stronger duty to help bring equity to the urban/rural disparity in higher education.

Insider/Outsider Status

I fall between an insider and outsider status; it is doubtful that the participants would view me as an insider because I am about 20 years older than them, and they may recognize that I teach a class in the COE. I took care to share with the students that I was learning alongside them, rather than holding superior knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I purposely did not select any participants that were my students. Before each interview, in order to diminish the impact of my position as a teaching instructor, I made deliberate choices to make the participants feel comfortable. I focused on building

rapport by being friendly, using a casual tone. For example, before each interview, I made small talk about being a student, hoping that they would see me more as a student, albeit graduate, rather than an instructor or someone that was more knowledgeable about student development than they might be.

As mentioned earlier, in order to bring forth any biases that I might have, I used the method of memoing my reflections on my positionality (Charmaz, 2014a). As I developed this research interest over a year ago, I have been reflecting on my experience in extensive memos. I explored how those experiences, such as growing up in a rural area and subsequently moving to urban areas, and how my college-going experience would influence my interpretation of the experiences of the participants.

Theoretical Sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity is a multidimensional concept that includes the researcher's level of insight into the research area, how attuned they are to the nuances and complexity of the participant's words and actions, their ability to reconstruct meaning from the data generated with the participant, and a capacity to "separate the pertinent from that which isn't" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 44). Traditional GT asks of researchers that they enter the field of inquiry with as few predetermined thoughts as possible, enabling them to "remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events and detect happenings without first having them filtered through and squared with pre-existing hypotheses and biases" (Glaser 1978, p. 3). Therefore, I reflected and created memos on my own experiences so I could understand my perspective. Then I entered each interview with an open mind, reminding myself that each person's perspective will differ, according to their specific educational journey and life experience.

Context of the Study

Data collection for this study occurred during a unique semester of unprecedented chaos. The first wave of data collection occurred at the beginning of the winter 2020 semester, before anyone was aware of the imminent transition from face-to-face classes to remote learning, due to COVID-19 pandemic. The first wave of data collection consisted of the participants' submission of a short video that focused on their thoughts on belonging, so that I could gather background information. This was the only wave of data collection that primarily occurred on campus. After campus closed in March due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the participants (9; 6 rural, 3 urban) moved back home and the rest (2 rural students) stayed in residences near campus.

The pandemic will be a time marker that will be used to refer to the point in time that significantly changed how we experience higher education for an undetermined amount of time. The effects of the pandemic are sure to influence how students develop a sense of belonging, as it at the time of data collection for this study, it was uncertain when students would be able to return to campus. This is significant when studying college student sense of belonging, because students had less contact with friends, peers, faculty and staff during the quarantine, which weakened some relationships, as I will explain later.

In the second wave of data collection, students were new to the transition to remote learning and using Zoom, a teleconferencing application that I used to facilitate the interviews. Since most participants moved to their parents' homes, most of the interviews were not private. I could hear family members in the background, and I suspect that the lack of privacy resulted in censored data. I focused on generating more

in-depth explanations of how the participant's background influences their development

of their sense of belonging, and also noted the effects of the pandemic. In addition to

unpredictable access to Wi-Fi, the situations that surrounded the face-to-face interviews

of Wave II and III had also changed significantly. I had planned on interviewing my

participants in a conference room on campus. After campus closed, I participants agreed

to continue the interviews remotely, using online teleconferencing applications, which

were recorded.

      Finally, the third wave of the data collection occurred at the end of the semester,

in May 2020, shortly after the police killing of George Floyd, which prompted

nationwide civil unrest, including protesting and riots, and a general sense of uneasiness

across the United States. I had planned that the final interview would be used to collect

data to be used for clarification and comparison of previous findings. However, given the

cries for social justice, I also collected additional data on participants' reactions to the

unrest and probed for ways their education might be impacted.

Locale

      The university is located in a Midsize City (according to NCES, 2016), with a

population of nearly 122,000. It is in a Midwestern college town, *Lakeside*, with an

economy dominated by education, healthcare, and insurance. I chose this setting because

it is a highly respected university with a remarkable College of Education (COE)

program. The university's racial makeup is nearly 80% White, 8% Black or African

American, 5% Hispanic, and 7% other, closely representing the city's demographics.

Recruitment

With IRB approval, I recruited eleven participants in the Spring 2020 semester. I distributed a survey in person to three sections of an introductory educational psychology course to identify volunteers for the study. I had a budget of $500 from a grant awarded from the graduate school to be used for participant incentives. I sought to recruit students who attended a high school situated, according to NCES guidelines (Appendix A), in a rural area. The survey (Appendix C) included questions about gender, year in college, name of high school, graduating class size, population of hometown, and how the participant identified with geographic locale.

Sampling

My goal was to recruit ten participants to start the study, and recruit more participants, if necessary, to be able to understand and define RPST belonging. My goal was to achieve theoretical saturation, "which is the point in category development at which no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge during analysis." (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 143). Thus, I sought to gather enough data to support the size of the project and magnitude of the claims (Charmaz, 2014a). However, researchers cannot anticipate what kind of sample will be necessary to reach saturation (Charmaz, 2014b). I was able to achieve theoretical saturation with eleven participants, as no new themes emerged at the last wave of data collection.

The first week of the semester I distributed 150 hard copies of recruitment surveys in the sections of an introductory COE course; 120 surveys were returned. I examined each completed survey for eligible participants; I organized the surveys into two stacks: 1.) those who were interested, and 2.) those who are not interested in

participating in the study. Of those interested, I looked at question #7 of the survey, "Where did you go to high school," and I referenced each high school with the NCES database and noted rural designations on the survey. One student indicated she was homeschooled, so I referred to the high school she would have attended. Next, I created an excel file of potential participants and contacted students individually by e-mail, inviting them to participate in the study. I provided the students with directions for phase one of the study, asking them to record a five to ten-minute video and submit the file to a password-protected electronic folder.

Fifteen students from a rural area indicated they were interested in participating in the study. Nineteen students from urban areas were interested. First, I contacted all fifteen rural by e-mail to verify intent to participate and sent them directions for all three interviews. I contacted rural students first because rural student interviews were to be my primary data collection source. Six students responded. Next, I aimed to search for a maximum of five students from urban areas to use as a supplementary data source. I had nineteen students to choose from, but only female participants, so I contacted the two males first and randomly selected three females. Only three of the urban students responded to the request. Unsure if I could achieve theoretical saturation with fewer than ten participants, and since I had funding to add at least one more participant, I sent a second request by e-mail in late March to both sections of the introductory course, and two more participants from a rural area volunteered to participate, for a total of eleven participants (Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

*Participant	Gender	Major	Town population	NCES locale designation	Graduating class	Year in college
Charlize	F	Agriculture Education	800	Rural-Distant	40	Sophomore
Paula	F	Elementary Education	5000	Town-Remote	Home schooled	Sophomore
Kathy	F	Agriculture Education	108	Town-Distant	120	Freshman
Sophie	F	Elementary Education	3000	Town-Remote	350	Sophomore
Heather	F	Elementary Education	3300	Rural-Fringe	200	Sophomore
Lisa	F	English Education/ Spanish minor	300	Rural-Distant	42	Freshman
Michelle	F	Elementary Education	12,000	Rural-Fringe	437	Sophomore
Susan	F	Secondary Education	12,200	Rural-Fringe	250	Sophomore
Rhonda	F	Secondary Education Spanish	100,000	Suburb-Large	500	Sophomore
Amy	F	Secondary Education English/Spanish	60,000	Suburb-Large	750	Sophomore
David	M	Middle School Education/Math	318,000	Suburb-Large	400	Sophomore

*pseudonyms used

Note. The students designated as "Suburb-Large" will be referred to as "urban", according to the collapsed urban-rural dichotomy, according to the NCES locale designation guidelines.

Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in all three waves of data collection. I contacted the nineteen participants who had agreed to be in the study, rural (n=15) and urban (n=4). Some students changed their minds, and ultimately rural students (n=8) and urban (n=3) agreed.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling occurs during the process of data collection. Based on the results of the initial analysis, decisions are made how to proceed with data collection so that enough rich data is collected to develop themes, looking for possible variation of categories and concepts that emerge in the data. In order to develop theory as it emerged, I jointly collected, coded, and analyzed my data and decided what data to collect next and where to find them (Charmaz, 2014a). My goal was to keep collecting data until no new significant information emerged. I was able to do this by the iterative process of coding and collecting data. Figure 4 shows the CGT iterative process of collecting data, illustrating the importance of revisiting data at each stage. Consistent with CGT, collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. Additionally, as I collected data, I began taking notes on significant participant quotes, which serve as initial codes. These codes were used to compare and contrast events and experiences with each subsequent interview.

I planned for multi-wave data collection so I would be able to immerse myself in the data in stages. I analyzed the data after each wave and planned for the next wave of collection based on the findings. As I collected transcripts, I examined how RPSTs (situation) developed a sense of belonging (grounded in the experience). To expand on the initial codes, I wrote memos, where I conversed "with [myself] about [my] data,

codes, ideas and hunches" (Charmaz, 2014a, p. 162). Additionally, I created operational,

coding, and analytical memos. I started analyzing the memos by identifying initial codes,

developing categories, exploring potential properties, and developing themes.

Staggering my collection in three waves supported successful theoretical

sampling because I was able to analyze each transcript for emerging themes and for areas

that would need to be clarified before the next wave of data collection. Each phase of

data collection was approximately one-month apart. This helped me to achieve

theoretical saturation. For example, after the first wave of data collection, themes of

anxiety emerged about fitting in on campus, and I edited the interview questions to probe

about the anxiety in the second wave of data collection. Follow-up interviews in Wave II

& III allowed me to elaborate categories and refine the themes (Charmaz, 2014a), and

during thematic refinement, the data became theoretically saturated. Theoretical

saturation occurred after incidents were coded into the same category several times, and it

was quickly decided when the next incident fell into the established category, as

described by (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Figure 4

CGT Plan (Tweed & Charmaz, 2011)
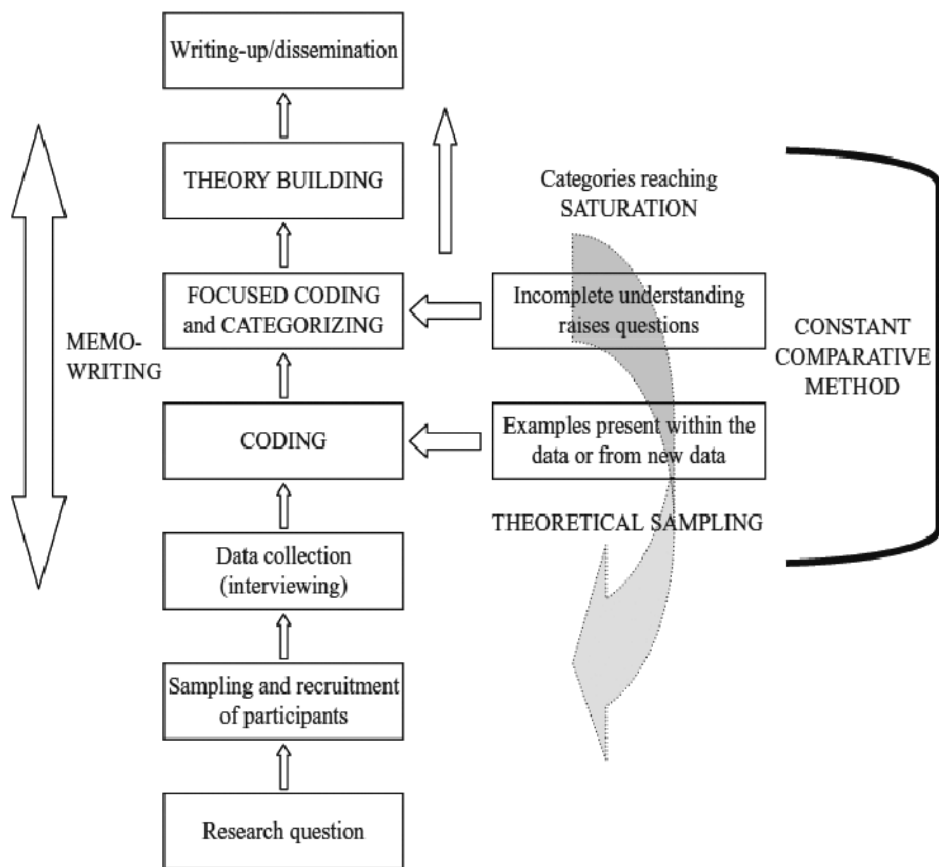
Note. The figure is a displayed vertically, illustrating that the process is not a linear process, but a dynamic one that revisits each step several times.

Data Collection

Qualitative interviewing was my primary investigative technique, which is the most used data collection approach of GT studies (Foley & Timonen, 2015). RPSTs' responses to interview questions were the primary data collected. Additional data were collected from urban students and were used to compare perceptions of RPSTs' fit on

campus. I also wrote analytical memos that were completed after each wave of data collection to record reflections for on-going data analysis.

I used semi-structured, intensive interviewing; this technique fits well with GT because it provides a balance of framing a focus of investigation while allowing for flexibility for themes to emerge (Charmaz, 2014a). I aimed to gather rich data that would offer insight into participants' internal lives and external contexts (Charmaz, 2014a) to discover influences that support or thwart belonging. Intensive interviewing allowed me to focus on participants' statements about their experience of fitting in on campus, how they portrayed the criteria to fit in, and the individual salience of school belonging. As illustrated in Figure 4, the process of data collection was iterative, as I used the data collected to build theory and then collected more data to get a complete understanding of the process of developing a sense of belonging.

Data Analysis

To examine the process of sense of belonging development of RPSTs, I used CGT methodology because I aimed to "ground" the study in the words, experiences, and thoughts of the participants (Charmaz, 2014a) and construct an emergent theory based on my interpretation of their experiences.

In accord with GT methodology, I started to analyze the data as quickly as possible. Glaser and Strauss (1967) provide guidelines regarding the timeliness of processing the data, specifying that the researcher should not wait until all the data is collected to begin the analysis. Charmaz (2014a) also specifies that the researcher should not wait until all the data is collected to begin the analysis. Thus, I began coding as soon as I transcribed the interviews, and the initial codes informed subsequent interviews.

My plan for analysis followed Charmaz' (2014) CGT iterative design:

1.Data immersion/Initial coding

2.Category development

3.Thematic refinement

4.Emerging Theme development

I analyzed the data using Glaser & Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method of "explicit coding and analytic procedures" (p.102). I constantly compared the findings in the data, first by incident, and then by properties, to be able to obtain accuracy of evidence in the conceptual category and to establish the generality of a fact (Cho & Lee, 2014). Following CGT guidelines, the process of data collection and analysis is not linear, as the researcher goes back and forth from data collection to coding (Charmaz, 2014a). After collecting and preparing each wave of data, I referred to earlier waves to compare and contrast findings and edited interview protocol when necessary.

Iterative Process

Constructing a grounded theory is an iterative process of collection and analysis. Before moving to Wave II of data collection, I created a chart of the emergent themes so that I would be able to amend the interview protocol. I analyzed the transcripts and researcher generated memos for themes of identity, and patterns of friendships, and perceptions of sense of belonging. For example, after gathering data in Wave I about the participants' friend-making experiences, such as their expectations and processes for making friends, I added questions in Wave II to probe for further details. Charting the data allowed me to reduce the data so that I could personalize the second set of questions

according to responses in the first round of data collection. For reference, I provide my coding guide (Table 2).

