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Retention and Persistence of Low-Income, First-Generation Rural College Students from West Virginia

Rachel D. Nieman

Dissertation submitted
to the College of Applied Human Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in
Higher Education

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Morgantown, West Virginia
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ABSTRACT

Retention and Persistence of Low-Income, First-Generation Rural College Students from West Virginia

Rachel D. Nieman

A considerable body of research demonstrates that first-generation college students face greater obstacles to college retention, persistence and completion compared to their non-first-generation counterparts. However, the extant literature rarely explores rurality as a salient factor to understand these challenges. Even less visible in the literature are the experiences and voices of West Virginians. West Virginia is a predominantly rural state and ranks 49th in the nation in terms of educational attainment, with only 19.6% of residents over the age of 25 having earned at least a bachelor's degree. While rural areas may experience multifaceted struggles, the educational attainment of rural residents is arguably one of the most pressing issues due to the connection to between educational attainment, employment opportunities, health outcomes and socioeconomic status. Through narrative analysis, the purpose of this study is to understand and highlight the experiences of college students who identify as low-income, first-generation, rural West Virginian at their land-grant institution. These experiences are considered through the lenses of social and cultural capital and spatial justice. Qualitative data analysis demonstrates five themes are salient in describing the experiences of LIFGRWV students: rurality, self-perception, academics, parents, and COVID-19. Two themes are salient in describing how the students' postsecondary experiences aligned with their expectations and the institutional land-grant narrative: rurality and the land-grant concept. Four themes are salient in students' perceptions of support affecting their success, retention and persistence: pre-college resources, in-college resources/ use of campus services, financial supports, and key players or influencers. References of perceived barriers were much less frequent but salient themes included rurality, first-generation status, mental and physical health, stigma toward WV students, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are considered critically through the frameworks of cultural and social capital (classed experiences) and spatial justice (spaced experiences). This study contributes to a gap in the body of literature by highlighting a subgroup that is unrepresented in extant literature, and by adding to the spatial justice conversation by examining the intersection of social reproduction and spatial inequality in a rural context.

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled:

Retention and Persistence of Low-Income, First-Generation Rural College Students from West Virginia

Prepared by

Rachel D. Nieman

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education at West Virginia University

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT

A considerable body of research demonstrates that first-generation college students face greater obstacles to college access, retention, persistence and completion compared to their non-first-generation counterparts (Thayer, 2000; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini, 1996; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). However, the literature on college retention and persistence rarely explores rurality as an important factor to understand these issues, despite the fact that economically distressed rural communities experience low educational attainment levels relative to national averages (Provasnik et al., 2007). Koricich, Chen & Hughes (2018) argue that of all the measures in which rural areas struggle, educational attainment is one of the most pressing due to its connection to other important social outcomes like employment, occupational status and income. Urban-centric views and solutions often dominate policy decisions and political issues, despite a growing interdependency between rural and urban spaces. These do not always translate to rural settings, contributing to the need for a more spatially inclusive approach to social problems and solutions (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017).

West Virginia is a predominantly rural state, with a need for improvement in educational attainment. The state ranks 49th among the 50 states in terms of educational attainment and has the lowest percentage of associate degree holders and those with some postsecondary experience (Strauss, 2018). Only 19.6% of WV residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher. This compares to 30.6% at the national level. Furthermore, only 55% of WV high school graduates enroll in college, compared to 70% at the national level (WV Forward, 2020). These low educational attainment levels are contributing factors to poor economic and health outcomes across the state, and poor economic standing makes accessing higher education more difficult

(Gofen, 2009; Hirsch, 2007). The problems of low educational attainment and lower socioeconomic standing exacerbate one another in a chicken-and-egg-like cycle of disadvantage.

Land-grant institutions like West Virginia University (WVU) have dedicated missions to service and engagement to address pressing social issues like poverty, rural community development, technological innovation and educational equity. More so than other types of four-year higher education institutions, they serve traditionally underserved populations (Geiger & Sorber, 2013). For example, the stated mission of WVU is to advance education, healthcare and prosperity for all by providing access and opportunity. Furthermore, WVU is home to the Center for the Future of Land-Grand Education, the nation's only research center focused exclusively on land-grant institutions (About the Center, 2019). In fact, WVU President E. Gordon Gee, one of the nation's most prominent higher education leaders, has said in many public addresses that no other land grant university is as important to its state than WVU. "It just makes sense that WVU should be the place that is leading the national dialogue on the future of land-grant institutions. More than most, WVU centers its identity around its land-grant mission," said Dr. Nathan Sorber, who served as the first Director of the Land Grant Center (WVU Today, 2017). In other words, WVU appears poised to provide solutions to economic and health disparities within the state through educational attainment.

At the same time, institutions of American higher education have never been more financially dependent upon their students' success. Since the Great Recession of 2008, most states have significantly cut financial support to higher education. In 2016, West Virginia was 13th in the nation for reducing spending per student. Between 2008 and 2016, per student spending was reduced by 23.6%. Such budget cuts lead schools to make up the difference through tuition increases (McElhinny, 2017). Additional budget cuts have occurred annually

since then, and now only about 10% of WVU's budget comes from state funding, well below historic levels (Young, 2019). When states disinvest in higher education, schools tend to respond by focusing on the recruitment of wealthier nonresident students who can afford to pay increased tuition (Mangan, 2019). While this seems to be in direct conflict with WVU's mission as a land-grant, it is arguably necessary to keep the university financially viable.

However, populations of college-aged students are shrinking across the northeastern United States, where most nonresident WVU students come from. Some projections show that the college-aged population in the northeast is anticipated to drop by 5% by the mid 2020s. Furthermore, once post economic recession (2008) birth rates are also factored in, some projections estimate a loss of 15% of the traditional college going population. Additionally, the socioeconomic groups who will make up a growing share of the population have traditionally had lower college-going rates on average than the groups whose share of the population will be shrinking (Jaschik, 2018).

All of this makes the recruitment of new students (particularly non-resident students, who pay significantly higher tuition rates) more difficult, and the retention of currently enrolled students all the more precious from a business perspective. In fact, retention initiatives designed to manage student enrollment are estimated to be three to five times more cost effective than recruitment efforts (Cuseo, 2010). With less state funding and a decrease in population, retaining students (and their tuition dollars) can contribute to maintaining an institution's financial stability. Coupled with WVU's mission to support the residents of its state, there is a strong moral mission and as well as a strong economic case to focus on improving retention of first-generation students from West Virginia.

West Virginia is completely within the geographic bounds of Appalachia (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010). While some work has been done on the college aspirations of students from rural West Virginia (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004), little research exists on the retention, persistence and experience of rural college students, and even less research exists that specifically examines these topics within rural Appalachia. Others interested in examining the Appalachian student experience (Beasley, 2017; Wilson, 2018) have noted the absence of literature surrounding this population as well. This is in relative contrast to an extensive body of work on urban students' postsecondary experiences that examine issues like poverty and academic under-preparedness – issues that rural students also face, but are often overlooked (Byun, et al., 2012; McDonough et al., 2010).

Given the marginalization of the target population in both practice and representation in the literature, there is a social justice case to be made for this project. More can be done to understand the experiences of rural West Virginian college students. Such data may illuminate rich insights currently missing in the dominant, urban-centric literature, and that can help us propose place-centric solutions to improve college access, retention, persistence and success. Furthermore, an economic case can be made for this project, as current budget and demographic realities make the recruitment of high paying nonresident students more difficult, increasing the need for land-grant institutions in states with significant rural populations to prioritize institutional supports and remove institutional barriers to help their in-state students, including first-generation students, realize their success.

PURPOSE STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This qualitative narrative study explores the experiences of low-income, first-generation, rural students in West Virginia at the state's land-grant institution. The study addresses a gap in

the literature because little attention has been paid to the rural Appalachian experience in higher education. Among the few studies that do exist, West Virginians and West Virginian institutions are not well represented.

- Research Question 1: What are the experiences of low-income first-generation rural West Virginia students at the state's land-grant institution?
- Research Question 2: How do the postsecondary experiences of low-income first-generation college students from rural West Virginia, align with their expectations and the institutional land grant narrative?
- Research Question 3: What institutional factors do rural, low-income, first-generation students perceive as sources of support or barriers to their success, affecting their retention and persistence?

DESIGN OVERVIEW

This study will use a critical approach to narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative process reliant on the relationship between the narrator and researcher, and in which the finished product will be something newly and mutually constructed between the two (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). An approach rooted in critical theory intends to give power to the voices of the traditionally marginalized participants in a constructionist approach that focuses on linkages between individual narratives and the broader culture (Marshall & Case, 2010). The study will use both supportive voice (which focuses on the narrator) and interactive voice (which constitutes an interaction between narrator and researcher) to push the narrators' stories into the limelight but to also have the researcher reflect deeply on their interactions with the narrators and take time in the analysis to examine the role of the researcher's own voice, social position,

interpretation and personal experiences through the refracted medium of the narrators' voices (Chase, 2005).

Narrative inquiry assumes that humans are innately storytelling creatures, and that opportunities to discover new insights are bountiful when you believe that there is value in the experiences of everyday people (Labov & Waletsky, 1968). Therefore, the approach is suitable for investigating the target population's perceptions of how WVU supports or impedes success, as well as how their experiences align with institutional narratives. It is also suitable because narratives are a way people construct identities and consider their positionality in the world. By understanding and magnifying the narratives of marginalized groups, we can use research to provide a strong rebuttal of dominant discourses that perpetuate inequities. The use of narrative is practical in that these stories can help researchers or policymakers gain new insights, make decisions, or inspire change.

Narrative analysis is a good match for researching the experiences of first-generation college students from West Virginia because stories are a way to make sense of, organize, revise and explain where we've come from, how we've arrived at our present, and where we wish to go. Interpretations change and flux through time. One of the most powerful things about the college experience is its ability to change and develop its students. The assessment, reassessment and theorization of meaning through the stories of development and experience by those living them will provide rich insights to the research questions that could not be gained otherwise. Furthermore, storytelling is a method well aligned with Appalachian culture (Goodman, 2010). Sharing the stories of rural, first-generation students from West Virginia who have successfully navigated challenges can be an effective mechanism to convey successful problem-solving experiences in a way that provides realistic role models to future students (Hlinka, 2017).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study builds upon sociocultural and critical theories and draws on a conceptual framework in student development to understand the experiences of first-generation college students from West Virginia. These lenses are meaningful to the research questions at hand. These questions and others like it stem from the researcher's broader theoretical commitments. According to Graham (2018), one way new knowledge is created is by addressing social injustice and proposing critical questions about ways of being and doing. Critical practitioners center marginalized voices in their evidence gathering and interpretation, allowing data to be used in transformative ways in the pursuit of equity. By framing this study and the use of this conceptual framework in the following theories, the researcher can honor these commitments and contribute to the higher education literature.

Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, where overlapping or intersecting social identities relate to systems and structures of oppression, was the original idea that grounded the researcher's thinking. Intersections through which one could consider the target population include geographic and social isolation, poverty, class, academic under-preparedness, and first-generation status. However, in an effort to avoid recentering critical race theory on a predominantly white population, a more appropriate concept is that of spatial inequality. Galster and Sharkey (2017) state that space plays a vital role as a foundation for inequality and perpetuating intergenerational inequality. Often, those with little are stuck in place both geographically and socioeconomically. Furthermore, they argue that space is a particularly salient and underappreciated contributing factor to inequality.

Additionally, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction, specifically the concept of cultural capital, is pertinent to this study. This refers to symbolic elements like skills, tastes, clothing, mannerisms, or credentials that one acquires through being a member of a particular

social class. Sharing similar forms of cultural capital with others is a way to create a collective identity, but it also creates social inequality because some forms of cultural capital are given more authority and higher value over others. This is a helpful lens through which to consider the experiences of low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia, and the effects their positionality may have on the way they are perceived by others (faculty, administrators and fellow students) within the higher education context.

From the vantage points of these theories, the researcher considers Reason, Terenzini & Domingo's (2005) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence. This model was revolutionary at the time because it incorporated a broader array of influences than previous major studies of college impact such as the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) (Pascarella et. al, 2001) and National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2003). The framework hypothesizes that students come to college with a range of demographic, personal and academic characteristics and experiences which shape their engagement with various aspects of their school. They are also shaped by a variety of curricular and out-of-class experiences and conditions. All of this occurs within and is shaped by the institutional context, including organizational characteristics, structures, practices, policies, culture and environments. This suggests that the traits and attributes students bring with them to the academy not only have implications for their retention via their individual engagement, but also in regard to institutional context.

SIGNIFICANCE/ CONTRIBUTION

The study will add to the ongoing conversation of student retention by illuminating the nature of the barriers faced by low-income, first generation college students from rural West Virginia by adding qualitative input from Appalachian voices into the current body of literature

examining changes in rural college going and completion. It addresses a gap in the relevant literature that prioritizes the barriers faced by urban populations relative to those faced by rural populations. It also addresses a gap in the relevant rural literature by focusing on students from West Virginia. Ultimately, this research should provide greater representation of West Virginians in higher education and a more nuanced description and understanding of factors that impact student retention by focusing on a group largely omitted from both the student retention literature and from dominant discourses surrounding inequality in educational attainment. This could provide valuable insights to help us understand the way that shifts in American society have shaped rural college going, which Wells et al. (2019) have called for. This work's practical contributions include the identification of solutions to improve retention rates among this population at West Virginia University. It is anticipated that solutions will include ideas for institutional or peer support systems that can be provided immediately before or during the first year of college, or for educating and training administrators and faculty to understand and respond to these student needs.

While the target population is narrow and specific, insights may be transferable to other settings. Other land-grant institutions may be able to utilize these findings to help them reconsider how they deliver on the promise of their land-grant mission. Other types of higher education institutions that serve low-income, rural, first-generation students may also find these results useful as they consider how to improve retention of marginalized groups underrepresented in existing student retention literature.

After all, much of the foundation of the study of college student experience, retention, persistence and development has historically been based on upper-class white, male, non-first-generation experiences. The new millennium brought new ways of thinking as scholars dissected

and critiqued this understanding, and as previous scholars revised their own work to accommodate nuances overlooked from their original models (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 2006). However, not all traditionally overlooked populations have been incorporated or considered equally into the body of work, including Appalachians – specifically, low-income, first-generation rural students from West Virginia. Insights from this traditionally overlooked population can add more depth and clarification to our current understanding of the literature on student experience. Through a comparison with the dominant discourse, these voices may even provide counter narratives that can help higher education researchers critically examine long-held beliefs on student success.

LIMITATIONS

This research is constrained by a number of factors, perhaps the most obvious of which is the specificity of the context. Although transferability to other settings is anticipated, the present study looks at one land-grant institution's relationship with a spatially and economically marginalized in-state population within a wider social, cultural and economic state context. Furthermore, rural students make up a minority (29%) of college enrollees in the US (NACE, 2018) which may cause some researchers to overlook the significance of developing support systems for this group. However, when it comes to improving retention, a multitude of tactics targeting a multitude of populations is necessary. There is no one silver bullet.

Another limitation is the definition of "rural". A multitude of definitions exist, causing current research findings to be mixed and occasionally contradictory. This impacts the utility of the research findings in contexts where other definitions are used (Wells, et al 2019a). To overcome this challenge, the present study will use a definition of "self-identification as rural," which first and foremost meets the theoretical and methodological commitments of the research

methods in this study. Transparency regarding the use of this definition will also help overcome the limitation by clearly specifying that the identity of rurality belongs to the individuals and is not ascribed to them by external entities.

The very nature of this study is limited in its ability to be a strong critical piece because it only examines students who have made it to college and persisted at least one semester. When considering the social justice and land-grant mission, this study and others like it leave out some of the most marginalized individuals who never make it to college in the first place. Any study focusing on students currently in higher education, though valuable, must be called out in its inherent privilege of educational access.

In regard to the particular approach (narrative inquiry), some limitations must be considered. First, any approach where the researcher is the instrument for data collection is open to human error. This could include the researcher's: (in)ability to think critically about the types of questions that would yield the best data; personal thoughts, feelings, or attentiveness on a given day; and commitment to ethics to not smooth the plot of the narrative. The researcher's own limitations and deficiencies affect the quality of the data collection and subsequent analysis. Furthermore, in qualitative narrative interviewing, it is important to leave room for potential changes or shifts in direction. The researcher must get their own views and preconceived notions out of the way to highlight the stories and experiences of the narrators.

Another limitation is the ability to effectively address power dynamics and get other scholars interested in social change. How do we address issues of audience? Audre Lorde's famous criticism "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" rings loudly. How effective can the existing system of institutionalized inequity be at implementing change? Social action is a prerequisite criterion of critical work, but it is not possible to guarantee that policy

change will result from this study. To counter this concern, the argument for improved financial institutional outcomes, which is certainly of interest to top leaders within higher education, becomes paramount.

A final limitation is that detailed qualitative work does not neatly allow for quick summarization in condensed formats like tables, graphs or charts. More stories could be more beneficial when trying to advocate for social change, but it is unrealistic to conduct large scale studies when the data collection is of this depth. Narrative work can stress the individual over the greater social context, sometimes to its detriment. It is difficult but necessary to simultaneously address the whole picture and the important small details in this method.

Despite these acknowledged limitations, the study is worthwhile for its contributions to the body of student retention literature and the methodology is sound based on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks outlined for this project.

CHAPTER 2

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature to situate the present study by highlighting what is known about the topic and what remains to be investigated. This literature review encompasses a wide range of peer-reviewed literature in student postsecondary access and retention, student development, as well as a justification of the relevant theories that provide the appropriate lens through which to view this study. Broadly, four main areas will be addressed in the literature review: standard or typical retention and student development theories; factors impacting retention; an overview of the theories of social reproduction and spatial justice and a justification of their use in the present study; and a brief overview of what previous research suggests are appropriate intervention measures to help students retain and succeed.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORIZING

In their book *Rethinking College Student Development Theory Using Critical Frameworks*, Abes, Jones and Stewart (2019) liken the evolution of the field of student development to waves, an echo of feminist scholarship. One can consider traditional theoretical contributions, neatly categorized into domains such as psychosocial, cognitive, and moral, as the first wave, identifying important developmental tasks by which students ought to experience growth. A foundational contribution of the first wave is the assumption that college students should grow and develop as a result of their experiences in the college environment (p 24). However, the authors argue that their primary emphasis on concepts like "dissonance," "assimilation," and "accommodation" suggest that while the developmental process was not without variance, it was still relatively consistent for all students.

In response, a second wave of theoretical contributions focused on the importance of social identity. In particular, there was a growing attention to notice who was left out of these original theories**.** Scholars began to identify that a student's group memberships and sense of belonging influenced their sense of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Furthermore, group memberships are influenced by larger societal structures that reflect systems of dominance and oppression. By extension, the second wave suggested there is meaning in how one's group affiliations are perceived by others, which can reflect structures of inequality and relations between different groups within the university setting. The second wave brought to attention the impact of inhospitable campus climates on student development and encouraged a greater inclusion of diverse groups. It also pointed out sociocultural contexts that help explain how students develop. Ultimately, the second wave brought nuance based on social identity into the light and helped explain the developmental journeys of some students previously excluded from dominant theories (p. 25).

The currently emerging third wave places as emphasis on critical theory. Through this lens, meaningfully integrating theory and practice is a mechanism to promote social change through emancipation. Critical theory positions scholars to explain inequities within higher education. Goals of emancipation may be big (like policy change) or small (like improving the experience of a single student or small group of students), but regardless of the scope, the goal is explicit. This explicit attention to structures of inequality as the context in which development takes place is a differentiator from the second wave. Abes et al. (2019) posit it will never be enough to simply describe students' experiences; instead, it is imperative to require a critical analysis of the "intersecting domains of power and structures of inequality that frame development in the first place" (p. 26).

While waves are not meant to be completely sequential or mutually exclusive, the present study can be likened to the cresting of the second wave. While a critical lens indicative of the third wave is central to the work, the researcher is not satisfied with the resolution of the second wave when it comes to considering first-generation, rural, low-income students from West Virginia. If the second wave signifies a deep understanding of how a student's group memberships and sense of belonging impact their development, the researcher argues that the work is unfinished in Appalachia. Abes, Jones and Stewart (2019) welcome the third wave, arguing it brings much needed attention to many marginalized groups by addressing systemic inequities based on race, ableism, sexuality, and colonization in higher education. However, some groups are missing from this discourse. Among those omitted are Appalachians.

Undergraduate Retention

The National Center for Education Statistics defines retention rates as the percentage of first-time undergraduate students who return to the same institution the following fall. Between

2017 and 2018, the percentage of first time, full-time degree seeking undergraduate students retained at four-year institutions was 81% (US Department of Education, 2019). This means for every five students who enroll at a given four-year institution, approximately one does not return the following year. West Virginia University lags behind this national average, reporting a retention rate between 75.9% and 79.6% for the five first-time full-time freshmen cohorts between 2014 and 2018 (Morgantown Student Outcomes, 2021).

While the issue of undergraduate retention remains timely, it is certainly not new. In their history of student retention, Berger, Ramirez, and Lyons (2012) offer some foundational assumptions, issues and definitions related to retention in American higher education. First, it is important to establish that "retention" refers to the institution's ability to keep a student at their specific institution. "Persistence" refers to the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning through degree completion (p. 5). Put simply, institutions retain, and students persist. Therefore, the present study is one of retention as it looks to examine the experiences of students within the institutional context, as retention is reflective of the type of environment provided by the institution and how well it meets the needs of students enrolled at that institution.

The concept of undergraduate college student retention (arguably much better phrased than its predecessor, "student mortality") began as a serious inquiry in the 1960s. A decade earlier, colleges saw booming enrollments as a result of the GI Bill implemented for white veterans. In fact, many institutions could not accommodate all interested students as college became increasingly desirable in an industrial and technology-oriented society. Enrollments grew further in the 1960s as African Americans fought for greater educational access through the Civil Rights movement. These previously omitted groups had lower levels of academic

opportunities and preparation in comparison to past cohorts, and as such, their retention was quite low. The lower retention rates of new groups of students coupled with a decrease in enrollments nationwide in the 1970s played a role in establishing the concept of retention as a critical concern (p. 12-14). Notable researchers such as Spady (1971), Kamens (1971), Astin (1977), Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980, 1983) spurred tremendous interest in the study of retention.

Although some work had been done in the 1960s, Spady (1971) was the first to call for a systemically and empirically based body of knowledge that could better inform efforts to understand and improve retention (p. 13). His 1971 model was the first to emphasize the interaction between student characteristics and the characteristics of the campus environment. This marked a shift to grounding studies in sociology instead of psychology. These effects are still salient today. Spady argued that if student attributes (skills, values, interests, attitudes) were congruent with the norms of the campus environment (faculty, peers, administrators), then the student would assimilate academically and socially, increasing their likelihood of persistence and success.

Spady's work was a precursor to Vincent Tinto's contributions to the field. He built upon Spady's model by incorporating elements of psychological and organizational theoretical models. Tinto (1975, 1993) suggested that a student's entry characteristics, coupled with their initial commitment to the institution and to graduation, influence their departure decisions, and that early and continued institutional commitment mediated academic and social integration, both of which are important to retention. Kamens (1974) demonstrated that more selective institutions face less attrition. His work legitimized the idea that the social charter and prestige of the institution can strengthen its ability to retain students. Meanwhile, Astin's (1977, 1985) work

demonstrated that involvement with one's education is key to retention and that the amount of energy a student invests in their collegiate experience directly influences their decision to persist or depart.

By the late 1970s, theoretical foundations were established and empirical work began. Pascarella and Terenzini (1977, 1979) built upon Tinto's models and opened the floodgates for a new wave of studies using systematic approaches. The 1980s ushered in the concept of enrollment management. Bean (1983) demonstrated how organizational attributes and reward structures affect student perceptions, which affects their satisfaction and ultimately their persistence. Now, data was being used to guide retention research as well as institutional practices in the areas of recruitment, student support services, and curriculum development (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, pp. 15-17).

By the 1990s, retention became a permanently established educational priority, as institutions began to turn more attention to student learning and the importance of overlap between the academic and social spheres (p. 18). As studies have proliferated, so too have critiques of Tinto's theory (Braxton et al., 2000; Longwell-Grice, 2008; Liu, 2002; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Some of the critiques address the need to take the existing models and integrate them with others to improve sophistication, and others call for the addition of constructs from other disciplines to elaborate on the existing models. Others have recognized the omission of certain subgroups from the literature (Berger, et al., 2012, p. 17). One of the most significant critiques is that Tinto's original theory did not empirically account for the importance of social integration (Braxton et al., 2000). Braxton et al. (2000) found that active learning played a statistically significant role in influencing a student's social integration, institutional commitment and their intent to return. They also noted other scholarship that provided empirical evidence for

the importance of social integration on organizational attributes and student involvement (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Milem & Berger, 1997).

Retention continues to be a scholarly and practical priority for institutions, as evidenced by the existence of an academic journal wholly devoted to the topic and the need for many institutions to focus on retention to increase enrollments in tight budgetary conditions. Furthermore, it remains clear that student involvement (engagement) matters to retention, and it matters most during the first year of enrollment. What is less clear is how to make involvement matter in different settings and for different subgroups of students in a way that enhances their retention and graduation (Tinto, 2006). According to Tinto's (2006) own critique of his earlier work, this represents a gap between research and practice, which the present study seeks to address.

Berger, Ramirez & Lyons (2012) argue the data from Braxton's study suggest that social, not academic, integration is key to understanding student departure (p. 17-18). But there is a growing recognition that successful retention of underrepresented groups may require institutions to depart from the assumption that integration is a one-way street where students must assimilate into the institutional context. Abes, et al. (2019) purport that interlocking, mutually supporting systems of oppression are embedded in the environments where identity develops, and what constitutes "context" has evolved to also include larger structures of inequality. As such, there is a need to investigate how a dominant organizational pattern affects retention of underrepresented groups. Some scholars have pointed out that despite a diversification in the makeup of enrolled students, higher education continues to focus on the privileged (Ardoin, 2019). Therefore, it is appropriate to critique dominant cultures and theories that assume students must adopt campus norms and integrate or assimilate in order to succeed.

The diversification of students within higher education has led to a diversification of retention issues as well. Hlinka (2017) notes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to retention – that each institution ought to have tailored initiatives that are specific to their student populations and environments. More can be done to explain the interaction between specific types of students and specific types of campuses. The present study adds to the existing literature by examining the interactive influence between the characteristics of low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia and the organizational context at their state flagship, land grant institution.

Factors Affecting Retention and Persistence

In the subsequent sections, attention will be given to literature focused on various factors affecting student retention and persistence, student development, forms of capital, spatial injustice in rural Appalachia, and institutional context with the intent of shedding light on what types of involvement and experiences matter for the improved retention of low-income, first-generation students from rural West Virginia at WVU.

Socioeconomic Factors

Middle Appalachia, which contains all of West Virginia except the four northern panhandle counties, has higher poverty rates (25.3%) and higher rates of students eligible for subsidized lunch (55.2%) compared to national averages (20.8% and 46%, respectively) (Pollard & Jacobson, 2014). A review of the literature demonstrates that a student's socioeconomic status (SES) has significant impacts on college access. Socioeconomic effects on persistence remain salient after controlling for gender, race and ethnicity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Akerhielm et al. (1998) found that students' expectations regarding educational attainment were highly correlated with SES. Once students enroll in college, their SES continues to influence

their experiences, achievement and graduation rates (OECD, 2014). After enrolling, even the highest academically achieving students from low-SES families face barriers to persistence to graduation (Astin & Oseguera 2004; Wei & Carroll, 2002). In a national study, Bowen et al. (2009) found that at public flagship institutions (such as WVU), the six-year graduation rate for low-SES students was significantly lower (68%) compared to the graduation rate for high-SES students (83%). Furthermore, while most retention studies look at first-to-second year retention, comparisons of low-SES to high-SES students demonstrate a visible difference in withdrawal rates even earlier than that: in the first to second semester (Bowen et al., 2009).

The college completion gaps between low and high SES students persist. A 2015 NCES study that examined postsecondary attainment by SES levels found that the graduation gap is wider than the enrollment gap between the lowest and highest earners. Both groups had high hopes as high schoolers, with 87% of students in the top quartile and 58% of students in the bottom quartile aiming for at least a bachelor's degree. However, at the end of a 13-year period, only 14% of those from the lowest quartile had earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 60% among the top quartile (NCES, 2015). Dynarski (2015) points out that of the students in the study who earned the highest math scores, 74% of them from the most advantaged SES backgrounds had completed a bachelor's degree, compared to only 41% of those with the lowest SES backgrounds. This signifies a completion gap of 33 percentage points between the highest academically achieving students based on their status as high or low SES. The study also found that a low SES student with top scores is equally as likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree as a high SES student with mediocre scores. And among those students with the lowest scores, 21% in the high SES group were able to graduate, compared to only 5% of those in the low SES group. The study suggests that class trumps ability as a predictor of college completion

(Dynarski, 2015). Another more recent longitudinal study by the NCES found a 50-percentage point gap in enrollment in postsecondary education between lowest SES (28%) and highest SES groups (78%), as well as a 46-percentage point gap between the lowest SES (32%) and highest SES (78%) groups in the completion of their bachelor's degree (NCES, 2019).

Low-SES students have greater levels of unmet financial need and are more likely to work more than 20 hours per week than higher-SES students (Titus, 2006). Both of these factors have been shown to negatively impact student persistence (Hippensteel et al, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Additionally, low-SES students are underrepresented in higher education and their underrepresented identity is likely salient, regularly reminding them of their differences from others (Alon, 2009; Hearn & Rosinger, 2014; Orbe, 2004). Studies have demonstrated that low-SES students regularly report feeling out of place in the college context (Harackiewicz et al, 2014; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Rubin, 2007, Soria & Stebelton, 2013) and that these students suffer from negative stereotypes regarding their ability and competence (Fiske, et al., 2002; Durante, et al., 2017). Low-SES students also report lower self-efficacy and have lower self-reported perceptions of intelligence than do high SES students (Hellman & Harbeck, 1997; Ivcevic & Kaufman, 2013; Stableton & Soria, 2012). Such stereotypes can contribute to classism toward those who are socially devalued (Lott, 2012, p. 654).

Walpole (2003) argued that if US higher education was truly meritocratic, then low-SES and high-SES student experiences and outcomes would be similar. However, continued and increasing gaps in persistence and graduation rates between low-SES and high-SES students suggests that US postsecondary institutions reproduce social class hierarchies rather than mitigate them (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2017; Bourdieu, 1977). Jury et al. (2017) found higher education is far from being culturally neutral because the system is built and organized by

unwritten rules created by middle- and upper-class cultural norms. Low-SES students can experience barriers in emotional experiences, identity management, self-perception and motivation (Jury et al., 2017). Students may face internal tensions between their prior and current experiences due to their shift from a poor or working-class home environment to that of middle-class academia (Soria, 2015).

Rowan Kenyon et al. (2017) used Bourdieu's (1977) theories of social and cultural capital to examine declining persistence trends of low-SES students to develop a model that demonstrated deficiencies in traditional models of student persistence to better accommodate the realities of low-SES students. Their model included measures of social and cultural capital, institutional characteristics, student supports while in college, environmental pull variables and student background characteristics. They found that institutional characteristics, student support and environmental pull variables mitigated the significance of social capital factors. Students who met regularly with an advisor or faculty member were twice as likely to persist (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2017). This suggests that adherence to social norms (social capital) are not necessary to persistence, but rather that discrepancies can be mitigated by institutional actions.

Ardoin (2018) provides an important nuance that SES is just one factor that contributes to one's social class and that more holistic experiences of social class are also relevant (Ardoin, 2017; Ardoin, 2018). Social class identity is fluid, subjective and complex, and is often first experienced through one's family through dress, dialect, manners, and methods of interaction (Barratt, 2011; hooks, 2000; Soria, 2015; Ardoin, 2018). Further review of class considerations through Bourdieu's (1977; 1987) theory of social reproduction will follow upon the conclusion of the review of factors salient to retention and persistence.

First Generation Factors

First-generation student status is linked to experiences with classism within the academy that significantly affect academic satisfaction (Langhout, et al., 2009; Allan, et al., 2016). There are several ways to define what constitutes a first-generation college student. For purposes of this study, first-generation refers to students whose parents did not obtain a bachelor's degree, as it is the most commonly used definition by higher education institutions. These students often do not have parents who are able to help them understand or navigate the college environment and its expectations (Davis, 2010).

The proportion of first-generation college students entering higher education is growing (Ishitani, 2003), with one in six students on college campuses and 27% of graduating high school seniors in this category (US Dept of Education, 2015). Despite a larger presence of first-generation students on college campuses, inequitable outcomes between first-generation and continuing-generation students remain.