Table 2

Coding guide used in this study

Initial code	Data that is marked, or "tagged" for further investigation based on its relevancy to the topic or interesting comment
Label	Description of an initial code
Category	Labels that are organized into units
Property	Dimensions of each category
Theme	Developed category

Wave I

The first wave of data collection involved eliciting narratives in the form of Digital Storytelling (DST); this method is comprised of a 2-to-5-minute audio-visual clip combining photographs, voice-over narration, and other audio (Lambert, 2009). I used DST because it reduces the power hierarchy between the participant and the researcher. I provided prompts to the participants to gather background information. Utilizing the DST technique of data collection creates a "safe space" for participants to disclose their personal views and opinions of their experiences because they can have space to express personal views and opinions of their experiences. Because they privately tell their stories, they are safe from suffering "any disadvantages if they express critical or dissenting opinions" (Bergold & Thomas, 2012 p. 6). The participants responded to e-mail prompts with a self-recorded video; the prompts elicited explanations of their friend-making experiences and perceptions of their sense of belonging on campus. The prompts

provided a framework and the physical absence of the researcher allowed for the participants to have more freedom of expression and to consider the topics that were most salient to them.

DST in research is especially appropriate for the use with marginalized groups; in their systematic review of the use of DST in qualitative research, Jager et al. (2017) found that DSTs are were most commonly used in studies of marginalized populations. They found that DST is particularly helpful in collecting data for under-represented groups because it involves self-representation and largely avoids the imposition of the researcher. Further, DST "appeared to elicit richer data compared to traditional interviews" (Jager et al., 2017). I found this approach beneficial because I could get acquainted with the participants before the face-to-face interviews. I noted their level of confidence when explaining their fit at the university.

As participants submitted their DST file to the designated, password-protected folder, I watched each video and created a worksheet (Figure 5) to begin coding. I tagged initial codes with a highlighter and labeled them. I completed the initial codes and labels and then wrote a memo on my findings, that would be integrated in later analysis to be used for constant comparison. In addition to noting individual characteristics that seemed to be salient to each participant, such as religion, family connection, work ethic, and established connections on campus. I also analyzed differences in how participants perceived their level of belonging to campus. I noted how they described themselves, as related to their identity, where they recorded the video, signs of anxiety, how confident I perceived them. Further, I made analytical recordings after each interview to record researcher reflections for on-going analysis.

Figure 5

Example of an Initial Codes Worksheet

633	Importance SOB	I feel like if you have a sense of belonging, then you have a sense of like getting resources you have people to trust To ask questions and to learn things from I feel like that's where a sense of belonging could play into that.

Note: The highlighted area is referred to as a "tag".

Wave II

After Wave I of data were analyzed and coded into categories, I modified the interview protocol for Wave II so that I could add questions to explore emergent codes like *Christian Housing*, *influence of Greek life*, *differences in farming communities*, *doubts on belonging*.

In order to probe for more detailed information on the influence of rurality, I conducted the second wave of data collection, which consisted of semi-structured interviews lasting from 45 minutes to one hour. The purpose of the interviews was to explore individual narratives to understand the ecological dynamics and perspectives that influenced belonging. The second wave of interviews allowed participants the time to tell their individual stories in greater depth (Seidman, 2013). I video-recorded the semi-structured interviews and probed for data that exposed experiences of intersecting ecological systems, such as interactions at home and on campus. For example, I looked for ways that their family might have expressed concern over their safety while they were away from home at the start of a pandemic.

Specifically, the questions were formulated to elicit an understanding of the factors that strengthen or weaken students' wellbeing and sense of belonging from the students' perspective. The semi-structured interviews were designed to reveal how they

feel like they belong on campus, how they get involved on campus, and how they make friends on campus. These items broadly describe students' sense of belonging, as becoming involved on campus can positively influence feelings of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

Additionally, to examine how the ecological influence on student development, I asked questions to collect data related to the four ecological systems, such as:

a. **Microsystem:** "Give me three words to describe your interactions with the faculty." I expected responses should indicate the quality and degree of reciprocal interaction.

b. **Mesosystem:** "Tell me about situations since you have been in college when you have needed support, either personally or academically." I wanted to investigate to whom the participant turns to for support, such as campus services, friends, or family.

c. **Ecosystem**: "Describe campus culture. Tell me more about that." I wanted to explore how perceptions of school culture aligned with salient aspects of the participants' identity.

d. **Macrosystem/Chronosystem**: **"**Explain how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected your studies at *MWU*." I aimed to examine the influence of the quarantine on relationships at home and on campus.

I began analyzing the transcripts by reducing the data using the same coding protocol as in Wave I, tagging salient quotes, and labeling them. I noticed that five participants (3 rural; 2 urban) mentioned their involvement with campus ministry, and three rural participants described their involvement or desire to be a part of the *Diplomat* program, which is a selective leadership program in the COE. I created jottings of participant characteristics (Table 3). Then, I began to analyze the data to amend protocol for Wave III data collection to probe for the salience of those categories. I also created a diagram to analyze other significant interactions within the system (Figure 6).   After memoing the significance of the initial codes, I amended the

protocol of the third wave of data collection to follow up on previous themes as well as

include questions on mattering.

Table 3

Wave II: Jottings of Participant Characteristics - Identifying Emergent Codes

Participant	residence	First Generation	Land-grant	Transfer Student	Disability	*Diplomat* member
Charlize	Sorority house	No- but identifies that is the first gen at "for a bigger university like a D1 school"	N	N		x
Paula	*Faith House*	Y	N	Y		
Kathy	dorm	No, mom is a teacher	N	N	Paralyzed arm	
Sophie	apartment downtown	Y	N	Y		
Heather	dorm	Parents didn't go to college, but grandparents did	Y	N		x
Lisa	*Faith House*	No, dad is a teacher	Y	N		x
Michelle	dorm	Parents went to *MWU* for one semester	Y	N		

Susan	apartment	Y	N	N
Rhonda	apartment	N	N	N
Amy	apartment	N	N	N
David	dorm	N	N	N

*Note: *Faith House**, a non-denominational campus ministry, offers housing for students. *Diplomat* Program is a student leadership program organized by the COE.

Wave III

Finally, I conducted a third wave of interviews to follow up on ideas that were expressed but not fully developed. I followed up on emergent codes from the second wave and probed for perceptions on how the civil unrest that resulted from the police shooting of George Floyd might affect their feelings of sense of belonging once they return to campus.

In the final wave of data collection, I focused on expanding belonging themes from the previous waves. Consistent with Wave I and II, I initially coded the data by tagging interesting, salient comments, coming up with initial codes, and transferring the information to the coding worksheet.

Figure 6

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Applied to RPSTs at a Flagship University
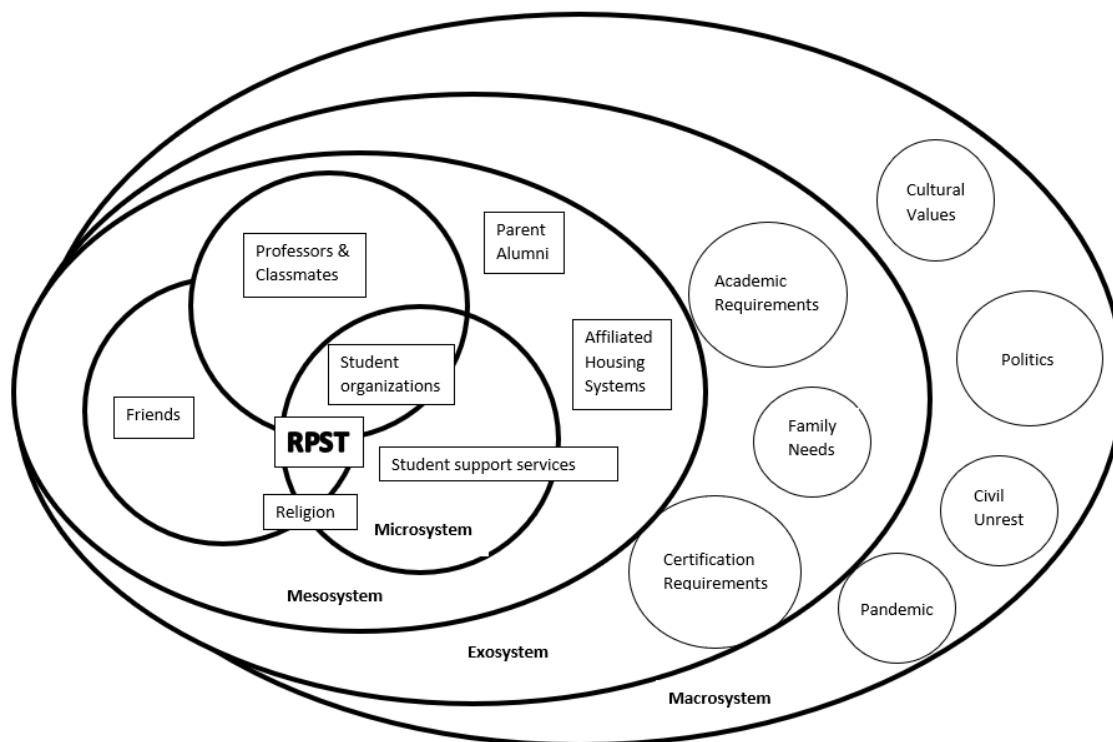
Creating diagrams was a useful way to immerse myself in the data. For example, I applied the data to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as a framework (Figure 6). I had originally created this model before starting the data collection and revised the model at each wave of data collection. I looked for overlap in system interactions, for example, peer exchanges within volunteer work, or classmates and roommates, and for the rural college life intersection.

Data Construction

I used a phased analysis approach by analyzing data after each wave of data collection and used theoretical coding to connect the key categories which allowed me to build a story around a sense of belonging. Included in the data construction were memos

for operational, coding, and analytical reflection (Charmaz, 2014a). I started analyzing

the memos by identifying initial codes from the first transcribed DST submissions and

continued the analysis by exploring potential categories. With a GT approach,

participants' responses formed the data to develop a theory. Data and analysis were

created from shared experiences of participants and the researcher. Together, the

researcher and participants' experience and interpretation created or constructed

knowledge; I studied how participants were able to develop a sense of belonging and

noted support and barriers along the way and interpreted their experience through memos

and diagrams.

Initial Coding

I followed the CGT systematic approach of refining coding categories by using

constant comparison analysis, which is an analytic method of comparing each new

finding with existing findings in the data (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Coding was divided

into two phases: initial and focused. In the initial phase of coding, I coded fragments of

data like words, lines, segments, and incidents using the participants' terms to tag initial

codes. I began with open and initial coding; this is the initial fracturing of the data into

pieces that begin to construct distinct codes (Charmaz, 2014a). This process of

deconstructing the data, in what Charmaz refers to as interrogating the data, allowed me

to find common themes of each story. As I read through the transcripts, I looked for

significant responses that helped to answer research questions. I created a chart at the

end of each interview that included the participant's name, description of the question,

and the quote (which I refer to as a "tag" in the coding process) with the line number

from the transcript. This chart allowed me to reduce the data from 20 single-spaced

pages for each interview to less than ten, which is much more manageable. All initial

coding was completed at the end of each wave before the next round of data collection.

Category Development

To create categories, I utilized focused coding. This process was facilitated by

reviewing the initial codes, labeling the initial codes in the comment sections of the

interview document, then, transferring the labels (which are descriptors of the initial

codes) to a concept mapping file that I prepared (Figure 7), which allowed me to

visualize the comparisons and contrasts among and between participants. The labels

emerged by comparing and contrasting the tagged quotes. Then, I organized the labels by

comparing and contrasting incidents to develop categories. For example, the category of

"anxiety" of RPSTs emerged quickly from comparing urban and rural students' responses

to making friends on campus. Urban students were much more confident and talked

about already having friends on campus because many of their high school classmates

also attended the same university. However, the rural participants explained the

difficulty of making friends, as they were campus unfamiliar with the campus and they

had very few friends attending the same university. Each response was noted that

involved with participants' appraisal of their anxiety, like the anxiety of saying

something wrong, of rejection by peers, or fear of a change in values.

Comparing the properties (characteristics) of each label with each other allowed

me to generate theoretical properties of each category; I was able to begin to consider the

dimensions and relationships of the categories to other properties and then develop sub-

categories. For example, when students indicated they felt sad or excluded (label), I

noted when and where and to what extent that they felt isolated (property) and what

influence that feeling isolated has on relationships (property). By looking for groups to compare, such as those who are from a farm and those from a small town, I found clusters of students that had different degrees of anxiety, according to the strength of their rural identity, and family dependence on the participant.

I grappled with breaking apart the codes and finding the nuances to develop appropriate categories. For example, when all participants explained they needed to matter, I further analyzed the data to understand what it means to matter to each individual and then analyzed the data to group the definitions together. By considering the properties of the labels, I was able to make connections among and between all participants. For example, when I focused on the integration of rural students on campus, the category "working harder" developed from clustering labels.

Figure 7

Labels for the Perception of working Hard[er] to Branch Out
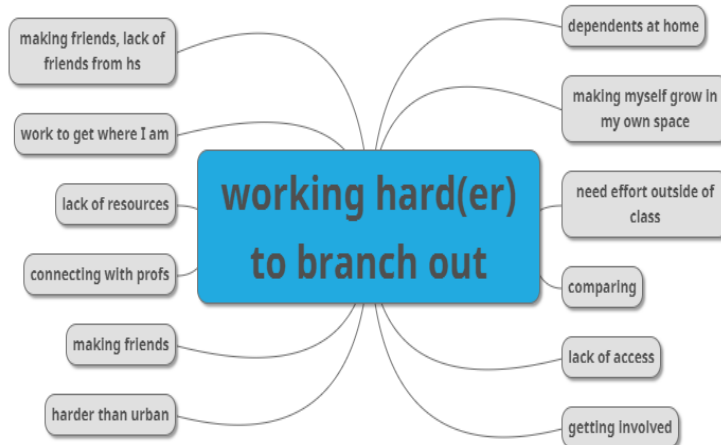
Note. The labels in this figure are represented in the grey boxes. They were used to develop the sub-theme of *perception of working hard[er] to branch out*, represented in the blue box. This theme was further developed into the sub-theme, *self-reliance*.

Creating concept maps allowed me to engage in abductive reasoning, which enriches theory construction by facilitating reexamination of data (Charmaz, 2014). Concept mapping allowed me to analyze the difference in perceptions among the participants of feeling like rural students have to work harder to be able to connect on campus.

Thematic Refinement

As the theory began to solidify and as major modifications were fewer and fewer, I began to clarify the logic of the salient dimensions of RPST belonging by taking out non-relevant properties, integrating and elaborating details of properties into the interrelated categories, and then reducing the data. By reducing the themes, I could formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher-level concepts. Additionally, by reducing the categories, the findings became more parsimonious and thus more generalizable.

Next, I developed themes by comparing categories and properties. I moved from constant comparison of incident with incident to comparison of incident with properties of the category that results from the initial comparison of incidents (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). For example, by constantly comparing the categories of the stressors stemming from rurality, I discovered that RPSTs are hesitant to reveal their rural identity. I developed the sub-theme of "perceptions of negative stereotypes". This sub-theme clarified the feelings of isolation of RPSTs. From then on, each incident categorized as *negative stereotype* would be compared with "feeling isolated", rather than "resistance." From this process, I began to understand how perceptions of rurality affected the participants' willingness to engage.

Once I completed incident coding for Wave I, I added the remaining data from Wave II and III interviews and checked for theoretical saturation. Theoretical Saturation occurred as described by Corbin & Strauss (2015).