First-generation students attain bachelor's degrees at a rate of 20% six years after entering postsecondary education, compared to 49% of continuing-generation students, and they have a higher rate of attrition; they are five times more likely to depart postsecondary education without a credential after the first year (RTI International, 2019a). Past studies have found first-generation students enrolled at four-year institutions are less likely to persist at their initial institution and complete bachelor's degrees at half the rate of their continuing-generation peers (Warburton, et al., 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; DeAngelo et al., 2011).

First-generation students are more likely than their continuing generation peers to come from low-income families (29% vs 9%), with those who are dependents having a median annual parental income of $41,000 compared to $90,000 for continuing generation students (Warburton, et al., 2001; RTI International, 2019b). This group subsequently faces comparatively high work

demands, family pressures and financial stress compared to continuing-generation peers (Cutrona, et al., 1994; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006) which may constitute financial barriers to their academic success (Engle et al., 2006). External influences including ties to home communities, time spent working and lack of time spent on campus can lower students' levels of integration or involvement on campus (Billson & Terry, 1982; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Studies have shown first-generation students tend to have lower GPAs (Chen & Carrol, 2005; Stephens, et al., 2014). Many first-generation students are disadvantaged in regard to familial support, expectations, planning and college preparation in high school. This relative lack of preparation creates a cultural mismatch between higher education institutions' individualistic norms and first-generation students' experiences (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Stephens et al., 2012). All of these factors of mismatch- inadequate family preparation; misalignment between student and institutional expectations, and student feelings of loneliness and discomfort - help to explain the relatively lower academic performance of first-generation college students (Komada, 2002; Stephens et al., 2012).

Outlets for meaningful social connection can be difficult for first-generation college students to obtain but make a significant difference when they do occur. First-generation students may experience alienation or loneliness and may be less likely to share about their college experiences with their non-college going friends and family back home (Barry et al., 2009). When they do have the chance to observe and know someone "like them" on campus, it can positively impact the relation between their stress level and perceived academic goal progress (Garriott & Nisle, 2018).

While the outlook on first-generation student success may look grim, both families and institutions can play a role in positively mitigating these realities. Ali & Saunders (2006) study of 87 high school students in rural Central Appalachia found that students' aspirations for college attendance were associated more strongly with their level of parental support rather than their parents' own educational attainment levels. In a 2019 study, Wells et al found that one of the largest predictors of college completion was whether a parent expected the child to attain at least a bachelor's degree First-generation students derive greater benefit from academic engagement than their continuing-generation counterparts (Pascarella et al., 2004). Campus supports are critical to the well-being and academic success of first-generation students (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007). Garriott and Nisle (2018) found that student stress is significantly related to institutional supports for first, but not continuing, generation students. The relationship between stress and institutional support may be weaker for continuing-generation students due to their increased access to forms of social and cultural capital on college campuses (Davis, 2010).

RURALITY / PLACE-BASED IDENTITY

The literature demonstrates the effects of socioeconomic status and first-generation status are salient and constitute challenges to student retention and persistence. Both of these factors are prevalent in West Virginia, where WVU is the flagship, land-grant institution. Another factor impacting low-SES, first-generation college students from West Virginia that is comparatively less studied is rurality. Previous research suggests that "rurality" can be an important aspect of one's identity (Heinisch, 2017; Schultz, 2004; Yenney-Henderson, 2019). Place-based identity consists of an objective component (where people live or have lived) and a subjective component (socially and culturally constructed meanings) that are fluid and exist within the system of urbanormativity (Cain, 2020). In addition to SES and first-generation influences on inequitable

student persistence, place can be an important contributor to attrition and success. As Tieken (2017) argues, "Educational inequity is not just raced or classed but also spatialized – that is, embedded in and maintained through geography" (p. 385).

Despite the growth of scholarly interest in identity politics, the rural/ urban axis remains understudied among college students, representative of a larger general disregard for rurality in research and policy. This is problematic, given research that demonstrates growth in postsecondary achievement was less strong in rural areas compared to urban and suburban areas, and that nonrural students exhibited a statistically significant advantage in bachelor's degree attainment even after adjusting for family resources, community social resources and academic background. Rural students were more likely than nonrural students to not attend college at all, and were also more likely than the other groups to obtain a sub-baccalaureate credential (Wells, et al., 2019). If student affairs professionals seek to more fully understand their students, place-based identity must be better understood, as the importance of interpersonal support and sense of belonging has been documented (Cain, 2020; Yenney, 2020; Coladarci, 2007).

Two contributing factors to the omission of place-based identity may be historical framing of rural education and a disagreement on what constitutes rurality and rural education scholarship. The concept of "rural" is not monolithic, consistent or precise. The US government uses more than two dozen systems to classify space and place, and depending on the system used, the rural proportion of a given population can change drastically, varying from 7% to 49% (Cromartie & Bucholtaz, 2008; Tieken, 2017 p 386). While there is some agreement that traditional predictors of college access and persistence such as parental education level (said to be representative of cultural capital) are less present in rural areas, there is disagreement on

whether or not rural and nonrural students attend or persist at similar rates due to nonstandard and varied definitions of rurality (Nelson, 2019; Li, 2019).

The inconsistency in defining "rural" populations has led to contradictory narratives in the research. Some argue from a rural deficit perspective signified by lower college attainment, lower SES, lower levels of parental education and lower resourced schools. But others take the perspective that rural students have stronger social capital and closer parent-child relationships (see Li, 2019, for a discussion exploring the two narratives), a stronger work ethic, greater maturity and perseverance (Elder & Conger, 2000; Heinisch, 2017; Yenney-Henderson, 2019). Wells et al. (2019) suggest that rural students are more likely than their nonrural counterparts to have residential stability, engage in a religious community, and have parents who know their friends' parents, all of which are associated with increased academic achievement (p. 6).

Although the lack of clarity of defining rural presents challenges, it does not negate the value of rural centered or rural related research. Instead, research should be interpreted and compared to other results with a careful consideration of differing definitions in mind (Manly et al, 2019). Biddle et al. (2019) propose that rural research should not necessarily be "inherently rural," but instead should address factors important within rural contexts and focus on how the scholarship is of critical relevance to rural communities. Instead of arguing that rurality as a factor uniquely shapes an outcome, researchers ought to be able to demonstrate the importance of their research for those in rural contexts. They argue that "place" should be thought of as not only geographic, but also as dynamic, political and relational. Biddle et. al (2019) also encourage rural-focused research to address how power manifests across space and place – which the present study keeps in mind through its critical lens.

Twenty percent of public-school students attend rural schools, but those student experiences are lacking in educational equity-focused research (NCES, 2014; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). Historically, politicians and educational reformers described challenges faced by rural people as "the rural problem," viewing rural schools as deficient in comparison to schools in more industrialized locales in the late 1800s and early 1900s (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Edmondson, 2003; Biddle et al., 2019). The viewpoint of these schools as "problems to solve" by applying efficiencies of scale and standardization has led to policies such as school consolidation, curricular requirements designed to provide a common body of knowledge despite its contextual irrelevance and expanding governmental oversight that diminishes local control (Corbett, 2007). Applying practices created within an urban-focused paradigm does not always translate well to rural settings. Examples include the charter school movement, which relies on a type of school choice unfeasible in many rural areas, and the No Child Left Behind Act, which made unreasonable demands on rural schools (Ash, 2014; Tieken, 2014). In addition to disadvantaging rural schools, one effect of these reforms has been that rural students leave school with knowledge and values incongruent and irrelevant to their rural communities, a phenomenon that Corbett (2007) calls "learning to leave." A common stereotype is that Appalachian families do not value higher education. However, more nuanced research shows that many families clearly do value higher education, while others do not necessarily question its value, but rather, are wary of its benefits (Kannapel & Flory, 2017). Once in college, rural students may receive advice from academic advisors regarding major selection or career selection that does not pay attention to whether or not the subsequent paths for those fields are viable or sustainable in a rural community. This assumed bias toward upward mobility may characterize success as unassociated with living in rural areas (Ardoin & McNamee, 2020).

Rural students may experience tension to either remain in their rural communities or leave for college. The move can be both a literal physical distance and a symbolic cultural distance (Tieken, 2016). Part of the rural college-going conversation focuses on employment opportunities, which can push families to embrace the need for a college education despite the fact that attaining that degree often requires leaving home (Tieken, 2016). Conversely, other rural communities may push back on the idea of a college education since many of the visible jobs do not require a degree, or because some areas have not seen positive economic benefits as a result of schooling. The lack of opportunity to observe how education can be a mechanism to advance one's economic standing can cause some students to question whether an education could help them in the future (Corbett, 2007; Starcher, 2005). Furthermore, some rural students' commitment to place and family makes the decision to leave less appealing, and some rural parents resist the idea of their children attending college out of their own needs and self-interests, such as the need for labor around the home or caring for siblings (Tieken, 2016; Beasley, 2017). The resistance may also come from the students themselves, as they may value family cohesiveness above individual achievement or personal goals or be wary of being thought of as "elitist" or "othered" by their home community (Deaton, 2008; Ardoin, 2018 p. 35). Rural students who do not hold these values may be more apt to leave (Binney & Martin, 1997; Johnson et al, 2005; Beasley, 2017).

With these contextual factors in mind, rural students as a group face challenges that have similarities and overlaps with those challenges facing low-SES and first-generation students. Rural students are more likely than average to be first-generation and have parents with lower incomes, lower education levels, and lower educational expectations for their children, all of which have been shown to be predictors of both college enrollment and completion (Provasnik et

al., 2007; Byun et al., 2012; Tieken, 2016; Nelson, 2019). Family income is consistently predictive on college completion, but its influence is most pronounced for rural students compared to suburban and urban students. Although socioeconomic factors help diminish the gap in college completion between rural and nonrural students, significant unexplained gaps remain between the groups (Wells et al., 2019).

Rural guidance counselors, who may influence students' educational aspirations, are overworked and undercompensated (McDonough, 2005). Ardoin's (2018) study of rural and non-rural college applicants found that rural applicants were overconfident about the information they had about college. Rural applicants believed they had the same level of understanding of the college-going process as the non-rural students with whom they were competing for admission. However, the urban and suburban applicants had more access to adults with college experience than the rural students, allowing them to leverage greater amounts of cultural capital valued by colleges and universities.

The challenges do not cease once a rural student enrolls in college. In fact, the gaps in degree attainment between rural and nonrural graduates are greater and less understood than the disparity regarding initial college enrollment (Wells, et. al, 2019b). Researchers suggest that rural students have difficulty with time management, the anonymity of attending a larger school, and exhibit anxiety when engaging with diversity (Heinisch, 2017; Yenney-Henderson, 2019). The present study seeks a better understanding of the experience of rural students on college campuses to provide more attention to all parts of the college pathway through completion.

A final consideration on the discussion of rurality is that educational inequities are intimately tied to geography (Tieken, 2017). Rural students and communities often share an experience of being on the losing end of corporate concentration and deindustrialization. These

spaces are often the last to get updated technological infrastructure, last to regain power after an outage, or the first to lose a regional or national chain store (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2020). The distribution of federal Title I funds favors large numbers of poor students over large proportions of poor students in a given district. This provides greater benefits to densely populated urban areas with relatively low poverty rates than to small rural districts with much higher poverty rates (Formula Fairness Campaign, 2015). When the system requires rural and urban schools to vie for these resources, it contributes to a sense of competition rather than allyship between the rural and urban poor (Tieken, 2017). Viewing educational inequities as a "rural vs. urban" competition for resources is a distraction from addressing the longstanding structural problem of trying to solve rural challenges using urban solutions.

The US educational system funds schools through property taxes. Therefore, those who own and reside in areas with high property values have the right to a high-quality education, whereas those with low value property do not. Tieken (2017) argues that the devaluing of certain property based on stereotypes (such as the racialized "dangerous urban" stereotype or the classed "backwards rural" stereotype) can contribute to lower property values that negatively impact the educational opportunities of children in those areas.

There are open questions about what constitutes the concept of rurality and what qualifies as rural education scholarship (Biddle et al., 2019). However, enough scholarship exists to posit that geographic factors are salient in the present study, which seeks to fill a gap in the literature by examining the experiences of low-income, first-generation rural college students from West Virginia at their land-grant institution. This work wishes to advance the understanding of rural experiences, for the rural and the practitioners and institutions who serve them. To better

understand the relationship between people, land, and context, Appalachian factors must also be explored.

APPALACHIAN FACTORS

"The Appalachian people know the value of tradition and continuity, even though they are sometimes ridiculed for this devotion by the outside world." – Foster & Connor, 1992 p. 18.

Appalachia encompasses all of West Virginia and portions of 12 other states from Mississippi to New York (Appalachian Regional Commission). This area is largely rural, faces high levels of poverty, low rates of white-collar employment, and low rates of educational attainment and college attendance (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004). A goal for the region is to increase participation in higher education to create a more educated workforce (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004). Relative to Appalachia as a whole, Central Appalachia (where WVU is located) has more students in poverty and with disabilities, lower levels of educational attainment, fewer adults in the labor force (70% vs. 78% nationally), a lower median household income ($42k/yr vs. $53k/yr nationally) and higher unemployment rates than the rest of the US or other parts of Appalachia (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2014). Of those who do work, a lower percentage work in professions requiring a college degree (ARC, 2014). The student population in this region is, on average, poorer and less ethnically diverse than the rest of the country (Kannapel & Flory, 2017). And for the first time in 2017, the CDC reported declines in life expectancy among less-educated rural whites in impoverished and remote counties of Appalachia (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017).

Nelson (2019) found that rural youth graduate from four-year colleges at a similar rate to peers from other areas, despite being more likely to come from lower SES backgrounds. However, within West Virginia that does not hold true. In 2000, only 18% of the population in Appalachian regions of the country possessed a college degree, compared to 25% of the population in the non-Appalachian regions. Average high school completion in central

Appalachia is only 64% versus 80% for the United States as a whole (Shaw et al., 2004). While some progress has been made over the past 20 years, West Virginia's college attainment is still particularly low, with 19.6% of residents age 25+ having a bachelor's degree or higher. This trails all bordering states (Kentucky 23.3%, Maryland 38.8%, Ohio 26.8%, Pennsylvania 29.7%, Virginia 37%) and the national average of 30.6% (WV Forward Human Capital, 2021).

In comparison to the literature that addresses socioeconomic status or first-generation status, there is far less extant literature on retention and persistence factors within Appalachia. The present study seeks to fill to this gap. As a group, Appalachians have a strong sense of belonging to their family, belonging to their land, and a recognition of the history present in both family and land. While many college students experience identity struggles as they transition from home to the university environment, Appalachian students seem to experience this internal conflict more acutely (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004).

Appalachian culture is known for its strong sense of familial ties (Beaver, 1986; Jones, 2002; Keefe, 1998) and kinship ties (Bryant, 1981; Tang & Russ, 2007). These ties are traditionally valued as much or more than modernist values like educational attainment, upward mobility and economic gains (Howley et al., 1996; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Wilson & Gore, 2009). Isolation created by the geographical terrain has traditionally resulted in limited in-migration and a strong reliance on family and community support systems, further strengthening the attachment and commitment to the region (Ali & Saunders, 2006; Elam, 2012). Students from cultures that prioritize strong family ties experience familial tethering, or a pull to remain connected to home which can have negative consequences on the student's ability to connect and succeed within higher education (Beasley, 2017). Wilson et al. (2018) examined the differences between social tethering and externalized tethering, where "externalized tethering" was defined

as the pressure from family to visit home and provide resources of time or money to the family. They found that Appalachian students experienced more externalized tethering compared to social tethering, and that externalized tethering was associated with a lower GPA – an association not observed in their research with social tethering (Wilson et al., 2018).

Appalachian students, women and students from large families were more likely to report pressure from their families to return home from college frequently, and subsequently, a weaker sense of connection to and more isolation from the university. This is important because one of the most influential variables often missing from college student retention prediction formulas is the concept of university connectedness (Wilson et al., 2018). This perception of connectedness, also known as "fit" within the university is part of a wider perception that the student is personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others within the environment (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hausmann, et al., 2007; Hotchkiss, et al., 2006). Many studies have demonstrated a high level of university connectedness positively affects student persistence, academic attitudes, and academic success (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hotchkiss et al., 2006; Wilson & Gore, 2010, 2013).

Wilson and Gore (2010) demonstrated a positive relationship between Appalachian students' perceived university connectedness and GPA, a relationship they did not find among non-Appalachian students, suggesting that Appalachian students who feel integration in the campus community similar to that which they feel in their home communities are better able to navigate the university environment and achieve academic success. However, achieving this sense of connectedness may be more difficult for Appalachian students, who are more likely to report feeling strong ties with immediate and extended family members and experience a disconnect between their home culture and university culture. This may cause avoidance of

becoming too connected to the university (Bryan and Simmons 2009). This aligns with research that suggests incongruence between home culture and university culture can cause feelings of the university as an alien environment (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 2004).

Wilson et al. (2018) compared a group of Appalachian students with a group of Hispanic students, as both cultures value strong kinship ties. Students in both groups are likely to come from families suffering economically and may be called upon for resources of time or money during times of hardship (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Sy and Brittian, 2008; Witkow et al., 2015). This can produce role conflict for these groups of students as they strain their ability to connect to and be successful within the university (Tinto, 2004; Triandis, 2005; Wilkinson-Lee et al, 2011).

Bradbury & Mather (2009) also observed first-generation Appalachian students and found their relationships with family and friends affected their ability to negotiate the academic environment, with most students in their case study having to juggle important yet often conflicting roles. Appalachian students' other responsibilities for producing for the family with time or resources limits the time they can spend on extra-curricular or co-curricular activities. This suggests the classroom experience of these students may be of particular importance to establish connections to the campus, as such opportunities for connecting outside the classroom may be limited (McHenry-Sorber & Swisher, 2020; Bradbury & Mather, 2009).

Another factor that can prohibit Appalachian students from academic and social integration is dialect. Appalachian dialects are heavily stigmatized in mainstream American culture (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016). Interactions with peers and faculty are influenced by students' dialects on several levels. It plays a role in the type of classmates a student initially connects with, it influences how others perceive them, and it can be cause for increased attention for those

students with a more pronounced dialect. Students from rural Appalachia who speak non-standardized varieties of English experience the effects of not being considered or respected equally by instructors or peers (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016).

Hlinka (2017) studied perspectives of students at an Appalachian Kentucky community college and analyzed them through Tinto's (1975) integration theory enhanced with Kegan's cognitive development theory and Bourdieu's (1977; 1987) concepts of capital, habitus and field. The study examined what phenomena serve as barriers and sources of encouragement to get students from the point of entry to the point of transfer in pursuit of a four-year degree. Findings revealed three major factors affecting decision making processes about their persistence: a) community and family's values of education provide the essential push to attend and complete college; b) students are challenged with overcoming the pull of family obligations; c) students struggle to make the cognitive leap necessary to master college coursework. Failing to meet the psychological need of feeling valued and cared for (or what one student described as "we take care of our own" attitude) negatively impacted retention of first year rural Appalachian students (Hlinka, 2017).

The Need for Institution-Level Research

A key takeaway from this qualitative study of Appalachian community college students is that current retention theories are too broad and need to be specified for characteristics of each college. The application of current theories has not resulted in appreciable gains in retention rates (Braxton, 2006; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006). Addressing obstacles unique to the demographics of a specific campus may further improve retention practices (Hlinka, 2017). Institutions who serve Appalachian students should invest resources to understand their specific needs. In an effort to improve retention, institutions are wise to develop strategies that effectively serve the students they have, not the students they wish they had. Institutions must understand

that their students are shaped by the region's culture and should customize retention practices and programs to meet those unique needs (Hlinka, 2017). There is a tendency to stereotype and ignore voices in rural Appalachia, signaling a need for further research on this population (Higbee et al., 2005). The present study seeks to fill a gap in rural Appalachian voices in the discourse surrounding higher education experience and persistence.

RELEVANT THEORIES: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND SPATIAL JUSTICE

The preceding sections detailed the intersecting, overlapping and compounding challenges to retention presented by economic, geographical, and family factors demonstrating a robust picture of possible barriers and challenges for low-income, first-generation, rural students from West Virginia. It also detailed the importance of social integration in student retention. Current approaches to addressing this problem fail to recognize the unique factors that impact the target population. There is a need for more nuanced approaches to improving retention among this population.

The present study approaches research from sociocultural and critical lenses by understanding the realities constructed by the narrators and to share their reality as observed. This perspective shapes the study by highlighting the voices, stories and experiences of the group. The results of their stories may have implications for policymakers and leaders in higher education to change current practices or implement new initiatives to better support the retention and academic success of this population.

The next section describes two frameworks through which existing retention theories may be more purposefully applied to and relevant for the target population: Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural/ social capital (classed); and the concept of spatial justice (spaced).

Social Reproduction: Bourdieu's Habitus, Capital & Field

Pierre Bourdieu's sociological contributions have been of great interest to many scholars and educators over the past 40 years. He argued that schools not only reproduce social inequality, but that they also provide legitimacy to existing class structure by equating class distinctions into "merit-based" distinctions based on academic achievement (Bourdieu, 1973). His three interconnected notions of "habitus," "field," and "capital" help explain both the role of educational institutions in the reproduction of social order and how to understand the way students experience education (Smith, 2020).

Bourdieu believed that outcomes are not objectively determined, nor are they the product of an individual's free will. Both the agency of individual actors (students) and the force of structure within society (norms, values, etc.) are at play. He called this constructivist structuralism and felt his work transcended multiple epistemological paradigms (Scambler, 2015). However, this notion has been criticized by other scholars who have described his work as inconsistent, overly broad, contradictory, or "overintellectualized" (King, 2000; Yang Yang, 2014; Schatzki, 1997; Shirley, 1986). Despite this, Bourdieu remains one of the most cited scholars in the social sciences, exceeding 43,500 Google Scholar citations per year since 2012 (Ollion, 2015). His theoretical work provides a vantage point to critically assess the college experiences and persistence of low-income, first-generation rural college students from West Virginia.

In Bourdieu's (1986) inquiry into French public schools' role in social class reproduction, he expanded the idea of social class beyond one's economic status. He coined the term "habitus" to describe a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behavior people acquire through acting in society. It represents a subjective lens through which a person or institution views the world that is shaped through the quantity and quality of one's possession of capital. The habitus reflects the

different positions people hold within a society and is part of how society produces itself. The concept posits that human action is better understood as being guided by social structures and socialization experiences that have been internalized over time (Bourdieu, 1971; 1990).

People who live similar lifestyles as a result of similar access to capital develop a shared worldview and inhibit a common habitus (Bourdieu, 1971). This is not to say that all members of a group hold the same exact views, but rather that group members hold common representation in class-specific manners at an unconscious level. This serves as a mechanism for individuals to classify themselves with others based on commonalities, as well as for marginalizing others who have access to different amounts or types of capital (Berger, 2000).

From this view, students succeed in college due to their ability to understand and correctly perform the knowledge that reflects the habits and culture of the elite classes who dominate the field (Bourdieu, 1999; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). Bourdieu posited that schools reflect the values of middle-class society, advantaging students who grow up in homes with similar values. When there is alignment of one's own values with that of a system or institution, it is easier for that individual to socially integrate, and therefore navigate and succeed, within that setting, or field.

Students from lower socioeconomic classes, or who have other lived experiences that do not align with what is valued within the university setting, may struggle with feelings of inadequacy as they try to fit in (Maton, 2008; Barratt, 2011; Ardoin, 2019). Educational institutions can treat poor and working-class students as outsiders who need to learn the manners, rules, and values that the middle and upper classes had already acquired at home prior to attending college. This can contribute to feelings of imposter syndrome that cause students to decide between the options of resistance, assimilation, or departure (Barratt, 2011). Institutions

ascribe value inequitably based on certain kinds of cultural behavior, thus contributing to the reproduction of existing patterns of societal inequality (Berger, 2000). When these phenomena (student feelings of inadequacy or institutional devaluation of certain groups of students) result in student departure, it contributes to the retention problem.

If the habitus represents the way society produces itself and creates shared worldviews among members of certain groups, the idea of "capital" represents the resources held by individual actors within the habitus and field. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social reproduction describes various forms of capital, including cultural capital and social capital, that are relevant to the present study. Inequities among first-generation and continuing-generation students in regard to cultural and social capital are well documented (Berger, 2000; Padgett et al., 2012).

Measures of the amount of capital possessed by parents to invest in their children are found in the characteristics of one's social origin such as parental education, family income, and socioeconomic status. Although the ability of a student's family to provide financial support is important, the cultural and social capital contributions have also been found to be highly valuable (Padgett et al., 2012). The cost of higher education and its hierarchical nature often result in poor and working-class students being funneled into less selective institutions. This suggests that poor and working-class students do not have the same access to opportunities that build the kind of social and cultural capital valued by society as wealthier students do (Stich, 2012; McDonough, 1994; McDonough, 1997).

The notion of cultural capital refers to symbolic elements like skills, tastes, clothing, information, mannerisms, knowledge or credentials that one acquires through being a member of a particular social class. It is a collection of symbolic resources embodied in personal outlook, familiarity with high culture, and educational aspirations and credentials used to justify social

distinctions and privilege. This body of cultural knowledge distinguishes higher and lower social classes, as it is valued by members of the upper-class but is not taught in schools (Bourdieu, 1977, 1987; McDonough, 1997). Examples of cultural capital in a higher education setting could include obtaining a credential such as a degree or micro-certification that translates into economic/ career outcomes; knowing how to use chopsticks to eat sushi at a social event; having appropriate attire for interviews or other professional settings; or having international travel experience to draw upon in class discussions.

Typically, the determination of what constitutes cultural capital and its value is largely determined by those who already have a high amount of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979, 1984). Sometimes, knowledge taught in school contradicts working class knowledge (a form of cultural capital) that is more valuable to the students' everyday lives (McFadden, 1995; Riley, 1996). Schools promote global messages, which may be inconsistent with place-based realities, values and local knowledge. For students in families whose experience conflicts with educational ideology, success in school can mean giving in to dominant middle-class culture and rejecting the family (Corbett, 2007; Rueda, 2005).

Hlinka (2017) found that incongruent priorities between the institution and its first-generation Appalachian students was a major hurdle to student success and retention. One faculty member interviewed for the study said, "Even though people in this region realize that 'education will open doors… it doesn't mean they know how to do education.' … Parents often do not possess the cultural capital to understand the rules of the academic game well enough to help their children play, and win, at the game" (Hlinka, 2017). Some students arrive at college with an innate understanding of the rules of the game. Other students have no idea that a game is even being played. Castleman et al. (2015) found that the lack of cultural capital to understand

the innerworkings of the university system negatively affects even those first-generation students who are otherwise well prepared for college level work. The cultural capital that rural, low SES or first-generation students leverage does not equate with the cultural capital of colleges and universities (Ardoin, 2018).

Social capital refers to the one's group association or membership, which confers status on to the individual and provides the benefit of the group's collectively owned capital. It is the sum of the actual or potential resources linked to a network of institutionalized relationships (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Examples of social capital in the higher education setting could include legacy admissions, obtaining membership in an esteemed group on campus such as an honors program, a football team, or Greek life, or being selected for a scholarship because you have a meaningful relationship with members of the selection committee.

Rudick et al. (2019) demonstrated how students identify and navigate the social structure of higher education and how, in doing so, they reproduce socializing norms. Higher education also functions as a site for accruing social and cultural capital in the interest of maintaining class hierarchies. Sharing similar forms of social capital with others is a way to create a collective identity, but it also creates social inequality because some forms of social capital are given more authority and higher value over others. This contributes to unequal access to social resources within the university setting based on group categories such as gender, class, and race. This is a helpful lens through which to consider Appalachian identity and the effects it may have on the target population of the present study and the way they are perceived by others within the higher education context.

This is not to say that low-income, first-generation rural Appalachian students have no social capital. In fact, research has shown that rural youth attribute their success to small town

community social capital and that rural students involved in their community are more likely to be exposed to the kind of social capital that leads to college access and success (Nelson, 2018; Beasley, 2017). However, their understanding of these social ties does not always translate to the university setting. Engle & Tinto (2008) found low-income and first-generation students were less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that contribute to success while in college such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and peers, participating in extra-curricular activities, and utilizing resources and support services. Such students may not understand the myriad benefits such types of academic and social interaction can add to their development. They may be less likely to reach out for assistance, less likely to understand how to navigate postsecondary settings and more likely to feel isolated or disconnected, which can contribute to lower persistence (Chambers, 2020; McNamee, 2019; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Concepts of habitus and capital are considered within the "field," a specific competitive arena with their own rules of the game where actors can use their capital to enhance or protect their resources (DiMaggio, 1982). A university community is an example of a field. All fields contain people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant relationships of inequality operate inside a given field, while simultaneously, actors within the field struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All individuals in the field bring to the table their own power (capital) which defines their position in the given field (Bourdieu, 1998 p. 40-41). A field's specific logic dictates how various kinds of capital can be used for competitive advantage.

Berger (2000) argues that if we are to understand undergraduate persistence from a social reproduction perspective, then we must account for what is happening at both the individual (capital) and organizational (habitus/ field) levels in the persistence process. The system of higher education was traditionally and arguably still is set up to sustain the broader constructs of

class stratifications. Even when higher education became accessible to more people, the expectation was that these students would assimilate to the beliefs and values of those already in college (Ardoin, 2019). Put another way, if students with relatively low capital were to enter a field built for the aristocracy, they would have to be held to the same standards as those longtime players on the field with relatively high capital. This expectation leads to the concept of "class straddling," where poor and working-class students find themselves living between two very different realms of class identity and having to learn to operate in each to be successful (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Lubrano, 2004; Stuber, 2011). Class straddling is a compromise that allows students to remain loyal to their roots while also assimilating with the norms of the academy. It often comes at a high cost, resulting in the individual not feeling quite at home in either environment, while feeling ostracized by both (Ardoin, 2018). An ability to navigate persistent dissonance is does not constitute development or growth for marginalized groups. Rather, the experience of persistent dissonance represents the perpetuation of systemic oppression (Abes et al., 2019 p. 93).

It follows that much of the literature on class identity in higher education views poor and working-class students from a deficit model, where the student's lack of economic mobility is their own fault, and the onus lies on them to "catch up" with their middle- and upper-class peers during their college experience (Soria, 2015). When cultural and social capital are assessed by things like reading books, obtaining a degree, or integrating into normative structures, there is an implication that class inequality is merely the result of individuals who are unable or unwilling to take the necessary steps to become part of the dominant class (Vryonides, 2007; Foley & Edwards, 1999; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). The value poor and working-class students bring to the academy is comparatively underrated and disregarded (Ardoin, 2019).

Viewing poor and working-class students from a deficit model is problematic because of its excessive focus on the individuals and not the systems or power structures. Rudick et al. (2019) provide a strong argument for the use of Bourdieu's work to assess the impact of institutions such as higher education on its students:

> Bourdieu's work points to the realization that conflict is not a byproduct of societal misalignment; rather, it is a central organizing principle of any society. Social and cultural capital are unevenly distributed—not due to individuals' failure to act rationally—but because what counts as capital shifts and morphs to protect the economic interests of elites… In short, Bourdieu's work stresses the need to identify social and cultural capital, not so it can be unreflexively mimicked or taken up, but as a way to intervene into and challenge those systems. (p. 441)

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital give educational researchers the tools to think about disrupting the automatic reproduction of the social order. The possession (or lack thereof) of different forms of capital can be a significant factor in the ways that students experience higher education, a notoriously bureaucratized setting with rigid hierarchies of social class. The present study seeks to add to the current literature by examining the experiences of low-income, first-generation rural college students from West Virginia at their flagship, land-grant university through this lens.

Spatial Justice

If the concepts of habitus, capital and field demonstrate that educational institutions produce and reproduce social order, the concept of spatial justice adds a nuanced dimension to studies considering rurality as a relevant factor. The space in which one lives is not only a "container" or "holding cell," but is instead an active force that affects (negatively or positively)

human life and behavior. From a critical spatial perspective, space is socially produced and can therefore be socially changed. Furthermore, this concept posits that the spatial reality shapes the social reality as much as the social reality shapes the spatial reality (Soja, 2009).

Spatial justice is an explicit emphasis on the fair and equitable distribution of socially valued resources and opportunities across spaces. It is not a substitute for other forms of justice (such as economic or social) but is instead a perspective that assumes there is always a relevant spatial dimension to justice. Biases imposed on certain groups because of their geographical location is a key part of spatial injustice, as is the creation of spatial structures of privilege and advantage through geographically uneven development and underdevelopment (Soja, 2009).