Next, I integrated the data by comparing the five emergent themes, *stressors associated with rurality, reconceptualizing community, considering contributions, finding comfort, and dynamic relationships* to develop a more abstract, emerging theory to describe how RPSTs develop a sense of belonging.

When I noticed conflicts in developing theoretical notions, I recorded a memo of my ideas (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). I constantly compared the findings in the data, first by incident and then by properties, to be able to obtain accuracy of evidence in the conceptual category and to establish the generality of a fact (Cho & Lee, 2014). For example, after Wave II of data collection, I wrote a memo and developed a model.

Quality of Study

I followed Charmaz' (2014a) four main criteria to evaluate the quality of a CGT study: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. I attended to credibility by showing familiarity with the topic and by providing sufficient data; I interviewed people intensively and repeatedly in order to clearly understand their perspective. I ended up with over 30 hours and 400 pages of transcripts. Charmaz guides researchers to provide enough evidence to allow the reader to form an independent assessment and agree with the researcher's claims. Thus, I provided a detailed explanation of the coding process, including initial codes, categories, and sub-themes. Additionally, the originality of the research is demonstrated by my research questions. Currently, there is very few studies on rural students' sense of belonging at flagship universities. This research resonates

because the findings are transferable. The reader will be able to connect the findings to other areas of research (Tracy, 2010). For example, the reader will be able to generalize findings of this marginalized population to other marginalized college student groups. The cultural influence intersecting with campus culture is an important area of study for the improvement of higher education attainment. Finally, to satisfy the need for useful research, I chose a CCT approach so that I could explain a process, rather than a descriptive approach, in order to advance the knowledge of how this population develops a sense of belonging in higher education. Charmaz (2014a) describes the usefulness of grounded theory, as the goal is to go beyond the surface in seeking meaning in the data, searching for and questioning tacit meanings about values, beliefs, and ideologies. Therefore, in my emergent theory, I explain the influence of considering cultural values, beliefs and analyze urban and rural differences in sense of belonging development.

Ethical Issues

Prior to recruiting participants, approval was granted by the university's Institutional Review Board under Protocol #2019455 (exempt status). The copies of the approved recruitment script (Appendix C) and approval notice (Appendix D) are included. To protect privacy, pseudonyms are used. The research study was described in the script, and at each of the face-to-face interviews, I thanked participants for being a part of the study. All interviews were conducted with respect and consideration for the participants' rights with oversight from Dr. Stephen Whitney who served as Principal Investigator for the study, and my academic advisor, Dr. David Bergin.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of rurality on the development of sense of belonging of pre-service teachers at a flagship university. I interviewed eleven pre-service teachers; eight were from rural areas, and three were from urban areas. All participants except one completed all three waves of the study, which was conducted in the spring and summer of 2020. During the interviews, I probed for expansion on salient topics to investigate how a rural background influences belonging at a large university. The first wave of data collection was conducted in the spring of 2020 before campus was forced to close due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The second wave of data collection occurred approximately six weeks later, shortly after participants began remote learning. Finally, the third wave of data was collected during a time of national civil unrest in response to the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man that was killed by Minneapolis police officers. I provide this context because it is relevant to student development; participants shared their reactions to the rapid changes in their environment, and I probed for meaning making of the changes as it relates to university sense of belonging.

Overview of Participants

In this chapter, I present portions of the participant narratives (Table 4) to provide a deeper understanding of how personal characteristics, including cultural identity, influence sense of belonging. Providing a thick description of context is necessary for a rigorous qualitative study; thus, in this chapter, I give an overview of participant characteristics before presenting the themes and supporting data from all three waves of data collection. Each narrative is unique to the participant because I included my

impression of each participant's most salient identity and their college belongingness

development.

Table 4

Participant Overview

*Participant (Rural)	Salient Characteristics
Charlize	Growing up with an immune system disorder influenced her decision to major in education. She described routinely commuting 30 minutes from her farm to a learning center as a child for therapy and medical services and described wanting to give back to the center that supported her when she was ill. Her mother is a teacher, and her father is a farmer. She explained that she is the first in her family to go to a D-1 school. Her sister belongs to a sorority at another smaller university. She joined a sorority, which she describes as a close community. She describes her sense of belonging to the university as very good and believes her sorority is the biggest influence to feeling connected to the university. She was excited to have been selected as a COE *Diplomat*[1] and looks forward to representing rural students in the COE. She also socializes within campus ministry. In the summer, she works at the same learning center where she received services as a child and enjoys working with the children.
Paula	Helping on her family farm gave her a sense of pride. Even now, her parents depend on her to help with her siblings, work on the farm, and help sell produce. She stays positive in the face of adversity and expresses gratitude for the opportunity to attend a flagship university, as she is a first-generation student who was homeschooled. She describes herself as a conservative Christian. She grew up on a farm and faced many challenges. When she was a child, her dad had cancer and is in remission, and now her mother has cancer, so her parents rely on her to take care of her younger adopted brother. She works at her family's produce stand in the summer, and during the school year, works full time to pay for her tuition. Working full-time leaves little time for fun. She made most of her friends at Christian housing, where it is a requirement to go to Bible study and ministry weekly. She appreciates deeper connections she has made on campus compared to relationships

[1]Pseudonym for a student leadership organization in the COE

formed in her rural community. She claims that *MWU*[2] is a good fit and feels a sense of belonging to the university; however, sometimes, she gets self-conscious about fitting in and feels out of place.

Kathy

Her mother is a teacher, and her father is a farmer. Even though one of her limbs is paralyzed, her family relies on her help with the farm. She says that she feels like she fits in on campus; however, she is disappointed at the lack of courtesy on campus. She connects with peers that work on a farm because they understand the hard work and obligations. She describes herself as hardworking and a loyal friend. She mostly makes friends in organizations associated with agriculture, such as her agricultural sorority. She was also a member of FFA[3] in high school, and many students she met through that organization have become her friends in college. She takes great pride in showing pigs competitively and dedicates significant time and effort to care for her animals.

Sophie

She is a Mexican American who spent most of her childhood in Texas. Due to her dad's military transition, her family moved to a rural area in the Midwest when she was in high school. She appreciated the abundance of opportunities (like scholarships and transportation) available at the university and is appreciative to get the experience she needs as an educator, which helps her feel like she belongs. She is a transfer student and is the only participant that did not respond to the final round of interviews. She describes herself as emotional and empathetic. She works as a tutor at *Kid Connection*[4], which she describes as "superfun." She also joined a student-organized club that plays *Animated Interactive*[5]; it has helped her feel connected. She enjoys participating in diversity conversations in the *Gateway*[6], a space in the COE that promotes and facilitates discussions about diversity and inclusion.

Heather

Heather takes pride in being open-minded and embraces her role as an educator to her family on social justice issues. She describes her family and small community as closed-minded. Her grandparents went to the same flagship university; however, her divorced parents are not college graduates. Her father is a bail-bondsman. She describes a complicated relationship with her mother, which includes her mother manipulating her. She describes forming the closest connections on campus in the COE. She

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[2] Pseudonym for the flagship university
[3] Future Farmers of America
[4] Pseudonym for a volunteer tutoring program
[5] Pseudonym for a club for a fantasy-based role-playing game
[6] Pseudonym for program in the COE that promotes diversity discussions.

explains that she does not feel like she belongs anywhere else; she does not party and left her sorority because it was expensive. She experienced rejection when she left the sorority and loneliness when her roommate was rejected from her preferred sorority and left the university. She explains that to feel connected to the university, you must be a certain type of person and must be involved in student organizations to feel significant. She claims to love *MWU* because of her family history, the staff and her friends. She does not like the conservative background she is from, with people stuck in their ways. She feels her background is unique, and she does not know anybody with the same background.

Lisa   Her dad is the minister for Christian housing at *MWU*. Growing up in a small Christian community, being a Christian is her most salient identity. She is the oldest of six. She expresses great school pride for her high school. Lisa is articulate; however, she is guarded when discussing conflicts of values on campus. She explained that the liberal culture at her flagship university has made her feel that her beliefs are wrong and that she feels ignorant in certain circumstances, making her think that she does not belong. She feels the classes are a good fit, but not the university. The culture did not meet her expectations for "human-to-human" interaction. She feels the interactions are superficial and does not have a strong sense of school pride. However, she claims that she found a good fit because of her classes, professors, classmates. She credits herself for connecting on campus because she explains she is an adaptable person and feels comfortable anywhere. She is involved in extracurriculars. She is involved in flag football, which she describes as "super fun" and plays guitar and sings on the worship team weekly for campus ministry. She also volunteers at a preschool.

Michelle   She grew up in a small town but does not connect to farming. She did not think about how she was different from her peers until she got to college. Her lack traveling experience and lack of exposure to people with diverse backgrounds made her feel that she did not fit in because she did not understand people from different backgrounds. Leaving her small school where she was known was difficult. In her freshman year, it was hard for her to make *MWU* small because she was just trying to navigate college life, and it did not feel like anyone knew who she was or really cared about her, especially in large classes. She also felt depressed when she was rejected from a sorority and believed that she owed the rejection to her mom not being a member of the sorority. She did not feel a sense of belonging to *MWU* until her sophomore year.

In her freshman year, she clung to her hometown friends that also attended the university. It was not until her sophomore year that she felt a sense of belonging. She is involved with a service sorority and is a *diplomat* in the COE.

Susan	She was from a small community and was raised by very strict Christian fundamentalist parents. Her parents did not have many friends and restricted her socialization. Her parents tried to discourage her from going to college. She describes that at first, she did not feel like she fit in at campus and feels like being a first-generation college student makes it difficult to connect on campus. She describes feeling very out of place at first because she imagined she would have to look like her imagined view of a sorority girl, but then she learned a specific look was not required to feel connected. She now loves attending a flagship university since she never felt like she belonged in her hometown. She says that she made the best relationships in her life on campus and attending a flagship university was one of the best decisions of her life. She describes herself as laid back, easy going, pretty quiet, pretty simple person. She is involved with *Christians United*[7], an on-campus ministry, and is part of the leadership team for the church. She is also in the honors college.

*Participant (Urban)	Salient Characteristics
Rhonda	Right away, Rhonda mentioned that she is ¾ Caucasian and ¼ Japanese. She grew up in the suburbs of a large city in a middle-class family of six. She stresses the importance of family, her interest in teaching Spanish, and her faith. Her faith influences how she treats people. She explains how her family values building relationships with people from various backgrounds. She explains that a lot of people from her native city go to this university and that makes it more comfortable and familiar. She never had a feeling of not fitting in on campus. She is involved in campus ministry, and the church she attends is built upon the importance of community, which she appreciates. She explains the university is a big place that she can make small in her own way and that it is a good fit.

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[7] Pseudonym for an on-campus ministry

Amy	She grew up in a large suburb that is an hour away from a major Midwestern metropolitan area. She describes her family as tight-knit. She would like to go into policy one day. She mentions the Honors College several times through each wave of data collection. She made close friends at a religious-sponsored recreation center, which is where she mostly hangs out. She mentions meeting a lot of people from farming communities and small towns quickly. She was intrigued by their stories and felt different when they explained the smallness of their community. Faith has always been a part of her life, but it's more significant now because she met many of her friends in her religious community on campus. She spends time there, does activities, including singing in the choir and service projects. She explains that the university is a good fit for her because it makes her feel comfortable and known. She feels like she belongs because she found a few social groups, and their connection to the university makes her feel connected.
David	He is confident in expressing his sense of belongingness to the university. He explained that because of getting into trouble (unspecified), he was assigned community service, and the assigned service at an area at-risk youth program gave him the opportunity to lead in providing tutoring services. He did not offer an explanation to the trouble he had gotten into, and I did not probe, as he seemed guarded and focused on his improvements. He described that he does not make friends on his own. He makes friends through his existing friendships. He came from an urban area and many of his high school friends went to the same university. He described a very stressful freshman year. He suffered from depression, and his concerned mother contacted student services. He received counseling immediately and is very thankful for their services. He changed his major from physical therapy to education because the required math was too difficult. Also, when he worked at summer camps, many told him he would make a good teacher. He connects with people from urban backgrounds and does not show any interest in understanding rural students. He says that he loves his flagship university. He says that classes are great; it's a great fit. He is a site leader for a volunteer tutoring organization and describes the work as "so much fun."

Note: *Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

Defining Sense of Belonging at University

I grappled with several definitions of sense of belonging throughout this study. In the findings, I used Strayhorn's (2019) definition of college student belonging as a framework, and am able to add new insight to Strayhorn's (2019) college students' belongingness model; he defines the construct:

> In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (p. 4).

Operationalized for this study, belongingness is a developmental outcome of feeling a connection within the campus system as a result of integrating values. I chose this definition as it is the most parsimonious description of college student belongingness. This allowed me to explore dimensions of the construct as it relates specifically to my targeted population.

Overview of Themes

Now I present the five emergent themes (Table 5) from the data: Stressors associated with a rural background, reconceptualizing community, evaluating contributions at the university, getting comfortable on campus, and dynamic relationships.

Table 5

Definitions of Sense of Belonging Themes

Theme	Defined	Categories
Stressors associated with a rural background	Thwarting variables to belonging that led to negative affect	Unfair, stereotypes, a perceived lack of courtesy, unfamiliarity with diversity topics, values, campus size, Christian values, authority
Reconceptualizing community	Thinking about interactions and connections to community and what community means in order to come to terms with the altered circumstances of fitting in.	Values, involvement, finding new opportunity, understanding needed effort, value of work
Evaluating contributions at the university	Proximal process where the RPST systematically interacts with the university environment (physical and virtual) in order to evaluate their sense of purpose.	*Diplomat*, leading, representing, hard work, change, voice, fitting in
Getting comfortable	Synthesis of a new comfort where two or more feelings are brought together to create a new feeling of comfort; combining experiences of connectedness to find university fit.	Home, grow, opening eyes, friends
Dynamic Relationships	Relationships that stimulate change or progress within the RPST process of developing a sense of belonging.	Friendships, family influence belonging. consistent, positive interactions, dependency

Stressors Associated with a Rurality

The transition from a sparsely populated, safe space, to a densely populated strange campus was marked with stressors for RPSTs; they discussed stressors associated with rurality that made them feel unwelcome at a flagship university. In the following sections, I will discuss stressors that negatively influence RPSTs' connection on campus

including *navigating urban-centric spaces, experiencing noticeable difference in values,* and *perceiving negative stereotypes*.

Navigating Urban-Centric Spaces

All RPSTs described struggles associated with engaging in urban centric spaces. Frequently, the stress of isolation and rejection resulted in stressful college experiences early in the transition to college. As Charlize described, "Your teacher doesn't really understand you or your background. In classes where they talk about urban areas, you are usually shut down." Likewise, a lack of connection to urban-centric topics and to the faculty made RPSTs feel insignificant; as described by Paula, "If you are learning all about urban areas, it's hard to feel a sense of belonging." She explains, "it is difficult whenever you feel like you know, your teacher doesn't really understand you or doesn't really care to understand your background." RPSTs described their strong work ethic and feel their struggle to go to college is not recognized. Kathy explained, "A lot of people don't understand it's not just roses and sunshine."

David, who grew up in a large metropolitan area, mentioned he had not considered having a rural friend,

> I don't even have friends that are from like, rural areas. I've never made friends with someone like that, who has just a different look of life, like different completely different paths that I have. So, I haven't really considered it.

The quote demonstrates how rurality added a layer of stress to the transition, because minority cultural status made it difficult for RPSTs to connect to their peers and

faculty. It is challenging for RPSTs to build social supports and urban students see them as outsiders.