Various aspects of inequality can be thought of as organized within space. Space can be considered a foundation of US socioeconomic inequality. The capital resources one has access to through their living environment may determine or contribute to one's life chances and opportunities. Such inequality is sometimes due to intentional efforts to organize physical space into ways that maintain or reinforce a status quo (Galster & Sharkey, 2017; Israel & Frenkel, 2018; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017).

Galster & Sharkey (2017) use the phrase "spatial opportunity structure" to describe markets, institutions, services and other natural and human-made systems (such as labor, housing, financial markets, education, criminal justice, healthcare, transportation) that have a geographic connection and play important roles in people's socioeconomic status achievements. They argue that spatial opportunity not only influences the aspects of their life over which individuals may exercise little or no volition, but also by directly influencing the attributes over which individuals do exercise their own volition by shaping what the individual perceives (objectively and subjectively) is the most desirable or feasible option. These decisions can lead

individuals into a trajectory that affects their later SES and subsequent life decisions, the cumulative effects of which can stretch across generations. Finally, they argue that the spatial opportunity structure also indirectly impacts youth through the resources, behaviors and attitudes of their caregivers (Galster & Sharkey, 2017).

Both Galster & Sharkey (2017) and Israel & Frenkel (2018) discuss Bourdieu's theories in their work on spatial inequality as a means to explain the socio-spatial structures that influence or constrain an individual's choices and freedoms. Much like Bourdieu's theories argue that those who already have elevated status are able to more easily maintain that status, the spatial opportunity structure evolves over time in ways that further benefit those with the greatest achieved status, with upward mobility linked to spatial mobility (Galster & Sharkey, 2017; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). One's social space and living environment are an expression of class stratification. That space can create barriers or act as a facilitator to enhance the ability of a person to realize their capability. Put another way, one's space is part of one's habitus, with some spaces being more highly valued than others.

However, the Galster & Sharkey article does not include the word "rural" even once, and Israel & Frenkel use the word once in passing, raising questions that there may be more to consider or explore regarding the spatial opportunity structure within rural areas from a Bourdieuian perspective. Their work, as well as Soja's, is urban-centric. Urbanormativity, or the assumption of the normality of urban lifestyles, is the result of living in a society where most people live in metropolitan areas. The US is an urban country with an urbanormative culture, which leads to cultural assumptions of the normalcy and superiority of life in cities and suburbs, and the subsequent abnormality or inferiority of the rural experience. Colleges and universities can further push these cultural assumptions by integrating the wider culture within the local

community and through the hidden curriculum (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2020). Lichter & Ziliak (2017) argue that rural America is increasingly viewed as being "left behind" in public policy and academic circles. When discussed, it is often primarily considered as a place for consumption for inhabitants of urban areas for commodities such as fuel, recreation, or retirement. They call for "a place for space" in the larger social science literature that emphasizes the need to identify, define and understanding changing spatial relationships and to embrace a spatially inclusive approach to contemporary social problems. This includes allowing for social constructivist perspectives, where inhabitants of spaces define themselves, rather than being defined by others such as academic or government entities.

Lichter & Ziliak (2017) provide five takeaways that should inform research and policy related to spatial inequality. First, acknowledgement that symbolic and social boundaries that have traditionally defined rural and urban America are changing rapidly within an increasingly global economy. Many individuals now experience both rural and urban worlds due to interconnectedness brought on by social media and the internet, and access to many of the same goods and services that urban people have access to (food and clothing, transportation, cell phones.) Second, it is time to rethink how we divide up America in spatial terms. There is a need to recognize that urban-centric approaches may miss or downplay the importance of factors that affect the health and wellbeing of rural Americans (an example might be applying educational policies and practices for urban areas to rural areas). Conversely, rural-centric approaches must acknowledge the growing ties to urban areas and their benefits.

Third, they argue for a reimagining of conventional classification systems to define rural and urban, as current practices have not kept pace with the rapidity of urbanization and globalism. This takeaway addresses the definition challenges and discrepancies often mentioned

in the rural-focused literature. Fourth, researchers must acknowledge that the current way the nation is administratively organized may contribute to the reinforcement or reproduction of outdated social boundaries of rural and urban in ways that make problem solving more difficult. Fifth, the most important takeaway is that spatial boundaries are highly fluid, and binary views of rural vs. urban groups as competing rather than complementary represent a conceptual roadblock to addressing spatial underdevelopment (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017).

There does not appear to be a clear answer to whether the possession of various forms of capital drive spatial organization, or whether one's spatial location leads to the acquisition or creation of capital (Israel & Frenkel, 2018). However, it is clear that the concepts of spatial inequality and urbanormativity align well with Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction in a university context, where the university is dominant and low-income, first-generation rural students are marginalized. This lens may help us understand the challenges faced by this group in West Virginia at their land-grant institution. Given the pervasiveness of urbanormativity in US society, it is worth questioning the university's role in advancing it and the impact it has on its students from rural backgrounds (Thomas & Fulkerson, 2020).

Documented Intervention Strategies

The preceding sections consider relevant student retention literature, examine factors that have been shown to impact the ability of institutions to retain students from the group in this study as compared to the average, and relevant theories that provide a helpful way of thinking about the additional challenges faced by low-income, first-generation rural students from West Virginia. The next section provides a very brief overview of some intervention strategies that have been shown to improve retention outcomes. This provides a base of knowledge to help inform the implications and further directions of the present study.

There are many well documented effective practices to support college students relevant to the present study. Kuh, et al, (2010) found that schools that Documented Effective Educational Practice (DEEP schools) shared two characteristics regardless of their size, funding structure, acceptance rate, or other differences: they had clearly articulated educational purposes and aspirations, and they had a coherent, well understood philosophy to guide "how we do things here" (p. 25). While DEEP practices manifest differently across a variety of institutions, commonalities included a high level of academic challenge, active and experiential learning, fostering opportunities for students to interact with faculty and a supportive campus environment (Kuh, et al., 2010). Interventions in line with these themes may be considered best practice.

Considering the group in the present study, there are a few documented interventions supported by the literature for this specific group. In particular, outreach to rural areas on the front end of a student's collegiate experience can support student retention (Heinisch, 2017). Institutions can support rural, first-generation students and families by providing information about the application process, what to expect in higher education, and by showing students what it is like to be enrolled at their institution through testimonials or virtual tours. Gathering knowledge about how college works in advance of actually attending college can help students make better informed decisions about their education during their time enrolled.

Given that rural students often have strong social ties to their home communities, and that sense of belonging is well linked to positive outcomes for college students, it is important to consider how institutions can facilitate the recreation of communal connections similar to those found in rural areas (Heinisch, 2017; Handke, 2012). Examples of community building interventions include student organizations, learning communities that incorporate academic expectations and support into a social setting, residential living learning communities, and peer-

mentoring programs. Building strong communal connections can minimize the incongruence some students experience between their rural social norms and college life.

CONCLUSIONS

A robust body of literature addresses the paradigmatic experiences of college access, retention and persistence of students, going back well into the 1970s. In more recent decades, studies have begun to examine various populations previously omitted from these original works to further tease out nuances impacting low-income, first-generation, and rural students. More work remains to be done on the subject of rurality, and specifically among low-income, first-generation rural students from West Virginia, which the present study seeks to address.

A review of the literature demonstrates that many scholars bring in theories and frameworks from other disciplines to refine existing student development and retention theories and to shed light on student groups that are not well researched. While social reproduction theory is often mentioned in the student access and retention literature, spatial justice is a new addition that brings a more focused view to the work. It also produces a tension, because much spatial justice literature is urbanormative in nature, and some of the above documented challenges faced by rural students are the result of urbanormative practices and values being held in higher esteem than those from rural areas. The combination of social reproduction and spatial justice theories brings a new, focused view to the investigation of experiences of low-income, first-generation rural West Virginia students at the state's land-grant institution, how these experiences align with their expectations and the institutional land-grant narrative, and how these students perceive institutional actions as sources of support or barriers to success affecting their retention and persistence.

The present study crests the second wave of Abes et al.'s (2019) student development theory and literature by providing insight into a social identity omitted from current research. It also represents an optimistic march toward the third wave of critical theory, where the ultimate goal is to seek liberatory action. By amplifying voices of low-income, first generation, rural students from West Virginia, the present study will provide new insights for the second wave of understanding the group's social identity. However, it is not sufficient to simply describe students' experiences, but to also present a critique of higher education as a field that frames their development in the first place. This represents the third wave of student development theory by bringing explicit attention to structures of inequality and offering recommendations for action.

CHAPTER 3

INTRODUCTION AND ARTICULATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A considerable body of research demonstrates that first-generation college students face obstacles to college access, retention, persistence and completion. The challenges of understanding the innerworkings of the university system due to a relative lack of cultural capital negatively affect first-generation students who are otherwise well prepared for college level work. While this is a well-documented phenomenon, there has been considerably less research focused on students from West Virginia, and there is a need for qualitative studies to help researchers understand the meaning students ascribe to their college experience and rurality on a personal level (Wells et. al, 2019b).

In West Virginia, only 19.6% of residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher. This compares to 30.6% at the national level. Furthermore, only 55% of WV high school graduates enroll in college, compared to 70% at the national level (WV Forward, 2020). These

low educational attainment levels are contributing factors to poorer economic and health outcomes across the state.

As a land-grant institution, West Virginia University has a duty to serve and educate its population. The stated mission of the university includes advancing education, healthcare and prosperity for all by providing access and opportunity. This is an appropriate setting to address these research questions:

- Research Question 1: What are the experiences of low-income, first-generation rural West Virginia students at the state's land-grant institution?
- Research Question 2: How do the postsecondary experiences of low-income, first-generation college students from rural West Virginia align with their expectations and the institutional land grant narrative?
- Research Question 3: What institutional factors do, low-income, first-generation rural students perceive as sources of support or barriers to their success, affecting their retention and persistence?

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND METHODS

This study employs a critical approach to narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative process that is reliant on the relationship between the narrator and researcher, and in which the finished product will be something newly and mutually constructed between the two (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The approach is rooted in critical theory as this work seeks to give power to the voices of participants marginalized by class and space. This study is also

rooted in a constructionist approach that focuses on linkages between individual narratives and the broader culture (Marshall & Case, 2010).

A mixture of supportive voice and interactive voice will be used to both push the narrators' stories into the limelight but to also reflect deeply on the researcher's own interactions with the narrators. Supportive voice focuses on the narrator by pushing their voice to the limelight, but allows the researcher to make decisions about how to transcribe the story, which parts to include in the final product, and how to organize and edit the story into a text (Chase, 2005). Supportive voice is used to construct Chapter 4.

The interactive voice represents a complex interaction between the researcher and narrator. The researcher examines their own voice, social position, interpretation and personal experiences through the refracted medium of the narrator's voice. There will be space in the analysis to examine the role of the researcher's own voice, social position, interpretation and personal experiences through the refracted medium of the narrators' voices (Chase, 2005). Chapter 5 includes a consideration of the results through the theoretical lenses of spatial justice (spaced) and forms of capital (classed), as well as a researcher reflection representative of the interactive voice.

Narrative work was purposefully selected as the methodology for this study for its usefulness in understanding human life. A commitment to narrative work means a commitment to the alignment of the researcher's theoretical assumptions and methodology. The present study takes a narrative constructionist approach, meaning a sociocultural orientation is assumed. This approach designates the researched as meaning-makers who use narrative as a tool to "interpret, direct and communicate life, and to configure and constitute their experience and their sense of who they are" (Smith, 2016 p. 204). This contrasts with the narrative constructivist perspective,

which assumes an individualistic approach that considers a narrative is a "thing" people "have" as a structure or process inside their minds (Smith, 2016). The constructionist approach is more suitable for the present study as it seeks to situate the experiences of the researched among the wider body of student retention literature and uncover nuances and differences specific to this population at their state land-grant institution.

Furthermore, the critical lens through which the researcher approaches narrative is aligned with the study's theoretical and methodological commitments. Magalhaes and Veiga (2015) describe the narrative approach as one that emphasizes the power of discourses to transform social and political structures and processes (p. 312). Likewise, the present study assumes that narrative can be a tool to explore potential inequities and discrepancies between a marginalized student population and the institution they attend. Critical narrative is the appropriate tool to explore the factors that influence the ways people make meaning of their experiences (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Hickson, 2016).

This approach is suitable for investigating how low-income, first-generation rural students from West Virginia perceive how WVU supports or impedes success, and how their experiences align with institutional narratives. This approach assumes humans are innately storytelling creatures and that opportunities to discover new insights are bountiful when one believes there is value in the experiences of everyday people (Labov & Waletsky, 1968). It is also suitable because narratives are a way for individuals to construct their identities and consider their positionality in the world. Only by understanding and magnifying the narratives of marginalized groups can scholars use research to provide a strong rebuttal of dominant discourses that perpetuate inequities. The use of narrative is practical because these stories can help researchers and practitioners make decisions or inspire change.

Narrative analysis is a good match for researching the experiences of low-income, first-generation rural college students from West Virginia. Stories are a way to make sense of, organize, revise and explain our best, present and possible futures. Interpretations change and flux through time. One of the most powerful things about the college experience is its ability to change and develop its students. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to assess, reassess and theorize these developments and experiences and what they mean than through the stories of those living them. The addition of the "critical" is explicit to distinguish this work from simply telling stories by making clear that the study seeks to describe culture, language and participation as issues of power in need of critique with the intent of alternation in the direction of social justice (Iannacci, 2007). Furthermore, the use of narrative aligns well with the working definition of rural in this study: rurality is defined by participants self-identifying as rural. Manly et al. (2019) argue that inconsistent definitions of rural mean there is likely to be confusion in the literature at best, and incorrect conclusions or recommendations for rural students at worst. Allowing students to self-identify as rural in a study that seeks to highlight voices and personal experiences makes sense and allows us to think outside of governmental definitions which may be inconsistent or unreliable.

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER/POSITIONALITY STATEMENT:

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) are considered leaders in the field of narrative inquiry. They stress that the concept of "Multiple I's," or "plurivocality" is of major importance in this methodology. This is the ability to separate and understand the researcher's various identities in relation to the research. I as researcher, I as graduate student, I as woman, I as Appalachian, I as student advocate, I as administrator, I as critic. All are distinct yet potentially overlapping or conflicting components of identity. Throughout the research process, which "I" is dominant, and

at what times, and for what purposes? This methodology requires the researcher to be explicit in acknowledging the influences on the researcher and on the research (Hickson, 2016; Iannacci, 2007).

Different aspects of the researcher's educational background have inspired the present study. Undergraduate studies in journalism pulled the researcher to the use of narrative from a critical lens. Journalism's ability to tell an untold story has often played a role in the march toward social justice. Research is another vehicle through which to tell stories. Chase (2005) warns of the need to adapt a story for the intended audience, cautioning that if the audience is powerful and invested in an oppressive status quo, the onus is on researchers to adjust our work to get the audience ready to hear the story, or at least, be jolted into listening to it.

The researcher's experiences in marketing have provided a heightened awareness of the psychological manipulation often present in dominant discourses. There is always a reason a message is crafted in a certain way. This background has provided a deep understanding of the importance of personalization in creating messages that resonate with specific groups, which helps the researcher reflect on the ways a message may be for some people, but not for others. This is the same skillset used when considering an institution's mission statement and critically examining how it succeeds or fails at aligning with the realities of various constituencies with varying levels of power or privilege.

The researcher is most deeply related to this work through personal and professional experiences.

> I was a non-first-generation student from West Virginia who grew up in Morgantown, home of West Virginia University. When I graduated, I got a job at WVU and was blown away by an entirely new perspective on how colleges operate. I have spent a great deal of

time over the years considering and reflecting on my privileges and disadvantages as a student. I had the privilege of growing up in a household where I was always told I could go to college. I was encouraged to take advanced classes and my parents reinforced the importance of academic success. I am forever grateful for that push of motivation and encouragement, which combined with other intersections of advantage that helped me arrive at and persist in college. However, I am now able to reflect on some of the ways in which I had relative disadvantages. As one of the first in my family to attend college, I had absolutely no idea how college worked. I knew how schooling worked, and I aced my classes. But I had no idea how to get involved, how to network with faculty, how to push myself to explore new things and open new doors of opportunity for myself. I now spend a great deal of my professional life explaining to students how to do just this, and it has influenced my desire to study and work in higher education. I had no idea many of my classmates were not holding down a job while I was holding two or three. I had no idea that many of my classmates were not paying their own rent, bills, and groceries, allowing them more time to get ahead. I had no idea many students with lower math scores than me were in majors like engineering and business, which I shied away from because I felt my skills were inadequate and I would fail – which was not an option for me. I would not know about this until much later in life. I am uniquely positioned in my current role to help students see their potential and help guide them as best I can to successfully navigate college life. The final component of my positionality that must be addressed in relation to this study: my place-based Appalachian identity. My perspective on the importance of place and space as it relates to West Virginians accessing and succeeding at the state's land grant institution is unique, as the physical space of the

university and the physical space of my Appalachian identity are one and the same. Holding these various positions situates me staunchly in the critical camp. I see inequities all the time; my work life where I see the institutional decision-making; in reflections of my own personal experience; in my understanding of how marketing and communications are used to further institutional goals. My positions also reflect a constructionist epistemology, where meanings are socially and culturally constructed and come into existence through engagement with realities in the world (Crotty, 1998). All of this inspires me to improve success for first-generation students from West Virginia.

Tieken (2016) documents that rural students may experience tension to either remain in their rural communities or leave for college. The move can be both a literal physical distance and a symbolic cultural distance. The researcher has spent much time contemplating the idea of this tension by considering serendipitously being born and raised near the state's land grant institution. Attending a major university has not only never been at odds with leaving home, but also there is literal alignment in physical space of family and university. In the mid 18th century, the researcher's great-great-great grandfather, an Irish immigrant named Edward Ryan, made a home and farm upon land now owned by WVU's forestry program. The family gravesite remains nestled in the university forest, and the researcher grew up surrounded by a large extended family a few short miles from that original settlement. The researcher did not leave her hometown until 10 years post-college because of the uncommon opportunity to find meaningful and well-paying employment at that same institution. While the physical distance did not present any issues, the cultural distance was at times quite noticeable, making aspects of the present study of great personal interest to the researcher. Employing a critical narrative methodology requires a deep interest in exploring the relationships between the life experiences of the

researched and the researcher, as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the scholarship (Iannacci, 2007 p. 56).

Research Site

This study explores the narratives of low-income, first-generation rural West Virginian students at their land-grant institution to understand their experiences and examine the ways in which the land-grant mission is manifesting (or not) in the lived realities of the students. West Virginia University was selected as the research site to uncover the interaction between the research participants and the land-grant concept. While every state has a land-grant (and some have more thanks to subsequent federal legislation beyond the initial Morrill Act) and has at least some rural population, West Virginia University provides an opportunity to explore this interaction within the context of West Virginia's highly rural population (outlined in the literature review) and a school that is highly vocal in its dedication to the land-grant mission.

West Virginia University is a public, land-grant institution founded in 1867. The flagship Morgantown campus is ranked R1 by the Carnegie classification system, with $195M in research funding for the fiscal year ending in 2020. Nationally renowned athletic teams compete in a Power Five conference. Morgantown is the third largest city in West Virginia with a population just shy of 31,000 without the WVU student population. The town has been named the "No. 1 Small City in America," a "Best Sports City," and a "Best College Town for Jobs." The Morgantown campus student population is 52% West Virginia residents. The remaining 48% come from all 50 US states, Washington DC, and 110 different nations. The 2020 incoming freshmen class had an average high school GPA of 3.6/ 4.0, an average ACT of 24 and an average SAT of 1141, although WVU does not require test scores for admission. The school awards more than $113M in scholarships annually, with an average award amount of over

$13,000. This helps offset the cost of tuition, which is more than $9,000/ year for West Virginia residents and $26,000/ year for non-residents (WVU Facts, 2021).

As of the first day of the fall 2021 semester, total enrollment on the flagship Morgantown campus was 25,534, with 4,449 students identifying as first-generation. Of those, 2,272 were West Virginia residents, and 2,002 were non-West Virginia residents. Of the 2,272 West Virginia resident first-generation students, 20.7% of them were first-time, full-time freshmen. A breakdown of race and ethnicity show that 1,881 are white non-Hispanic (82.8%), 134 are two or more races (5.9%), 84 are Black (3.7%), 81 are Hispanic (3.6%), 70 are Asian (3.1%), 16 are of unknown race (0.7%), 4 are American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.1%), and 2 are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. They are enrolled in every college or school on the Morgantown campus. The top represented colleges are Arts and Sciences (n= 662), Business and Economics (n=276), and Engineering Mineral Resources (n= 241). They are 58.46% female and 41.54% male (WVU internal document).

WVU's mission statement begins with its self-identification to its land-grant mission: "As a land-grant institution, the faculty, staff and students at West Virginia University commit to creating a diverse and inclusive culture that advances education, healthcare and prosperity for all by providing access and opportunity; by advancing high-impact research; and by leading transformation in West Virginia and the world through local, state and global engagement" (WVU Mission, 2021). Furthermore, WVU is home to the Center for the Future of Land-Grant Education, the only higher education research center in the country focused exclusively on land-grant institutions, policies, access, success, leadership and engagement. The Center advances knowledge in student access, retention and success, and land-grant institutional effectiveness

(About the Center, 2021). The existence of this Center and its dedicated faculty have inspired the present study.

WVU is also part of a nationwide societal context that makes solving problems of retention and persistence is a priority for higher education. While many scholars and practitioners seek solutions, there is a dearth of research on rural students, and even less such research focused within West Virginia. Much first-generation student work does not focus on rural populations. WVU is a land-grant institution with a duty to serve the needs of state residents, but first-generation, rural, low-income West Virginians are not well understood compared to other groups. Additionally, individuals in leadership roles at WVU may not be sensitive to or innately familiar with some of these challenges or may only be familiar with the challenges in an academic sense. They do not come from these (Appalachian, first-generation) backgrounds, may have little contact with people from these backgrounds, and have an insufficient understanding of the realities, experiences or values of people from these backgrounds that may impact the institution's ability to understand at meet the needs and unique challenges of this population.

STUDY DESIGN - PARTICIPANTS

The researcher solicited undergraduate participants through campus email's Survey Tuesday email campaign to all active students on the Morgantown campus. Students were invited to complete a brief survey to identify whether or not they met the criteria for study participation. It was advertised that each selected study participant would receive a $50 gift card for their full participation in the study. The researcher self-funded these gift cards from the tuition savings from receiving an academic scholarship for the 2018-2019 academic year.

A total of 373 students responded to the survey, with a total of 88 students self-identifying as low-income, first-generation, and rural. This was far greater than the number of respondents needed for the study, so the researcher narrowed down the list by including only respondents native to West Virginia, considering their self-reported race/ ethnicity, gender, and major of study, and investigating more details on the population and distance of their hometowns as a measure of rurality. Attention was also given to the geographic location of each respondent to have a variety of locations throughout the state represented in the study. A total of eight students were selected, and seven of the eight completed the study.

Interviews were conducted with seven college students from West Virginia who self-identified as low-income, first-generation and rural. This sample size sought was seven to 10 participants, which is an appropriate necessary design choice because conducting narrative interviews yields a large amount of qualitative data. This number of participants was sufficient for rich data analysis. However, there is no major consensus on what constitutes a sufficient number of participants in narrative inquiry. Two guiding questions allowed the researcher to determine the necessary quantity of data amassed: "Is there sufficient information to answer my research questions?" and "Is the additional data I'm gathering redundant, meaning I have reached a saturation point?"

Questions on the survey began with contact information, academic rank, and the name of the student's hometown and state. Next, survey respondents were asked if the students self-identified as a first-generation college student and included the definition as "neither parent or guardian has completed a four-year degree." Then, students were asked if they self-identified as low-income or as rural. The rurality question specified that "self-identifying means you get to

decide whether or not being 'rural' is part of your identity." The survey concluded with questions about race, ethnicity and gender identity.

While conformity on some attributes is necessary for the purposes of the study (residency, first generation status, enrolled at WVU), the researcher sought to incorporate diversity in regard to gender, race, major of study, city/town of origin, college GPA and socioeconomic status. The researcher's access to student data allowed for this kind of diversity to be handpicked for the study, provided the survey respondents represented these various traits. Selecting for diversity of major and GPA posed a challenge, as the qualified respondents disproportionately had strong GPAs and engineering majors were overrepresented in the results (50% of the 8 invited to participate were enrolled in various majors within the engineering school). However, the other desired measures of diversity were met via the respondent pool.

One of the benefits of using narrative analysis is that it allows the researcher to see both individualism among the participants and connections across the participants. While some categories will unite all participants together, there are potentially important differences in these categories that can mediate, exacerbate or minimize the effects of first-generation or rural status. For example, a lower income black female student from Morgantown, where the University is geographically located, may have a very different experience from a middle-income white male student from Boone county, three hours southwest of the University. And yet, there may be parallels in their storylines of which university administrators, faculty and student support services staff should be cognizant.

DATA COLLECTION

The researcher collected qualitative data via interview transcripts and audio recordings of the interviews. The researcher was initially open to a possible second round of interviews or to

conduct a focus-group with participants. However, the data collected in the initial individual semi-structured narrative interviews was sufficient to begin to elucidate the research questions. In narrative analysis, the narrative itself often drives or repositions the questions, which opens up ample ideas for future research opportunities.

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) posed seven primary questions and subsequent probing questions to answer the research questions. RQ1 asked about the participants' experiences at the state land-grant institution. As previously mentioned, this group is widely omitted from current literature, and this is one way the study fills a gap. As such, three of the seven questions sought to elucidate the college experiences of low-income, first-generation, rural West Virginia students (IQ2). These questions asked about the students' pre-college preparation and choice to attend WVU (IQ1). They also asked about the participants' feelings and opened an opportunity for participants to share about relevant experiences not explicitly covered by the RQs (IQ7).

RQ2 sought to understand how those experiences align with both the students' expectations (IQ3), and with the stated mission of the land-grant (IQ6). RQ3 was an effort to uncover the students' perceptions of institutional supports and barriers to success. The related IQs (IQ4 and IQ5) sought to uncover ways the students have felt supported or challenged, and in what ways they feel the institution could have supported them better or differently. A probe of IQ4 also asked how these factors have impacted the student's desire to leave or stay at WVU.

Not only were the interview questions designed to elicit credible data to answer the research questions, but the methodology employed is also designed specifically with these research questions in mind. The theoretical commitments required of the correct use of narrative methodology described above, combined with the purposefully designed interview questions to

link to the research questions, demonstrate a robust alignment between the why (theory) and the how (methodology) of answering these research questions in this particular way.

Data collection occurred during the spring 2022 semester (January-May). This was an attempt to ensure that all participants had completed at least 1 semester of collegiate coursework and had sufficient experiences to reflect upon their transition to college and evaluate their experience/ performance.

The researcher remained opened to change, because in narrative inquiry the narrator, not the researcher, is in the driver's seat. While the researcher determines the topic to examine and asks questions poised delve into the topic, ultimately the experiences and stories of the narrator study participants can shift the direction of the research results. The researcher must be open to exploring new questions that arise based on their experiences and stories that are relevant to their relationship to the institution and their success as students. Data gathered from the narrative interviews can lead to new questions arising in real time, and the researcher must be adaptable to move forward in a way that makes the most sense to keep the conversation flowing.

In a pilot study for a qualitative methodology course, the researcher interviewed C, a first-generation college student from West Virginia who went on to persist and graduate at the top of her class at WVU and later went on to earn a master's degree. This provided insight to determine the interview questions (Appendix A) to be used in the semi-structured narrative interviews of the present study. Specifically, the questions focus on the temporal nature of a student's experience in hopes of creating a more well-defined storyline that does not require as much of the researcher's own interpretation. Additionally, the questions purposefully ask the participants to express their feelings at certain points in time, not just what they experienced at a

given time, and also inquire about the roles of others in their story, including heroes, antagonists, and supporting characters.

In addition to interviewing, another form of data produced is a researcher reflection. The concept of reflexivity is a foundational aspect of critical narrative inquiry, and requires the researcher to be self-aware of how actions, perceptions and responses are interpreted (Hickson, 2016). The use of reflection allowed the researcher to make sense of the various components of her self-identity present throughout the journey of this dissertation project and provide a source of interactive voice to the study (Chase, 2005; Connolly & Clandinin, 1990). Chase (2005) describes the "interactive voice" as a strategy that displays the complex interaction between researchers' and narrators' voices. The researchers examine their own voices and positionality through the refracted medium of narrators' voices. An intentional space for reflexivity and self-understanding is required for narrative researchers if they are to understand their own interpretation of narrators' stories, and consider how readers will eventually interpret the research.

Reflexivity is a connective thread between critical reflection and narrative inquiry (Hickson, 2016). In a critical narrative approach, critical reflection should be used by the researcher to acknowledge their own values from which they are operating and appreciating the influences of their own background, assumptions and expectations for outcomes, as well as their own role and influence in the research. Furthermore, the researcher must be open to new understandings and new viewpoints based on the narratives of the researched (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Hickson, 2016).

The instrument was a semi-structured narrative interviews of 6-10 questions, lasting approximately 45-75 minutes. The study took place on WVU's campus (face to face or virtually)

at the location and modality preferred by the student. In line with narrative work, either the narrators should dictate the where and when of the data collection, or it should be co-decided. This ensured student comfort and expectations of privacy, and also decreased the inherent power dynamic between researcher and participant. Meeting in the researcher's office was avoided as it could be intimidating, and the traditional office desk setting creates a physical barrier and power differential. The interviews were be conducted in a neutral, public setting (face to face) or virtual setting at a level of privacy that the student preferred. Narrator participant comfort was of the utmost importance to the success of the study, as narrative inquiry relies heavily on the ability of the researcher to establish trust with the narrator. Discomfort or apprehension would have affected the quality of the data collection.

DATA ANALYSIS

The semi-structured interviews were recorded on a computer via Zoom and then transcribed using YouTube. The researcher read and listened to the transcripts multiple times to make corrections to the seven transcripts as needed. This was an extensive process as free transcript software lacks accuracy, and some of the participants' (and on occasion even the researcher's) accents and colloquialisms were not appropriately captured by the software.

First, multiple readings of the interview text were used to inductively determine codeds for qualitative data analysis. Narrative interview data was analyzed in two ways. The first, found in Chapter 4, is a thematic narrative analysis (Smith, 2016). This includes an analysis of what topically and thematically surfaced in the realm of each story's content. This highlights what is important to emphasize in the findings and ensures that the researcher is meeting her commitment to the supportive voice that puts the narrator in the limelight as an expert on their own experience (Chase, 2005). The result of these initial findings led to eight main themes:

perceived resources/ supports, perceived barriers, rurality, self-perception, academics, parents, land-grant concept, and COVID. A full list of the thematic codes and sub-codes, which were implemented using NVIVO software are as follows:

- Resources/ Perceived Supports (RQ3)
    - Perceived lack of
    - Use of WVU resources
    - Key players/ influencers in their journey
    - Pre-college resources
    - Involvement on campus
    - Finances
- Perceived Barriers (RQ3)
    - Finances
    - First-Generation Status
- Rurality (RQ1, RQ2)
    - Distance to resources
    - Thoughts on rurality
- Self-Perception (RQ1)
    - Perceived Luck
    - Fear/ Worry/ Doubt
    - Believing in self
    - Resilience
- Academics (RQ1, RQ3)
    - Preparation

    - Difficulty of college work
    - Major choice
- Parents (RQ1)
    - First Gen
    - Parents' experiences
- Land-Grant Concept (RQ2)
- COVID (RQ1, RQ3)

The second analytical approach comes from Mishler's (1995) consideration of the function of contexts and consequences of narrative. One of these contexts and considerations includes politics. The researcher will code the data based on the ways notions of power, conflict and resistance come to light. These findings will elucidate the way that the theoretical lenses of social/cultural capital and spatial justice play out in the narrators' experiences.

Furthermore, the researcher will provide one additional analytic approach that is representative of Chase's (2005) interactive voice to provide an opportunity to reflect deeply on the researcher's own interactions with the narrators and examine the role of their own voice, social position, interpretation and personal experiences. This analysis will provide the opportunity to reconcile and address the various lenses through which the researcher conducts the first two analyses (Connolly & Clandinin, 1990). These lenses of self-identity include: researcher, West Virginian, student support provider and graduate student. By adding this as the fourth form of analysis, the researcher has provided a separate space to specifically address their personal opinions and various perspectives without clouding the narrator's story with her own input, and also gives space for another West Virginian to participate in the academic discourse.

By providing analysis on four fronts: the themes of the narrators' stories, the examination of those themes and stories through the lenses of social/ cultural capital and spatial justice, and the researcher reflection, the researcher will be able to meet the commitments of supportive and interactive voice (Chase, 2005).

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND CREDIBILITY

There is significant disagreement and discussion over what constitutes validity in narrative research and critical narrative research, due to concerns over whether evaluative concepts from other fields are relevant for education research. Furthermore, the theoretical viewpoint of this methodology rejects the idea of universal truths. The main point of consensus among scholars is simply that "inquirers need to demonstrate that their studies are credible" (Iannacci, 2007). Despite these limitations, there are practices that can increase trustworthiness.

The emphasis on "reflexivity" in this study is supported by previous scholarship on the credibility of narrative inquiry (Mishler, 1990; Simco & Warin, 1997). In a social constructionist framework, the quality and credibility of qualitative research is partially dependent upon the researcher's ability to think reflexively about the data collected and to create new data as they engage with the collected material. Through the practice of reflexivity, researchers can reveal how their personal understandings and theoretical commitments shape their inquiry. Iannacci (2007) believes that it is important to continually locate, name, examine and reflect upon biases and beliefs throughout the research to remind the reader that the researcher is present within the narratives they are constructing and theory choices they are making" (p. 68).

Another practice that can increase trustworthiness focusing on the quality of interpretations made by the researcher and the consistency with which they are recorded (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Iannacci, 2007). Consistency in the frequency of data recording

must be an explicit and purposeful goal in order to give the data sufficient time to come together and shape the story. Furthermore, the idea of "thick and rich" description has also been purported by some scholars to enhance the credibility of the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Yet another practice to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the study is member checking. This is particularly useful for data collected via interview, as it provides an opportunity for the participant to confirm, clarify or correct the data collected by the researcher. It helps the participant see how the data is to be used to further the research mission. This practice also gives the participant another opportunity to share additional information that could be helpful in shaping the research.

A final practice to bolster credibility and trustworthiness is to critically examine all trustworthiness practices and explicitly describing where they fall short, a concept Iannacci (2007) describes as "criteria consciousness and candor" and Clandinin and Connelly (1990) describe as "researcher wakefulness."

CHAPTER IV

This qualitative study investigates the college experiences of low-income, first-generation rural (LIFGR) college students from West Virginia. The three research questions are:

- RQ1: What are the experiences of LIFGRWV students at the state's land grant institution?
- RQ2: How do the postsecondary experiences of LIFGRWV students align with their expectations and the institutional land-grant narrative?
- RQ3: What institutional factors do LIFGRWV students perceive as sources of support or barriers to their success, affecting their retention and persistence?

Participants were solicited through campus email. Respondents completed a brief survey to determine if they met the target audience, including hometown and state, identifying as a first-generation college student, identifying as being a low-income student and identifying as rural. The following chapter introduces each narrator. Then, each research question is answered through the lens of Chase's (2005) supportive voice, where narrators are responsible for co-constructing the research and the researcher's job is to allow for representation of the narrator participants' experiences as observed.

NARRATOR PARTICIPANTS[1]

Embry is a second semester first-year student who hails from the small community of Salt Rock (population ~166) in Cabell County in the southwestern part of the state and has dreams of working for NASA. Salt Rock is approximately three hours from WVU. Embry is conscious of the classed and spaced juxtaposition of being from a rural community that neighbors one of the more populous cities in the state. Her consolidated high school had an "absolutely insane" engineering program and she was part of a graduating class of approximately 425 students. Embry is an only child who grew up with both of her parents and a large extended family nearby. She is incredibly close with her mother.

She describes falling in love with STEM thanks to influential middle school and high school teachers who provided rewarding experiential learning opportunities. Academic success came easy to her in high school, and she chose to pursue a dual degree in aerospace and mechanical engineering. She even secured a competitive internship at the Green Bank Observatory prior to the start of her freshman year. She considered a prestigious out of state

[1] To maintain student confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the study.

school, but ultimately decided to choose the in-state option that offered her dream majors due to a confrontational interaction she had with a non-West Virginia friend she met through STEM programming. This person questioned and belittled WVU and her choice to attend.

Embry's college experience got off to a rocky start. Within the first week of her first semester, she called the admissions office at WVU's smaller regional campus closer to her hometown in an effort to transfer. She ultimately decided to stay in Morgantown, but her first semester was full of challenges due to mental health struggles and roommate conflicts. She extensively utilized campus mental health resources and ended her first semester on academic probation. At the time of the interview, Embry expressed she had made significant academic and personal progress since that time. She feels gratitude for access to WVU resources, which made a positive impact on her decision to stay enrolled.

Mason is a second semester first-year student from Point Pleasant (approximate population 4146) in the Midwestern part of the state and about 2.75 hours from WVU. Mason described himself as shy and nervous about his transition to WVU, but having two older siblings currently enrolled at WVU helped ease the nerves. He repeatedly described his hometown as a "nice, close-knit" place to grow up, but recalled that there was not much there in terms of opportunities or things to do. He also commented on the lack of diversity in his hometown, which was particularly salient to him as a Hispanic identifying individual.

Mason knew from a young age that he wanted to attend college, encouraged by both of his parents who had each attempted but not finished college. He took as many courses as possible to prepare. However, by his senior year there were only two required courses left for him to take due to a lack of advanced coursework offered at his high school. His school was attached to a career center that offered engineering courses he could take as electives. He

enjoyed those courses and the supportive instructors who taught them, and felt this experience helped prepare him for a college major in engineering. He adjusted well academically, which he credits in part to his fellow engineering majors in his residence hall. He made President's list[2] after his first semester.

Marla is a second-semester freshman from Pocahontas County (approximate countywide population 8382) in the southeastern part of West Virginia, about 3.5 hours from WVU. Although her mailing address reflects the name of the county seat, she grew up in a rural area about 35 minutes from the town in one direction and 30 minutes from her high school in another direction. She graduated with about 68 students and was valedictorian of her class. She described her hometown as very "county focused", constantly supporting local business, agriculture, and the dreams of its students regardless of whether they went to college, the workforce, the military, or another path.

Marla grew up with both parents, who she describes as hardworking and very intelligent but did not have the resources to pursue college. She began thinking about college in the fifth grade when she had the opportunity to shadow her father's friend who was an engineer. In high school, she fell in love with STEM and solidified her thoughts on attending college. Due to the small size of her high school, she became very close with her math teachers – almost like friends. The teachers were very supportive and encouraged her to consider a career in engineering that might bring her back to the county one day.

Marla has had a relatively smooth transition to college life. She cited two main factors for this. First, the close-knit network of friends from her high school that has provided stability, support, and transportation back home. Second, her total time commitment toward school related

[2] The President's List includes students who earned 4.0 GPAs during a given term.

activities is less in college than it was in high school. Specifically, she likes that she no longer has to include hour-long commutes each day, as was the norm to get to her high school or to get to the local library for internet access during the COVID-19 pandemic. She has performed well academically overall, but does have to retake one course due to illness.

Faith is a second-semester sophomore studying public health from Ravenswood, WV (approximate population 3716), 2.25 hours from Morgantown. She grew up there with her grandparents and older brother, who also attends college at a different West Virginia institution. Faith said college "was always in the books for me" and her grandmother was an important force supporting the importance of education. Faith's father was not part of her life growing up, and her mother had to relinquish custody of her and her brother due to addiction when Faith was in middle school.

As a student of color, Faith is critical of both her hometown and, to a lesser extent, of WVU for their lack of diversity. In her graduating class of 100 students, she was often the only nonwhite student in the room and she feels that the bond she shares with her brother is particularly strong due to the unique experience they had navigating predominantly white spaces.

Faith shared about several challenges she has faced and overcome during her time at WVU. Her first-generation and low-income status is particularly salient to her. She also had to overcome a generational gap, working with her grandmother through the college admissions process. She experienced feelings of isolation due to COVID-19 protocols her freshman year which limited her opportunities to meet new people, and disappointment due to inadmissibility to her top major choice, nursing. Despite these many challenges, Faith describes feeling "very, completely happy" with where her life is at the time of the interview, signifying achievement and resilience.

Grant is a second semester freshman from Calhoun County, a particularly rural central West Virginia county with a total population of approximately 7185 about two hours away from WVU. He graduated from a combined middle and high school with about 60 students. His older sister is a college graduate and now works as a teacher in Calhoun county. He is studying exercise physiology and has dreams of attending medical school at WVU. He was inspired to become a doctor from TV shows in his youth.

Grant described significant feelings of nervousness and anxiety as he prepared for college and throughout his first year thus far. He recalls many older students trying to succeed at WVU and failing out. He is a vocal critic of the lack of qualified teachers in his hometown, and felt that he was in no way prepared for college level work based on the rigor of his high school. However, he took nearly 55 credits of dual enrollment college courses, which have played a role in helping him succeed at WVU. Despite significant fears and perceived difficulty adjusting to the pace of college work, Grant finished his first semester on the President's List.

Grant attributes his success to his work ethic, the support of his family and sister, and resources such as HSTA (Health Sciences Technology Association) and a medical school coaching program offered by WVU. Through these support systems and utilizing social media platforms such as TikTok, he has been able to learn from the successes and failures of those before him to forge his own path toward his dreams.

Adeline is a second semester sophomore from Birch River, WV (approximate population 136) in Nicholas County in the central part of the state about 1.75 hours from WVU. She is enrolled in an accelerated 3+3 program with a major in political science and plans to attend law school. She describes growing up in an extremely rural setting with her father and younger brother. She is very close with her father and does not have much contact with her biological

mother. Her father remarried, bringing two much older stepsisters who had successfully completed college in to Adeline's life when she was about 10 years old.

Adeline attended a small private Accelerated Christian Education school with a total student body of approximately 30 students and a graduating class of two students. She was the first student at her high school to graduate with honors, the first to attend a major university such as WVU, and one of the only graduates to pursue postsecondary education in general. She credits her schooling with empowering her to be an independent learner. Adeline began to solidify her plans to attend college her junior year of high school when she realized she loved to read and could probably succeed in college.

Adeline credits the COVID-19 pandemic and its social distancing/ de-densifying protocol with allowing her to experience stepping-stones between her graduating high school class of two and a WVU campus of more than 20,000 students. She sets a strict schedule for taking care of herself and studying, and has been very academically successful thus far. She credits her academic advisors and the SSS Trio program as major supports during her time at WVU.

Ella is a first semester freshman from Hedgesville, WV (approximate population 251) in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia about 2.25 hours from WVU. Ella grew up with her mother in a rural part of town with dirt roads and did not have an extended family support system. She did not intend to go to college due to finances and once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, stopped completing and submitting high school schoolwork. However, she was notified a few weeks after high school graduation that she was a randomly selected winner of a drawing for a full ride scholarship for young people who received a COVID-19 vaccine. Although it was too late to enroll for the fall semester, she decided to enroll at WVU for the spring 2022 semester as a business and communication pathways student.

At the time of her interview, Ella was still acclimating to college life. She was only about two months into her studies, and had been sent home once already sick with COVID. She is learning about how to take notes, how to study, and setting a schedule. She feels that her college performance is decent, especially compared to her high school efforts.

Ella describes her relationship with her mother as very emotional. She has a much older half-brother, and her mother only had an empty nest for about three years between his high school graduation and Ella's birth. Ella's departure was emotionally difficult on her mother, who is described as a "bit of a doomsday prepper" and "extremely religious." Ella's mother describes the scholarship as a divine intervention that Ella should thank Jesus for. Ella felt that she herself was to thank for signing up for the drawing – or the injection nurse, who encouraged Ella to put her name in the drawing for a chance to win a prize, such as a full ride scholarship.

Most of Ella's support has come from friends and parents of friends, straining her relationship with her own mother who views their actions as taking on Ella as a "charity case." However, Ella described the support of her friends' parents as much needed, since her own mother does not have familiarity with the college going process.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION RURAL WEST VIRGINIA STUDENTS

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of low-income first-generation rural West Virginia students at the state's land grant institution?

Five themes are salient in describing the experiences of low-income, first-generation rural West Virginia students: rurality, self-perception and academics, parents, and COVID-19. Rurality provided a foundation for the students' pre-college to college transition. Self-perception and academics included the students' perceptions of the changes and experiences in college. This

combined theme encompassed the preparation participants felt they did or did not have for college-level work, as well as their acclimation to academic expectations. Parents influenced students even once enrolled in college. Although participants had not had a non-COVID postsecondary experience, they perceived COVID as influential to their experiences.

RURALITY

Marla

Marla felt that her high school predominantly pushed trade schools and did not encourage students to obtain a four-year degree. Marla said, "We don't have like a local college or anything so (people at school) were like it's just easier if you like go there (to a trade school) instead in the county." However, Marla's love of math and desire to be an engineer led her to leave. "I was like I can't do engineering math related fields if I don't like venture out." However, once she made the decision to attend college, she felt her community was supportive. "I feel like the community, no matter which direction they chose, whether it be like military or anything (for after high school) was just really supportive. Like everyone was like, 'yeah you'll do great in that.'" She echoed sentiments of a supportive community with three other examples: all families coming together to participate in a community 5K fundraiser, advertisements of local farmers' markets and young agricultural business owners, and community fundraising to help send students to college.

Marla graduated as the valedictorian of 68 students, and she described her community as having about 9,000 residents, compared to the 20,000 plus student body at WVU. "When I came here (to WVU) that was one of the weirdest things cuz like there's no way I can ever recognize – there's so many faces every day."

Marla's rural high school led to close knit connections with teachers and fellow students.

Most of my teachers, I had all four years of high school. I could kind of pick and choose

which ones I wanted because there was very few. There's only three teachers in the entire math department. I had one and she became my friend by the time I was 18. We were just friends at the end of that. Most of them, you developed kind of a relationship with because it's just like they're like your older family members. They give you guidance because it's so small. Like you talk to them every 180 days for four years straight, you're going to have to be friends with them. And all my classmates I knew since I was 6 so it's kinda like siblings almost.

Marla described her home as 30 minutes from town and 30 minutes from her school. A family-owned gas station 15 minutes from her house was the closest resource. The only chain restaurant within 40 minutes or so was a Dairy Queen in the town.

Everything else was kinda like local… I think it's bizarre that you can Door Dash here (in Morgantown.) It's crazy but it's nice, I like it… And the Starbucks is like in the (dorm), like that is insane. The closest Starbucks (in my hometown) was like 45 minutes from my house. It's so funny that I live next to one now… It's so weird because I get on my phone (here in Morgantown) and I run out of data all the time because I don't realize that you can turn your service off because I never had to do that before because I had no service ever.

Marla described how a possibility of returning to her home community after college appealed to her. Marla described how an educator helped plant the idea, saying,

If you come back to the county, you can make so many stream studies and like you can do all this stuff. And it was so cool. Yeah she was so supportive about that. I never said that I'm 110% moving back because you can't make that call but there's definitely a high

chance I'm coming back. It's just like you never know. You got to see where jobs are available, got to see where it takes you.

Marla expressed a desire to meet other first generation Appalachian students. "That would be pretty cool because I feel like if you're first generation and from like a rural area it's different because you're not really exposed to people who have (been to college.) Most of the people in my county don't have college degrees." She suspects that experience may be different in a more urban area.

Mason

Mason enjoyed the small, close-knit aspect of his rural hometown, specifically in regards to the widespread support his high school wrestling team enjoyed within the community. However, he felt that he was missing important opportunities.

> I was ahead in school throughout pretty much all middle school and high school. And there's a point of like in high school, I had three periods every year because there wasn't an option to take higher classes. There just wasn't anything around that was available to take.

He also reflected on having to leave the town for resources, restaurants and recreation. "When we wanted to do something for fun, we'd go drive around. We'd go sit at the high school. There wasn't a whole lot to do," he said. Mason identifies as Hispanic and felt that his hometown was lacking in terms of diversity. He appreciates the greater diversity present at WVU.

> There wasn't that many minorities in my town. I mean it wasn't something that you saw a whole lot… Originally when I was little I felt like I was a little different of course. It was definitely a little weird but as I got older I got more used to it and it didn't really bother me as much. I started to realize who I was actually friends with. They didn't care or make

any comments or anything like that.

Faith

Faith was not a big fan of her rural hometown, and was critical of the state of West Virginia in general. However, her experience at her high school was one of the highlights of her time in her rural area.

> It's not really known for much. I definitely don't want to live there in the future. I'm just not a big fan of small towns. It wasn't diverse. I was like one of maybe five people of color at my school. I enjoyed it because it was close knit, but obviously there's downsides… Like everyone knowing your business if something goes wrong, and there's not a lot of new people… Coming to a big city made me excited if that makes sense because, like, literally it'd be nice to have a Target in the town…I don't think I'll settle down in West Virginia… I just don't really like this state that much. It's not that it's a bad state. It's not its fault, but it's not as diverse as I want it to be. I don't want to be the only person of color in a lot of places that I go. WVU is even more diverse than my hometown, so that was a positive thing. It's not as diverse as it could be, but it's better than rural West Virginia and has more opportunities I guess… I've seen things online about the colleges that are known to be black campuses headed by black faculty and stuff. It makes me kind of like wonder what my life would have been like if I'd gone to one of those.

Grant

Grant's graduating class was only about 60 students. He liked that it was a tight knit community that allowed him to have deep relationships with others. However, he expressed significant concerns about the realities of rural life. He was asked about what embodied the rural

experience to him. He described a lack of economic support from the community as well as feelings of frustration and inadequacy in regards to his academic preparation.

> Honestly just like the lack of resources we have… there's hardly any stores or anything so you don't really have anyone that's helping you… There weren't local businesses who could donate to the schools, so everything you do has to come out of your own pocket, and of course a lot of people coming from rural communities, you know, you don't have a lot of money the way it is. (When it was time for inter-school academic competitions) we would literally just throw a team together at the last minute to try to compete with them. But I mean we would never win anything because we've never had like the dedicated people and resources to really make sure that we were really going to learn (the material) and like make that happen.

Grant also felt the rurality of his hometown contributed to educational barriers and felt that the rural nature of his community got in the way of his academic success. With the closest Walmart more than 30 minutes away, and the closest larger town of Parkersburg (population approximately 30,000) about one hour away, it was very difficult to obtain supplies necessary for school projects, even if transportation was available. "You'd have to be like really good at planning, so that way you don't have to go to Parkersburg so many times every week."

Grant did have praise for rural educators when it came to caring about the students as people. He contrasted this to his experience with faculty at WVU.

> You have very few (college faculty) that actually I think care about you as a student. Despite you know where I came from, and not having a lot of qualified teachers, they all really cared about you, you know? You could confide in them if something was happening in your life, if you needed advice. (Something that was difficult with the

> transition to WVU was) coming here and realizing you don't really have that same support level.

Grant felt that his rural experience caused him to see a black and white dichotomy between oil and gas work and attending college.

> All I'd ever been taught was there's really no like in between, which is definitely not true with technical schools and different things you can do. But I just kind of knew from probably like middle school on that I definitely didn't want to do (labor) for the rest of my life and see the struggles that so many people in my community go through with not having enough work or getting laid off.

A positive of Grant's rural upbringing was his close-knit family. He had a sister and six cousins who spent time together after school Monday through Friday while their parents worked, plus family dinners at grandparents' houses on the weekends. He greatly cherished the quality time he had with his more extended family.

Grant had high praise for Health Science Technology Academy (HSTA) which is a West Virginian program that helps prepare underrepresented high school students pursue and succeed in STEM based college programs[3]. "That was kind of nice to actually have a program. It was like hey we're here for you guys at this rural community. We really want you guys to go to school, and you know they're paying for me to go here. That was nice to have a program like that built around you."

Ella

[3] The vast majority of HSTA participants go on to graduate from college, and 75% of program participants are rural areas (What is HSTA, 2019).

Ella described her hometown as very isolated, with a dirt road to get to her home. "We have a Dollar General. That's about it. If you didn't have a car you were just unhappy because there wasn't really any public transport and Uber still hasn't gotten there." She also described her rural hometown as a relatively unwelcoming place, which was in contrast with what some other participants experienced in their rural hometowns. When asked how she would describe her hometown, the first word was "homophobic."

> One of the first things that comes to my mind (when recalling my hometown experience) was being called a dyke walking down the street because I had a short hair cut in middle school. It was mostly hick people. A lot of the kids my age were more progressive, but it's very much old people in that community. It's a very Republican state, honestly, West Virginia. I just don't want to be like negative, but that's all I can think of is the negative side of living in a rural town. I didn't really know a lot of people. I mean my neighbors were nice, but it was the only thing I knew. Being up here (at WVU) is a lot more like community. I know a lot of people say small towns are community based, and everyone knows everyone. No they don't. They don't care about you.

When asked about what being from a rural community meant to her, she shared, slightly tongue in cheek, that "you have to know how to shoot a gun. If you don't you'd probably be excommunicated from the community because everyone hunts."

Adeline

Adeline's ruralness was a focal point for much of her interview. Her private Christian high school enrolled a total of 17 students and she graduated with just one other student. Her father's towing business operated out of their home, so life at her home base was busy with customers.

> There ain't much to talk about it. Behind the house there's just hillside. Ain't nothing that really goes on… The closest thing to us is a gas station. I mean you can't just like run to the store or to get something to eat. There was just not much around. You're sort of like separated from everyone else if that makes sense. I mean I'm lucky because I live close to some people. A lot of people don't. My grandparents and my real mother she lives like an hour from society, she really is in the middle of nowhere… I feel like since I come from a small community, I wasn't exposed to as much.

At the same time, Adeline adores her home and spoke at length about loving the mountains, the lake, the snow, the rocks, and being outdoors. Adeline's home place is about 20 minutes away from a more urban center, Summersville, WV (population approximately 3300). But despite the geographic proximity to resources like Wal-Mart and restaurants, Adeline lamented her lack of reliable internet both at home and at her school. It is worth noting that her experience completing school work was different than that of her fellow research participants since her school was so small and grounded in ACE (Accelerated Christian Education). "I've never set foot in a class before I went to school here (at WVU). This was my first time like legit like sitting in a class listening to a professor."

Adeline shared about her vernacular. Her father told her she needs to "work on my 'y'all' and says 'don't ever talk like me.' She felt that some folks she's met at WVU have a hard time understanding her accent or colloquialisms, especially after she returns to Morgantown after time spent at home. "I really hear stuff come out of my mouth and I'm like wow." She feels she has sometimes faced a stigma for her accent, mostly from peers.

Embry

Embry's concept of rurality began with comparing her home community of Salt Rock, outside of Barboursville, with the nearby city of Huntington, WV (population approximately 46,000). She felt the juxtaposition of rurality and urbanity played a big role in getting her to college. Her elementary and middle school years were spent in smaller local schools, but her high school experience led her to one of the largest consolidated schools in the state. She felt that the size of the nearby high school "absolutely" influenced her smaller middle school's ability to secure opportunities in STEM for their students.

She described her hometown as a "very unique place and that it's very personal." She described the community as close knit and caring. It's "a very country area, like people riding their four wheelers on the main road... at (school), especially all of the Salt Rock kids are considered to be like really country." Embry was conscious of differences among various groups within her consolidated high school. "It's very odd like going to elementary school then high school because it's a very contrasting dynamic. Especially with kids from the higher class neighborhoods of Barboursville interacting with Salt Rock kids interacting with Milton kids. It was very interesting. But I really appreciated the people from Salt Rock because even though I'm definitely not as country as them, it definitely was like it reminded me of where I actually live."

Embry described a time in high school when her stretch of the road was pummeled by an ice storm and all of Barboursville lost power. Specifically, her area was without power for two weeks.

> There were trees on the street, like people couldn't get to places to get heat. There was ice on the road. So what our street did is everybody like worked together to clear the roads, and also like make sure everybody had fuel to get heat. Our neighbors came over and stayed at our house so we could all stay warm. We all slept in the living room with

one big heater, which I thought was really cool because like in a bigger neighborhood I don't think you could be like, 'Hey, the power's out. You guys want to come spend the night to stay warm?' I don't think that would have worked out if it was anybody else. It felt like post-apocalyptic so it was good to have everybody working together…It was really bad, but they collectively, like all of the power companies came together and made a little community in our mall parking lot and they got everybody's power on in less than a month. I mean they did their best. Some people had to wait three weeks, but I think we were pretty lucky to get it in two.

Embry has faced some doubters due to her "country" upbringing. Some of it has been light-hearted, as she recalls some lovingly teasing comments from one of her best friends." He's like 'you are the most country person I've ever met. You're from Salt Rock.' And I'm like, 'dude, I am not. You should meet some of the (other) people!' Like it's the type of neighborhood where you look out your back window and someone's asking your dad if they can hunt in your backyard."

Other instances of teasing have been less kind. For example, her first roommate's mother often made disparaging comments about the quality of the town surrounding WVU, and complained publicly on social media about West Virginia. Embry found this to be hurtful. But even before she matriculated to college, she experienced a criticism that propelled her to commit to and succeed at WVU.

So since I'm an aerospace engineering kid, I wanted to go to Embry Riddle in Daytona Beach so bad. So they have like very specific funding for things I wanted to do. So I applied there, and I applied here, because this was my state school. I wanted to go to WVU. I was having a conversation with one of my friends that I've made that went to

Embry Riddle. And he said, 'Where do you want to go?' and I was like, 'Well if I don't go to Embry Riddle, I'm going to go to WVU.' And he responded, 'Well do you really trust your education with a West Virginia school? And that made me so mad. I was so mad. I kept my composure and I was like, 'You understand that you just insulted the place where I'm from? You understand that, right? And you insinuating that WVU can't give me a good education because it's from West Virginia makes me angry.' So I was thinking about it and I was like, no, I'm going to WVU. It's really important to me… You know, people are gonna think you're country. And I don't care. I mean I grew up in Salt Rock, I don't care if people think – they can think whatever they think. But being from a rural community, I think it really shows you what it's like to interact with people like keeping very close knit to people. So even when you're in a big school (like WVU) you feel like you can have a personal connection."

Summary: Experiences of Rurality

The seven participants all felt their rural upbringing had an impact on their experiences of college preparation and college attendance. Specifically, all participants acknowledged the difference in size and activity in Morgantown compared to their hometowns. Some students were very overwhelmed by these differences (Grant, Embry, Marla) while others were excited by the change of pace (Faith, Ella). Some participants had very isolated, remote experiences (Adeline, Marla, Grant, Mason), while others had easier access to resources such as stores and restaurants (Adeline, Ella, Embry). Most participants spoke fondly of their close-knit, rural communities and recalled them as supportive. But others like Ella and Faith, recalled it less fondly, mentioning what they called the more negative aspects of growing up in a rural environment. The two racially minoritized participants, Faith and Mason, both commented on their displeasure with the

lack of diversity in their hometowns, and felt that Morgantown was an improvement. Embry and Adeline commented on experiencing stigma based on their "country" accents and vernacular. Some participants attended small, rural schools (Adeline, Marla, Grant) while others attended large, consolidated schools (Embry, Ella). All of these points of divergence highlight the heterogeneity of the rural experience.

Academics (Preparedness & College Rigor)/ Self-Perception

All students interviewed discussed the transition from high school-level work to college-level work. Some felt quite prepared, and others felt very underprepared. Influential factors included their high school experiences, the difference between their small rural hometowns and the large university setting, COVID-related interruptions, and the resources available in their hometowns.

Adeline was one of the participants who felt like her high school adequately prepared her for college. In her nontraditional high school, she did extracurricular activities like dramatic monologues, word count, recitations and sewing, quilting and crocheting. She hired an ACT coach to help her prepare for the exam because her high school curriculum did not align with what would be covered on the test. "I'm the world's worst test taker. Never was a test taker, so it took me a lot to get it."

Adeline did not know that the fields of study she is enjoying in college – philosophy and political science – even existed when she was in high school.

> I didn't know any degree like that existed until I came here, because everyone I know who went to school always seem to be that they went to school to be a doctor of some sorts or an engineer. So I didn't know something like that existed… I really got into it. And I absolutely love reading. That's one of the things about political science. I love to learn about that type of stuff like constitutional law and civil liberties, like that's more up

my alley. And then philosophy, I love the mindset of it. Love it. I've never enjoyed so much. I love puzzles, which is like brain games. You know, philosophy, to me is like that, and I really like that.

Adeline said that topics such as civil liberties and constitutional law were never covered in history classes at her school. In fact, she recalls she rarely had any social studies curriculum at all. Despite this nontraditional approach, Adeline felt her high school provided her with tools necessary to be successful at WVU.

> I'm actually really thankful that I went to the school I did, even though I never had like the classroom experience. I actually find that to be so helpful. I'm so, so motivated and so self-disciplined. I do so much better in my online classes than I would ever do sitting in the classroom. I'm really on top of all my stuff if that makes sense. I'm very independent. I can learn more from a book than what I can somewhat from a professor teaching me. I would not stand here today if it wasn't for my school. There are some things I didn't learn before I went to college, but then there's a lot of stuff that I did learn from my school that college doesn't offer – like how to write checks, how to do stuff with every day life.

Marla was a bit nervous about the rigor of college level work. She shared that her father was very supportive of her going to college, but was not initially supportive of her attending WVU specifically. But as her school's valedictorian, she felt that her dual enrollment credits earned in high school helped prepare her for college level work.

> He was more like go to (smaller state school)... I don't want you to get up there and be like not able to adapt fast enough to take on college courses, and then an atmosphere change or like new environment change. I was like no, I think I can do it. He was

supportive of me going (to college) he was just like I just don't want you to get up there and then (not succeed). (My parents and others told me) just stay prepared and focused and you'll be fine. That's what I kept telling myself. As long as I don't get distracted by anything and stay organized I can do it. That's the main thing I focus on is organization.

This focus on organization has served her well. Marla shared she didn't struggle too much with the adjustment to a college schedule due to her rural high school experience where her school day took 10 hours or more due to lengthy transportation plus her extracurricular activities. She felt that the preparation for college level work and expectations was overplayed by high school teachers. She feels the college level instructors are more forgiving and lenient than she was led to believe. It is possible that exceptions made and policies changed in light of COVID-19 impacted this experience.

Although Marla felt her academic preparation was sufficient, acclimating to college level work has still taken some adjustment. She recalled a tight knit sense of community with her high school teachers in her rural hometown. WVU's way of doing things signified a transition or adjustment in regard to communication with faculty and using academic support systems, specifically tutoring.

(Before I got here) I didn't know tutoring centers existed. I didn't know that was a thing at all… those students who work there, they know exactly what they're doing. They got through the class, like you can ask them anything and they can explain it just as well as a professor has to me… In high school I never had to email my teachers and now it's the only source of communication. That was so weird to me because my high school email I get like one notification a week, and now I get six-plus (school emails) a day.

Mason felt that his high school did not adequately prepare him for the rigor of college level work, because he had completed all the available courses to take before his senior year. There were no additional math courses for him to take after his sophomore year, when he completed a college level calculus course. Fortunately, his high school offered an engineering program that he could complete on an elective basis during his senior year. He feels the college coursework in engineering is extremely tough, and experienced a wakeup call his first semester when he earned a grade of D on a chemistry exam.

> That was like the first time I did so bad on something, so it really shocked me. Then I just realized I had to actually start studying more and focusing more. I feel like (my high school) decently prepared me for (college), some classes more than others. Once I realized how hard the (college) classes actually were I realized I needed to focus on school more… Trying to get used to everything while trying to maintain my grades was pretty hard. Luckily all my roommates were in engineering so we kinda have the same classes and we got to know each other really well and became pretty good friends. We were able to work together on stuff and kind of make sure that each one of us is getting through it together.

Mason described a critical academic experience that helped him stay engaged and motivated during his first semester of college – department visits in his freshman engineering program.

> You go to a lecture about the different engineering majors. And it's cool to see all the different majors and what all they do. They even show us some projects and stuff. That was really interesting to me. I liked that. And then in the engineering building they have something called the Innovation Hub. There's a bunch of like 3D printers and laser

engravers all that stuff. It's really cool to kind of think that I will be working with that eventually. So that was nice.

Faith was one of the participants who felt relatively underprepared for college level coursework. She experienced feelings of nervousness and excitement during her early college days. Faith initially wanted to pursue a nursing major, and began in the pre-nursing program. The courses were more difficult than she anticipated and she did not meet the criteria for matriculation to the nursing program. Faith remembers being mostly excited, but also worried and nervous about attending college.

> No one in my family knew what to tell me (about college)… Our high school is known for having really bad math teachers. Luckily I don't think I struggled with that cuz my math scores were fine. But I know other kids had trouble… I didn't get into the nursing school. I was sad at the time, but like honestly I'm not regretful of that at all. I enjoy public health a lot more to be honest. It excites me. It's sad that it took a rejection to notice that, but I think public health would have made me happier in the end. If I'm not happy with the money I'm making (in the future) I could go back to nursing… when I changed my major the academic advisors were super nice about it and very helpful to me. There was a lot of options otherwise. And if I did still want to pursue nursing before graduating I could have. They would have made that happen for me.