Noticeable Difference in Values

RPSTs described that in the beginning, campus seemed impersonal and superficial, especially in large lecture classes. Participants that came from farming communities recognized an incongruence in values between their rural communities and campus. They described noticing that their values were associated with religion and their view of ethical practices of farming. For example, Kathy explained that she feels that her peers do not respect farming, but she is steadfast in her decision to farm and views on slaughtering: "That's not up to them with what I do. That's my job." However, reconciling different values also gave rise to an opportunity to make connections with new friends. Paula, whose parents taught her to cook on the farm, explained how she enjoys cooking for her new friends and described listening to their differing opinions on farming. She described that she is sensitive to those who have a "vegan lifestyle" but wonders the role that media has played in their decision, "I think a lot of times in the media it's, it's portrayed wrong, you know about animals and slaughtering. So, I think I've opened up a little bit of a window for my friends to further look into it for themselves past the media." Thus, even though RPSTs perceived a lack of respect of their values associated with farming, they did not change their views on their established farming practices. Further, they attempted to share their ideas with some of their friends, who showed an interest in learning about rural life. So, despite having differences of opinion, they could still feel connected to their peers when given the opportunity to share their

values. The opportunity to share their parts of their rural identity with their peers was important to be able to feel a sense of belonging.

Some RPSTs also felt isolated because of the perception of an incongruence with their Christian faith and campus values. For example, Lisa explained feeling disconnected from classes dealing with sociology, psychology, and social justice issues; Lisa described classroom discussions in a sociology course that had a narrow focus on Christian beliefs: "That class was called social deviants. There was never really room for anyone to speak up, or, like, to disagree with anything that was put out there about religion, or really about anything." She explained that it did not feel like "a comfortable space for different opinions to be discussed." And was disappointed that the professor never asked for the "Christian perspective." She described the importance of connecting with people that share her faith because she was able to talk about uncomfortable feelings with her friends. She explained her discomfort about watching a documentary in that class, "called *Jesus Camp*, and it's like, I don't want to say it's a cult, but it was just like these really extremist missions, a ministry community. And he [professor] just kind of talked about Christianity as though, like, all Christians are like this."   She explained that Christians were depicted like a "cult" and was upset that her view of Christianity was not presented. It is important to note that some had positive experiences in these classes. The quality of the interaction was largely dependent upon the openness of the instructor.

Noticing an incongruence in perceived campus values, most of the participants, both from rural areas and those from large metropolitan areas were private about praying. They feared of rejection, which was also explained by Lisa, when asked about her response to nationwide civil unrest after the police killing of George Floyd. She detailed

her understanding and discomfort over differing opinions on prayer, "for me, prayer is one of the most powerful things I can do. So, I'm going to continue to do that even if people don't think it's enough. It's all I got right now." Both rural and urban students wanted to share their values and lifestyles with their peers and faculty and can establish new bonds when peers are open to diverse thought. When students' religious beliefs and practices, are perceived not to be unimportant to the campus community, students disengage from dialogue and feel alienated.

Perceptions of Negative Stereotypes

All the RPSTs felt uncomfortable by perceived stereotypes of rural people, such as, fewer academic achievements, inferior education, are bad people for assumed political beliefs, Trump lovers, racist, close-minded, rednecks, uncultured, and are all poor. Feeling like they were judged by their background influenced a hesitancy to engage on campus because they felt like peers and faculty looked at them through a deficit lens. Susan described feeling isolated and noticed a change of body language when her classmates found out where she was from,

> and I would sometimes start with, 'So I'm from southern Missouri', and you can just see it, you can see people, like their body language all of a sudden, where it's just like, like, kind of standoffish and they don't even know what I was about to say.

Likewise, perceptions of rural stereotyping made RPSTs people feel judged, as explained by Lisa:

> I think people make assumptions that you're a redneck maybe, like at *MWU*, if you came from a really small town, people were like, 'Oh, you

probably live on a farm or in a trailer park or something.' And that's not

super accurate. So, different like that, or just that your school was like,

really bad, or the students there weren't as high achieving, as in bigger

schools. I think I've gotten that, especially from like, people from Kansas

City and Chicago, like the really big, mega cities, who probably haven't

interacted with rural communities as much. They just kind of perceive you

as probably not receiving the same level of education that they have.

This quote demonstrates the uneasiness that RPSTs feel at college. They feel like they

are perceived by their urban peers as having an inferior education and being uncultured.

Additionally, Sophie, the only person of color in the study, felt like rural people are not

taken seriously. Her urban peers did not understand her culture, and she assumed that an

exposure of their lack of knowledge about her rural background would make them

uncomfortable, because she felt uncomfortable with her lack of urban knowledge. So, she

felt pressure to joke about her background to protect her non-rural peers to avoid an

awkward situation. She explained "people who are from cities don't necessarily have to

really try and understand people from rural places because they [cities] are more

inclusive." She explained the differences in background lead to feelings of,

some sort of like, dissonance or like comfortability with like not being

able to talk about my experience in, like a rural town, because nobody

really understands. So, like, most of the time if I did talk about it, it's like

as a joke because nobody else understands."

So, she has trouble connecting, and resorts to joking so that others don't feel

uncomfortable for not understanding. Because of the negative perceptions of

rurality, RPSTs sometimes felt like they did not matter; they felt less important than urban students who had more exposure to diverse populations. Thus, deficit views of rurality cause RPSTs to feel alienated.

Reconceptualizing Community

All RPSTs described reconceptualizing community. RPSTs explained how they formed a new idea of what community means in order to come to terms with the altered circumstances of fitting in. In the following sections, I will discuss developing awareness of *noticing community disparities* for personal and academic development, *finding a new community* that included social justice and *shifting personal paradigms* as they consider their role in social justice causes.

Noticing Community Disparities

Initially, RPSTs described feeling uneasy when they realized they were less experienced with activities typically associated with urban settings; they explained their perceptions of missed opportunities from attending a rural high school, such as access to scholarships and lack of opportunity to explore potential talents. For example, one participant described missed opportunities for career exploration because she did not have a career center in their high school. Some RPSTs complained they had few opportunities to explore different sports because their athletic department was limited. Kathy, who grew up on a farm that was twenty minutes away from her high school, explained the disparity of opportunity and new fortune: "I missed opportunities to develop skills that urban students had. Now is the time to grow my skills and connect better."

Urban students also recognized RPSTs' lack of opportunity for identity exploration. Amy, from a suburb of a large Midwestern metropolis, contrasted her educational experience in the suburbs with what she perceived to be the rural school experience. She explained that she had opportunities:

> to make a lot more of my identity. I was like very invested in theatre, which I'm not invested in, in college, but it was just personal to me. I knew who I felt like I was to an extent, obviously, that is always changing. But I think some people in smaller communities, I've noticed they came out of those communities, and are now figuring out more of who they are or that they have these options. If you come from somewhere where you didn't have those choices, you have to do that in college. I came from a school where I had choices in my classes and my activities in the people I hung out with.

She explained that rural students are "doing that for the very first time." She recognizes the educational and developmental disparity of rural and urban schools, and it influences the way she sees her rural peers.

RPSTs were disappointed when faculty appeared to have a deficit view of rurality; for example, Charlize perceived that some professors were not interested in her because of her background. She explained that in smaller classes, of around 30 people, student introductions are customary. She usually explained that she is one of the only students that includes living on a farm in her introduction so that "kind of sets me apart…like they remember me that way. But I feel like they think I'm not as

knowledgeable as these other kids because they had more resources. They had all these

extracurriculars that I never had."

She further explained how influences of rurality made it challenging for her to

connect with faculty and peers on campus. She explained that rural students arrive at the

university with a different sort of educational background, "in a small town, you are

educated in other ways." Noticing the difference led to confusion. "I wouldn't say that I

feel I don't fit in at *MWU*, but certainly in certain circumstances I have been made to

feel that I don't belong." She also explained that "in that class [a course covering culture

in the classroom] they try to look for people that are like, LGBTQ or come from lower

classes or of a different race…they reach out to them more…which I can understand, but

I also feel like my opinion is just as valid as theirs.

Amy, an urban participant, described how her rural classmates were

uncomfortable in her cultural diversity class. For example, when they talked about the

LGBT community, rural students explained the topic was not discussed in their

community. "Some people didn't even know what all the letters stood for when they

walked into that classroom."

One of the consequences of limited opportunities for student engagement in high

school for RPSTs is delayed involvement on campus. The rural interviewees were

hesitant to get involved with extracurriculars during freshman year because high school

teachers warned of the difficulty of college. After Lisa had a successful freshman year,

she became confident that she could be a successful student, and she decided to get

involved with a sorority. However, she was devastated when she was rejected:

But I didn't think I would get emotionally invested in it. But you kind of

do, because it's weird, but you, like, almost fall in love with the house, like

a house, and you feel like, I really liked that house. I really liked the girls I

talked to, and then the next day they come back, and they don't choose

you. It just kind of hurts your soul a little bit.

Lisa's rejection to join a sorority is one example of how first-generation RPSTs

experienced additional challenges at a flagship university; she felt unwelcome and

unimportant because her mom was not an alumna. Because of her rejection, she was sad

and felt disconnected from campus.

However, RPSTs appreciated some aspects of their new campus community.

They were exposed to more opportunity to explore their identity, engage with diverse

backgrounds, and make new friends. RPSTs persisted at *MWU* despite feeling self-

doubt that is characteristic of first-generation students like Paula, who said:

I should have just been a farmer like my parents or something like that,

but I feel like that is the self-doubt in me and know I can do this and I

want to prove it to myself so badly like I've got this, I can do this and

want to be the best possible teacher I can be.

A lack of models and opportunities for personal and academic growth made the

transition challenging for RPSTs. When RPSTs transitioned to college, they realized that

they were less fortunate than their urban counterparts when it comes to opportunities to

such as taking advanced courses, identity exploration, and connection to university

traditions, such as Greek life. Attending a flagship university made RPSTs recognize the

lack of opportunity that was provided by their communities. They felt rejected because

they came from communities with limited resources, which made them feel like outsiders because they felt faculty and peers saw them as underprepared for an urban setting.

Finding New Community

RPSTs began changing family and community trajectory by learning new ways of interacting on campus. They began to reconceptualize the meaning of community and how it is formed. RPSTs began to connect with their peers by comparing stories about how they grew up with their new friends on campus. Paula explained the difference between the benefits of hard work and knowledge gained on the farm compared to urban experiences.

> .…whereas I have more hands-on nitty gritty work, they do have a better understanding of life. I think it kind of evens itself out. We can kind of complement each other and fill in the gaps of, you know, I asked them things about life that I might not know about, and then I give them a better understanding of how you know, animals are raised in rural life.

This quote demonstrates the benefits of RPSTs attending large universities because they are able to share their perspectives with their non-rural counterparts and are also able to broaden their worldview by being exposed to new ideas. Meeting new people and developing the confidence to engage in conversation about differing lifestyles supports belongingness development.

Further, RPSTs found a new sense of community by reflecting on their concept of community and realizing their experience in the COE was meaningful and strengthened their affiliation with campus identity. The pivot to remote learning as a result of COVID-19 also made participants reflect on their sense of community. For example, Susan

explained that before the pivot to remote learning, she felt her sense of community was linked to her memberships in campus organizations, but after the pivot, she realized how much "classes themselves are community also. Because in a way, this pandemic has forced us to talk about stuff that's real." Lisa also described how the pandemic caused reflection and the realization of belonging. She explained that her cultural diversity class still met online during remote learning, so she felt the classroom experience did not change. She appreciated the continued connection with campus "Even if I have had superficial connections in my other classes, it's positive to know that people are thinking about these things [social justice topics], even if it's not something they're speaking openly about issues in general." Further, upon reflection, she felt that she might have made unfair assumptions that people were just not interested in talking about those things [social justice], but then realized that she also was not speaking up. Likewise, Michelle described reflecting on the process of belonging as a participant in the study: "I've had to dig deep within my brain to come up with answers [to the interview questions]. And even when I say it, I'm like, 'Wow, I didn't realize I thought that way or felt that way.' Like we talked about belonging, and I thought about like, 'Oh, I actually feel like I belong on campus, and the College of Ed.' I matter there. People care about me there." And Susan described a positive experience working with high school students, despite her reservation that her "passive personality" would be detrimental in the classroom. A positive field-work experience alleviated her fears and reinforced her decision to teach. She said, "I was just so happy… watching them learn was really, really amazing to me. It just made me feel really confident that that's what I wanted to do."

Integrating into the new campus community is a mutual process, where people from different backgrounds share their histories. Building a sense of community requires that faculty and peers take an interest in them, and for the RPSTs to reflect on their progress of strengthening connections.

Paradigm Shift

After transitioning to college, RPSTs began to shift their identity paradigms. Cultural diversity coursework gave RPSTs an opportunity to hear personal testimonies from minority students that brought about self-reflection. They learned about social justice and some took the ideas back to their rural community. For example, Michelle described an interaction she had with children in her rural community after national unrest had begun in response to the police shooting of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man:

> So, the people I nanny, the little boy is five and little girl is seven. And yesterday, she came downstairs, and she said, 'Have you ever had any issues with the White people versus Black people?' I was okay to have that conversation with her, obviously, knowing that I have boundaries as the nanny. But I think two years ago, I would have been just like, okay, let's just change the topic.

This is an example of how RPSTs begin to change their thinking as a direct result of developing relationships through their coursework. They discussed forming relationships as they discussed meaningful topics, such as nationwide civil unrest. RPSTs are able to share their new perspectives with their rural community and feel they matter, both on campus and at home.

Also, RPSTs began to make friends with diverse students on campus. Paula described feeling isolated until she realized "I just had to put myself out there more. That's around the time when I started really opening my eyes to other walks of life just because I don't want to be friends with just one type of person, you know, that doesn't help me grow as a person at all." Once she decided to, "put myself out there a little bit" she "got close with people that had differing opinions." Often, Paula spoke of expanding friendships to include the LGBTQ community, a lifestyle that was not welcomed by her church. She explained the transition of becoming more open-minded and developing new relationships made her feel connected.

Transitioning to their sophomore year, RPSTs reported feeling more open, and started to approach and talk to people. They began to realize that they could still feel secure in their faith and accept diverse lifestyles that were previously shunned by their religious community. Because the campus community emphasizes inclusivity, RPSTs were able to practice their faith while enjoying new friendships, as explained by Susan: "I still am a strong Christian, you know, but that's one of those things where you can't be friends with people who are lesbian or gay or anything like that. And those beliefs for me have completely changed because *MWU* approaches it with a lot more inclusivity than my hometown does."

Missed opportunities for growth that are generally offered in urban communities influenced RPSTs' perception of fitting in on campus; they felt marginalized when they noticed that students from densely populated regions had more opportunities to take advanced classes, travel, participate in extracurriculars, and in general had more opportunities to explore interests that aided in student development. At first, noticing the

urban-rural disparity in educational opportunities led to feelings of isolation, as RPSTs felt disadvantaged. However, ultimately, a large university setting was beneficial to development, as the COE provided positive social spaces to connect with peers with diverse backgrounds, which influenced identity exploration of the RPSTs.

Considering Contributions at the University

In the following sections, I will describe how RPSTs felt that they contributed to the university through *earning status through work*, *sharing their experiences growing up rural* to teach the campus community about rurality and becoming involved with *social justice* discussions.