Grant came to college with 55 hours of college credit, so in that regard he felt prepared for college academics. However, this experience contrasted with his experience of having unqualified or underqualified teachers at the high school level. The rigor and volume of college level work was new to him.

> No one even close anywhere in my family went to college, so you know we were kind of on our own trying to figure that out. I am starting to figure it out. I feel like those college classes I did in high school helped. But definitely coming here was a big adjustment and it still is. I'm still trying to figure things out. The few certified teachers we had, I mean even then they weren't like super focused on school work. We did not have the teachers put on the work like we should have. In no way did they prepare us for this. Because they, like most of our students there, were not interested (in going to college) so there wasn't any need to be like, you know, assigning a ridiculous amount of work, because (the students) weren't going to do it either way... We would spend a whole week doing one assignment, you know. And then here it's like we have an assignment every single day, plus all these tests to study for. So I think that's definitely been the biggest thing for sure… just getting used to the workload here.

Beyond feeling unprepared by his high school, Grant also experienced nervousness from observing other students from his county who attempted college at WVU and did not succeed. Despite his fears and apprehension regarding maintaining the grades needed to qualify for medical school, Grant ultimately ended up making the President's List his first semester. Before getting to that point, Grant experienced earning a bad grade on a test.

> I was like ok, this just fortifies my entire reason I was so scared to come here… You start freaking out, especially for me whenever like so much rides on my grades for going to the next step, you know to medical school. So that was very low for me because I was like how am I going to like come back from this? … I knew it was going to be really hard. There's been a lot of people from Calhoun that have tried to come here and in fact do the premed route and they failed out. So that was very daunting to try to be like, 'well,

> what makes me any different, you know? Whenever they've tried the same thing and they went to the same school that I did… It's difficult but not nearly what I thought… I just came in here and I was obviously like really worked up the whole time. I kept talking to my sister. She always talked me off that ledge. Like you're gonna be fine, Grant, you just need to keep working. She was like after you get that first assignment and you start, you'll be fine. Really that's how it was. I mean I just started doing it and I was like, if I can just get into a rhythm of this I think I'll be ok. And I did. The next thing I know it was the end of the semester.

Ella also reported struggling with college level coursework. She passed high school by doing makeup work and packets, and she felt the amount of effort she put in during high school was not sufficient to prepare for college. She said that she would have done some things differently if she could have possibly known the stroke of luck that was about to befall her upon high school graduation. But in some ways, she does feel college is going better than high school.

> I'm almost failing a class… I bought a planner, I don't use it. If I don't write it down I'll put sticky notes on everything, I just forget that they exist… Without the high school structure, I find myself doing better. That's not a common thing for people with ADD or ADHD which I have. But it's kind of like doing things at my own pace and having to keep myself accountable for something. That's actually taught me a really big lesson. If you do (the homework) the first day and turn it in early your teacher's not only going to like you, they're going to read it. You're going to get a good grade or if you turn it in early, well some of my teachers will let me make revisions to get a better grade. That's something that's really helped me. [If I had known I would be able to afford college] I

probably would have studied a lot harder and got a lot of the things that I'm learning right now out of the way. Like note taking, which I just learned how to do this year.

Although it's been difficult, Ella says it has not been as difficult as she mentally prepared herself for. She had not yet received her first set of college grades at the time of the conversation, but she anticipated college would be even harder, requiring her to focus solely on schoolwork. Her experience has included a lively social life.

> I don't work that hard on school work, and I still get pretty good grades. I do have to study more. Studying is something I don't like to do. I didn't expect to be like study study study, but yeah. I have to study.

Embry felt well prepared for college level work thanks to the opportunities she had to immerse herself in STEM related education from an early age. Due to the proximity of a great high school, Embry's middle school also had STEM programming that allowed her to travel on all expenses paid trips to metropolitan areas.

> We had a lot of funding. A lot of engineering departments in high schools especially don't get a lot of money. It was shocking the stuff we could get funded. We had a laser cutter, we had multiple 3D printers, and double monitors for all of our engineering projects. It was absolutely insane…The thing about Barboursville is that while there's a lot of low income communities, there's also a lot of higher income communities. So a lot of funding money for the middle school came from parents. Parents contributed a lot of money, especially the higher income places, because there was such a contrast. It's just this contrast of different like socioeconomic areas. A lot of our funding came directly from parents." She also had a wonderful teacher that instilled a love of science early on. "I had a science teacher and her name was Miss Ryder. The funny thing is that I'd also

gone to church with her and she sat behind me in church. So when I showed up in her class, I was like this is gonna be awkward. But it wasn't. She made sure to make class fun. Everything was personalized and once she came to me with the idea of, "oh there's this thing where you can compete and you can do fun stuff" I was like "absolutely!" We did some real research studies as early as seventh grade. We were studying e coli levels in the Guyandotte River. It was a big deal. We placed number one in West Virginia and got to go to DC, which was so cool. I was like If I can keep doing science like this, I'm gonna stay (in WV). We went again in eighth grade and placed again and got to go to New York City. Miss Ryder drove us. She was like I don't want you guys to miss out on this experience.

But the strong academic preparation did not adequately prepare Embry for the mental health challenges she would experience during her transition to college life. She experienced very poor mental health and felt some of her habits were not up to the standards needed to succeed in college.

When I was in high school… I didn't have to study or anything. [In college] I think that kind of hit me weird because I was like I don't instantly know this [material]. It wasn't that I thought that I was like a genius. By no means was I a genius. But you know, I knew math. I knew science. I knew history. I knew how to write papers. But in high school, I had a structure. I had to go to a class every day at the same time. I got out of class, I did all my homework, then I went to work. I did the same thing every day. When I came to college, I was responsible for everything, keeping myself healthy.

This change in scope of responsibilities threw Embry for a loop as she sunk into a season of poor mental health.

Summary: Academics / Self-Perception

Low SES students suffer from negative stereotypes concerning their ability and competence, and show lower self-reported perceptions of intelligence (Fiske, et al 2002; Durante et al, 2017). Each of the seven participants spoke about how their academic preparation in high school impacted their transition to college and their in-college experiences, as well as how they thought about their ability to complete college-level coursework. Grant was the most self-critical and critical of his academic preparation, despite entering his first year at WVU with 55 hours of college credits. He was hyper-aware of a lack of qualified teachers (perhaps because his own older sister is now a teacher in the county) and the failures of older students before him. Mason was also critical of his school's lack of advanced coursework, although he was kinder about the support provided by teachers at the technical school next door where he took elective engineering courses.

Ella, Faith and Marla felt somewhat critical of their academic preparation, though for different reasons. Ella did not feel she was adequately prepared because she was able to graduate thanks to remedial work. Faith felt like the low rigor of her high school was partially to blame for her inadmissibility to her top choice major. Marla felt that her high school tried hard to prepare students, but wasn't sure if it was up to the standards expected at WVU – after all, she was the class valedictorian.

In contrast, Embry and Adeline felt their high schools prepared them for the rigors of collegiate coursework, but their experiences were vastly different. Embry attended one of the largest high schools in the state that offered advanced coursework and had a strong STEM program and well-funded extra-curricular educational opportunities. Unfortunately, this did not translate to academic success in her first semester of college as mental health struggles impeded

her progress. Adeline attended a tiny ACE-based school that did not provide the curricula of public high schools in the state. However, the school required students to obtain practical skills and be self-sufficient in time management, which has served Adeline well in college.

First Generation Status/ Parents' Experiences

All seven participants mentioned the first-generation positionalities of their parents. There were 114 unique references to parents. Some comments were about their parents' own college experiences (or lack thereof), and other comments about parents were related to the participants' first-generation college student identity. Many participants described the push and pull of parents wanting to help and be supportive, but not knowing how. Some parents, such as Marla's, had feelings of fear and worry about sending their child to college.

As Marla left for college, she experienced dealing with her parents' emotions and fears. She described them as "super sad."

> Neither of them went to college so neither of them really gave me any advice coming into it. They didn't really have anything to say other than stay focused. But they were also like afraid of safety issues because at home we rarely ever lock our door, or like we leave our keys in our vehicle with the doors unlocked in our driveway. And here you can't do that. They were scared.

Although her parents' fears and concerns of the unknown in a college town weighed heavily on Marla, in contrast, she attributed much of her desire to attend college to her first-generation status and her parents' lived experiences.

> My dad really wanted to go to college. He just couldn't. Like he didn't have the means, you know, the grades to go. And he's so intelligent he could have got any degree he wanted to. I got a lot of scholarships with SAT scores and stuff, it's like well, if I have all these means, all this support to go, why not just like do what I want with what I can do?

> So furthering my education was definitely one of the things I want to do for [my dad] in a way. I mean, also for me of course. But if he didn't get to do it because he didn't have the right things? I have the right things, and if I want to do it, I might as well.

Marla also described taking responsibility and ownership of her college preparation, in contrast to what she observed from non-first-generation peers.

> I had to do it by myself. Like my parents don't have access to my Portal at all. I paid for my entire college. I feel like that's partially because I'm first-generation. I also feel it's partially because I'm from Appalachia because for one, my parents didn't know that they could have access. But coming from Appalachia they've never had a college fair. Like there was one day out of my entire four years of high school where we had colleges come and speak to us. I don't think WVU was there, I think it was Potomac State, which is the branch campus… And I feel … the parents for first-generation students are never really given information. Everything that I tell them, like FAFSA, I have to do on my own. Because they're like 'What's a FAFSA?' they've never had to do any of that. If more information was provided to the parents, it would make the whole thing easier.

Mason was the only student in the study with two parents who attempted college, but neither completed a credential. His parents wanted a different path for their three children. When Mason recalls what his parents shared about their college experiences, he said they spoke mostly about fun stories from that time in their life and not about the process of going to or attending college. While he enjoyed their stories, he did not find them particularly helpful as he navigated college, instead relying more on his older siblings who recently went through the process.

> They always pushed me when I was little, me and my siblings, because they wanted us to go to college because they saw it as a good thing… just all three of us getting through college will, I think, mean a lot to my parents and to my family in general.

Faith described a feeling of longing for a parent who attended college – both for her own desires and also to put her on a more even playing field with her peers. Her mother, who struggled with addiction, dropped out of high school and later completed a GED. Her father was not in her life when she was growing up. Recently before this study was conducted, Faith reconnected with her father as an adult. Throughout her college journey thus far, Faith has noticed a contrast between herself and her peers on the basis of parental college experience. She described an alienating experience of her friends exchanging text messages in a group chat, featuring pictures of their parents from their college days.

> A lot of my friends have like both parents and stuff. They'd be like oh yeah well my mom went here for college and when she came back she had me. [The picture] was really cute but then it made me just think that like, oh wow, I'd love to see what my mom looked like in college, too, but [that's not possible.]

Faith explained that her grandparents took guardianship of her and her brother when she was in the fifth grade, and her experience living with an older generation was in contrast to much of her friends' experience. While the age gap and unfamiliarity with college has complicated some things, the involvement of her grandmother in her education has been a positive influence in Faith's life. "[My grandmother] always said academics first. Never like forced it on me, but just kind of said it's important. She's my support and why I'm here [at college] probably."

Grant described his parents as very supportive of his pursuit of a college education. His mother attempted college but ran out of money to finish. His father attended a technical center while enrolled in high school.

> I know my mom really hated not being able to finish college. I think she really wanted that for my sister and I. Even though [my dad] didn't go to college, you know he went through a lot of struggles with trying to provide for us. I mean we have a very nice lifestyle but I think he always wanted to do more. I think that was one of the things he kind of felt bad that he didn't try to go to college or anything and just went straight into working. I really think that both my mom and my dad were very influential. (They said) you need to try to do [college] because it'll make sure that you can have a future… I saw with my parents my entire life that you're just not really going to get anything if you don't work for it. You're only young once so I was like what if I did try to go as far as I can? I really want to become a doctor, but can I do it? I don't know. But at least I can try while I'm young and that way I know for sure.

Ella shared about complicated emotions and feelings regarding her relationship with her mother, who dropped out of high school, had her first child (Ella's older brother who is 20+ years her senior) at 18 and then returned for her GED. She described a supportive and loving, yet tumultuous relationship with her mother. This is further complicated by significant support Ella received from a friend and her friend's mom through high school and matriculating to college, which at times created a wedge in the relationship with her own mother.

> It's kind of hard being a first-generation student. [My mom] got her GED but it took a while for her to do that… [My mom] tried to go back to school for nursing, but she didn't have the funds to do it. And then she got pregnant with me, so it kind of went down the

drain for her… It's hard because if I have a math problem, my mom's not really the person that I can go to and my dad's not here… If I have any questions about college I usually go to [friend's mom.] My mom gets very upset about that. My mom and her don't really have the best connection. I didn't really have a great life growing up and her family took me in basically. My mom, she thinks that my best friend's mom used me as a charity case. I got the hand me down clothes. I get the homework help. I get all the stuff like that, even now [in college]. My friend's mom is the one that helped me set up my FAFSA, that helped me do almost everything that had to do with college. And that's kind of hard, too, because it kind of strains my relationship with my mom. Because one thing she loves to say to me is 'just because you're going to college doesn't mean you're smarter than me.' I don't want to be rude but she can't do fractions.

Ella feels strongly that her mom wishes she could do some of those supportive things to help her. Despite these challenging feelings and emotions, Ella's mom has been consistently insistent that she wants a better life for her daughter. Ella became passionate when discussing this, pounding the table for emphasis when recalling what her mother had told her.

My mom had always been like do better (hits table for emphasis) than me. Do better (hits table harder for second emphasis) than me. Treat your kids (hits table) better than I treated you. Get better finances (hits table) than I have. Get a better house (hits table), get a plot of land and we'll live on that plot of land. I'm living with you.

When Ella found out that she had won the full ride scholarship, her mom was elated and credited Jesus with the stroke of fortune.

Basically, she just cried. She was like you did it, you did it. But honestly I wasn't great throughout high school. I barely passed a lot of my classes and had to retake a lot of

classes. So me getting this scholarship was basically my mom's like divine intervention, I guess. You should thank me [instead of Jesus]. I'm the one that signed up for it. No, thank the nurse! Thank the nurse that told me about it…[My mom] was like you're doing good, you're going to be great, you're going to be the next Albert Einstein. And I'm sitting here like I can't do fractions because you can't do fractions.

Ella also described a tearful, emotional goodbye when she did finally come to college and her mother had an empty nest after more than three decades. Ella said, "Basically, it's just us right now. I'm the only one that she has."

Ella acknowledged positives and negatives regarding her mom's assistance while enrolled in college. In addition to the encouragement and emotional support, her mother provides financial help for food and incidentals as she is able. Ella described her mom as "a bit of a doomsday prepper" who provided more supplies than she had room for in the residence hall. However, some aspects of getting to college were made more difficult by her mother, specifically when it came to paying for college, despite having a full ride scholarship.

I actually went to [the FAFSA filing program] because I can't really do that myself. It wouldn't let me complete [the form] so I went. They were like 'Oh yeah, your mom needs to come in. Or she needs to go into the site and click that she is acknowledging her tax information is being used.' And I was like (whispers) my mom doesn't know how to turn the computer on. So I tried to do my FAFSA filing there by just being like well let's try her email and maybe her social security number, because I've known [all my mom's documents] since I was 10 just in case something happens. But [the financial aid worker] was like 'You can't do that.' I was like why? He said it was illegal. I was like oh, I'll do it at home.

Adeline described her father as her greatest support in life. Her older stepsisters encouraged her to consider college, and her father was supportive from the beginning. So far, he has helped pay the portion of Adeline's college tuition that hasn't been covered by scholarships. She has offered to get a job to pay part of the bill herself, but her father has encouraged her to focus on her studies.

> He said, 'okay, as long as you don't screw up, do something stupid, and try to make something of yourself, I will help you go to college.' He's like no, don't get a job. You can work in the summer or whatever you want to, but I'm not going to make you work… He's like I will help you pay for college if you just study and get As. If you get As, I'm behind your back.

Adeline experiences feelings of guilt because she does not work to contribute to the financial aspects of her college education, while she describes her father as a very hard worker who built or fixes and maintains everything they have – their home, his business, their vehicles. "It really guilt twists me half the time. But he's like no, no don't worry about it. But yeah my father is a real big help."

Adeline has also experienced criticism from classmates, roommates and other peers based on her accent and colloquialisms. These are deeply engrained from her sense of place and her family. She shared that her accent becomes much stronger after spending time at home, and that her father is self-conscious about their southern accent.

> He told me I still need to work on my y'all (laughter). I still need to not talk like him is what he tells me. He's like don't ever talk like me. All the time he's picking on me, like well if you are going to be a lawyer you don't need to be saying that (laughter).

Adeline has been very mindful and observant of experiencing intellectual growth during her college journey thus far. She recalled that her parents never influenced her to read as a child, and that her father typically has other people read things to him or he doesn't read. Adeline discovered a passion for reading by accident late in high school, and in college, her experience is that learning by reading is one of her greatest joys. When catching up with her father, he often remarks on Adeline's intellectual growth and development.

> He's like, 'a year ago we would not be sitting down having this conversation. You really have improved a lot…' Like I've said, my father doesn't read a lot so like half the time I talk about stuff with him about my day he might not know what I'm even talking about… But [he knows] I have really worked hard for what I have got right now and I don't intend to stop anytime soon. Like everyone in my family has worked hard for everything they have ever had and I'm working hard for my degree.

Embry's also described having very supportive parents, even if they did not always know how to help. She grew up in a home where aspiring to college was the norm, a requirement even, which she attributed to her opinion that she "always" wanted to go to college. Her parents' experiences with adversity (especially her mother's and her maternal grandmother's) was channeled into pushing Embry toward a better standard of living.

> My mom when she graduated high school… she worked retail. And my dad he went to trade school so he became a welder. So the whole time I was growing up my mom used to tell me, you do not have an option... You're getting a college education, you're getting a good job where you don't have to worry. You don't have to live paycheck to paycheck. She was like I regret not doing things more that I wanted to. I want you to be able to do whatever you want. Which I thought was really cool…[Me going to college] was

important to my mom especially... When my mom was a kid, my grandparents got divorced. My Nana had to support four children while putting herself through beauty school. She had a lot on her plate. My mom got to see what it was like for my Nana to struggle. And then my mom, you know, she didn't go to college, so she was working retail which absolutely was perfect for her, she has such an eye for color and shapes. But they didn't pay her well enough. So she's like 'I understand what it's like to struggle and I never want you to have to struggle or worry about where your money's coming from.' She was like it's very important for you to get a college education.

Even with such consistent and enthusiastic support from so early on, Embry still experienced challenges as a first generation college student. In particular, she has experienced challenges with transitioning from her family unit, explaining college processes to her parents, and explaining why her performance in high school and college were so vastly different in her first semester. Embry and her mother are still very close, speaking on the phone multiple times per day, and yet sometimes there is still a disconnect.

> It's hard to explain, but my mom does not know what it's like to be a college student. Neither does my dad. I try to explain to my mom different things about college. I had a whole financial issue with student accounts I had to get that figured out. But I was trying to explain [the issue] to my mom, that it's not something I can directly handle. I have to get people to help me with that. She's like well I don't understand why you can't just do it. And I'm like, ok but you haven't been to college. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I'm just saying there's kind of a disconnect, especially with communication and like having issues with dealing with certain things in college.

Embry also had to work through the experience of her mother missing her so deeply when she moved away from home. Embry's departure was difficult on her mom. Although Embry described her mom as relatively unemotional and as someone who "doesn't cry", she showed her sadness in other ways such as acting angry and irritable, which Embry described as a tough experience. Once at college, the amount of time the two spent in communication was unusually high, especially in that first semester. "She used to call me a lot more. About every couple hours. Then I got her like weaned off of calling me so much. She started calling me just twice a day which is pretty ok."

The mental health struggles Embry experienced during her first semester of college were acutely felt by her mother as well. This aspect of the college experience has not been smooth for her and has led to emotional challenges and academic missteps. Furthermore, Embry took on more than the lion's share of the emotional labor and burden, wishing to shield her mother from the worry.

> I struggled a lot last semester. I got really depressed. And I stopped doing work. And it was very scary for my mom, I will tell you. [She] wasn't used to it because I had always had straight As. I had a 4.7ish GPA when I graduated [high school]. I really had a bump. I had a bad bump. And I mean I've got some pretty not great grades. I would call her crying. Like I was in therapy. My mom took it the hardest. She was like I'm three hours away. I can't like actively be there for you. I didn't want to ask for my mom's help actively, because I didn't want to worry her. So I kind of took on responsibility all alone and I shouldn't have. There's plenty of people I could have asked for help but I didn't. (Being willing to seek help) was not something I realized would be that difficult coming out of high school.... But I've made up for it. But it was very hard for my mom to get to

understand that college is harder. Not just because of the work, but because I'm also raising myself, feeding myself, going to class, going to work, doing all this stuff. So that definitely was a disconnect, but we're working on it.

Summary: Parents

All seven participants reflected on the influence and impact of their parents and their first-generation status on their own experience in college. Some participants grew up in two-parent households (Embry, Grant, Mason, and Marla), while others grew up with one parent (Ella, Adeline); Faith grew up with her grandparents. Only Grant and Mason had parents who had attempted college. Several participants were able to rely on their older siblings or step-siblings for advice (Mason, Faith, Grant, Adeline). Participants commented on feelings of guilt in various ways. For example, Marla was pushed by the fact that her parents were capable of a college education, but it was simply out of reach. Ella described her mother's emotional outbursts at the thought of her daughter receiving a college education. Grant felt guilty that he perceived his father felt bad for not "doing more". Some of the participants described being pushed by their parents to achieve what they had not, while others did not experience that pressure.

COVID-19

Study participants were interviewed during the spring 2022 semester, the fifth regular academic semester impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic impacted students' college experiences in various ways before, during and after the transition from high school to college, as all were juniors or seniors in high school when the pandemic shuttered daily routines in March 2020. In regards to RQ1, there are examples of how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the experiences of these low-income, first-generation, rural college students from

West Virginia in four realms: adding to the feelings of worry with attending college, the acclimation to college-level work, navigating COVID-19 guidelines, and building social bonds.

Several participants (Faith, Grant, Mason, Marla) described experiencing an additional layer of worry and stress regarding going to college due to the impacts of the pandemic. Faith, who had at the time of the interview contracted COVID-19 on two separate occasions despite being vaccinated, worried about going home and potentially spreading COVID-19 to her grandparents. Mason felt that he would probably be fine due to his young age and because he got the vaccine, but he and his parents still experienced concerns about the disease. Marla's mother worked in healthcare and it was a priority for her to be up to date on her booster before coming to school. Mason noted, "I feel like I would feel a little more comfortable if we all didn't have to wear a mask and try to keep our distance and everything like that. I did get the shot before I came here to feel more comfortable with it all."

A majority of participants (Grant, Marla, Embry and Ella) referenced challenges to academic preparation due to COVID that they feel contributed to their experiences of acclimating to college level coursework. In particular, Grant and Ella separately used the phrase "we did nothing" to describe entire semesters or years of high school education impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Grant elaborated that his school wasn't technologically equipped for students to be able to complete work from home. "We didn't have computers or good Internet at all… So we literally did absolutely nothing like from the beginning of March [2020] to the end of that school year." The pandemic also left psychological imprints on the participants that impacted their academic success. Embry recalled, "I felt like I kind of lost a little bit of like who I was kind of before COVID… I definitely struggled a lot. My grades suffered. I got put on academic probation but I'm making up for it. I've got really good grades this semester. I had to

definitely do a 180 and I was ok with that because [now I'm] back to how I was in high school." Although Marla has been successful in her transition to college level work, she mentioned that she felt her academic preparation was negatively impacted by COVID because it cancelled a statewide competition she was poised to compete in.

Marla described a challenging first day experience in Morgantown as COVID-19 took away the opportunity for an in-person New Student Orientation. She and her parents experienced a stressful day trying to find the correct parking garage and determining how to use the on-campus transit system.

> We didn't get to do (in-person new student orientation). It was all on Zoom. I feel like it would have been super beneficial for like my parents and I to come up here together. Because the first time that we all came up here, it was move in day and it was so chaotic. It was terrible. My dad had no clue where [my residence hall] was.

Furthermore, Marla and her close friends had negative college experiences due to the COVID-19 guidelines and contact tracing protocol enforced by the University. She described a lack of clarity and certainty around the University's efforts to identify known exposures in classrooms and describe or enforce quarantine policies. She told a story of a time she received a text from a friend she had been with the day before. The friend had received a notice from university that he was required to quarantine for five days due to COVID exposure. He had reached out inform Marla, as she was a close contact. But determining if he was really exposed, and if Marla was a close contact by extension, was anything but straightforward. This caused additional layers of stress and uncertainty for students trying to do the right thing by quarantining when necessary.

> Five minutes later [after he texted me] he was like 'They just sent me a second email saying they emailed the wrong person.' I was like, 'Are you serious?' And he's like 'yeah, they apologized.' And then he got ANOTHER [third] email [saying] it wasn't a mistake, [he was] exposed to COVID. [So he asked them] 'Do I quarantine?' And they [replied] 'No, wait wrong person again. I'm so sorry but you weren't exposed to COVID'. [He was] so confused. He [replied to the email saying] if you tell me what class it is, I'll tell you if I have that class. Because there must be like a boy with the same name or something [causing the confusion]. And they were like 'No we can't tell you that, it's too personal information but we promise you weren't exposed.' It's just like a bunch of panic. [Because you need to know one way or the other if you were exposed. And they told him he couldn't] go to class for five days, so [while all these emails played out] he missed two of his classes today for absolutely no reason.

The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted the social experiences of students. Faith discussed this at length. When the pandemic first began in March of Faith's senior year of high school, her college roommate decided to cancel her attendance at WVU to instead attend a local community college at home. Faith was looking forward to living with this friend, and felt increased nerves knowing that she wasn't heading to college along with her friend. She spent her first year without a roommate at all, which she felt was a negative impact to the social aspect of her college experience.

> I didn't have a roommate my entire freshman year. I feel like that limited my potential friendships… Everyone says when you're going to college you won't be friends with people from your hometown anymore, but like about five or six of [my close friends] came from my hometown and, and I think COVID, I mean I love them all and they're my

close friends, but I feel like I would have made even more [friends] if COVID didn't limit me from meeting people. Can't really meet someone when you're wearing a mask. There wasn't as many opportunities, like welcome week wasn't really a thing… So I just think that like my close friends are good, the hometown ones, but I feel I would have had more [friends] if COVID didn't happen.

Faith also contracted COVID twice during her time at WVU – first around Thanksgiving break of her freshman year, and then a second time over winter break of her sophomore year despite being vaccinated. While there are obvious health challenges with COVID, overcoming the social isolation was a challenge, as well.

Although her outlook on it was more positive, Marla also felt that the COVID-19 pandemic helped keep her closer and tighter knit with her friends from high school.

> I hang out with them every day almost. Whenever I moved in with my [random] roommates… my whole [high school] group came over and [my roommates said] 'you really must have like a huge high school' but like no this is one-sixth of my entire senior class, we're just all really good friends.

Grant credited the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the reasons he sought to avoid requirements to live in the dorm, staying in his own apartment instead. While he felt this was ultimately the best choice for him to focus on his studies, he acknowledged that it does prevent him from getting the full college experience in some ways.

> There's only like two of us that came here from my high school. I have a couple friends in classes, but I don't really have that many friends because I live off campus. I feel like that kind of is like [both] a good and bad thing, but I was just like really adamant about I didn't really want to live on campus… so I mean in that aspect I think that also has taken

away a little from me just because I'm not able to maybe be around so many college students like [most students] are literally 24/7.

There were two concrete examples of COVID playing a very positive role in the participants' college experiences. Ella's very presence in higher education is thanks to a chance given her as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Adeline called COVID-19 a "real blessing" in her life that has enabled her to succeed in college.

Ella was able to afford college because of a scholarship giveaway to incentivize young people to get vaccinated against COVID-19. However, she was notified of her award too late to apply to WVU for the fall semester, and so she started in January instead. The second week of school, she contracted COVID and had to miss some school right at the start of the semester. Ella also disclosed that she experiences imposter syndrome from being in college predominantly due to this stroke of luck.

> Well basically how I applied [for the scholarship], I literally got a shot. When I got my second dose two weeks later, a nurse said 'Hey do you know about this [scholarship giveaway]?' And I said, 'no,' and then she helped me sign up for it. When I got picked I thought it was a scam… Imposter syndrome [motivates me to perform.] I haven't been a good student. But me getting a random lottery, like being here and [having] everything paid for me, that's kind of pushed me. [I think how] these kids are paying tons of money, their parents are. They're going to be in debt for the rest of their lives. I don't [have to go into debt.] I have the opportunity to not do that. And if I want to actually make the most of it, then I need to get my shit together [or else] this opportunity could have gone to someone way more deserving. I'm trying, I really am, and trying not to throw [the opportunity] away.

Adeline felt positively about the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on her college experience, which began during the fall 2020 semester. WVU's COVID-related protocols and adjustments made the large university in a comparatively urban setting more hospitable to Adeline, whose graduating class consisted of her and one additional student. Now in her fourth semester of college, each semester has become a new learning experience that she was more prepared for based on the previous experience.

> Honestly, if it wasn't for COVID, I don't think I'd be here [at WVU]. COVID has really been a blessing in my life. Like seriously I don't think I'd be in college if it wasn't for COVID. People's like you're crazy. I'm like I truly don't think so because it transitioned me into college a perfect amount. Literally I just took steppingstones and entered into it. [College] didn't hit me like all at once… for instance, we had a lot of classes online and my classes were very small… I had no one on my dorm floor. I didn't have a roommate either. There were six people on my floor. That was just like perfect for me. So each semester I've just kept taking stepping stones and gradually getting into [college]. And this semester [spring 2022] is really when it all went back and running like 100% which is really perfect for me because I gradually introduced myself into it.

Summary: COVID-19

The impacts of COVID-19 were salient for all study participants both before and during college. All participants were in high school when the pandemic began and experienced varying levels of technology and accessibility issues that impacted their learning. During college, participants felt the impact of COVID differently. Many caught COVID, although none reported falling seriously ill. There were worries for their families back home, especially for Faith who was raised by her grandparents. Participants reported varying feelings of discomfort and

displeasure with masking and social distancing protocols. In particular, Marla detailed the stress of contact tracing for students who were trying to follow the rules and procedures. The pandemic also impacted students' social experiences by limiting the number of in-person activities. Faith and Grant felt this negatively impacted their opportunities to make new friends, while Marla felt it gave her the opportunity to become closer than ever with friends from her high school. Ella and Adeline actually credited the COVID-19 pandemic for their college attendance and success, respectively.

RQ1 Summary: The LIFGRWV Experience

The present study seeks to add to the body of student retention literature by highlighting the experiences of low-income, first-generation, rural (LIFGR) students from West Virginia. These narrative interviews help fill the gap omitting this group from the literature. This matters because there is a growing recognition that successful retention of underrepresented groups may require institutions to depart from the assumption that integration is a one-way street where students must assimilate into the institutional context.

The literature review showed that low SES students with greater levels of unmet financial need are more likely to work more than 20 hours per week than higher SES students (Titus, 2006). However, the participants in this study did not fit this mold, perhaps because of significant parental support and subsidized education through the WV PROMISE scholarship and other scholarship programs such as HSTA and COVID-19 awards. While Faith did stress the impact of financial challenges, perhaps more financially challenged students were not able to participate in the study due to their work commitments.

The literature review detailed the challenges first-generation college students face, and the stories of the West Virginia LIFGRs were largely aligned with the literature. They felt that their parents, though supportive, were not effective in helping them understand or navigate the

college environment and its expectations. Several study participants mentioned family pressures to attend college (Embry, Mason, Grant) or to succeed in college (Embry, Adeline, Marla). However, a majority of study participants' experiences (Grant, Mason, Marla, Adeline) deviated from prior first-generation student research suggesting that first-generation students have lower than average academic performance. This aligns with some previous studies on rurality that suggest rural students are more likely than their non-rural counterparts to benefit from factors that are associated with increased academic achievement (Wells et. al, 2019). Previous literature highlighted the tensions between staying and leaving a rural community. The students in the present study largely had wide support to leave their rural communities to go to a more urban setting to receive their education. While there were some difficult transitions and tears shed when going off to college, by and large the participants' families were supportive and encouraging of their children to leave.