Earning Status Through Work

RPSTs want to contribute to their community in meaningful ways. Volunteering in the COE, tutoring in outreach programs, and working at part-time jobs on campus strengthened RPSTs' connections at the university. Primarily, students volunteered through programs developed within the COE to find a place to fit in on campus. Charlize, who is not a first-generation student, but the first in her family to attend a flagship university, explained why she applied to volunteer to lead in a student organization in the COE, "I want to be an **diplomat** to represent others that are underrepresented." Heather also talked about the benefit of having more rural representation in the COE **diplomat** program and the campus organization that leads tours for recruitment purposes:

> That is a **diplomat**, there's people that you can relate to that have
>
> experiences like yours. And that's the thing about people applying, they
>
> usually like to hear from people that are your friends and people who, you

know, possess the same traits as you, and so I feel like if we had

somebody who was from more of a rural community, that could try to

translate with a lot more guys that come on tour, and then even like just

talking about the program and that would also get a different perspective

instead of just having the same type of girls mostly being in the program.

This quote illustrates the RPST viewpoint of the importance of being able to

diversify leadership roles to include rural students. RPSTs in leadership roles connect to

the college and are eager to recruit education majors from rural communities. Heather

also described that being a *diplomat* makes her feel connected: "I love being a COE

diplomat, it's like my favorite thing, I love volunteering with that." However, she

explains that the COE is the only place where she feels she belongs: "I don't really feel

like I belong a lot anywhere else. I don't go out, I don't party, I'm not in a sorority

anymore. Um, I would, like, never drink, so, like, I don't get in that crowd." Getting

involved in the COE allows RSPTs to see themselves as professionals when volunteering

to represent the COE by giving tours. Michelle explained that *diplomat*s* are "the face

that people meet." She says, "always stand with my head up." She also expressed that

she was able to learn about the college and "feels more confident." Since she wants to be

an educator, she feels important, which keeps her from feeling "lost and just be another

face." Susan described the process of learning to become more assertive when given a

leadership role in her religious organization where she must enforce rules and ask for

respect from her peers. RPSTs in leadership roles connect to the college and are eager to

recruit new education majors from rural communities. Given the chance to lead and

represent the COE made RPSTs feel proud and supports their sense of belonging

development. Developing an identity that was representative of the university was important to developing a sense of belonging. When they recognize accomplishments and involvement, they are proud, Susan explains, "you get to go out to these public schools and show *MWU* off and a little bit." Contributions like that support belongingness development, supported by Susan's assertion: "I really do feel like I belong here like truly coming to *MWU* has been the best decision of my life, and it's led to so many great things and optimistic that it will continue." Representing the college to future rural teachers made them feel like they mattered and connected to the university. Several RPSTs were eager to engage in COE activities. By giving RPSTs space to offer their personal stories and to volunteer, they earned a sense of mattering. Given the strong work ethic that RPSTs report to be a great asset, it was essential to give them opportunities to earn a sense of connection to realize that they belong. After a phase of gaining confidence, they felt less pressure and enjoyed transitioning to a new community.

Self-Reliance

RPSTs expressed a desire for a sense of belonging on campus; they reported concerns with earning a place of status on campus, which influences a sense of belonging. For example, Heather candidly expressed why she decided to get involved in the COE: "You are not just taking up space." Lisa expressed similar reflections on agency: "If you don't build that community for yourself, you're just going to be another person walking around on campus with your AirPods in and your head down." Also, Sophie described considering different approaches to work and having respect for differences in backgrounds and addresses the intersectionality of being a rural person of

color. She described that it felt good to talk about her background to other rural students about "…what the difference is for students who are from rural communities and how like, we may have had to work maybe harder to come to this same institution and not to degrade anybody else's hard work." RPSTs are eager to engage in COE activities. By giving discovering a space to offer their personal stories and to volunteer, RPSTs earned a sense of mattering. RPSTs are self-reliant to find ways to connect. They feel a sense of agency to connect so that they can build community.

Sharing their Rural Background

RPSTs are happy to share their background with those who are interested. Sophie enjoyed contributing to diversity discussions because she feels she has a welcoming approach. She describes her excitement to share her stories about growing up Latina in a rural community:

> There's not many spaces for people who aren't people of color to like be
>
> able to ask questions and be able to not feel attacked. So, whenever there
>
> is a conversation, I enjoy being that person that can do that without
>
> anybody feeling like they're hurt.

She is explaining that she uses her intersectional identity to patiently teach others about what it like to be a person of color and what it's like to grow up rural. She felt conflicted because she more comfortable around rural students than urban [including urban Latinx] because she had little experience interacting with people from urban areas.

Charlize also enjoys talking about her rural lifestyle with urban peers: "My friends from Chicago, they came down and visited my farm one time they were so blown away. They had never seen cows before. So, it's pretty cool." She also describes faculty

that are not aware of 4H, one of the university's extension organizations that is commonly available to rural youth. Some professors ask about 4H and she explains it to them. She explains: "They were like, 'Okay, cool. Thanks.' And so that was really cool to be appreciated whenever I got to talk about something I knew about." Three of the participants were sensitive to their peers' lack of understanding of their accomplishments and knowledge about agriculture and sought ways to bridge the gap; by sharing their experiences they facilitated a sense of connectedness.

Working Toward Social Justice

RPSTs felt pressure from their classmates to demonstrate activism against racism but were confused about how to engage in social justice causes. They were fearful to start engaging in dialogue and advocating because they did not have clear direction of how to navigate conflict during civil unrest. Every participant expressed wanting to get involved in some way, but the degree of involvement was typically low; overall, they spent more time listening to their peers and reading social justice posts on social media. Although the participants [urban and rural] were empathetic and wanted to help, they felt fearful of engaging in activism because they did not know what actions were appropriate; one participant was afraid her efforts would be seen as performative activism. Lisa described, "studying the situation and trying to navigate the difference between performative activism and meaningful contributions." However, some RPSTs were able to make new friends in the COE who were already activists, and thus, those RPSTs felt connected to the campus and the social justice cause by association. Even though Heather asserted she is very passionate about social justice, she was anxious about how her friends of color called attention to action. She clarified that the civil unrest helped

her find common ground and was able to connect with friends of color who were also in

the *Diplomat* program. She felt pressure to discover how to support social justice in

new ways "I have a couple of friends specifically who are in the *Diplomat* Program

with me, who are students of color, and they they'd say, like on social media, 'White

friends, I'm watching you to see like, what you're doing, what you're saying, what your

actions are." Heather also described participating in discussions sponsored by the

Gateway, a diversity program in COE, and how her involvement makes her feel

connected, especially when the coordinator recognized that she was a regular attendee

and reached out to her to communicate special programming due to the need for dialogue

surrounding the civil unrest, "I was like, 'Oh, that feels nice', you know, that I was put

kind of on that list or the person who runs the program, she came up to me and was like, I

really want you to be on this committee." For others, creating a personal connection by

listening to the lived experiences of their classmates influenced a change in mindset,

resulting in activism. Lisa described appreciation for diversity in her class and explained

personal connections to social justice because of class friendships. When I asked Lisa in

the last interview about the changes she might have noticed since we last talked, she

detailed her increased activism because of her relationship with a former classmate,

"knowing him…made me feel more like I belong in the sense that I need to do

something." So, she decided to sign a petition because she realized it was important for

her friend and for the university. RPSTs feel a significant connection when they work

toward social justice. RPSTs are hesitant to become activists; however, developing

personal connections with activists increased awareness and support.

Getting Comfortable

In this section I will discuss RPSTs compared feelings of comfort in their *tight-knit,* rural community and new feelings of comfort of liberation from conforming to rural community expectations, brought together to create a *new sense of comfort*, as they appreciated the opportunity to *get a break* from blue-collar work and felt less pressure to conform to family and community norms.

Looking for a Tight-Knit Community

Most RPSTs sought comfort in small sub-communities on campus, such as their residences, in campus ministry or in the COE. Although they claimed to appreciate diversity of thought, they felt the most relaxed with familiar people and spaces; sub-communities provided opportunities to develop a sense of safety that encourages more in-depth conversation. RPSTs spoke fondly of their tight-knit rural communities. Lisa described the benefits of small community cohesion. She explained "You really all do stick together [in a rural community] like if one person gets hurt, we all feel it." And she provided an example of the impact of two classmates' death: "it was like the whole school [rural high school] felt it whether you knew them. And just the impact…when you've met somebody in a rural town like you've met them, it's not really like you pass them by kind of thing." When feeling isolated and uncomfortable in a large lecture class that discussed Christianity from a negative viewpoint, Lisa turned to friends at **Faith House**, "I just kind of took that back to my community of Christians." Her friends also explained how they felt uncomfortable when they took the class. "So, I don't know, I guess, knowing that I wasn't isolated. In general, even if I was kind of isolated in that class, it was helpful." Urban students also noticed that rural students were more

comfortable in less populated spaces because that is what they are familiar with, thus they feel safe. Rhonda described her perception of rural students' transition to college, "There is a lot of security in knowing something so well it's like rooted in you, because that's where you've grown up your whole life." Most described feeling the most comfortable surrounded by peers who share their faith, for example Susan explained, "So the values that they represent is just, you know, inclusivity and love. We have people, you know, from the LGBTQ community, backgrounds and ethnicities and races and everything like that." Thus, smaller classes provided a sense of comfort and safety as they provide a familiar space to get one on one attention and build friendships. RPSTs missed the safety and friendliness that small communities offer, which makes feeling connected in a large space challenging. While they looked for similar community values, RPSTs added a new dimension of diversity to their new cohesive communities. RPSTs reconceptualized the meaning of community, which includes a vital need for inclusiveness.

Freedom Brings Comfort

RPSTs described enjoying more freedom at the university. Charlize explains the feeling liberated from her small community. She described that she must be careful about choices she makes at home because she recognized the impact of her reputation on her family. Conversely, people at the university are more open-minded, "This is the time in life to make mistakes and do stupid things because you don't have to be super responsible. If you want to make choices that scare you just to say you've done them, that's on you." Some RPSTs feel a better fit at a flagship university than in their rural communities, like Susan:

I do belong here. I know that I do because even in *Rich Valley*, I never felt

like I belonged there really…It was my hometown; it was all I ever knew.

But it didn't feel like home. It felt like I was waiting to get to the next

thing. I feel comfortable and in a way that I never did back home, and so

this has been a place where it just fits. And, I do have a sense of belonging

here, at **MWU**. I feel like I belong, and so that's just been really cool to

think about and reflect on.

This data illustrates the journey of belongingness for an RPST that found a better

fit on campus than in their rural community. This participant explained that her family

was "picky" about her friends and tried to discourage her from going to college. Through

reflection included in this qualitative research, participants realized their fit on campus.

At college Susan has the freedom to explore leadership in a non-denominational campus

ministry, which allows her to grow professional skills and feel important. Michelle

reported feelings that she thinks she fits better on campus because in her rural

community, "a lot of fitting in is being like having the farming and doing the ag stuff."

However, because the "campus is so diverse" she could find people who match her

interests. "And even if it's just like one or two of my interests, I can find people…and like

all the different aspects of me, I can find that."   Enjoying a sense of freedom was an

indispensable benefit of attending a flagship university. When in their rural community,

RPSTs worked to uphold their family reputation, but at college enjoyed the freedom to

explore new experiences without the watchful eye of their rural community. Freedom

from the criticism of a close-knit community allows RPSTs to explore their identity. In

rural community, RPSTs saw themselves as representatives of their family. Campus

provided anonymity and students were open to identity exploration; RPSTs reconsider their values in an open-minded environment, which helps them build a connection within a diverse environment. Specifically, two students mentioned becoming open-minded to make friends with LGBTQ peers.

A Break from Hard Work

All RPSTs explained their rural upbringing provided them with a strong work ethic; they described working hard at home to help their families and the community. They perceived that they worked harder to find opportunities for work, because there is less opportunity in rural communities, and most of their work was blue collar. Sophie described feeling relieved about seeking educational job opportunities on campus, "The challenge I had in a rural community was I did have to work really hard to get where I am, and that helped me adjust to this community better." There is more competition in rural areas because there are less opportunities for scholarships and fewer opportunities for leadership. She described being able to let her guard down and not working as hard as she had in the rural community to show that she was passionate about learning. "It's more competitive in a rural community. So, I would have to not only search for it, and make the connections to get it. She enjoys the plentiful opportunities that a flagship university offers and says there are "options for you if you can't get it right away. I can relax a little more here knowing that if I don't get a certain opportunity now that another one will open up." Being able to relax allowed RPSTs time to adjust to their new community.

Two participants also felt less pressure to help at home. When answering who is most dependent on her, Kathy explained that both of her parents have "health issues" and

they are dependent on her to help with the farm; she likes the escape that school provides: "It's nice to go to school. I know this might sound selfish, but when I want to do something, I can just do it. I don't feel like I have to feel guilty because I'm leaving them."

Hard work is part of RPSTs identity. Paula, when asked to describe a rural identity, "Being rural for me, I think like the word that comes to my mind is just work ethic." She said that "because on a farm, there isn't a lot of time to slack off. You got to keep going. That has really transferred over into college as well. Just that work ethic to just hustle and get it done." Several RPSTs explained that they didn't work harder than urban students, but they had been used to blue collar work, which is not recognized on campus.

Dynamic Relationships

The theme of dynamic relationships are relationships in is study is defined as relationships that stimulate change or progress within the RPST process of developing a sense of belonging. In this section I will discuss how relationships, especially *friendships* and relationships with family influence belonging. They find school fit when they have *consistent, positive interactions* on campus that feel safe. However, the dark side of *dependency* within relationships on campus and with family caused more stress and thwarted feelings of fitting in on campus when RPSTs are at home.

Making Friends on Campus

All RPSTs discussed the difficulty making friends. Lisa explained her disappointment when her expectations of making friends were not met, as she perceived her classmates as guarded,

I expected when I came to *MWU* that people in my classes would be just really open and friendly, and looking for friendships, and I have found that is not the case. People in my classes seem to be more in their own little bubbles, kind of like AirPods in, tune out the world, like, 'I'm just here to learn' I think I expected there to be some deeper, more meaningful friendships that would come out of classes that I'm in and that just has not been the case. So, how have I made friends, through *Faith House*, the people that you live with, I think you're sort of forced to make connections with. So, I have established a lot of pretty deep friendships with people there.

The quote illustrates that a lack of classroom interaction thwarted motivation to engage with peers and develop relationships, so RPSTs turned to common ground to build relationships. All participants discussed the role of their residence for forming vital relationships. Most consistent, positive interactions occur in housing. However, broken relationships among roommates can also thwart belonging development.   Heather described the anguish of not making friends after a sudden departure of her roommate as "hitting rock bottom" and "crying my eyes out" because she struggled with her fitting in at her sorority and making friends. She was incredibly lonely because after three days of her freshman year, her left the university because she did not get into a sorority. Then, she paid to have the room to herself but felt like it was a mistake because "I just felt like I had no friends." She explained that she would need to make more effort to hang out other times outside of class because "There's just not the space and the time for those relationships to be formed in class." And explained she would be willing to do that if she

did not already have strong relationships with other people. She clarified that after the

quarantine is lifted, she will most likely want to put in the extra time and work to get to

know her classmates.

All participants discussed the disparity of the ease of finding friends among urban

and rural students on campus. Michelle described difficulty making friends on campus

because her new peers had different backgrounds, and it was hard to connect to her peers

in ways that she had relied on in the past because it was hard to find similarities:

> I was, like, naive, and like I just didn't understand what they were going
>
> through. So, I couldn't connect with them. And it I felt different in the
>
> sense that I didn't understand what they were going through. And I
>
> couldn't like, build the relationship because here [in her rural community]
>
> we can all be like, Oh, yeah, I had that high school teacher or, oh, I've
>
> been there. Like, that's how we made friendships here. But we had to get
>
> deeper to make the connections because there wasn't the surface level
>
> things. So, for about three months or so of my very first semester, my only
>
> friends were like my roommate. I pretty much spent all my time in my
>
> dorm.