Previous research suggested that rural students have difficulty with time management, the anonymity of attending a larger school, and exhibit anxiety when engaging with diversity (Heinisch, 2017; Yenney-Henderson, 2019). However, the present study does not completely align with these findings. Ella, Embry and Mason both reported challenges with time management, but Ella contributed those to her essentially giving up in high school during the COVID-19 pandemic, Embry felt it was due to poor mental health, and Mason reported it yet still managed to earn a 4.0 in his first semester of engineering. Other participants like Adeline, Grant, Marla and Faith reported strong time management skills. Specifically, Marla and Adeline credited their rural high schools with preparing them for the rigor and expectations of time management necessary to succeed in college level work. While students did mention the adjustment period from a rural to a large setting, most reported enjoying the change of pace a

larger setting provided, and two specifically praised the diversity present on WVU's campus compared to their hometown. No participants reported a discomfort or anxiety with diversity.

The present study reinforced Tieken's (2017) study that educational inequities are intimately tied to geography. All seven narratives help paint a picture of how rurality impacts the educational experience. For example, Embry's large consolidated high school gave her STEM-based educational opportunities as early as middle school. In contrast, Grant's lack of qualified teachers left him feeling nervous and unprepared for college level coursework. Mason's school did not offer any additional math courses for him to take after the tenth grade. Adeline's rural private school did not have a social studies curriculum and very few previous graduates had ever attempted higher education.

Chenowith and Galliher (2004) reported that Appalachian students seem to experience an internal conflict of identity struggle more acutely than most students. Wilson et al. (2018) found that Appalachian students experienced greater levels of externalized tethering (or the pressure to provide external resources of time or money to the family) but the participants in the present study do not seem to reflect either of these findings. This may be because students who opted to participate in the study felt confident, or may be a reflection of the communication and connectedness technology available today that was not available at the time of these prior studies.

Prior research showed that Appalachian students' dialects can be a source of stigmatization in the higher education setting (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016). Two students specifically mentioned experiencing stigmatization on the basis of their accents, but neither reported facing this stigmatization by a faculty member or staff member of the university.

EXPECTATIONS & THE INSTITUTIONAL LAND-GRANT NARRATIVE

Research Question 2: How do the postsecondary experiences of low-income first-generation college students from rural West Virginia align with their expectations and the institutional land-grant narrative?

Two themes are salient in describing how the postsecondary experiences of low-income, first-generation rural West Virginia students aligned with their expectations and the institutional and-grant narrative: rurality and the land-grant concept. The comparisons and contrasts between their rural upbringings and their ideas of Morgantown and WVU shaped their expectations of what to expect regarding their college experiences. Six of seven participants were asked directly about their knowledge and thoughts on the land-grant concept (the seventh, Embry, was not asked due to time constraints because her interview took a turn in another direction providing rich insights in other areas). Study participants were unaware of what it meant for WVU to be a land-grant university. After being provided with a brief description of the meaning, all study participants felt that WVU lived up to the notion of having a calling as a land-grant university. Adeline described it as exceeding her expectations, saying, "college is not as treacherous as I imagined it."

Marla and Faith both described WVU as being financially accessible to any West Virginians who worked hard in in school. Faith shared that her out-of-state friends described WVU's non-resident tuition as less expensive than in-state tuition in their home states, a fact that seemed to surprise her. Marla discussed this idea:

> I would agree with [the notion WVU is accessible to the people of West Virginia], if you really wanted to go here and you don't have the means financially to go here, you could make it. You could if you really wanted to because there's so many loan opportunities and scholarship opportunities… I always tried to get straight A's and I would study for the SAT and stuff and I ended up being valedictorian and like getting all the scholarships.

> I [said to my dad] you can keep your savings [for my college] if you want it because I got like a full academic ride here. Even any background that you come from, I feel like if you really had your heart in it, I feel like you could get the means to come here. I feel like that's huge because if you compare in-state [in WV] with the girl I'm living with next year [from another state] she said in-state there was like $60,000 [per year] and I think that's insane comparatively because we're an R1 school like it's not like we have bad education programs. We're really accredited in most fields so I think it's crazy that there's such a big difference [in cost] when you're getting a good education both places. So I feel like that's something WVU's doing right.

Adeline and Ella both described WVU as living up to the land-grant idea by being accessible in terms of admissions criteria. Ella's driving force to attend WVU was winning a full ride scholarship. She felt her high school grades did not reflect her full capabilities, but she was pleased that she was still able to enroll at WVU. "I didn't have good scores in high school and they still accepted me. Might be because of the money [I won] but I don't know. They still accepted me. And I know a lot of other kids that don't really have a lot, but they're able to go here too." Adeline's nontraditional high school caused some challenges when applying to some other schools in the state, but she said there was no issue with being admitted to WVU. "I just got into [WVU] like there was absolutely no problem. I applied to [two other in state schools and there] it was such a long treacherous process [for admission]. Since my transcript looks a lot different than a public-school transcript, I realized a lot of admissions offices had a difficult time reading it and understanding it. But WVU was just like yep you're in."

Mason and Faith, two study participants with minoritized identities, both framed the "land-grant" idea in terms of social acceptance. Faith said, "I had heard good things from people

that have gone up here from my hometown. I think it pretty much all ends with the land-grant thing, it's just accepting here and that's what I thought." Mason echoed this sentiment: "they kind of have like something for everybody, different things to learn… it's really cool just to see all the different classes and stuff that they offer here. I was hoping to come to a place [with lots of variety], and people who had different goals and different backgrounds. There are here. Here, it allows for that."

Grant was the only participant who expanded upon the land-grant notion beyond the confines of the WVU experience and tied it back to his rural hometown experience, where he noted WVU's frequent presence in his community. "Whenever I was in high school, I know there was always opportunities you could do like summer camps or online camps. They would have those all the time. Especially you know, even go to reach us in rural West Virginia. And so I think (WVU) does a really good job with [living up to the land-grant mission], especially with the extension service at the 4H, I think that's a prime example."

RQ2 Summary

Participants were unfamiliar with the concept of the land-grant mission. However, upon learning about the purpose and brief historical overview of the creation of land-grant institutions, all participants agreed that WVU lives up to the calling. Rationales depended on their individual experiences in their communities and at WVU and mostly focused on the notion that land-grant universities ought to be accessible to state residents. Marla and Faith felt it was financially accessible not only because of the aid (need-based and merit-based) that was available to them, but also because of comparisons with their out-of-state friends' home state institution costs. Ella and Adeline reported vastly different levels of high school performance, but shared an appreciation of the accessible admissions criteria – in one case, for someone who "didn't have enough credits to actually pass" and in another case it was more accessible than other state

institutions that "had a difficult time reading and understanding" a transcript from a nontraditional high school.

PERCEIVED SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS

Research Question 3: What institutional factors do rural, low-income, first-generation students perceive as sources of support or barriers to their success, affecting their retention and persistence?

Four themes are salient in describing perceptions of low-income, first-generation rural West Virginia students regarding the institutional factors they see as sources of support or barriers to their success. Resources and supports encompassed both pre-college and in-college resources and supports such as finances, key players or influencers, and use of WVU services. Perceived barriers encompassed pre-college, in-college, internal and external perceived barriers and COVID-19, which impacted the ability of college to deliver on their expectations. Using NVIVO open coding, the seven participants mentioned resources or perceived supports 269 times compared to 114 references to barriers or perceived barriers. Despite the participants' recognition of challenges and barriers they faced, they spoke much more frequently about the resources and supports they received before and during college.

RESOURCES / SUPPORTS – KEY PLAYERS

All participants discussed various resources and supports from their pre-college and in-college experiences. Parents and guardians who encouraged college attendance to varying degrees were mentioned frequently as a support. Participants were asked when they knew they would attend college. Experiences varied widely. Two of the seven participants indicated a sense that they'd always known they would attend college: "Ever since I first thought about it," and "It was always in the books for me" without a specific moment they decided they were bound for college.

A majority of participants (four) first formed their college-going plans in middle school. Marla recalled an opportunity she had to shadow an engineer. Embry recalled impactful and formative academic experiences related to STEM education. Grant recalled becoming inspired to be a doctor from television shows he watched as a child. Adeline recalled being encouraged by her new, college-educated older stepsisters to start thinking about it, although she did not decide for herself at that time.

Two participants reported solidifying tentative plans in high school. Marla's love of STEM subjects in high school really solidified her ideas of attending college. Adeline's new-found love of reading and encouragement from her family and teachers gave her confidence to commit to attending college.

One participant (Ella) did not establish a plan to attend college until after her high school graduation. In fact, she had consciously decided NOT to attend college due to finances.

> I gave up on college because I just thought I was going to work for the rest of my life, like my mom did. I was prepared to do that. Before I came here, before I even graduated, the minute I turned 18 I joined the Home Depot Warehouse making $17.25 an hour. I thought that I was going to be doing that for the rest of my life and here I am.

Despite the variety in the timeline of decision-making, all participants described having the support of their families to attend college. Support may have looked or sounded different for each participant, but all reported having parents who were ultimately supportive of their intention to pursue higher education.

Other key players and influencers that provided sources of support included high school teachers (Marla, Embry, Mason, Adeline), guidance counselors (Faith, Marla), an uncle (Embry), friends (all), siblings (Grant, Mason, Faith, Adeline), parents' friends (Marla), social media

influencers on TikTok (Grant), and friends' parents (Ella). Marla felt she benefitted from purposefully staying close with childhood friends who accompanied her to WVU. When Marla felt like backing out of her decision to attend WVU, her friend's reassurance that they would be "each other's support systems" kept her on track. Faith expressed some disappointment in not making more new friends due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but she was quick to say how grateful she was for her friends from high school.

> Honestly I have a really good friend group so I'm really thankful. There's like five of us all from my hometown and they've stuck around…. I just got lucky with that. And my friends, we like push each other kinda. We like when we study. It's motivating.

Mason made several new friends in the engineering program in his residence hall. Studying together and spending time together has been a huge support system thus far. Although his hometown was close and tight knit, he feels these friends are even better.

> It's just nice to meet all these new people… I want to say they're better friends than I have back home because I feel like if they didn't have the choice they wouldn't hang out me because there's so many people here. So it's like they choose that they want to be my friend. So that's cool.

Resources / Supports: Finances

All study participants self-identified as low-income and were confirmed to meet the institution's standards of financial need based on EFC. While many commented on not having significant means growing up, few expressed difficulties with financially affording WVU due to scholarships and familial support. The students in this study contrasted from previous literature that outlined the need for low-income first-generation students to work many hours per week while in school (Titus, 2006). Faith was the only student who disclosed that she once

experienced a point between semesters where she was almost completely out of money. A change in her billing, possibly due to her change in major, added a $170 charge to her account. "They took that (financial aid) off and I was like okay well heck, so I have to pay that ($170) now. I was coasting along fine, but then by the end of this mess I literally left sophomore year and I didn't have much money. I worked over the summer but I barely made it (financially).

Most students in the study obtained the WV Promise Scholarship (Marla, Mason, Embry, and Faith). Grant's education was paid for with the HSTA award, Ella's through the COVID-19 drawing raffle, and Adeline's through various grants and scholarships. Marla, class valedictorian, recalled that her parents had been able to save some money for college, but she told them to keep it. "I was so thankful for all the scholarships I got too because like the financial problem wasn't really a problem [for me]."

Mason also had no cost for college, but in contrast to Marla's parents, his did not have any savings set aside. His parents expected him to do well enough in school to earn scholarships. Faith and her older brother did not have much means set aside for college, but could attend because of the Promise Scholarship so long as they stayed in state. "Because of the Promise [scholarship] like is pretty much the only reason [my brother and I] are going [to college]," she said.

Adeline's tuition is covered by scholarships, but her father provides money for her cost of living and incidentals. She feels some guilt knowing that he works so hard while she "just" goes to school. But she and her father agree that school is her job – especially since she's performing so well. She was deeply moved to be the first student from her high school to receive a scholarship offered by the school. "That alone made me break down in tears. They're very supportive of me. They still think about me now and always contact me."

Ella's financial path to college was unconventional. She never imagined she'd be able to afford college, and then a scholarship fell into her lap from a statewide giveaway. She recalled, "[the fund] had $100,000 in it when I first got it. They really said four years. It's got my tuition, room and board, my food plan, and books and I got a laptop."

It is important to note the findings of this study suggest that financial accessibility seems to lessen tensions around college going. Rural areas often demonstrate skepticism or question the utility or relevance of higher education (i.e. Adeline's fellow graduate who thought she was "crazy" for going to college). However, financial support changes the conversation and negates some of the hesitance to give higher education a try. Of all participants, the only student who did not retain to the start of the following academic year was on academic probation at the time of the study interviews, which typically leads to the loss of institutional aid.

Resources / Supports – Institutional

Study participants mentioned several resources they have benefitted from while at WVU. These include student organizations, professional organizations, academic-affiliated groups, tutoring, academic advising, diversity programming and mental health services. Five participants specifically mentioned their academic advisor (Marla, Mason, Faith, Adeline, Embry), and six specifically mentioned tutoring as resources and supports provided by the institution (Marla, Mason, Grant, Ella, Adeline, Embry).

In addition to the financial support Grant has received from HSTA, he benefitted from his involvement in high school and continues to benefit now as a college student. Pre-college, he attended statewide HSTA activities with other high school students across the state. Now, he's enrolled in college alongside them, and participating in the collegiate side of the program. In addition to his medical school coach, HSTA provides him with a sense of community. This aligns with Garriot & Nisle's (2018) finding that when students have the chance to observe and

know someone "like them" on campus, it can positively affect the relationship between a student's stress levels and perceived academic goal progress.

> It's nice to kind of actually get to know them a little bit better. It is good to talk to them, especially about the academic rigor of stuff coming here because they're from [various] rural communit[ies]. It's definitely been nice to kind of hear how they've struggled but still came out on the upper side of it. That's nice to hear from other students that are almost going through the same exact thing that you are, and kind of like get tips from them. That I really like. For instance, the girl I'm paired up with [as a medical school coach] she actually failed her first semester of medical school. So she had to take a year off and fix those classes and now she's starting back. I hate that for her, but it was nice for me to hear that you can fail and still continue on this path. It's not like you have to be this perfect A plus student all the way through, because that's just not going to happen… I think [these other students] honestly care about you a lot. The actual leader of our HSTA group Dr. Epps, he's really good about like really caring about you. He'll help you in any way that he can.

Adeline credited the Student Support Services/ TRiO office with helping her every step of the way. They've provided guidance, helped connect her with a tutor at no cost, and have provided events and activities that helped her feel connected on campus. "There's a lot of support there. I love all of them. They're the most kindest people ever [sic]. They actually want to help me." Embry similarly found a great deal of support in the campus mental health center, which she attributed to helping her throughout what had been an unexpectedly difficult transition. "I was having too many panic attacks for me to be able to function. So I just started going to therapy, which was really good. My therapist [at the center] was absolutely wonderful

and she was a perfect person to talk to."

Ella was the only student enrolled in a freshman seminar course at the time of the interview, and she credited this course as a supportive resource to her acclimation to college life. Uniquely, she also expressed that WVU fostered a stronger sense of community than she experienced in her hometown due to the expanded resources available and ample opportunities to meet new people. "Being up here it's a lot more like community. I know a lot of people say small towns are community based, and everyone knows everyone. No they don't. They don't care about you… [Here] if I wanted to meet someone I could strike up a conversation at [the student union coffee shop]… Then someone else will start a conversation. I do like that." Faith appreciated the attention drawn to diversity on campus, and said that the email invitations and flyers for activities for diverse students made her feel welcome and supported. "I get emails and stuff about (diversity) and how they want people to group together and come support it, so I definitely feel supported by the school [regarding diversity]."

Some participants talked about specific clubs, events or activities on campus that were meaningful to them. Grant attended a panel discussion for first generation exercise physiology majors. "Any of the ex phys professors that were first generation actually came and talked about how… they made the adjustment and what it was like for them. I'd say that was a really nice thing for me to be able to hear, that like yeah there's a professor who was a first-generation college student at one point in time. I think that was good to hear about." Mason had the opportunity to connect with the head of the biomedical engineering department. Although he was nervous about the opportunity at first, he was so glad that he did it. He felt that her encouragement directly impacted his desire to stay enrolled at WVU and continue pursuing his field, and joined the biomedical engineering club as a result. Marla and Embry are both members

of Society of Women Engineers. In fact, Marla even was able to attend their virtual conference for free thanks to support from her academic advisor "[my advisor is] probably the main way I felt supported. You know they want the best for you."

Overall, study participants felt very well supported by the institution. A quote from Grant sums it up well:

> I think the biggest [adjustment] is adjusting to what I consider city life [in Morgantown]. You have all of these business and resources at your fingertips. I don't know about other colleges, but I think that West Virginia University is very good with having student success opportunities and things like that. There's always people you can go to for help.

The participants overwhelmingly shared about support systems in place to help them succeed in college. Familial support came in the form of mothers (Embry, Grant, Mason, Marla, Ella), fathers (Marla, Grant, Mason, Embry, Adeline), grandparents (Faith), siblings (Grant, Mason, Faith, Adeline), and other relatives (Embry). Family friends with industry connections or knowledge of the college-going process were also influential (Marla, Ella). High school teachers and guidance counselors also provided support for many (Marla, Mason, Embry, Faith, Adeline). New and existing peer friendships while in college also provided support to all participants. Participants had varying degrees and sources of financial support in college. Some participants paid entirely for their schooling with merit based and need based aid (Mason, Grant, Marla). Adeline and Embry relied on a mix of familial support and need-based or merit-based aid. Faith relied wholly on need-based aid, and Ella paid for school using winnings from a raffle drawing. Institutional resources such as academic advising, tutoring, and student organizations were salient for several participants. Most participants indicated specific programs or services such as

the first-year seminar (Ella), HSTA (Grant), diversity programming (Faith), mental health services (Embry) and SSS/ TRiO (Adeline).

PERCEIVED BARRIERS

References to perceived barriers were less frequent than references to perceived supports, but salient themes related to perceived barriers to college success were present. These included lack of resources in a rural hometown, adjustment from a rural to less rural environment, first-generation status, mental and physical health, stigma toward WV students and the COVID-19 pandemic.

BARRIER: RURALITY

Participants often cited a lack of resources and adjustment to a less rural setting as a barrier. Grant felt the rurality of his hometown contributed to educational barriers, specifically, a lack of teachers generally as well as a lack of certified teachers. Due to his accelerated studies, he did not have many options for upper-level high school coursework.

> A lot of times we literally just had like anyone with a four-year degree come in and teach... The few certified teachers we had, even they weren't super focused on schoolwork because they, like most of our students there, were not interested [in going to college] so it wasn't any need to be assigning a ridiculous amount of work because [the students] weren't going to do it either way. I think that was kind of hard, because we were never really taught how you should be… I think that's really hard to [come from where I'm from and] really have that good foundation coming [to WVU]… I pretty much finished high school in two years, so I really had two years left I needed to do something [else]. I [decided to] take online college classes to help me later. A lot of kids don't do that, you know. So they just take a bunch of random classes, or they take classes over and over again because it's like grades don't really matter to them.

Both Grant and Adeline also remarked on the lack of internet access in their rural hometowns as a barrier. Although Grant lived in a place that got decent internet, he was one of very few students in his school with that privilege. Adeline's home and school had the "world's worst internet" and said she doesn't know "anyone that has good internet" in her hometown. With everything from homework to college applications to college prep occurring predominantly online, this lack of internet connectivity presented a significant barrier.

Adjusting from a more rural hometown into a larger environment at WVU posed challenges for some participants regarding population size/ class size (Marla, Mason, Adeline) as well as with the distance from their familial support system (Grant, Faith, Ella). Finding new ways to be successful in these significantly larger class sizes while away from their familial support systems required flexibility and perseverance.

Participants regularly experienced class sizes of 200-300 students and found the experience to be overwhelming, at least at first. This was a significant adjustment for most participants, as their entire graduating high school classes were smaller than this one single college classroom: 130 (Mason), 99 (Faith), 68 (Marla), 60 (Grant), 2 (Adeline).

As Mason explained, "I had a biology class last semester, I think it was like 300 kids and I was a little overwhelmed because I felt like I didn't get any one on one with the teacher. It was hard because I'm used to that. So it was a little overwhelming." Marla also experienced feeling overwhelmed with the larger class sizes. However, she was relieved when she realized most classes of this size are typically lower level, less difficult courses.

> I was overwhelmed by the idea of having so many kids in my class. I read about it online because I was like it would be terrifying to be in a very difficult class and not be able to ask the professor any questions because he has like 400 other students… that's

intimidating. But I did some more research [and realized] it's just for pre reqs. Once you get more major specific is when you have like 30 or something [students in a class].

Adeline's tiny nontraditional high school required her to complete a lot of work independently. She had never sat in a class lecture before. "One of the deepest struggles I really struggled with is sitting in a classroom listening to a professor. I know that sounds stupid, but that is one of my biggest struggles. I can gain more from reading a book than I can listening to a professor. I don't know if my attention span is just horrible, or I just can't absorb information [in this way] but I'm getting a lot better."

Other participants expressed that leaving their families and loved ones behind posed a challenge or barrier to overcome. Faith called not having her loved ones always there a "negative" of her college experience. Grant felt that moving from a rural community to the "big city of Morgantown" was an adjustment and found it difficult to feel so far away from home so often. And Ella said that as she prepared for her transition to Morgantown, one of the top stressors on her mind was about leaving her mom and social support system. "I haven't left my family for less than two weeks [before this] so basically I was like [long pause]… Oh fuck. What am I going to do? I was trying to think in my head who I knew up here, it was basically no one… I really didn't have anyone up here."

Barrier: First Generation Status

Six of seven of participants expressed various challenges with being a first-generation student. The seventh (Mason) mentioned that his older brother, the first in his family to attend college, experienced challenges that Mason could observe and learn from and not have to personally experience for himself. Other students mentioned various challenges related to first-generation status such as difficulty completing the FAFSA, a lack of first-generation centered

programming, an inability to rely on parents for guidance and support, and a disconnect with parents when trying to explain their college experiences.

Faith, Marla, and Ella all felt a first-generation barrier was FAFSA completion. Without this document on file, they would not have been eligible for the financial aid that made their college attendance possible. Marla and Faith both described feeling a bit overwhelmed that they had to complete the FAFSA on their own, with Faith saying "I basically had to do it myself." Ella did have support from a friend's mom to complete the FAFSA, but that form of support came with its own challenge or barrier – driving a wedge between her and her mother.

Filling out the FAFSA before college is not the only financial related barrier related to first-generation status. Embry experienced difficulties trying to explain a financial aid issue to her mom. Her mom was growing impatient that the issue was not yet resolved.

> She's like 'Well I don't understand why you can't just [take care of it].' And I'm like okay, but you haven't been to college and I'm not saying that's a bad thing, I'm just saying there's kind of a disconnect with communication and like dealing with certain things in college.

Faith, Grant and Adeline all described the challenges as a first-generation college student when trying to relate with parents, grandparents, or friends who do not have familiarity with college. Faith and Grant both felt at a disadvantage compared to peers whose families could provide guidance, input and support. While they felt the institution provided great resources to help, there was a sense that it's just not the same as having someone close in your life who can guide you through it.

As Faith noted,

My grandparents [had] no idea what to do so … once I'm here [in college] the classes and stuff they didn't know how it worked. I didn't have anyone to base it off except my brother because he is a year ahead of me, but he goes to [a different school] so it didn't really help… [I didn't know] what to expect because no one in my family knew what to tell me since I'm a first-generation student.

Grant relayed a similar experience:

> Really no one even close anywhere in my family went to college, so we were kind of on our own trying to figure that out… I feel like those college classes I did in high school helped but coming [to college] was a big adjustment and still is. I'm still trying to figure things out… I think just not having a parent that you can kind of call on to [ask] 'how'd you do this in college?' or you know, like 'what would you recommend I do because you went through the same thing?' If they haven't went through what you're trying to do, it's just like really flying blind… The school has a lot of different resources if you're first generation, but definitely not on the level as if you could just have a parent that's been there.

For Grant, the fear of the unknown associated with not having many role models who attended college manifested in panic during his New Student Orientation meeting where he began to register for his first semester of coursework. While the outcome of Grant's first semester was extremely positive, the initial stress and anxiety was a barrier in his way.

[The advisor was] telling me all these classes I was going to have to take. It was biology, chemistry, exercise physiology, psychology. I started freaking out. I'm like what did I just get myself into? Like I don't know how I'm going to do this. So I told them 'Hey I need to just take a break for a minute I'll be right back.' I literally left the room and I was

like I don't know what I'm doing. I was so scared because I was like, I think I just made a really big mistake because I do not think that I can do this. It was really scary. Then I ended up here and I mean I ended up President's List my first semester.

Adeline was not only the first in her family to attend college, but she was the first from her high school to attend a comprehensive university like WVU. She recalled that some people (family, friends, and classmates) thought she was "crazy" despite being supportive of her choice to attend. Despite the fact that many in her community found it strange that she wished to attend college, she feels proud of her accomplishments and how she was able to set a new precedent for students in her high school.

I mean no one in my school went to university. Maybe to a smaller technical college… but I'm the first for my school to go to a university like WVU… The boy I graduated with works for the pipeline. I mean he thought I was crazy coming to college, like 'why would you want to do that to yourself?'… But I sort of like created a path for all these other kids [from my school] that want to [go to a large university].

Marla described that one barrier or challenge she faces as a first-generation student is not having many opportunities to connect with fellow first-generation students or have support systems specifically dedicated toward first-generation students. While she was overall very pleased with the resources and supports available at WVU, she identified this as an opportunity for growth that could further improve the university's offerings.

I thought there was gonna be more first-generation stuff [on campus] and I haven't really seen anything… If there was first gen academic advisors that like specialized in that, I feel like that'd be nice. That'd be pretty cool meeting other first generation [students]. I feel like first generations from Appalachia though would be even cooler, because I feel

> like if you're first generation and from a rural area it's different because you're not really exposed to people [who have attended college].

Although many participants expressed pride in their first-generation status, they also acknowledged that it creates barriers that they perceive their non-first-generation peers do not have to face. Challenges with paperwork, financial aid, understanding how college works, overcoming questioning from folks in their hometown, and having access to a network of fellow first-generation students were all cited as barriers caused by first-generation status. The students in the present study did not overwhelmingly display the external influences in previous first-generation student literature such as lack of time spent on campus, time spent working in a job, and ties to home communities (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Barrier: Mental and Physical Health

Embry's mental and physical health struggles impeded her academic success, even with treatment. Ella's mental health struggles are undiagnosed and she does not wish to seek treatment on campus. Marla's physical illnesses caused her to perform poorly on an exam that was weighted so heavily in her final grade that she had to take and pay for the course a second time despite doing well in the class otherwise.

Embry's hometown was a place where she knew everyone and didn't interact with strangers often. The transition to WVU caused social anxiety for the first couple months of her college career which impacted her mental wellbeing and academic success.

> I got in a rut and had a lot of issues with mental health, especially being so far away from my family and I had … a really big falling out with my roommate. I got really depressed and I stopped doing work. It was very scary for my mom because I would call her crying. I was in therapy. I had all kinds of stuff going on. I got sick a lot, like I got pneumonia,

> the flu and COVID all last semester. I struggled a lot and my grades suffered. I got put on academic probation.

Ella had only been in college for about half of one semester at the time of her interview. She described having "pretty bad anxiety" but expressed an unwillingness to seek out campus mental health services due to negative things she'd heard about the service from friends.

> I am scared to reach out to [the campus mental health center]. At the same time I can't really do anything about [my anxiety] until I get it professionally diagnosed and either get on meds or some other thing for it. Someone told me I could get diagnosed at [the campus mental health center] and I'm like no, I'm not going there.

Marla, who was valedictorian of her high school, described sickness as a barrier to her college success. She had multiple sinus infections and other colds during her first semester. Missing one exam caused her to retake one class over the summer, which is not covered by financial aid.

> The grading in there was so weird. I'd never had a class like that. It was like the only grades you have in that entire class was exams. So if you did bad on one exam, then you could fail the entire class. I failed the second exam so that tanked my grade. It was irreversible. There was no like recovery so that's kind of sad. It was so frustrating though, because I knew the content. But I literally couldn't breathe or see my paper because my eyes were watering so bad. I literally just wrote stuff down and turned it in. I was like I have to get out of here.

Barrier: Stigma Toward West Virginians

Embry and Adeline both experienced stigma of being from rural West Virginia from fellow students. In addition to the stigma Embry experienced from a fellow aspiring aerospace engineer about the quality of a West Virginia education, she also dealt with negative comments

from her roommate and her roommate's mother. This was a major contributor to roommate issues that impacted her mental wellbeing and academic success.

> She was from Delaware and she liked to mock people from West Virginia and that just didn't sit right with me. I got into plenty of arguments with not only her, but her mother about it. Her mother posting on Facebook about, you know, 'I stayed in a hotel in Morgantown yesterday and it was bad' and people commenting, 'what do you expect, it's West Virginia.' I just felt like it wasn't good for either of us to live together.

While Adeline's experience was less hostile, it was still impactful enough that it manifested in the interview. Her roommates are from Virginia Beach, North Carolina, and New Jersey and were not from rural areas.

> It's a big cultural difference. [My roommate comments] on some of the stuff I say. Half the time she looks at me like 'what the crap is this girl even talking about?' And she does not understand me most of the time. I think to be honest, I truly deep-down think that she thinks I'm an idiot. She sort of treats me like I'm stupid. There's just a big cultural difference there.

Barrier: Impact of COVID 19

All participants mentioned the impacts of COVID at various stages of their college preparatory or college going experiences. Challenges during the college preparation stage included internet access and geographic access. Challenges persisted once participants were enrolled in college as the pandemic created social barriers (more challenging to forge new friendships) and academic barriers (online education, adjusting to college level coursework during a global pandemic).

Marla had to drive 35 minutes one way to town to submit her high school homework. "The Governor put internet in each public library for the students if you have one of those school emails. I would have to drive to the library to get that. That was the closest library, it's about 35 minutes one way."

Grant was a junior in high school when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. He recalled that during his senior year, his schooling included about six weeks of completely online instruction.

> They told us, 'you're going to be out of school for two weeks.' You know, everyone's just panicking. And we ended up being out for the rest of the year… Honestly this sounds crazy I remember the number: It was March 13; it was a Friday and we never came back to school. We didn't do any education at all from then on, because they weren't like ready to be at home [work from home/ technology wise] and we didn't have computers or good Internet at all to do it. So we literally did absolutely nothing from the beginning of March to the end of that school year. We did nothing.

And Grant felt he was one of the lucky ones because he had relatively strong internet access due to living close to one of the nearby schools.

> I would always be able to get onto the Teams meetings. But [it was common] for me to be the only one on [the Teams meetings] because students really could not get on[line]. You know I say for my junior year [from] March to the end of that year we didn't do the education, but for a lot of kids, even… that next year they still didn't really get to learn much of anything because they couldn't do anything from their house. They couldn't get on to any of the meetings or even do homework. They didn't have [internet]. So I think that definitely impacted [them] and that really worries me a lot. My sister [who is a

teacher] has said too that she can tell the kids are definitely not where they should be. It's not their fault. You know, I mean they've just been out of school for so long. They just aren't where they should be.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic ended up being a stroke of luck for Ella in some ways (as she was the winner of a raffle for young West Virginians who received the COVID-19 vaccine), she also described how the pandemic decreased her motivation for school. She did not have prior intentions to attend college due to financial barriers, so when COVID-19 struck, she stopped completing any schoolwork. "I didn't do anything [school-wise] the first year of COVID." This has come back to negatively impact her college academic success because she did not have the same level of preparation that she may have had if the pandemic and online education didn't occur.

Marla described COVID-19 as a barrier to becoming familiar with the physical layout of campus in advance of her first semester. Her freshmen orientation experience was on Zoom. "I feel like it would have been super beneficial for my parents and I to come up here together [before the semester started]. Our first time up here was move in day and it was so chaotic. It was terrible." In RQ1, Marla's experience recounted how WVU's COVID-19 contact tracing protocol created added stress and confusion for students.

Summary of RQ3

Participants' perceptions of support encompassed financial supports, having key players or influencers in their lives, pre-college resources and use of WVU resources, including on campus involvement for some participants. Participants spoke much less about barriers, but did perceive their first-generation student status, relative lack of resources in their rural hometowns, mental and physical health, stigma toward West Virginians and COVID-19 as barriers to their success.

CHAPTER V

The present study approaches research from sociocultural and critical lenses by understanding the realities constructed by the narrators to share their experiences. This perspective shapes the study through the stories of research participants and has implications for leaders in higher education to reflect on current practices and consider making changes or implementing new initiatives to better support the retention and academic success of this population. The present project posits two frameworks – social and cultural capital (classed) and spatial justice (spaced) - can further illuminate existing retention literature as it relates to the retention and persistence of low-income, first-generation, rural students from West Virginia. The chapter concludes with a researcher reflection that analyzes the participants' experiences from the interactive voice (Chase, 2005), where results are viewed through theoretical lenses and researcher reflection, and the researcher serves as narrator.