This quote demonstrates that RPSTs felt isolated because they failed to see similarities

between themselves and their peers. They often relied on building relationships with

people of similar faith with those in campus ministry or in their residence, which helped

them feel supported but lead to a lack of engagement outside of residences. Depending

on these relationships that were formed on core values strengthens those bonds but limits

opportunities to connect to the rest of the campus.

RPSTs described the process of letting down their guard and becoming receptive to new friendships with non-rural peers.   For example, Charlize described inviting her new urban friends to her farm for the first time:

> They had a million questions…most of them have never seen cows. Like we climbed on the bed of a feed truck and like went out fed the cattle and then like, they all came up. And yeah, two of the girls that were from Chicago, they're like, can we reach out and pet it? And I'm like, 'I mean, I wouldn't pet it, but you can try'. I thought I kind of felt like I was living through some like, family things that we had done together, like we have a spring on our farm will go down visit it and so bringing them down there. I felt very like homey to me, and to get them into that was really special and like was really cool. Yeah, I think they really enjoyed it too.

This data demonstrates that RPSTs appreciated the opportunity to share pieces of their identity with new friends. When they shared dimensions of their rural identity to new friends, they felt comfortable and connected. Further, all participants discussed the disparity of the ease of finding friends among urban and rural students on campus. Further, urban participants discussed the comfort of coming to campus with several of their friends, while rural students reported having few friends when they first transitioned to university.

RPSTs were fearful that if they represented an incongruent value with the professors' beliefs, they would be penalized. Heather described safety in childhood friendships: "the people in your kindergarten class will be the same people you have in your senior class, so like, if something goes wrong in that time period, nothing is really

gonna change." Michelle described the challenges of bringing childhood friends to campus. She described seeking out new friends on campus as "pretty difficult." She came with two of her high school best friends, so she stuck to her comfort zone and "was pretty scared to get out [of her comfort zone]". She had been going to school with "the same couple of people" since middle school and had not really had to make new friends in a while.

Some RPSTs were able to keep prior connections, find a good fit among peers with similar interests, and felt accepted, as explained by Kathy. Before coming to campus, she made most of her friends through FFA through competitions, like a public speaking contest. She explained the value of the organization, "I feel like those helped me be able to talk to people and be able to talk to just about anybody. It helped me open my shell." She described that she felt comfortable in an agricultural women's sorority, in part, because she had already met several of the members through FFA. She explained, "I probably wouldn't have the confidence to be able to try out for it if I didn't know at least some of the people already." She further described:

> Everybody was really nice, and I didn't ever feel left out. And so, I just felt
> right away like it was a good fit. Like, I didn't feel like anybody was trying
> to judge me or anything like that, even though I guess technically they
> kind of were in my interview rounds. But I felt like everybody was really
> nice and open to talking. And I felt like I already had friends when I joined
> because I'd already hung around them.

This quote explains how these positive interactions allowed her to build a community where she felt safe.

Consistent, Positive Interactions

Two of the participants resided in *Faith House* and referred to it as a positive place to develop friendships. Being forced into remote learning allowed RPSTs to see they still had prior connections, as explained by Lisa, who discussed changes after the first wave of data collection. She remarked on her reflection that she was able to maintain a lot of good friendships in her rural community and in her Christian residence, "even through a pandemic and not being physically with those people. I think those friendships are still really there. So that's cool." However, some compared and contrasted the resiliency of relationships. The stress of the quarantine caused the RPSTs to reflect on their salient relationships; some realized that their strongest relationships are with their parents, as explained by Charlize, who was disappointed by the lack of connection with her sorority during remote learning:

> we were all bonded together like we were in this, you know, come hell or
>
> high-water kind of thing. And I feel like now that we're all at home and
>
> we're like, all comforted with our parents and very adjusted to this life. It
>
> just kind of wasn't like, 'we're there for you', kind of thing. It was like, not
>
> in every man for themselves, but just not as together.

Established relationships were a source of comfort; RPSTs often relied on prior relationships to feel safe. Keeping established relationships in-tact established strong foundations to build new relationships, thus enhance feelings of belonging.

Dependency on Relationships Based on Rurality

Even though Susan did not appreciate her parents' lifestyle and did not feel at home in her rural community, she still looked for their parents' approval: "I mean, they

don't really understand like, exactly, they think it's just church. But they, no matter how many times I explained stuff to them, they just don't retain it. But, they're fine with it. They like that I have somewhere to go and, like, have that community somewhere."

Likewise, Paula explains finding support from other rural students in class. She recognizes that they, "definitely all have the same beliefs" talk quite a bit in class and form a group and "do things on our own to the best of our abilities" because they all want to get a good grade. She also explained how her family inspires her. She wants to set a good example for her brothers. She wants to help them earn scholarships because her parents were not able to help her. She said, "It makes my parents so proud to see us working so hard because, my parents, they just got married and started a farm." She explains her parents want the best for her and, "I like getting good grades because it really reflects how hard you're working and that's something that our parents taught us so much, and that really reflects on their parenting style for us as well."

Finding support in the classroom takes time, as clarified by Sophie, who said, "I think as the second semester I really came into it and feeling comfortable in the big classrooms and I felt the support of my peers more I felt like there was more I was able to get out firsthand like in class more often than if it was a smaller class, I think. And the professors here make themselves very available for you. And staff makes themselves very available for you too if you have any questions if you need any extra support."

Urban students also notice RPSTs values and notice similarities in the value of sameness, as explained by Rhonda, "Um, however, I can tell that they really value their community back home, and really, of being there and being a part of that when they can

as well. Probably because it feels maybe a little bit safer or more familiar, which is how it

is for me too." Kathy describes how it is important to make friends who share her values.

> I definitely made most of my friends through FFA before I'd already
>
> gotten there. Through like competitions and just things like that. And even
>
> I did a public speaking contest for FFA. I feel like those helped me be able
>
> to talk to people and be able to talk to just about anybody. It helped me
>
> open my shell, you know; I'm a member of an agricultural women's
>
> sorority and a lot of them I met through FFA. So, I probably wouldn't
>
> have had the confidence to be able to try out for it if I didn't know at least
>
> some of the people already.

She made some of her best friends with those who also compete in livestock

shows and understand their hard work and commitment. She explains that they

"understand what it's like because a lot of them, to an extent, are kind of outcasts at their

school because a lot of people don't competitively show animals.

Safety in the Known

RPSTs sought to build new relationships on their support structure of cohesive

communities. They looked for a sense of togetherness and discovered safe relationships

that formed based on similar backgrounds. Most RPSTs were still connected to their

strong rural community back home. They found the most comfort in like-minded people,

like in Christian housing and professional organizations. They appreciated compassionate

professors and advisors and formed deep relationships in smaller classes. Further, RPSTs

involved with agriculture organizations before coming to the university were at an

advantage to fit in.

For both rural and urban participants, their Christian faith was the most vital source of support. Lisa described how her faith and choice of living in Christian housing influences her friendships. She explained, "It does affect my participation in college and how I make friends. It's my immediate environment. It also is how I do college, a lot of the events that I participate in are directly correlated to *Faith House*." Feeling supported is a strong motivator for making lifestyle choices; students most often turn to their faith for support, limiting their interactions on campus. Susan explained:

> So, I think it's very easy to feel isolated and just swallowed. But I think
>
> that's not how it has to be. And I think that you can make a difference.
>
> Supports are in place too, for you to realize that you are able to make that
>
> impact. *Christians United*, it is a smaller community so I've built
>
> relationships there that are supportive and have made me realize, you
>
> know, some strengths that I have personally, but then also, just being in
>
> the College of Ed, like I have known ever since I decided to go to college,
>
> I wanted to go for education. But this College of Education, in particular,
>
> has been really, really great for me just because I mean, I love what we
>
> learn about, but also, a lot of the teachers I've had make me feel
>
> individually capable. And even as a freshman who knows absolutely
>
> nothing.

In sum, RPSTs find comfort and safety in connections they made before attending the flagship university. Having like-minded friends is essential to easing stress, so they seek people with similar values in the classroom for academic and social support. They are comforted by consistency, and fear of change was a challenge to sense of belonging

development. Overall, a sense of faith was the foundation for developing a sense of

purpose. RPSTs developed the most significant relationships in the COE, Christian

Organizations, and Christian housing.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The implications of this research are both practical and theoretical. The practical implications are grounded in recognizing that rural students face unique challenges in higher education that influence sense of belonging development. Challenges to belonging include stressors associated with a rural upbringing that position rural students as a cultural minority at large, flagship universities. Rural students graduate from high school at higher rates than their urban counterparts but have lower higher education graduation rates; it seems likely that unique barriers to success in higher education are undiscovered. School sense of belonging is developed when students feel supported, cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community (Strayhorn, 2012). Institutions want to attend to issues of social justice and reduce issues of equity in education but have not paid much attention to rural students. Research indicates that students who feel connected at school are more likely to graduate. Thus, school belongingness in primary and secondary school is a popular area of study. In the past, few studies focused on the nuances of how college students develop a sense of belonging, but attention is increasing. Because there is a critical rural teacher shortage and a higher education achievement gap that disproportionately affects rural students (NCES, 2012), I focused this study on Rural Preservice Teachers' (RPST) belonging at a flagship university.

In this final chapter, I provide an emerging theory explaining how all of the participants were able to connect with their flagship university despite challenges that are specific to rurality. Other studies have used Strayhorn's (2019) model of college student belongingness to examine rural student belongingness, but to my knowledge, it has not

yet been used to develop an emergent theory of belongingness specific to the unique experiences of RPSTs. I explore the ways that this research has added to the current understanding of college sense of belonging development and outline what more needs to be known to develop advanced theory. I also discuss the limitations of the study and close with implications for future research and practice.

Overview of the Findings

Findings in this study indicate that rurality influences sense of belonging development of RPSTs; they include the nuances of how RPSTs developed a sense of belonging, including the chaos they felt when they transitioned from a sparsely populated, safe space, to a densely populated, strange campus, the new community they formed, relationships built, reflections on their contributions, and finally how they were able to settle into campus life. To illustrate these findings, I developed an emergent model of belongingness that takes the shape of an eye (Figure 8). The model illustrates the iterative process of developing a sense of belonging that is facilitated by dynamic relationships.

Here, I provide an overview of "An emergent model of college belongingness: A gaze on rural preservice teacher development" (Figure 8). It is appropriate to represent the process in the form of an eye, as visibility was a consistent theme in the data, supported by quotes such as, "They see us as rednecks," "They see rural people as little-minded," "I feel like nobody sees me," "We couldn't see eye to eye," "My parents are proud to see us working," and, "I finally opened my eyes." This model explains that belongingness development is dependent upon perceptions of fitting in.

Figure 8

An Emergent Model of College Belongingness: A Gaze on Rural Preservice Teacher Development
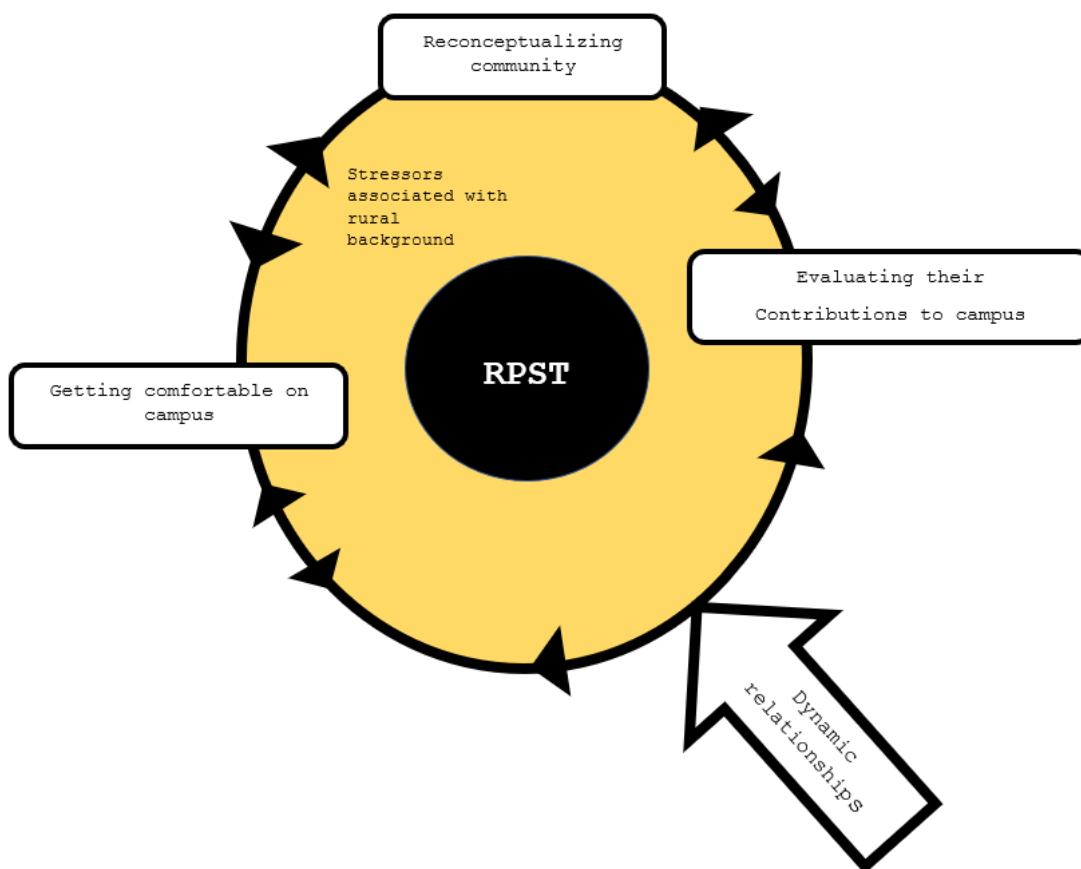
Note: The gaze[8] represented is reciprocal. The Rural Preservice Teachers' belongingness is influenced by their perception of the campus environment and their perception of how they are viewed within the campus environment.

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[8] **The gaze** refers to students observing the campus environment and perceiving the environment is watching them.

I begin explaining the process of belonging with the yellow area of the model, which represents stressors associated with rurality.[9] I describe how the stressors impact belonging. Next, I move to the three rectangles, which represent the cognitive evaluations of development, reconceptualizing community,[10] evaluating contributions,[11] and getting comfortable on campus.[12] Then, I describe the final dimension in the model, the arrow directed at the process, identified as dynamic relationships,[13] and explain how they act as mediators against the stressors found in the university environment. The small black arrows facing both directions that border the model represent the iterative process of belonging development; there is not one clear or linear direction to feeling a connection to campus, and each cognitive evaluation is revisited by the RPST.

The dimensions of the model are dynamic because it explains how the individual perceives belonging changes over time. At the start of the study, participants gave an overview of their general feelings of how and where they belong on campus. Rural participants were hesitant to proclaim a fit, while urban participants confidently described their belonging on campus. As the study progressed, I probed for clarification and expanded on how RPSTs made meaning of belonging on campus and its significance. I also discovered both positive and negative ways in which RPSTs perceive that their

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[9] **Stressors associated with rurality** is defined as thwarting variables to belonging that led to negative affect.

[10] **Reconceptualizing community** refers to thinking about interactions and connections to community and what community means to come to terms with the altered circumstances of fitting in.

[11] **Evaluating contributions to campus** refers to the proximal process where the RPST systematically interacts with the university environment (physical and virtual) in order to evaluate their sense of purpose.

[12] **Getting comfortable** refers to RPSTs' synthesis of a new comfort where two or more feelings are brought together to create a new feeling of comfort; combining experiences of connectedness to find university fit.

[13] **Dynamic relationships** are relationships that stimulate change or progress within the RPST process of developing a sense of belonging.

ruralness affects their ability to develop a sense of belonging at a large university.

Finally, I explored RPSTs' perception of the relationship between a sense of belonging

and persistence at a large university.

Stressors Associated with Rurality

This study's conclusion that stressors associated with rurality bring about unique

barriers in higher education is in accord with current understandings that have presented

negative influences of rurality on higher education attainment (Allen & Roberts, 2019;

Battle et al., 1995; Goldman, 2019; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Morton et al.,

2018). I extended findings from Moffa and McHenry-Sorber's (2018) study that

described deficit understandings of rurality by the college community. My research

confirms the influence of deficit perceptions of rurality as asserted by Theobald and

Wood (2010) and perceived stereotypes on belonging, as this study confirms Dunstan and

Jaeger's (2015) findings that rural participants are concerned that they might sound less

educated and less credible. My research is significant because findings describe the

significance of rural stressors on belongingness. Findings represent the first direct

demonstration that the most significant threat to belonging was the perception of rural

stereotypes and deficit views of rurality, as these perceptions thwarted engagement with

the campus community.

This study also confirms Goldman's (2019) findings that rural students experience

social barriers to fitting in on campus and adds the findings that, primarily, RPSTs' own

perception that they are a cultural minority on campus was a barrier to connecting to

campus because they felt like they were not important to university goals; they did not

feel that the university goal of creating an inclusive environment applied to them. This

study's findings also converge with Moffa and McHenry-Sorber's (2018) findings that

rural students feel marginal or belittled for their beliefs and lifestyles, such as their

farming practices. From these results, it is clear that efforts toward inclusivity on campus

rarely recognize rural students as marginalized or address the equity concerns for rural

students, which supports Terman's (2020) findings that rural college students must

negotiate and overcome burdens of social identities in order to belong in urban places.

Further, geographical location is an intersectional identity and marginalization

aspect because urban spaces are the cultural norm. Confirming Allen and Roberts' (2019)

study, clearly, there is a disadvantage for rural students to build a social network on

campus. Few of their university classmates originate from rural areas, whereas urban

students report having a large network of friends from their high school that attend the

university. Thus, this study is unique because it diverges from current belonging literature

to explain how a lack of social network influences belonging.

Reconceptualizing Community

Recognizing change in the RPST and the campus environment was an important

aspect of the interpretation of this study. The model explains how attending a large public

university challenges RPSTs' conceptualization of how a community is defined and

recognizes where they belong in each system. This study confirms Heinsch's (2017)

findings that learning communities, organizations, and outreach programs facilitate a

connection to the university. Notably, this study focused on the microsystem of

Bronfenbrenner's (1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) ecological model. Most of the

interactions and relationships that were salient to belonging happened in the COE.

Findings converge with Heinisch's (2018) unpublished dissertation on rural students'

barriers to success at large universities that explored the stressors associated with the transition as well as unforeseen positive experiences. His findings indicate that rural students were unprepared for a lifestyle change; they had to adjust to the anonymity, feeling insignificant in large classes, and adjusting to norms and expectations of a new system. Heinisch reported positive benefits of rurality. Rural students valued a sense of community at home and at the university; thus, at the university, some gathered with other rural students in order to create an extension of their rural life. Also, "those that did strongly identify with rural life benefitted from their experience on Ag Campus (p. 196)." While the current study confirmed his reported stressors, my findings demonstrate how stressors thwart feelings of belongingness:

1. RPSTs often experience stressors resulting from a mismatch between values at home and on campus, which thwarts belongingness. Incongruent values, such as religious beliefs, political views, views on methods of social activism, and ethical farming practices, pose barriers to creating positive relationships.

2. The current study is the first to report that RPSTs' expectations for campus culture to be more hospitable, courteous, and closer to the "Midwestern hospitality" that was common in their rural communities led to disappointment as they transitioned to college, which also led to feelings of isolation.

3. RPSTs were accustomed to an atmosphere where "ruffling feathers" is frowned upon. Thus, frequently, they were uncomfortable engaging in classroom debates because they were not familiar with public disagreement.

Evaluating Contributions to Campus

The current study adds to current understanding of how rural students experience higher education because findings indicate that when RPSTs transitioned to college, they realized that they had missed out on important opportunities for growth, which put them at a disadvantage to fitting in because urban counterparts seemed to be more experienced. They realized in order to be a part of the community, they had to become relevant on campus. RPSTs were optimistic that they could gain the experience needed for professional development; the perceived benefit or advantage of professional development opportunities aided in belongingness development because they connected with the College of Education (COE) and took advantage of leadership roles and volunteered to tutor youth in the community.

This study's findings cast new light on how their own contributions to the campus community, primarily in the microsystem, contributed to feelings of belonging. This idea is further supported by Tieken's (2016) findings that rural students primarily seek higher education for its utility to find work. They rely on their strong work ethic that developed from their rural upbringing. Thus, their discussions centered on skills to become professionals instead of the focus on self-exploration or cultivating interest and curiosity that are typically encouraged on college campuses. They reflected on their contributions that include engaging in classroom discussions, leading in COE organizations, and volunteering to serve local youth, working toward social justice. This study is significant because it details how RPSTs often relied on their strong work ethic, "working hard for their dollar," "doing nitty-gritty work," and "hustling to get it done." The present study confirmed findings of the narrow focus that RPSTs bring to campus, including the

primary extrinsic goal of preparing to enter the workforce. Thus, their discussions

centered on working toward skills to become professionals, and through that purposeful

work, they developed feelings of belonging. When RPSTs engaged in activities such as

leading campus tours, they felt like they mattered, which supported their feelings of

belongingness.

Although previous findings have indicated the barriers of first-generation

students, such as having less cultural capital, the current study demonstrates the effects of

a lack of cultural capital. Findings indicate that the intersectionality of their rural identity

with first-generation status resulted in a lack of the extensive network of support that

urban students enjoyed. For example, urban students had more high school friends

attending the same flagship university, and consequently, urban students were less eager

to make new friends, as it was also difficult to make friends in large classrooms, which

rural participants disliked for their anonymity. This study is significant because it

explains that participants started to fit in when they began creating a community based on

professional goals; all participants indicated a genuine interest in becoming teachers.

Because of the vital relationships that RPSTs developed in the classroom, they

slowly became interested in social justice causes, specifically referring to the police

shooting of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. Consistent with the urban participant

action, their involvement was slow, and primarily consisted of praying and reading social

media posts. In short, both urban and rural participants reported posting activist messages

very minimally, and one rural participant mentioned signing a petition to remove a

Thomas Jefferson statue from campus. However, one rural participant also contributed

monetarily to a fund established to pay the bond of protestors. Additionally, the rural

participants explained efforts to inform their family and community about the importance of social justice. This study is significant, as it describes the intent to get involved and explains the consequences of the slow cognitive process to becoming publicly active. Because they were acting at a slower pace than some of their more passionate classmates or did not publicize their support, both rural and urban participants felt criticized. Neglecting efforts to understand social justice thwarted the development of sense of belonging, as their cognitive change was not apparent, thus unrecognized by the campus community.

Getting Comfortable

The current study is unique because it describes the important step of getting comfortable in order to find university fit. Findings indicate that, eventually, some participants expressed feeling comfortable in a way they never felt back home, enjoying the freedom to find themselves without guilt. They could enjoy the freedom that college offers without the burden of family responsibility, such as helping with the family business, the farm, or with siblings. RPSTs synthesized the new comfort compared to their comfort in their rural community; they considered how they felt connected at home and on campus to find where and how they fit on campus. Compared to their rural community, RPSTs felt less pressure to conform to family and community norms. However, they still identified with a rural identity, such as maintaining and relying on their strong work ethic that they owe to a rural upbringing. Findings also suggest that RPSTs missed the safety and friendliness of their small communities, so they looked for organizations with similar values, such as religious student organizations, religious housing, and small classes, as they began to advance in their program.

This study specifically finds that RPSTs also built relationships based on their foundational values, such as religion. Both urban and rural participants made friends through campus ministry, which included Baptist, Catholic, and non-denominational affiliated organizations, and reported feeling comfortable in settings that supported their religious beliefs, such as activities associated with ministry and in Christian housing.

Dynamic Relationships

In line with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness, the current model of belongingness describes the role of frequent interactions with ongoing bonds, which serves as support for student development. However, the emerging model is specific to this context and provides more in-depth insight to RPST college development; it also demonstrates Schlossberg's (1989) assertion that a person can matter too much, that there is a dark side to dependency. For example, in situations where a participant's family was dependent on the RPST to help with farm chores or care for siblings, relationships represented stressors but supported belonging development on campus because they were liberated from family responsibilities. The participants carried a variety of stereotypes and perspectives about their expected college experiences.

Findings also indicate that the disappointment in non-rural students' lack of interest in developing friendships resulted in rural participants feeling isolated and thwarted belonging. This converges with Ganss' (2016) findings that rural students felt different because of their rural upbringing and consequently had difficulty making friends. Accordingly, the current study is significant because it demonstrates how rurality influences the ability to make friends. RPSTs assumed it would be easy to make friends but did not realize that their cultural minority status would impede their ability to make

friends and contribute to classroom discussions. They found other students disinterested in making new friends. Urban participants indicated that they already had friends when they arrived on campus because they had high school friends who attended the same university. Because RPSTs entered campus with few friends and little opportunity to make new friends, they felt alone and disadvantaged. Thus, RPSTs often relied on prior supports, which limited opportunities to develop new relationships. A common observation in this study is that RPSTs sought safety; some relied on high school friendships even though the friend did not attend the same university. Like Ganss' (2016) findings, some looked to build new relationships based on prior connections, such as networks developed in FFA [Future Farmers of America]. However, this study diverges from Ganss' findings because RPSTs used their faith as a foundational support to develop new relationships. They resided in Christian-based housing and joined campus ministries; some were non-denominational while others identified Catholic and Baptist ministries. They looked for like-minded friends to ease stress. The most significant relationships were found in the COE, in Christian student organizations, and residences. These findings are similar to Goldman's (2019) findings that one participant relied on her established rural network to build a new network.

Additionally, in line with Schlossberg's (1989) assertions on the influence of mattering, this study found instances where faculty took an interest in RPSTs' background, which made them feel they mattered and supported feelings of belongingness. When faculty took an interest in their background, and when they could participate in open discussions about important topics such as equality surrounding race/ethnicity/sexual orientation, participants felt connected to the community. They also

enjoyed sharing their background with friends outside the classroom. This study is unique because the findings illustrate that when urban students took an interest in their rural lifestyle, they felt like they mattered and could connect with the university. Integrating to the new campus community is a mutual process, where people from different backgrounds must share their personal stories in order to facilitate meaningful dialogue.

Connection to Previous Literature

Certainly, this study covered a wide range of issues important to rural education and student development. Adding to the current knowledge base is an important step to reducing the rural–urban higher education disparity and ameliorating the rural teacher shortage crisis. Compared to research on urban student experiences in higher education, research is sparse on how rural students experience college.

Most extant studies on rural students in higher education examined the lower higher educational attainment through a deficit lens; researchers explain the urban–rural disparity is due to the lack of academic preparation of rural students, their first-generation status, and lack of resources (Ganss, 2016; Morton et al., 2018). These studies did not explore the foundational aspect of college persistence, sense of belonging, and there are very few studies in educational research investigating how rural identity impacts belongingness.

Strayhorn (2012, 2019) was the primary reference for a framework to investigate RPST belonging, as his work has focused on marginalized students. Strayhorn's college belongingness is based on studies investigating marginalized college students' experience with belonging development. However, Strayhorn's work includes few references to rurality, and it is essential to understanding how individual identity and experiences

influence how students form a connection to campus. While the data supported his work on college student sense of belonging development, it also supplements current understandings of belonging by providing specific insight on the rural college student experience.

Similarities and differences exist between this study's emergent model and Strayhorn's (2012, 2019) model of college student development. The current study complements Strayhorn's model of college belongingness because findings in the current study emphasize the consequences of a mismatch in values. Strayhorn (2012) asserts that college students experience belonging differently based on their identities and experiences. The current study also supports that assertion and demonstrates that although a mismatch in values between cultures can present extra barriers for marginalized college students, a mismatch in values does not necessarily thwart belongingness, nor does it mean that RPSTs must leave their rural identity behind, which is congruent with Strayhorn's (2019) assertion that minority students are more successful while retaining their identity. The RPSTs interviewed in this study seemed to keep the most salient pieces of their identity and added new dimensions to their identity to develop a sense of belonging.

While the findings of this study confirmed that sense of belonging increased with feeling accepted, respected, valued, cared about, and important, understanding the larger picture of higher education goals was essential for RPSTs in this study. Additionally, like Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, recognizing student goals and goals of the university is a vital dimension of college belonging. Although Stayhorn's (2012; 2019) college belongingness theory was developed by including Tinto's (1993) theory of

student departure as a framework to inform his empirical studies, he rejects the interactionalist component. Explaining that Tinto's theory posits that students must integrate to campus to develop a connection, Strayhorn asserts that students will lose their salient identity in the process. However, I see the utility of retaining Tinto's dimension of system integration to fully contextualize the student's experience connecting to campus. Recognizing goals, both at the university level and student level, is vital to belongingness development.

Because RPSTs originate from a background that primarily sees college as a means to an end, it takes a while to acculturate to the bigger picture of a broader purpose for attaining a college degree. The status of being a cultural minority on an urban-centric campus is a focal point of belongingness in this study; RPSTs expressed a genuine interest to become great teachers, and once they were exposed to higher education values, they began to broaden their minds and feel connected in their new environment. Recognizing how background reflects on their goals is vital to understanding how to support and educate RPSTs to attend to their needs to belong.

Bridging the Gap

While other studies report that rural students feel isolated, none explain the process of how RPSTs develop a feeling of belonging. In this study, I found that dynamic relationships, the reconceptualization of community, and recognized contributions to campus influenced how they eventually coped with the stressors of rurality and got comfortable and eventually felt connected. Additionally, no previous literature addressed how perceptions of belonging influenced persistence.

This study focused on the role of geography in determining college fit. School belonging research broadly positions rural students on the fringes, and research that focuses specifically on RPSTs is sparse. I found that RPSTs' experiences forming relationships were impacted by rurality, specifically their lack of experience with diverse populations. Their lack of experience made them self-aware of their cultural minority status. These findings add the benefits of attending a flagship university and call attention to the equity issue of unequal representation of rural students in higher education.

Finally, this study reflects the impact of negative perceptions of rurality; its findings explain the lack of engagement that stems from fears of judgment. It is also essential to explain that while other studies report rural students feeling isolated, none explain the process of belonging. In this study, I found that dynamic relationships, the reconceptualization of community, and recognized contributions to campus determined the quality of belongingness. Also, this study adds to current literature because it explains the tricky process of developing friendships from a cultural minority perspective. This research does consider how being a cultural minority on campus isolates rural students. Even though their status may be invisible, efforts are taken to hide their salient rural identity or defend their upbringing if it becomes apparent.