FRAMEWORK I: BOURDIEU'S FORMS OF CAPITAL (CLASSED)

Bourdieu argued that the formal education system not only reproduces social inequality, but also provides legitimacy to existing social class structures by equating class distinctions into merit-based distinctions based on academic achievement within a classed system (Bourdieu, 1973). Through the lens of his work, individual actors' quality and quantity of various forms of capital and their position within a society interact with societal norms and social structures internalized over time (Bourdieu, 1971; 1990).

Cultural capital refers to the symbolic elements like skills, tastes, clothing, information, mannerisms or credentials that one acquires through being a member of a particular social class. It is valued by members of the upper class but is not taught in schools (Bourdieu, 1977, 1987). Several study participants alluded to not having access to cultural capital prior to college by

lacking exposure to upper class norms as they are from rural, low-income areas. For example, Mason recalled sitting in his school parking lot for fun because there were no other public spaces to spend time, and not enough resources in time or money to drive to an area with more activity or recreation. Similarly, Adeline commented that her upbringing was mostly centered on her own home place, which included her small house and her father's towing business. She recalled "I just have been used to being around trucks, vehicles and equipment all the time. That's basically my hometown. There ain't much to talk about it… ain't nothing that really goes on." Grant described jealousy of his fellow college students who hailed from better-resourced hometowns, explaining that he lacked access to cultural capital related to opportunities through his very rural school. "It's kind of hard to do a lot of things… we don't really have a lot of money to do [sports and school projects] so our stuff suffer[s] compared to other schools." Marla described her parents' lack of capital of educational attainment as one of the most salient inspirations for her to attend college, saying "My dad really wanted to go to college when he was out of high school. He just couldn't… I was just like if he didn't get to do it because he didn't have the right things, like, I have the right things and if I want to do it I might as well." She went on to say that the challenge imposed by first-generation status was broader than just her own family. "I feel like if you're first generation and from a rural area it's different [than being first-generation in a non-rural area]. Because you're not really exposed to people who have [a college education]. Most of the people in my county don't have college degrees."

Through the lens of cultural and social capital, students succeed in college because of their ability to understand and correctly perform to the social norms of the elite classes who dominate the field, or by utilizing their social connections (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). The participants of the present study differ from higher education's traditional or dominant class in

multiple ways: they identify as low-income (college has traditionally been for the wealthy); they identify as first-generation (continuing generation students are more likely to be endowed with education related social/cultural capital by their parents and are a dominant group within higher education); they identify as rural (rural students are a minority of higher education participants and may have less access or proximity to valued forms of capital); they identify as West Virginian (West Virginia has one of the lowest college-going rates in the nation); and some study participants also differ from the dominant class in regard to race/ethnicity (Faith, Mason) and gender (Faith, Marla, Embry, Ella, Adeline) and sexual orientation (Ella).

These points of divergence between the research participants' positionalities and higher education's institutional norms and values may make it more difficult for these individuals to culturally and socially integrate and succeed within the academy through the lens of this framework. Previous research demonstrates that students with lived experiences unaligned with what is valued and normalized within higher education may struggle with feelings of inadequacy as they try to fit in (Ardoin, 2019; Barratt, 2011).

CAPITAL AND EXPECTATIONS: BRIDGING CLASS DIVIDES

The cost and structure of higher education can lead to poor and working-class students being funneled into less selective institutions, suggesting that these students do not have the same access to opportunities to build the kind of social and cultural capital valued by society as wealthier students do (Stich, 2012). As a land-grant in an under-resourced state, WVU does not have competitively selective admission criteria. Some participants (Ella, Adeline) remarked on the ease of admission and the accessibility afforded them that they might not have received elsewhere.

Several participants (Faith, Grant, Marla, and Embry) mentioned that they attended WVU due to financial accessibility. Mason described WVU as a place that allowed "a variety of people

with different goals and different backgrounds" to succeed. Some students (Adeline, Embry, Faith) had considered other institutions but ultimately chose WVU for the cost. Others (Marla, Adeline, Ella) described their reaction to the cost of out of state-tuition some of their fellow students pay. Marla shared that her family had saved some funds for her college education. However, they did not need to use the funds due to the merit-based scholarships she received, and the relative low cost afforded her at the state's land grant.

> My dad had made [my college savings account] when I was like six months old, so I was set. But… I ended up being valedictorian and getting all the scholarships. I was like you can keep your savings, because I got a full academic ride here… I think it's crazy that there's such a big difference [in cost] when [both options offer] a good education. So I feel like that's something WVU's doing right.

Overall, participants felt that WVU lived up to the land-grant concept by being financially accessible, eliminating class barriers to enable greater access. This aligns with Rowan-Kenyon et al's (2017) finding that social capital is not necessary to persistence, but that discrepancies in the amount of social capital a student has can be mitigated by institutional actions.

Capital and Experiences: Declining Social Capital and Cultural Divides

Research participants demonstrated shared experiences regarding cultural and social capital. Past studies have suggested that rural youth attribute their success to small town community social capital, where their involvement in that community was more likely to expose them to the kind of social capital that leads to college access and success (Nelson, 2018; Beasley, 2017). Most study participants (Adeline, Embry, Marla, Grant, Faith and Mason) attributed some of their college preparatory success to teachers or school-based initiatives within their rural home communities.

One common experience was the transition of having high levels of social capital in their rural home community to having relatively lower levels of social capital and higher levels of anonymity within the WVU community. This was challenging for some participants. Marla described it in terms of the social capital she enjoyed with teachers at her high school compared with that of her college professors.

> In my high school, the biggest class I've ever been in before college was 16 or 17 [students]. You could go up to the teacher at any point in time during class… and if you needed help after school the teachers would stay in their rooms for 30 minutes after… so I was scared [about the size of WVU] because a lot of times [that one on one time is] what helped me understand [course content].

Mason had a similar experience, adding, "I had a biology class last semester [with] 300 kids and I was a little overwhelmed because I didn't get any one on one with the teacher and it was hard because I'm used to that." Mason also experienced this transition with his experience of living in a residence hall.

> I was nervous, to be honest. I'm not a super outgoing person so living in the dorms with random people because I don't know any of my roommates [from before college] was scary, just because I was so used to that small town and knowing everybody. Then I came to a whole new place where I'd stay in a room with people I didn't know and go to class with people I didn't know. It was very overwhelming.

Adeline's experience with roommates reflected differences in cultural capital and possibly a lack of alignment with the capital valued in her hometown compared to the capital valued in the college setting. Adeline described a roommate who did not know how to boil water for cooking or how to clean the house, which were daily expectations for Adeline throughout her

childhood. She described her roommates' reactions to the code switching she exhibits after a weekend home with her family. "My roommates will be like, 'what's this woman even talking about?' It's probably because I've been home for too long." She described the disconnect between her and her roommates as a "big cultural difference."

> Some of the stuff I say, half the time [my roommate] looks at me like what the crap is this girl even talking about? She does not understand me most of the time. I think, to be honest, I truly deep down think that she thinks I'm an idiot. She sort of treats me like I'm stupid.

Embry also had a negative experience based on cultural difference with a roommate not from West Virginia who "liked to mock people from West Virginia" and whose mother made disparaging comments about West Virginia in front of Embry. This led to a "really big falling out" which negatively impacted Embry's mental health and academic performance.

Grant shared that he experienced feelings of imposter syndrome and significant stress about obtaining the capital necessary to succeed in college. He experienced intense bouts of self-doubt during virtual new student orientation, and during his first round of exam preparation during his first semester of college. He also shared that his decision to live in an apartment instead of a residence hall may have inadvertently created some barriers to building social bonds with peers by making it more difficult to feel connected.

> I feel like living off campus is [both] a good and bad thing. I was just like really adamant about it. I didn't really want to live on campus because I just heard so many stories about the partying and constant noise and stuff. I'm not here to be like that. I really just want to come here for school.

However, Grant's social capital with his sister who recently graduated college was a key factor in overcoming these feelings.

> I was really worried, like, what if I don't do good [in college]? How am I going to get the resources? I didn't know basically anything… I was so nervous and I still am… I was really worked up the whole time. I honestly don't know what I would have done if I wouldn't have had [my sister] to talk me off the ledge.

After making it through the first semester on the President's List, Grant reflected that his access to college level courses while in high school, as well his access to internet during the virtual COVID days, both forms of cultural capital, were helpful in setting the stage for college success. "I feel like those college classes I did in high school helped."

Other previous research demonstrated that finding success in college might mean giving in to dominant middle-class culture and rejecting the family to succeed in education (Corbett, 2007; Rueda, 2005). While there were examples of assimilating to expected norms (living with strangers, finding a way to succeed despite the anonymity of large class sizes, and code switching, the idea of "family rejection" did not manifest in the present study. Some did describe a disconnect in explaining higher education to their non-college educated parents or grandparents (Adeline, Embry, Faith), while others mentioned feelings of rejection for their rural hometown (Faith, Ella), and one participant described challenges of having a conflicting worldview with their parent (Ella), but no participant described feelings of rejection of their family.

Similarly, the concept of "class straddling," where poor or working-class students find themselves living in two very different realms of class identity and having to learn to function within each to be successful, was not salient in the present study. Ardoin (2018) found that class straddling could leave poor or working-class students feeling ostracized in both their home and

academic lives. While this did not manifest among participants, further work could be done on both the concepts of familial rejection and class straddling later in the students' academic careers to see how their thoughts may change or evolve over time.

McFadden (1995) and Riley (1996) both found that knowledge taught in schools sometimes contradicts working-class knowledge (a form of cultural capital in working class communities). Adeline was the only participant who communicated that some of her family and friends were puzzled or confused by her desire to pursue higher education. "They sort of thought I was crazy. Why would you want to do that to yourself?" This was an example of the cultural capital of a student's home community not being in alignment with the cultural capital of higher education. But even for Adeline, ultimately her core supporters (her father, brother, stepsisters, and teachers) were supportive of her decision to attend college.

Measures of the amount of capital parents have to invest in their children are found in characteristics such as parental education, family income and socioeconomic status (Padgett et al., 2012). Low-income, first-generation college students such as this study's research participants demonstrated varying levels of parental education, with at least two participants' parents earning a GED later in life (Ella, Faith), others completing a high school diploma (Embry, Marla, Grant's father); and others who had attempted college (Mason, Grant's mother), and one not explicitly saying the level of their parents' education (Adeline). The experience of being a first-generation college student did manifest in the narratives of their college experiences, and the findings show cultural divides negatively affected the academic and social experiences on campus for some study participants.

Perceived Institutional Supports and Barriers to Building Capital

Previous research (Engle & Tinto, 2008) found low-income and first-generation students were less likely to be engaged in academic and social experiences, or institutional factors, that

contribute to success like studying in groups, interacting with faculty and peers, or utilizing resources and support services. Hlinka (2017) found that incongruent priorities between the institution and its first-generation Appalachian students was a hurdle to student success and retention, saying that while students may understand that education opens doors, they may not "know how to do education". Ardoin (2018) found that the cultural capital of rural, low SES or first-generation students does not equate with the cultural capital of colleges and universities, which may cause challenges for students.

In the present study, the results are mixed. A majority of participants were engaged in at least one of the areas mentioned by Engle & Tinto, mentioning various institutional factors that they have perceived as sources of support, and very few as barriers to their success. Several participants (Marla, Grant, Mason, Adeline) were succeeding greatly in the classroom and certainly seemed to know how to "do education." Others like Faith, Embry and Ella struggled with the transition to college-level work, although for different reasons. Embry was a high achieving student in high school and never learned the study skills that would have been helpful for more rigorous college level work. Furthermore, she experienced mental health struggles that significantly influenced her academic performance. Faith felt that she just was not quite prepared for the academic rigor of her first choice of major and needed to make a switch to a new major better suited for her strengths. Ella described how she purposefully stopped trying in high school due to her financial status and the COVID-19 pandemic and was not surprised about the challenges presented by collegiate level coursework given the choices she made in high school.

For students with the cultural capital to know how to "do education", or who were emulating others regarding how to "do education" (social capital), some of the sources of support included academic services. For example, Grant utilized a tutoring center.

> I was not afraid to seek out help for tutoring and stuff. I know a lot of kids are like 'I don't want to be caught dead in the tutoring room' or whatever but I mean that's what they're there for, you know? I didn't want to end up with bad grades just because I didn't want to go to tutoring. That's really silly. I believe I wasn't ashamed of [going to tutoring] at all.

The environment at WVU was conducive to the creation of various forms of social capital that served as a resource to many of the study participants. However, the sources of this social capital varied among participants. Some students relied on strong bonds from high school that remained or strengthened during college (Faith, Marla), others relied on new roommates or friends (Mason, Ella), and others relied on institutional programs such as HSTA (Grant), student organizations (Embry), and Student Support Services (Adeline). Embry and Ella indicated fewer social bonds and participation in institutional activities than other participants did.

FRAMEWORK II: SPATIAL JUSTICE (SPACED)

The concepts of social and cultural capital are clearly relevant to the college experiences of the study participants. However, amassing cultural and social capital can be more challenging in rural or remote places. There may be fewer opportunities for rural youth to organically accumulate the types of social and cultural capital necessary to help them succeed in postsecondary education. Furthermore, depending on the existing industry and employment opportunities in a given rural setting, there may also be fewer chances for rural youth to observe future employment possibilities. Rural youth who have a great deal of social capital in their hometown communities may be forced to break those social ties due to minimal industry and available employment opportunities.

Adding the lens of spatial justice to this study provides further insight to the impact of rurality on the participants' experiences, and the importance of rurality to this study. Location can be a determinant for one's wealth and resources such as education and healthcare. Spatial justice refers to an explicit emphasis on the fair and equitable distribution of socially valued resources and opportunities across spaces. It is not a substitute for social justice or economic justice but is instead a perspective that assumes there is always a relevant spatial dimension to justice (Soja, 2009).

In the framework of spatial justice, one's ability to access capital is influenced by their geographic location. This means one's living environment influences their life chances and opportunities. Institutions and systems such as markets, labor, education healthcare and transportation constitute a given place's "spatial opportunity structure," which is tied to geography and plays a role in one's socioeconomic status achievements (Galster & Sharkey, 2017). Not only does the spatial opportunity structure influence the available choices one has, but it also influences the extent to which individuals have the agency to exercise those choices by shaping what the individual perceives to be the most desirable or feasible option. This can influence an individual's trajectory, and therefore subsequent life decisions. This may also lead to cumulative effects that influence multiple generations (Galster & Sharkey, 2017). In the present study, this may manifest through the first-generation positionality held by study participants, as youth are likely to experience indirect impacts by the spatial opportunity structure through their caregivers' behaviors, attitudes, and access to resources (Galster & Sharkey, 2017).

Spatial injustice can also lead to imposing bias upon certain groups because of their geographic location. Geographically uneven development can lead to areas or relative privilege

or advantage/ disadvantage (Soja, 2009). The chronic underdevelopment or lack of investment in rural West Virginia may affect the lives of inhabitants by affecting the quality and quantity of opportunities available and accessible to residents, including the pursuit of higher education. The following section will explore place and space as it relates to college expectations, experiences, and students' perceptions of institutional barriers and supports.

PLACE/ SPACE AND COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS

Rurality was a major influence in the pre-college and college preparatory experiences of study participants, and included themes of poverty and distance from resources (transportation challenges, stores, supplies, restaurants, qualified teachers, rigorous high school curricula, etc.) Rurality is also associated with poor internet connectivity. This was particularly salient due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which initially occurred during the study participants' junior or senior years of high school and therefore affected their most critical years for academic preparation for college.

Many higher education institutions have limited or no engagement with rural communities (Davis, 2019; McDonough et al, 2010). This limits rural students' exposure to college-going behaviors and understanding of postsecondary pursuits and possibilities. As a land-grant school, WVU has a larger presence in its predominantly rural state which may help alleviate the common disconnect between colleges and universities and their states' rural areas. WVU's dominance in the in-state market manifested in some of the narratives, although WVU's presence in the participants' home communities varied. For example, Grant found WVU to have a very visible presence in his rural home community.

> [WVU] reach[es] out a lot. Like whenever I was in high school, there was always opportunities you could do, like summer camps or online camps, or whatever. They would have those all the time. Especially, you know, even go to reach us in rural West

> Virginia. So I think they do a really good job with it, especially with the Extension service and 4H. I think that's a prime example.

This early repeated exposure to WVU impacted Grant's perspective on what opportunities were available to him in life. In his rural hometown, he saw the main employment options were to work in oil and gas or pipelining. He was one of the few in his graduating class who chose to try the less traveled route – leaving town to pursue a college education.

Adeline's experience was similar to Grant's in that she rarely saw anyone in her community with a college education, but she did not have regular touchpoints with WVU prior to enrolling. Instead, the inspiration to attend college came from family (two older stepsisters who attended graduate school at WVU) and teachers.

> All my friends, none of them went to college. I mean one of my best friends, she's a cake baker. That's what she does is bakes cakes. The other [friend] now works at a vet's office and the boy I graduated with works for the pipeline. I mean he thought I was crazy coming to college… I [didn't] have anyone really around me [back home] that actually went to college [except for] teachers.

Similarly, Marla had little interaction with WVU prior to enrolling but was inspired by some family friends and teachers. She was also encouraged by her parents. She recalled that WVU did not have a heavy presence in her community.

> There was one day out of my entire four years of high school where we had colleges come and speak to us. I don't think WVU [main campus] was there, I think it was Potomac State, which is a branch of WVU. They might have been combined, but like there was never a WVU specific representative that came.

Nevertheless, Marla, Grant and Adeline, despite their varying pre-college experiences within their rural home communities, felt that WVU was the place they needed to go (and could afford to go) to achieve their aspirations.

PLACE/ SPACE & COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

Challenges posed by place and space were far more salient for study participants in their pre-college and transitory period as opposed to their experiences as enrolled students. Examples of this are more thoroughly outlined in the previous chapter. Several participants referred to Morgantown as "the big city" in contrast to their hometowns. Once on campus, students described enjoying an unprecedented level of spatial access. Some access focused on the area outside of campus, such as stores like Wal-Mart or Target, walkable restaurants, coffee shops, and nightlife. Marla had one of the best examples of the change in access from hometown to college town:

> It's funny. Everybody [back home] was like, wait, you live next to a Starbucks? Because it's right beside my building. Like that is insane [compared to the two hour round trip required back home.]

Other participants mentioned the accessibility of needed services on campus, such as tutoring, mental and physical health resources, and ease of getting to class. Even if parallel services and resources existed in their rural hometowns, accessing them may not have been possible. Mason was particularly pleased with the change of pace offered by this change of space on a college campus:

> [Back home there] wasn't a whole lot going on. When we wanted to go do something for fun, we'd go drive around… There wasn't a whole lot to do. [Here] you [can] just go out and walk around the town. I don't do that in my hometown. [Where I'm from] I can't just

walk around to different shops and stuff. Up here, I can. Even like having a gym that I can go to in a five-minute walk I don't have that back where I live.

For several participants, the 10 to 15 minute walk to college class was a welcome change from the 30-40 minute drive to high school (Marla), and the ability to catch a local bus to get to Walmart was preferable to the 90-minute drive required in their hometowns (Grant, Mason). Ella was the lone dissenter of the group. She had only been on campus for about 8 weeks at the time of her interview (in contrast to the other study participants who had been enrolled at least one semester or more, and it was during the coldest part of the year) and was still getting used to the more walkable community. As someone who had always relied on driving to get anywhere from her home on a dirt road, she described traversing campus as such: "Here, walking is like hell." Many students also commented on the availability of ridesharing services, accessibility of social opportunities, reliable internet service and cell phone service (specifically Marla, who lives near a "complete dead zone") in contrast to their experience in their rural home communities.

Study participants had varied levels of access to vehicle transportation, which affected their ability to visit home. Faith described feelings of stress related to not having a car, which she felt she needed to secure part time employment and to return home to see her grandparents.

> I don't have a car yet, and I haven't had one. I'm not going to have one until the end of sophomore year I feel like that kind of made my options limited. I was going to get a job. Luckily my scholarships paid for [school so I didn't need a job] but I could still use [a job] to save money.

Marla relied on a tight knit social group from back home to catch rides, and Mason's older siblings were able to provide him with transportation home. Adeline's father was willing to

make the drive to come to her. Grant was required to make the trip home twice per month to work as an EMT in his local county.

One negative aspect of space and place that came up for Marla and her family was safety in a college town. Although Marla felt the town was relatively safe, she recalled that "[Back home] we rarely ever lock our door, or we leave our keys in our vehicle with the doors unlocked in our driveway. Here you can't do that."

PLACE/SPACE & PERCEIVED INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS & BARRIERS

Rural, low-income, first-generation students, like other minoritized student groups, are influenced by the institutional environment within higher education. Tinto's theory of student integration described how students separate from their backgrounds and integrate into their new settings on campus in order to succeed (Tinto, 1975). As described in the literature review, there are many critiques of this work for not accounting for a wider variety of positionalities and experiences in higher education. However, the fact remains that institutional environments can be leveraged to engage and include students, influencing their success and educational attainment. There is a growing awareness for a need to focus on low-income, first-generation, rural college students, but more needs to be done.

Several study participants reported internet connectivity as an important source of support provided by the institution. For participants like Marla, Grant and Adeline, this was in stark contrast to what they (or others in their rural home communities) experienced in high school. For example, Marla had to drive 35 minutes into town to submit her homework during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic; Adeline's high school did not have a reliable internet connection; and Grant recalled sometimes being the only student in his entire high school class able to join the teacher for online learning.

Another source of support related to geography is the relatively low cost of WVU's in-state tuition. As mentioned in the previous section, participants felt they were able to access a solid education through a mix of a low in-state cost and the availability of need-based, merit-based, and lottery-based aid. While Faith and Grant experienced some concerns and anxieties about running out of money if they did not maintain their financial aid, challenges surrounding financial need did not manifest in the interviews to the extent the researcher anticipated based on the literature review.

Proximity to wellness resources while in college also proved to be a source of support to the study participants, who noted such resources were much closer and more easily accessible at college than in their rural hometowns. This included mental health services, recreational activities such as a gym and nightlife, close proximity to social support like friends, student organizations and study groups, and academic resources like tutoring and advising.

Some participants experienced proximity to family as a barrier or challenge (Grant, Faith, Embry), and others as a source of support (Mason, Ella). Specifically, Faith shared that she was very close with her older brother, but since he attended another institution several hours away, he was not able to provide the level of support she had hoped he'd be able to provide. In contrast, Mason found great benefit in the geographic closeness of his two siblings who also attended WVU. Embry struggled with her mental health as she moved away from her hometown, while Ella described having relatively better mental health away from her hometown.

Study participants reported far more institutional sources of support than barriers to success. While the students interviewed may be considered to possess less cultural and social capital than the average college student, the sources of support provided by WVU filled many of these gaps. The majority of participants shared that they felt comfortable to reach out for support

when needed, and then used the campus supports provided. These included mental health resources, academic support services such as tutoring, financial aid services, academic advising, student organizations, and sponsored programs such as SSS/TRIO and HSTA. Spatial proximity to these resources and services was a new phenomenon for most participants that positively affected students' ability and willingness to make use of them.

WVU's calling as a land-grant institution also plays a part in influencing place and space in rural West Virginia. Grant felt that WVU succeeded in its land-grant mission to support the state by offering educational opportunities through extension programs. "I think [WVU] does a really good job of [reaching out to the people of the state], of being there for the community. I think they give a lot back. I mean heck they've bought almost every hospital in West Virginia now and they do a pretty good job of running those. I've seen that firsthand." Although study participants were unfamiliar with the definition of a land-grant university, they were in unanimous in believing that WVU fulfilled its place-related purpose once they understood the definition. The land-grant concept is an example of Galster & Sharkey's (2017) concept of the "spatial opportunity structure" that shapes what individuals perceive to be the most desirable or feasible option. The combination of geographic proximity to home and the relative affordability that accompanies in-state tuition (also defied by geographic location) both manifest in the present study.

SUMMARIZING FRAMEWORKS

Frameworks examining class and space help us understand the expectations, experiences, perceived barriers and perceived supports of low-income, first-generation rural college students from West Virginia. The spaced aspects of students' experiences were more salient at the pre-college stage as students reflected on the differences in geographic access to various resources

before and during college. Rurality was a major influence in the pre-college and college preparatory experiences of study participants, and included themes of poverty, distance from resources (stores, restaurants, qualified teachers, rigorous high school curricula) and poor internet connectivity, which was especially challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While enrolled in college, study participants widely reported an enjoyable and unprecedented level of access and proximity to resources.

Although the issue of space was in some ways solved by the transition to the college campus environment, the classed aspects of students' experiences were more salient while enrolled in college. Before coming to college, students tended to see folks in their home communities as coming from similar backgrounds and having access to similar resources. A contrast began to develop as they began to interact with students from new areas and different levels of class privilege. Study participants reported several manifestations of cultural or social capital consciousness. This included a lack of confidence in their ability to compete with students from more highly resourced areas; an inability to rely on parents for desired guidance compared to their non-first-generation peers; a negative perception of their accents and codeswitching by their peers; and concerns about class sizes and lack of individualized relationships with instructors which helped them during high school.

The present study suggests that there is a strong alignment between the expectations of LIFGRWV students and what WVU provides as a land-grant institution. All participants felt that the institution delivers on its promise of serving the state and its people. Some participants felt WVU lived up to the calling of a land grant by being financially accessible to residents of West Virginia (Grant, Marla, Faith, Adeline, and Embry). Others perceived the institution as a more welcoming and accepting place than their home communities (Mason, Faith, Ella). In addition,

others felt it was accessible in terms of admissions criteria to make the pursuit of higher education possible (Adeline, Ella). One participant (Grant) specifically mentioned WVU's role in his rural community through extension programs, 4-H programs, and medical services which are all part of WVU's land-grant mission.

In comparison to the literature review, results from the present study are mixed. Students reported far more sources of support than barriers to their success. There are classed aspects of the participants' positionalities that have influenced their ability to arrive at and succeed in college, but instances of feeling out of place or unsupported at WVU were comparatively few. The students who did experience stigma described feeling so because of fellow students, high school preparation, or their parents' first-generation status, not due to institutional actors, policies or structures.

Both Galster & Sharkey (2017) and Israel & Frenkel (2018) discuss Bourdieu's theories in their work on spatial inequality as a means to explain the socio-spatial structures that influence or constrain an individual's choices and freedoms. Much like Bourdieu's theories argue that those who already have elevated status are able to more easily maintain that status, the spatial opportunity structure benefits those with the greatest achieved status with upward mobility linked to spatial mobility (Galster & Sharkey, 2017; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). One's social space and living environment are an expression of class stratification. That space can create barriers or act as a facilitator to enhance the ability of a person to realize their capability. The present study supports this notion, as the challenges reported by students related to space were largely mitigated by living on campus. That is not to say disadvantages related to space cease to exist simply because a student enrolls in college and moves on campus. However, some of the participants' pre-college struggles or barriers to success were no longer in their way.

This study sought to explore spatial inequality and urbanormativity within Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction in a university context, where the university is dominant and rural, first-generation, low-income students are marginalized. The intent was to understand the challenges faced by this group and to question the university's role in advancing urbanormativity and the impact that has on its students from rural backgrounds (Thomas & Fulkerson, 2020). While challenges faced by the group have become known, there is little in the data to suggest that the university has played a significant role in advancing urbanormativity to the detriment of the study participants. In contrast, most participants reported unprecedented levels of access and support while at college that allowed their own talents and gifts to flourish in a way that may not have been possible in their rural hometowns. The following two quotes from study participants highlight how the accessibility of resources and opportunities at WVU have improved their perception of their capabilities:

- "Knowing I could reach that milestone [of making President's List] was honestly the best part so far. Just knowing that if I really did try, that despite where I came from, the lack of resources, I can do this as much as anybody else." – Grant
- "I don't mean this in a braggy (*sic*) way, but I look back at it and I'm like man, I really come a far way." – Adeline

RESEARCHER REFLECTION: INTERACTIVE VOICE

In qualitative research, researchers must understand that their work is a representation of a version of the truth that reflects the writer's choices. In constructing, interpreting and representing others' voices, researchers develop their own voices (O'Sullivan, 2015). Researcher reflexivity is key in critical narrative inquiry because it allows the researcher to acknowledge their own values, assumptions and expectations from which they are operating, as well as their

own role and influence in the research (Hickson, 2016). Research is the product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them (Mertens, 2010, p. 16)

Of Chase's (2005) voice styles of narrative inquiry, the interactive voice represents an interaction between the researcher and narrator, where the researcher examines their own voice, social position, interpretation and personal experiences through the refracted medium of the narrator's voice (Chase, 2005). An intentional space for reflexivity and self-understanding is required for narrative researchers if they are to understand their own interpretation of narrators' stories and consider how readers will eventually interpret the research. The following is a brief discussion of the researcher's emotions, thoughts, research relationships and interpretive decisions. The positionalities are ordered on a continuum of objective to subjective.

I as Researcher/Graduate Student

As a novice researcher, I sought objectivity in sharing the stories of the narrator participants as-is. I observed that West Virginian students, particularly LIFGRs, were underrepresented in the literature and felt motivated to add their voices to the current body of work. I was chiefly motivated to put forth quality work for this dissertation for professional reasons: graduation for career advancement. This was a no-nonsense part of myself that interacted with the narrator participants and their stories more at arm's length to complete the task before me.

However, just as the narrator participants were striving to persist and succeed in college, I saw a parallel in myself as one of the first in my family to pursue higher education and the first to pursue graduate work. This observation likely blurred the lines between objectivity and subjectivity, as I found myself rooting for the participants to persist and graduate much in the same way I am rooting for myself to achieve the goal of earning a terminal degree. At the conclusion of several interviews, I felt the urge to tell the narrator participants that I was proud of

them, as if they were "mine" to be proud of. I instead focused on praising the students for some of the things they did, overcame, or aspired to do. This is decidedly not objective as my researcher intent and is due in part by a second positionality I hold: I as administrator/ student success advocate.

I as Student Success Advocate/ Administrator

I've been working closely with undergraduates since late 2014 in various roles including new student recruiter, retention specialist, freshman seminar instructor, living learning community coordinator, student organization liaison, peer mentorship program director, student ambassador trainer, and decider of financial aid awards. In these roles, I champion for students and am responsible for making decisions that affect individual or group student outcomes. As part of my professional and moral standing, I am committed to doing whatever I can to help the institution retain students, and to help students persist. This is a decidedly less neutral position than I as researcher, as I (professionally and morally) have a vested interest students persisting to graduation. This is not a neutral position, but this is what led me to my area of research interest.

This positionality was full of emotion. I experienced immense joy that the participant narrators were overcoming challenges and forging new paths for themselves. Their can-do attitudes, their drive to persist despite the challenges they acknowledged, showed a resilience I don't often see in my professional role. This was inspiring, empowering, and exciting. I felt a bit of sadness and great frustration that these bright students did not benefit from some of the privileges that benefit many of the students I interact with professionally: privileges including internet access, qualified educators, geographic proximity to resources, familial financial support, and parental firsthand experience with college.

My work experience serving students on academic probation as a success coach has sensitized me to be alert to the challenges/ barriers faced by the participant narrators; but this

prior experience also made me anticipate greater academic difficulty than was found in the study. Only one of the seven narrator participants was not in good academic standing at the time of our interviews, and all but one returned to WVU for the fall 2022 semester after our spring 2022 interviews. This may represent a self-selection bias in participation in the study.

As an administrator, I shift my viewpoint from the student's perspective to that of the institution. I know from my professional role that due to increasing dependence on tuition revenue, institutions are admitting students who are more likely to need higher levels of support than previous incoming classes. Throughout this project, my administrator positionality continued to ask – what are we doing to ensure we have systems and supports in place to meet students (in this case, LIFGRWV students) where they are? Is the institution focused on the value (financial and moral) of retaining these students? How many folks on the faculty and administration share the positionalities of the students they serve? Is the academy aware of the challenges these students face - not just regarding some of the statistics outlined in Chapter 2, but also in regard to the actual lived experiences highlighted in Chapter 4? The current study presents an opportunity to communicate the experiences of LIFGRWV students to others in the academy who may have greater difficulty understanding the needs of low-income, first-generation, rural students from West Virginia.