This study provides a counter-narrative to current rural teacher narratives that rural teachers are inflexible in their beliefs and reject outsiders. Burton et al. (2013) called for counter-narratives to contradict the current deficit lens used to report on rural schools. For example, in their systematic review, they found research that describes rural teachers as inflexible. While the current study investigated pre-service teachers, not practicing teachers, it is still important to explore the disposition of future teachers.

Findings of the current study indicate that, at first, RPSTs resisted change. Because of their lack of models and experience with social justice causes and hesitancy to "ruffle feathers," RPSTs were hesitant to become activists; however, developing personal connections with diverse populations caused a paradigm shift, demonstrating they were open to change with proper guidance. For example, developing relationships with activists increased awareness and support. In this study's exploration of the progression in a change of mindset, it uncovered how RPSTs are accepting, and through that acceptance, they are accepted. The process of becoming more open-minded due to being integrated into the flagship university community could transfer back to their own teaching practice.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the recruitment survey included questions about geographic orientation. Students who are unaware of geographic differences might not be interested in the study. Secondly, during the semi-structured interviews, I directed students to relate to their rural identity. However, I also tried to address all identities (first generation, ethnicity, disability status, Greek life membership) as data emerged. Many participants had not considered the influence of their rural identity in developing a sense of belonging at college. I could have asked more direct questions about how other identities intersected with a sense of belonging. Thirdly, I acknowledge the dichotomous nature of distinguishing rural and urban students does not fully explain group differences, as their histories, backgrounds, and experiences are unique. Further, this study was conducted at one predominately White, Midwestern flagship university and contained a limited sample size. Finally, this study was limited to

the experiences in a COE. Further studies should explore other colleges within higher education institutions and focus on other systems of the ecological model.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Rurality influences RPSTs' experience at flagship universities. Findings indicate that RPSTs consider themselves a cultural minority on campus and have difficulty fitting in. It takes time for RPSTs to feel like they matter, are cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important on campus. Findings of feeling isolated because of negative perceptions of rurality explain a slow development of a connection to campus. Positive interactions with faculty, staff, and peers between RPSTs and the flagship environment were crucial to their sense of belonging development.

Additionally, the findings of this study indicate that initially, RPSTs were less engaged because they were unaware of the broad purpose of higher education. Findings indicate that they are more comfortable in small spaces because they are less experienced with urban schooling; thus, transitioning to a flagship university is a chaotic time. Furthering the chaos is an incongruence between RPSTs' concerns about academic preparation and the university's curriculum. RPSTs entered the university with strong goals to become good teachers. They sought directed paths to accomplish those goals based on their rural upbringing and their views on work. They were not prepared for the broader goals of higher education like becoming responsible citizens of the world. The academic goal mismatch negatively affected their psychological processes like motivation to engage in debates, as RPSTs needed sufficient support to engage in new activities to satisfy a goal that they might not have considered before they were college students.

In conducting this study, I noted several important areas for future research. First, there is a limited amount of qualitative research examining college sense of belonging. Much of the literature investigating sense of belonging reviewed for this project was quantitative. The field of educational psychology would likely benefit from more qualitative studies because more information is needed on the nuances of student development.

Second, several areas of interest could be developed to contribute to extant literature. For example, research examining the intersectionality of ethnic minorities of rural students attending flagship universities is needed; minorities make up 22% of the rural population (USDA, 2018). Only one RPST in this study identified as an ethnic minority. She was the only participant not to respond to the final wave of data collection. Research on the college experience of minorities from rural communities could significantly improve this field's ability to understand how the intersection of ethnicity and rurality impact college experiences.

Third, sense of belonging development should also be examined beyond teacher preparation programs. We must also investigate rural students' experiences in other colleges, such as business, medicine, and the arts.

Finally, researchers must collect data to close the rural–urban achievement gap. Data should be collected on recruitment and retention, as well as college-going behaviors, in order to address the higher education disparity, which is an issue of equity. Focusing on designing, implementing, and reporting on interventions that would support rural students is critical, especially RPSTs, so that rural schools will not suffer the burden of a critical teacher shortage.

Implications for Practice

      As this research demonstrates, RPSTs experience barriers to developing belonging due to their rural background. Below I offer suggestions to support RPSTs' belonging.

Creating Systems of Support

      Rural students have a smaller social network on campus due to their minority cultural status. They must be supported in developing a network that will connect them to campus to address the urban–rural disparity in higher education. Due to the difficult transition from a small community to a large community, college students need time to understand and accept common goals. Since rural students have previously attended small schools, it will take longer to interpret the school's mission. This trend, in addition to the identified barrier to developing a sense of connection on campus, indicates it could take longer to develop feelings of belonging. Therefore, they will need extra guidance through the transition.

      Administrators, faculty, and staff need to recognize the isolation that RPSTs feel and offer support. They must recognize that developing relationships is advantageous in overcoming negative stereotypes. Aid in developing a network with peers, faculty, and administrators before arriving to college would support belongingness development. They would benefit from support developing relationships, such as a mentorship program, which would connect them to peers with a similar background. Support could be supplemented with the use of technology due to the geographical disadvantage to connecting to campus resources. For example, video applications could be utilized to facilitate mentorship.

Further, all the participants discussed how contributing to the campus community helped them to feel valued. Advisors could suggest ways for RPSTs to contribute to the college and to the university, for many are first-generation are not familiar with the opportunities and are often shy to engage when they first transition to campus. The participants discussed the challenges to develop friendships with little common ground or few established relationships to build upon. Consideration should be given to developing a buddy study system to develop connections.

Additionally, it should be taken under advisement that RPSTs would benefit from smaller class sizes at the beginning of the transition. Offering small-scale seminars within the COE for students to understand student development and providing strategies such as journaling and ideas for outreach will strengthen connections. This strategy would expand their limited network and help them build stronger networking skills.

Classrooms Inclusive of Rurality

Faculty should adopt a more inclusive approach to lectures, readings, and classroom discussions. Rather than alienating students with an authoritative approach to instruction, opening discussions to allow differing viewpoints on topics like religion would support belonging development. Also, findings in this study indicate that RPSTs made sense of their transition by reflecting on their own values and hid markers of their salient identity that were incongruent with the campus environment's urban-centric values and were defensive of perceptions of negative stereotypes of rurality. Faculty and staff would benefit from a general understanding of how negative perceptions of rurality influence belonging development; measures should be taken to mediate the role of negative perceptions and feelings of isolation. For example, professors could position

rural students competently in the classroom, so that they feel their background is respected and they feel like they are accepted, despite their feelings of being marginalized.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the field of educational psychology generally and higher education by exploring the experiences of RPSTs at a flagship university. The participants in this study lent their voices so that those in higher education are better informed about how to serve RPSTs. Clearly, rural students have been largely ignored in educational research in general. Most published articles concerning rural students appear in journals that are dedicated to researching rurality. By better understanding the impact of a rural identity on sense of belonging development, administrators, faculty, and staff are further able to support student development. As higher education begins to take notice of the equity issue of underserved rural students and starts attending to the rural teacher crisis, the higher education disparity will shrink. As more rural students, especially in the teacher education program, are considered important, they will persist, which will attend to the current crisis of the rural teacher shortage.

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APPENDIX A: NCES GUIDELINES

NCES CLASSIFICATIONS AND CRITERIA

2.1 Classifications and criteria The NCES locale framework is composed of four basic types (City, Suburban, Town, and Rural) that each contains three subtypes. It relies on standard urban and rural definitions developed by the U.S. Census Bureau, and each type of locale is either urban or rural in its entirety. The NCES locales can be fully collapsed into a basic urban–rural dichotomy, or expanded into a more detailed collection of 12 distinct categories. These subtypes are differentiated by size (in the case of City and Suburban assignments) and proximity (in the case of Town and Rural assignments). The NCES classifications and corresponding two-digit locale codes are as follows:

City – Large (11): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population of 250,000 or more.

City – Midsize (12): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.

City – Small (13): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 100,000.

Suburban – Large (21): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more.

Suburban – Midsize (22): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.

Suburban – Small (23): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 100,000.

Town – Fringe (31): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area.

Town – Distant (32): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.

Town – Remote (33): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.

Rural – Fringe (41): Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.

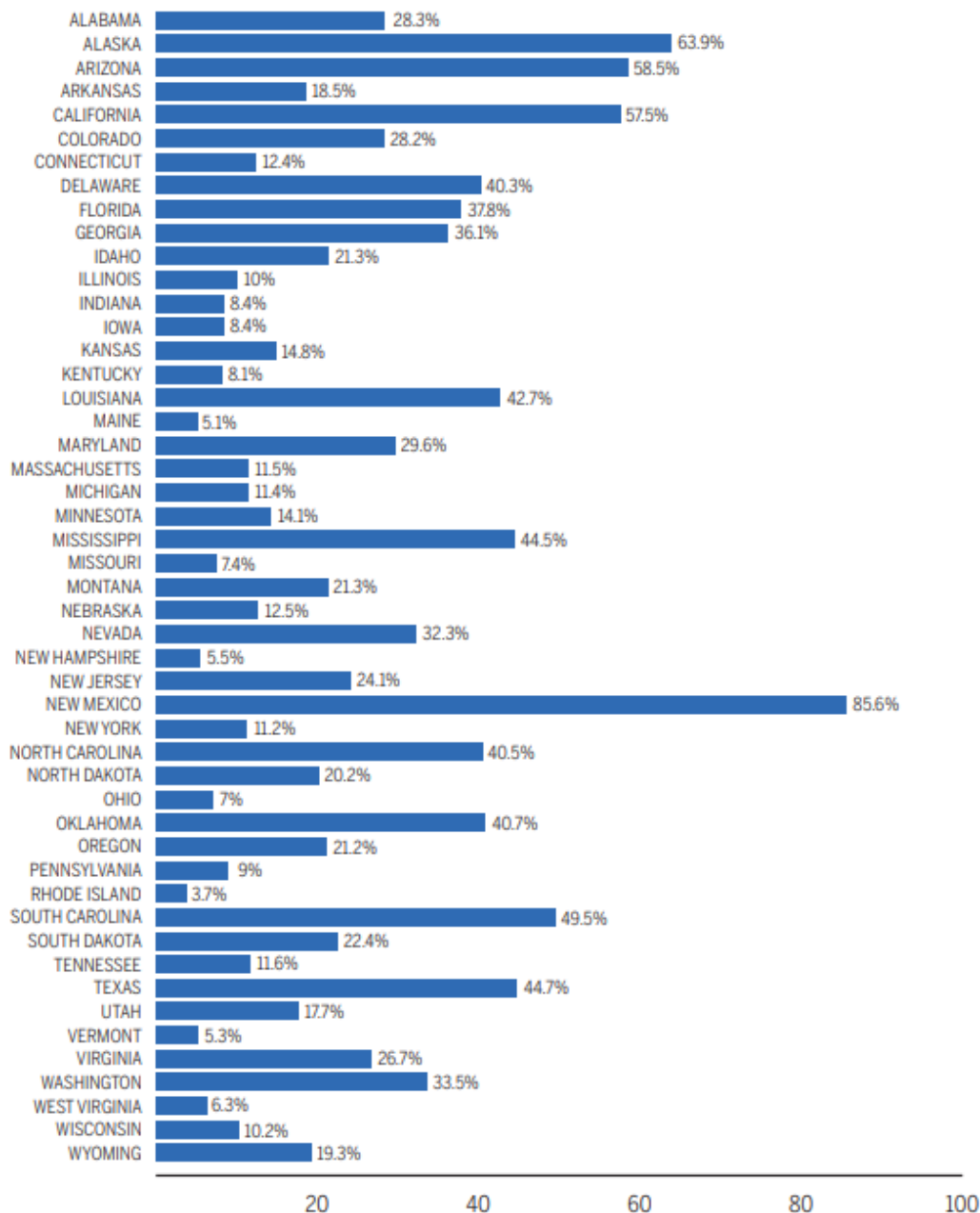*Rural – Distant (42)*: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Rural – Remote (43): Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

APPENDIX B: PERCENT OF MINORITY RURAL STUDENTS

Percent rural minority students, by state, 2013-2014

Number of minority students enrolled in rural districts as a portion of all students enrolled in rural districts

State	Percent
ALABAMA	28.3%
ALASKA	63.9%
ARIZONA	58.5%
ARKANSAS	18.5%
CALIFORNIA	57.5%
COLORADO	28.2%
CONNECTICUT	12.4%
DELAWARE	40.3%
FLORIDA	37.8%
GEORGIA	36.1%
IDAHO	21.3%
ILLINOIS	10%
INDIANA	8.4%
IOWA	8.4%
KANSAS	14.8%
KENTUCKY	8.1%
LOUISIANA	42.7%
MAINE	5.1%
MARYLAND	29.6%
MASSACHUSETTS	11.5%
MICHIGAN	11.4%
MINNESOTA	14.1%
MISSISSIPPI	44.5%
MISSOURI	7.4%
MONTANA	21.3%
NEBRASKA	12.5%
NEVADA	32.3%
NEW HAMPSHIRE	5.5%
NEW JERSEY	24.1%
NEW MEXICO	85.6%
NEW YORK	11.2%
NORTH CAROLINA	40.5%
NORTH DAKOTA	20.2%
OHIO	7%
OKLAHOMA	40.7%
OREGON	21.2%
PENNSYLVANIA	9%
RHODE ISLAND	3.7%
SOUTH CAROLINA	49.5%
SOUTH DAKOTA	22.4%
TENNESSEE	11.6%
TEXAS	44.7%
UTAH	17.7%
VERMONT	5.3%
VIRGINIA	26.7%
WASHINGTON	33.5%
WEST VIRGINIA	6.3%
WISCONSIN	10.2%
WYOMING	19.3%

Note: No data for Hawaii or Washington, DC. Source: Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman 2017. Data reflect NCES Common Core of Data, Public School Universe Survey 2013-2014.

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Recruitment Survey

IRB:2019455

Consent:

You are invited to participate in a study about preservice teachers' experiences in the College of Education, related to where you live and your motivation. Participation is voluntary. At the end of the study, you will be compensated with $50.00 in gift cards. You will be asked to create one 5–10 minute digital autobiographical story about your background and university experiences. You will also be interviewed twice, for about 45 minutes to one hour. After the second interview, you will be given the $50.00 gift card. Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please answer the following and forward to:

Stephanie Woods ********. If you have any questions, e-mail or call me at 573-291-2431

1. Name _____

2. Year in college_____

3. If known, GPA_(this question is optional)_____

4. Gender_____

5. Where are you from?_____

6. What is the population?_____

7. Where did you go to high school?_____

8. What was your graduating class size?_____

9. Do you consider yourself as rural, suburban, urban, or other?_____

10. Would you be interested in participating in this research?_____

11. If yes, please provide your e-mail

    address_____

APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL

January 30, 2020

Principal Investigator: Stephanie Lynn Woods
Department: Graduate School

Your IRB Application to project entitled A study of perceptions of urban and rural pre-service teachers at large universities. was reviewed and approved by the ███ Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	2019455
IRB Review Number	258744
Funding Source	STAR Program
Initial Application Approval Date	January 30, 2020
IRB Expiration Date	January 30, 2021
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Exempt
Exempt Categories (Revised Common Rule)	45 CFR 46.104d(2)(ii)
Risk Level	Minimal Risk
Internal Funding	Internal Grant (ex. Research council, etc)

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation utilizing the Exempt Amendment Form.
3. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date to keep the study active or to close it.
4. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.

VITA

Stephanie is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology (ESCP) at the University of Missouri. Her research uses theoretical models from educational psychology to understand the effects of the school environment, including issues of education access, equity, and student success. She has conducted applied research on Rural Preservice Teachers' belongingness at flagship universities, and program evaluation for the College of Education.