I AS APPALACHIAN

Part of my desire to see these participant narrators succeed so badly is intimately tied to my third positionality – I as Appalachian. I grew up in Morgantown, but my high school experience pre-dates social media. As such, I did not have a solid grasp on the magnitude or pervasiveness of negative stereotypes of Appalachia/ West Virginians until I attended college and was surrounded by out-of-state individuals. This was, at times, a jarring experience for me despite the fact that I benefitted from numerous privileges the participant narrators in this study

did not have: financial resources, non-first-generation status, geographic proximity to a comprehensive university, internet access, and one of the best high schools in the state.

This comparison and contrast between my own positionality and that of the participant narrators greatly moved me. I was already devoted to pursuing research that gave agency and representation to West Virginians, but as I engaged in the interviews, I became increasingly determined to portray Appalachians positively in the discourse. I wanted to show others how these students navigated and overcame challenges to persist. I wanted to show that West Virginian students are intelligent, capable, deep, and strong. I want to demonstrate that if we have individuals with such grit and drive, persisting and excelling despite being low-income, first-generation, and rural, what more could they accomplish (and what could others even less fortunate accomplish) if we adequately invested resources into their home communities and educational opportunities?

I as Appalachian am among many West Virginians tired of being seen as nothing more than an amalgamation of state legislators in Charleston, an economic sacrifice zone, and a place primarily for extraction. I am tired of losing our youth to brain drain and the opioid crisis. I am tired of a narrative that says West Virginia gets what it deserves when so many residents lack agency and educational opportunity compared to other areas of the country. Through highlighting the experiences and successes of low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia, I seek to show we are so much more than the stereotypes. We are more than an economic sacrifice zone. We are more than what the handful of individuals in political and economic power depict us to be. Finally, I seek to show that West Virginia University as a land-grant can, should, and does play an influential role in supporting LIFGRWV students.

I as Critic

When I set out to complete this study, I as critic was a positionality I outwardly suppressed for objectivity's sake. While I as critic was clearly necessary to engage in a critical narrative analysis, I felt concerns about confirmation bias. I felt susceptible to searching for ideas or interpreting the qualitative data in ways that supported my pre-conceived notions. I as critic was skeptical of the amount of support and resources the narrator participants would perceive they had at WVU. I changed my tune as the interviews progressed, as participant after participant had overall positive feedback on their experience at WVU. In narrative research, the researcher must be open to new understandings and new viewpoints based on the narratives (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Hickson, 2016).

I as critic gained a new sense of optimism from the present study. Based on the findings, the institution lives up to its land-grant mission in the eyes of LIFGRs. Furthermore, LIFGRs reported many more sources of institutional support than barriers to their success. The critic that remains does have reservations and concerns that the present study's participant narrators may not be representative of the subgroup as a whole, which I address in the limitations section of the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER VI

This final chapter summarizes the findings as they relate to the three research questions posed in this study. After describing the findings in broad strokes, this chapter will highlight the value of this study's contributions to existing literature. Next, implications and recommendations for practice and future research are presented. The chapter concludes with reflections from the researcher.

DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

The present study investigates the college experiences of low-income, first-generation rural college students from West Virginia. The three research questions are:

- RQ1: What are the experiences of LIFGRWV students at the state's land grant institution?
- RQ2: How do the postsecondary experiences of LIFGRWV students align with their expectations and the institutional land-grant narrative?
- RQ3: What institutional factors do LIFGRWV students perceive as sources of support or barriers to their success, affecting their retention and persistence?

Summary of Main Findings RQ1

The impacts of rurality were more salient pre-college, while the impacts of social and cultural capital were more salient during college. The findings indicate five salient themes in describing the experiences of LIFGRWV students. **Rurality (affecting pre-college preparation and experiences):** All seven participants felt that their rural upbringing was a salient factor affecting their experiences of college preparation and college attendance, but their pre-college experiences and college experiences were not homogeneous. The "ruralnesss" of a student's hometown did not directly correlate with reported feelings of being overwhelmed. Some participants went to very small schools with graduating classes of fewer than 100 (Adeline, Grant, Marla), while others attended large, consolidated schools with several hundred in the graduating class (Ella, Embry). Some students reported feeling very overwhelmed with the transition to college (Grant, Embry, Marla), while others were very excited by the change of pace (Faith, Ella), and some fell in the middle, feeling both excitement with the newness and apprehension about the changes (Mason, Adeline).

Academics (the academic experience afforded them in high school and the experience navigating college-level coursework): These experiences also differed widely among participants. Many found significant academic success at WVU (Marla, Mason, Grant, Adeline), while others faced significant academic challenges (Embry, Ella), and one had overcome initial academic challenges by switching her major (Faith). Embry reported top notch STEM opportunities afforded her in middle and high school, including trips to Washington, DC and New York City, and a pre-college internship opportunity (a form of spatial privilege), but struggled in college. Mason and Marla both described having very caring teachers who made a positive influence (a form of social capital), despite their school's limited academic offerings. Both were succeeding in college, with Mason even making the President's List his first semester. Grant described limited internet connectivity, a dearth of qualified teachers in his high school, and long commutes to purchase school supplies (spatial injustice) and credited the opportunity he had to complete 55 college credits in high school (a form of cultural capital) with helping him succeed so strongly in college. Faith shared that she felt her high school preparation was not sufficient for her first choice in major. Adeline, who attended an ACE school with a graduating class of two students, arguably had the most nontraditional education of the group. However, she strongly credited her schooling and teachers for her ability to succeed in college due to the independence and time management skills gained in that setting, and her grades reflect strong achievement. Ella did not comment on the quality of her high school education, instead emphasizing that she did not put forth any effort in high school because she believed college was not a financial possibility. Although her college performance was not stellar, she was pleased given her high school performance.

Self-perception (their anticipated ability to succeed in college/ how they felt about their abilities): In addition to the varying levels of academic preparedness, study participants reported varying levels of confidence in their abilities as students that developed as they went through college. Grant reported extensive, significant feelings of nervousness and self-doubt about being able to succeed in college before enrolling and during the early weeks of his first semester, yet ended his first semester in a rigorous major on the President's List. Embry felt relatively confident in her ability to succeed in college, only to find that both academic (she did not learn how to study in high school since academic material came easily to her) and non-academic factors (mental health, homesickness) negatively impacted her performance. She finished her first semester on academic probation Adeline reflected on the education omitted in her K-12 experience as well as her current college success, and felt pride in saying that she's "really come a long way." Faith, who had to change her major, reported feeling happier with her life than she ever had before. Marla felt very prepared for college level work but failed a required course due to illness. Although she was disappointed, she did not have negative perceptions of her capabilities and felt optimistic that she would find success taking the course during the summer. Ella felt strong feelings of imposter syndrome, since she felt her high school academic performance was poor and was only able to enroll in college due to winning a scholarship. Although her college performance was not stellar, she felt pleased given her high school performance.

Parents: The influence of parents and the impacts of their first-generation status varied across participants, with all seven participants commenting on the influence of their parents/ guardians. Parents play an influential role in the accumulation of a student's social and cultural capital. Many students described a push and pull of their parents wanting to be supportive, but

not knowing how. Some participants described a push from their parents to achieve more than they did, while others did not report that pressure. Some reported feelings of guilt, but for different reasons. Grant felt guilty that he perceived his father felt bad for not "doing more" for their family. And Ella felt guilt that her mother expressed perceived jealousy of her daughter's opportunity to attend college. Some students, such as Faith and Grant, more strongly identified with challenges related to the identifying as first-generation. Most participants reported strong bonds with their parents, while others had more contentious relationships with theirs.

COVID-19: The impact of COVID-19 was salient both pre-college and during college. The pandemic's impacts to spatial in/justice were particularly salient during their pre-college experiences. The disruption to high school education and daily routines manifested in all seven interviews. Specifically, Grant and Ella both used the phrase "we did nothing" to describe their schooling in the early days of the pandemic. Grant recalled that his school was not technologically equipped for students to complete schoolwork from home. The pandemic took away opportunities for students to participate in statewide competitions or other forms of experiential learning.

In addition to the pre-college impacts, the pandemic also affected in-college experiences in at least four ways. First, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' feelings of worry and concern related to attending college. Several students experienced health concerns for themselves and their families back home. Additionally, Marla mentioned challenges with online New Student Orientation that contributed to feelings of worry and concern regarding college attendance. Second, the pandemic impacted students' acclimation to college-level work. More than one participant reflected on how their high school education was cut short in some ways due to the move to online learning. There was a sense that these students did not arrive at WVU with

the typical amount of pre-college learning due to school closures and perceived sub-par instruction in the early days of the pandemic. The impact was not only academic, but psychological, too. For example, Embry reported feeling that during the pandemic, she "lost who she was before COVID" and struggled to emulate the academic success she had in high school while in college. Third, the pandemic created additional challenges for students by requiring them to navigate what students felt were confusing, and occasionally conflicting, COVID-19 guidelines (see Chapter 4 for a detailed account of Marla's experience with the campus's quarantine policy). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' ability to build social bonds in college (Faith felt robbed of the college social experience she originally envisioned).

The COVID-19 pandemic also created opportunities for some students. Marla felt that it helped her retain her strong social bonds with her friends from high school, which she credited with helping her succeed in college. Ella stated she would never be in college had it not been for the pandemic and the nurse who encouraged her to enter the drawing for a college scholarship for receiving a COVID-19 vaccination. Adeline also felt the pandemic allowed her to experience a large university in small increments, which helped her acclimate from a high school graduating class of two, to a university of more than 20,000 students.

Summary of Main Findings RQ2

The findings indicate that participants were unfamiliar with the concept of the land-grant mission. However, once they learned about the purpose and brief historical overview of the creation of land-grant schools, all seven participants agreed that, in their estimation, WVU lives up to its calling. Some students felt that the expectation of a land-grant was delivered in the financial accessibility of the institution (Faith, Marla, Mason). This may have played a significant role in overcoming the hesitance and skepticism some rural communities have about the utility and relevance of a college education. Multiple participants indicated that if they had

the financial opportunity to attend, they might as well try. Others felt the institution delivered on the promise of a land-grant by being accessible in terms of admissions criteria (Ella, Adeline). Yet others remarked that WVU was more welcoming and accepting than their home communities (Faith, Ella, Mason). Grant noted ways that WVU lives the land-grant mission that he noticed before attending college- specifically, Extension 4H programming in his home community and WVU's prominent presence in medical facilities across the state. As a land-grant in a small, predominantly rural state, WVU has the opportunity to live the land grant mission in ways that other land grants may not. An institution of this size may be able to alleviate some of the educational access challenges posed by spatial injustice in rural West Virginia.

Summary of Main Findings RQ3

The findings indicate that LIFGRWV students perceive far more instances of support than barriers to success. Despite recognition of the challenges and barriers they faced, participants spoke much more frequently about the resources and supports they received before and during college. Specifically, the themes found in the qualitative analysis included resources/supports (finances, key players or influencers, institutional resources) and perceived barriers (rurality, first-generation status, mental and physical health, stigma toward West Virginians, and COVID-19).

Resources and supports included financial aid (either through need-based, merit-based affiliation based, or lottery-based scholarships/ grants) which aligned with some students' perception of WVU as a land-grant being financially accessible to the average West Virginian. Access to financial aid seems to lessen tensions around college-going, which some rural communities see as an unwise financial investment. Participants noticed a contrast between resources in their rural hometowns and in their college town, including technological access, mental health services, recreational activities, close proximity to friends, student organizations,

sponsored programs such as HSTA, academic advising, study groups, tutoring centers, and services such as SSS/TRIO all available on campus.

Social capital was considered a resource by all students, but there were differences in how social capital was illustrated across participants. Marla relied heavily on high school back home connections by choice, and enjoyed the deeper connections she had built with those she knew from back home. Faith relied heavily on high school back home connections, not by choice, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on being able to meet new people. Despite her discontent with the inability to meet new people, she commented that she was "lucky" to have a good group from back home. Mason, Embry, Adeline and Ella all mentioned making new friends at WVU and did so through a mixture of meeting in the residence halls, joining student organizations, and speaking to others in class. Compared to the other participants, Grant shied away from making new friends, as he focused almost exclusively on his studies. However, he did report relying heavily on connections through HSTA to create a sense of community. Embry and Ella reported the lowest number of social bonds and participation in institutional activities during their spring 2022 interviews. A post-interview look at the academic performance of study participants indicates that Embry did not enroll for Fall 2022, and Ella's academic performance lags behind the other participants of the study.

Although participants spoke less about barriers, they did perceive their first-generation student status, relative lack of resources in their rural hometowns, mental and physical health, stigma toward West Virginians and COVID-19 as barriers to their success. These barriers were more related to issues of class than space, although both played a role. This included students' lack of confidence in their ability to compete with students from more highly resourced areas, an inability to rely on parents for desired guidance compared to non-first-generation peers, and a

negative perception of their "country" accents (Embry, Adeline). Additionally, the sheer size of the institution eroded what was once a big source of social capital for some participants – small class sizes.

While the COVID-19 pandemic caused challenges and barriers for most study participants, both at the pre-college stage and during college in relation to online classes and decreased social opportunities, two participants directly credited the COVID-19 pandemic with their ability to attend WVU (Adeline, Ella).

IMPLICATIONS / CONTRIBUTIONS

This study adds to the discourse around student retention theories by exploring the experiences of low income, first generation, rural college students from West Virginia at their land-grant institution. Specifically, the present study adds to the existing body of literature in two ways. First, it fills a gap by highlighting a subgroup that is unrepresented in the literature: LIFGRWVs. Second, it adds to the spatial justice conversation by focusing the intersection of social reproduction and spatial inequality in a rural context.

HIGHLIGHTING LIFGRWVS

Abes, Jones and Stewart (2019) described current "third wave" student development research as having a strong emphasis on critical theory, where researchers integrate theory and practice as a mechanism to promote social change through emancipation. This follows a second wave of theoretical contributions that demonstrated there is meaning in how one's group affiliations are perceived by others within the higher education context and brought attention to the impact of inhospitable campus climates on student development of minoritized groups. Although the present study arises from a critical lens which aligns with the third wave, the researcher is not satisfied with the resolution of the second wave when it comes to considering

low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia, who have not been well represented in the literature. This study adds to the current body of literature by highlighting the voices of low-income, first generation, rural West Virginian students and detailing their experiences before and during college in their own words.

Giving representation to this population of students is an important step to overcoming the tendency to stereotype or ignore voices in rural Appalachia (Higbee et al., 2005). Furthermore, the present study meets Hlinka's (2017) call to address obstacles unique to the demographics of a specific campus in an effort to further improve retention rates. A key takeaway from the 2017 study of Appalachian community college students was that current retention theories and programs are too broad and should be customized to meet the unique needs and challenges of the students they serve (Hlinka, 2017). This study adds to the existing body of literature by providing a context-specific examination of LIFGRWV college student experiences at a land-grant institution. The present study's findings differ significantly from Hlinka's (2017). This is likely due to differences in institutional context (community college vs. land-grant comprehensive university) and student backgrounds (the students in Hlinka's study a. faced significantly more familial pull, b. reported greater struggle to make the cognitive leap necessary to succeed in college level coursework; and c. expressed feelings of the institution failing to meet their psychological needs).

Intersection of Social Reproduction & Spatial Inequality in a Rural Context

This study purposefully avoided heavy use of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as it is not the researcher's intent to use a theory created by and for racially marginalized individuals for a predominantly white population. However, this study does highlight the overlapping challenges of students with four arguably marginalized identities: low-income (socioeconomic), first-generation (socioeconomic), rural (spatial injustice), and West Virginian (spatial injustice; a poor

and resource-extraction heavy state). While significant research exists on the first two identities, much less research exists on the third and fourth identities, a contribution of this research.

This study adds nuance to the current literature by combining social reproduction with spatial justice as lenses through which to examine the college experiences of rural students. As outlined in chapter 3, much of the spatial justice research is urban-centric in nature, which leads to cultural assumptions of the normalcy and superiority of life and cities in suburbs, while othering or marginalizing the rural experience.

Spatial injustice is sometimes due to intentional efforts to organize physical space into ways that maintain or reinforce a status quo (Galster & Sharkey, 2017; Israel & Frankel, 2018; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). The intentionality of the marginalization of rural West Virginian spaces is far outside the scope of the present study; however, the research participants' rural experiences reflect a status quo of community aspects such as labor, education, and transportation that affected their college aspirations, preparation, and in-college experiences. Each of these aspects are part of Galster & Sharkey's (2017) spatial opportunity structure, which affects an individual's socioeconomic status achievements. Furthermore, the spatial opportunity structure was strained in many cases due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused extra challenges due to limited, intermittent or unreliable internet access (Adeline, Embry, Grant, Marla, Mason).

This work adds to extant literature by exploring the spatial opportunity structure from a Bourdieuian perspective from the standpoint of individuals who self-identify as rural. This contributes to Lichter & Ziliak's (2017) call for "a place for space" that emphasizes the need to identify, define and understand changing spatial relationships and embrace a spatially inclusive approach to contemporary social problems. By highlighting the experiences of LIFGRWV

students, the present study makes the body of literature more spatially inclusive as scholars and practitioners develop solutions to problems of college access, retention and success.

In practical terms, the inclusion of rural and West Virginian identities adds nuance to the current literature by demonstrating how lack of connectivity (geographic and technological) and rural identity impacts college readiness and success. It is a call for greater investment in educational resources and opportunities in rural communities, for more attention to rurality as a salient factor in understanding identity, and a suggestion that schools should recognize and celebrate the perseverance of LIFGR students, as well as communicate explicitly about the resources and supports available to them.

This study suggests that students perceive WVU as adequately meeting the promise of a land-grant institution. The students who did experience stigma described feeling so because of fellow students, high school preparation, or their parents' first-generation status, not due to institutional actors, policies or structures. There are classed aspects of the participants' positionalities that have influenced their ability to arrive at and succeed in college, but instances of feeling out of place or unsupported at WVU were comparatively few. Some students (Adeline, Ella, Grant) had high praise for institutional actors such as professors, academic advisors, SSS/TRIO staff, and the HSTA program coordinator. Hlinka (2017) argued that institutions must understand that their students are shaped by the region's culture and should customize retention practices and programs accordingly. The present study suggests that the institution is meeting students where they are once enrolled in college. However, as a land-grant institution, WVU could do more to invest in education in rural, low-income communities. The students in the present study have already obtained an uncommon level of privilege for West Virginians by attending college. With West Virginia's college going rate expected to drop further (WV Higher

Education Policy Commission, 2023), the institution should be mindful of outreach and access programs in underserved parts of the state if it wishes to impact the trend of West Virginia having the lowest college attainment among all bordering states and the national average (WV Forward Human Capital, 2021).

The shared experiences of the present study may assist faculty, student support staff, and administration in better understanding the perspectives of low-income, first-generation college students. This could result in delivering better quality services (academic, mental health), social opportunities (living learning communities, cohort-based groups, formal and informal mentorship), and academic resources (more office hours for intimate interactions, study groups, tutoring) to current students. It also has implications of rethinking outreach for admissions and recruitment in low-income, rural areas. For example, Grant's ability to routinely see WVU in his rural community contributed to an early decision to attend college one day, and to see what was possible beyond pipelining. In contrast, Marla felt less supported by WVU before College, saying that nobody came to her high school or spoke with the parents about opportunities available.

While the insights from this study may most directly influence individuals working at this particular land-grant institution in this particular state, there may be takeaways that other land-grant institutions can use to connect with the low-income, first-generation, rural individuals within their states, particularly among higher education institutions within Appalachia. Furthermore, hearing the experiences of these students and seeing their ability to overcome and succeed may bring hope to other low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia. Indeed, more than one study participant mentioned feeling apprehensive about enrolling at WVU due to seeing older community members go away to college, only to come

back after "failing out", unsuccessful and dejected. Additionally, more than one study participant mentioned they hoped the present study can inspire or help at least one other student like them in the future.

A final implication is that WVU has a special opportunity due to its relative size within a small, predominantly rural state, to deliver on its land-grant mission compared to other higher education institutions. Davis et al (2019) found that many higher education institutions have limited or no engagement with rural communities. The results of the current study suggest that WVU is outperforming the norm (based on students' perception of WVU delivering on the idea of the land grant mission) but that there is more work to do to bring accessibility and college success and attainment to low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia. A new initiative that has launched between the beginning and completion of this study is WVU's Mountain Scholars Program, a support program for college transition of West Virginian students. Although it is open to all students from West Virginia, the program seeks to provide extra support to the positionalities highlighted in the present study (low-income, first-generation, rural).

LIMITATIONS

The present study faces several limitations that should be considered to appropriately contextualize the findings. Anticipated limitations of this work were outlined in Chapter I. Now that the study has been conducted, additional limitations have manifested. First, the size and scope of the study presents a limitation. While the seven participants are sufficient for a qualitative study of this nature, the experiences of these seven students may or may not be representative of the pre-college and college experiences of LIFGRWV students. Furthermore, the present study sought to examine students' perceptions of their institution as a land-grant with

a duty to serve the state and its people. These findings, therefore, may not be easily applied to non-land-grant schools with less interaction within their home communities.

Another limitation may be the opt-in bias of study participants. Perhaps students who elected to participate in this study differ in significant ways from students who did not choose to respond to the invitation to participate. Perhaps the students who struggle the most and face the greatest barriers are those who are not checking campus email to consider participating in research on LIFGRWV student experiences. Nationwide retention of first year students at four-year institutions was 81% in 2018 (US Dept of Ed, 2019) and Chapter II outlined the myriad ways students from West Virginia lagged behind national averages. However, the narrator participants of the present study had a first to second year retention rate of 85.7% (some participants were already in their second year of study at the time of their interview; all but one were enrolled at WVU for the fall 2022 semester).

Some of the narrator participants in this study are among the highest achieving low SES, first-generation students. Most participants cited financial support from external sources and family that alleviated financial stressors. One literally won a lottery which enabled her to overcome the financial barriers she faced to pursuing higher education. The lone participant who did not return for fall 2022 lost their institutional aid due to academic performance in the first year.

Furthermore, Engle & Tinto (2008) found that low-income and first-generation college students were less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that contribute to success while in college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and peers, participation in extra-curricular activities, and utilizing resources and support services. However, the students in the present study did indeed do many of these things.

A third limitation to the value of the present study is the fact that the students enrolled in higher education already hold a more privileged status than the average LIFGRWV citizen. While it is certainly worthwhile to understand the experiences of the students who have "made it" and understand how they've overcome challenges to succeed and persist in higher education, these findings may not be useful to individuals who are unable to overcome the barriers to enroll in the first place.

A fourth limitation could be impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews for this study were conducted in the spring 2022 semester, and campus life was still impacted and upended in some ways by COVID-19 protocols. This may have affected recruitment and interest. It also led to some of the interviews being held virtually (Embry, Mason, Faith) with others being held in person (Adeline, Grant, Ella, Marla) which may have led to inconsistencies or different comfort levels across participant interviews. Furthermore, the impacts of the pandemic were very salient to this particular group whose high school graduation and college matriculation were most heavily impacted in the early days of the pandemic. These experiences may be unique to this particular cohort during this particular snapshot in time and may not be representative of the student cohorts before or after them.

A fifth limitation is the researcher. Any approach where the researcher is the instrument for data collection is open to human error. Specifically, the researcher's lack of experience and time constraints related to dissertation work for a part-time graduate student with full time employment likely influenced the outcome of the study. The present study could be improved with more experience and more time to dedicate to the project. Furthermore, the researcher's passion for the project, while important to the work, does leave room for bias.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study has been described as the cresting of the second wave in Abes et al.'s (2019) description of waves of student development theory. While the present study does contribute to second wave research to bring additional nuance based on the social identities of low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia, the work remains unfinished. Abes et al. (2019) argued that it will never be sufficient to merely describe students' experiences (the focus of the current study). It is imperative to require a critical analysis of the "intersecting domains of power and structures of inequality that frame (student) development in the first place" (p. 26). The present study does provide some initial contributions related to this particular subgroup of students in regard to examining social and cultural capital (classed) and spatial justice (spaced), two structures of inequality that may frame student development. The researcher offers ideas for additional studies that could build upon this dissertation in pursuit of promoting social change and emancipation of low-income, first-generation, rural college students from West Virginia:

One area for future study could include a heavier focus on LIFGRWV's student interactions with faculty and staff. Interactions with faculty and staff manifested as a source of support to many students in the present study, which may tie into the concepts of connectedness and fit, which are particularly salient for Appalachian students (Wilson & Gore, 2010, 2013, 2016). Looking at the nature, frequency, and comfort level of these interactions more closely may provide insight on how an institution can more effectively serve this population. Such a study may include an examination of the institution's faculty and staff identities as they relate to the students' identities. Students often express a preference or need to see themselves reflected in their faculty and student support staff, but the identities researched in the present study (low-income, first-generation, rural, West Virginian) are not observable by sight. The makeup of folks

employed in a higher education institution likely varies significantly compared to the makeup of folks in the rural hometowns of study participants. This is not only due to the geographic location and spatial resources afforded in a college town, but also because of the social mobility often afforded to individuals who enter the professoriate or professional jobs in higher education. To add to the critical lens, questions could be crafted for research that further elucidates the makeup of faculty and staff, and how that may impact their ability to understand the needs of and relate to LIFGRWV students.

A second area for further research may be the intersection of spatial justice with ecological models of student development. When addressing the issue of place and space and the impacts of rurality on spatial injustice, this study's findings support the notion that institutions can intentionally create spaces conducive to student success that improve the lives and experiences of students. Many study participants noted a lack of resources in their rural hometowns – issues that were not completely solved but often alleviated via their presence on campus. Perhaps an examination of Lichter & Ziliak's (2017) five takeaways on research and policy, some of which manifested in the present study,

A third idea for future research includes a closer examination of rurality in terms of identity. In the present study, most of the discussion around rurality manifested in students' precollege-experiences and their initial transition, as opposed to their experience in college. A specific area for further inquiry might be code switching, accents, and speech of students from rural West Virginia. Two participants in the current study explicitly mentioned stigmatization from others for being from West Virginia. While these negative experiences did not occur from institutional actors, it might be a worthwhile endeavor to examine how LIFGRWV students feel about their perception and interactions with institutional actors based on their speech.

A fourth recommendation for future study is to create a research design that entails spending more time with participants to get to know them better. While there were very interesting findings based off the seven approximately one-hour interviews, much more depth and thickness could have been delivered with more time and more conversation. The interview format of the present study was designed to let the study participants take the lead on explaining what they felt was important in their own words. Because no baseline experience for LIFGRWV students existed in the research, this study yielded some broad results to create new knowledge about their experiences. However, now that a handful of these experiences have been documented, a revised set of more specific interview questions, coupled with more time to engage with study participants, could yield rewarding and worthwhile additional findings. For example, the final interview in the present study was conducted with Embry, who talked at length about an experience she had in high school where her entire rural community was without power or heat for two weeks. Grant spoke about how he grew up with his extended family (grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles) on a daily basis. Adeline's experiences were influenced by her attendance at a tiny, rural, Christian school. These were interesting experiences that may yield the creation of new questions to ask another cohort of LIFGRWV students to dig deeper into their pre-college and college experiences and college success. Alternatively, another way to get to know research participants better would be to revise the current study as a longitudinal study that checks in with the participants again after one year, including those who did not persist at the institution.

A fifth recommendation for future study is to examine the experiences of LIFGRWV students who left higher education after one or more semesters of study. This would address concerns of two of the limitations above: that this study only focuses on the already privileged

subset of LIFGRWV students who actually matriculated to higher education, and that there may have been self-selection bias in the respondents to the call for participants. Higher achieving students who more regularly check campus email may have been more apt to respond to the call for participants.

A final recommendation for future study is to connect this work to emerging research on rural institutions and rural-serving institutions. Although the present study focuses on a land-grant institution in a small, predominantly rural state, not all land-grants may be well positioned to carry out practices suggested by the implications of this study. There are a significant number of non-land-grant schools playing a vital role in supporting educational and employment attainment of rural learners. Near the conclusion of this dissertation study, Ascendium Education Group funded two projects that resulted in publicly available data tools to identify such institutions (Ascendium, 2022). Moving forward, this dataset could be leveraged in the further study of LIFGRs and implementation of best practices to meet their needs.

In all the suggested areas of future research above, the researcher also strongly encourages future researchers to closely examine the idea of the "deficit model." In speaking with the students in the present study, it was clear that any "deficits" were the result of external factors outside of the student's control. While rurality is not automatically or always a deficit, the socioeconomic and spatial justice-oriented realities of growing up in a rural, under resourced area does create a barrier to college success and did manifest in the present study. Once immersed in in the college environment with access to the kinds of resources and social connections conducive to success, most participants in the present study were finding success. Put another way, the recommendation is that future research clarifies that deficits are often in the ecology of the students' upbringing, not within the student.

A final note on possible future studies is to consider quantitative research on this subgroup. Quantitative work lies outside the realm of the present study, and qualitative work was specifically chosen to bring unrepresented voices into the literature. However, one of the challenges in researching an underrepresented group is that little literature exists to build off to determine strong research questions, develop strong interview or focus group questions, or to tease out nuances in experience. Although quantitative research on this topic could take many different shapes, particularly relevant areas of inquiry may include an economic analysis of the participants' hometowns, or a spatial analysis of the participants' proximity to key resources that support academic success. Not only would quantitative research be valuable in its own right, but quantitative findings may generate provoking results that future qualitative researchers could use as a jumping off point to delve deeper into specific, nuanced questions surrounding the college access, experiences, and success of low-income, first-generation, rural West Virginian students.

Closing Reflections of the Researcher

This area of study became of interest as I reflected upon my own privileges as a two-time college graduate. While many in my family never attended college, I do not claim first-generation status, as my mother attended nursing school in the 1980s. This research has given me a deep appreciation of the challenges she must have faced, as institutions provided far less support then than they do today. As I learned about the impact of rurality on college choice and access in my graduate studies, I thought about how my large Appalachian family just so happened to live on farmland 21 miles from WVU. In fact, what is today the university's research forest was once a Preston County farm owned by my family. The gravesite of my earliest immigrant ancestors (on my paternal grandmother's side of the family) still exists on this land (as a side note, the other branches of my family also were extremely close to this same

farm). I have thought about how all we had to do to attend college at a major university was "head down the mountain," as my grandmother calls the trip between Bruceton Mills and Morgantown. This spatial proximity undoubtedly played a role in the college access and attainment of my mother, and of the subsequent generation in our family.

The participants' experiences moved me. I felt joy for them, pride in their accomplishments (although they are not "mine" to feel proud of), as many seemed to overcome so much more than they gave themselves credit for. I was humbled to spend time with them – they were overwhelmingly positive, with a can-do attitude. Despite the challenges they faced (most of which I did not), they were finding success and joy in their pursuit of education – several of them at levels which I never achieved.

My theoretical commitments included giving voice to the narrator participants and incorporating a critical lens. Critical theory integrates theory and practice as a mechanism to promote social change. More than one student thanked me for conducting this research. While I acknowledge that this target population is small (some higher education researchers may consider insignificant, which I clearly refute), I feel so passionately about the need for West Virginians to be more widely represented in academic literature, especially in a positive light. To hear their words of thanks was a validating and humbling experience in the moment and was a motivator to me many times throughout the writing process. I am grateful they elected to participate in my study and am honored to have the opportunity to share their stories and experiences. Through this study, I've sought to empower the participants to define their own identities, not allowing academic or government entities to define those identities on their behalf. I hope that if nothing else, this project elicits social change in terms of encouraging a more favorable opinion and impression of LIFGRWVs.

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Appendix A – Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about when you first decided to attend college.
    1. Probe: ask about key players in the journey and how they were/were not supportive.
2. What conversations did you have as you were preparing for your first semester at WVU and with whom?

   A.) Probe: How did you feel as you were preparing for your first semester at WVU?

B.) Probe: How did your hometown's proximity to WVU affect your decision to attend school here?

3. What have been some of your experiences since you've been at WVU?
   A.) Probe: What are some high points and low points?
   B.) Probe: Can you tell me a specific example or story?
   C.) Probe: Describe how you felt in that time.
4. Tell me about your adjustment to WVU.
5. In what ways have you felt supported by WVU during your time here?
   A.) Probe: can you think of any ways WVU could better support you?
   B.) Probe: What if any barriers have you faced at WVU?
   C.) Probe: How have these sources of support or perceived barriers to success affected your desire to stay in school at WVU?
6. In what ways have you felt challenged by WVU during your time here?
7. Do you know what it means for WVU to be a land grant university?
   A.) If yes, do you think they are living up to that charge?'
   B.) If no, briefly explain what it means. Based on that, do you think they are living up to that charge?
   C.) Probe: In what ways does the land-grant mission align with your expectations as a WV native?
8. Is there anything else I haven't asked about that you feel would be relevant to your story and pertinent to share?