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THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF RURAL NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY

COLLEGES IN SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

by

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May 2023

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF RURAL NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Tanya J. McGhee
Old Dominion University, 2023
Director: Dr. Mitchell R. Williams

Community colleges are important settings for the development of social capital as well as institutions of higher learning. The democratic mission, geographic dispersion, and close relationship with multiple stakeholders throughout their service regions allow community colleges to be well-suited to act as liaisons and social architects facilitating social capital creation. This is particularly true in rural areas, where community colleges are often among the largest employers and are major cultural and civic engagement centers. In an era of persistent budget reductions and fiscal tension, there is a need to better understand the multitude of ways rural community colleges support communities that are not captured by traditional enrollment funding formulas.

This study used a multiple case study methodology and a social capital lens to document the role and contributions of rural community colleges in creating community social capital. Data was collected through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis to better understand rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. This study helps fill a gap in the community college literature related to the community-building function of rural institutions.

The findings of this study confirmed that community social capital is not consistently present in rural areas and that community engagement varies substantially among rural community colleges. Community partners' perceptions of the role and effectiveness of

community colleges varied in a pattern that correlated with partners' understanding of the college mission. Partners who worked with colleges that exhibited extensive partnerships and community engagement were better versed in the comprehensive nature of the college's mission. Similarly, leaders from the college who displayed a culture of community enrichment and civic duty were more confident in their institution's effectiveness as an architect of community social capital. The study has implications for college leaders who want to expand community engagement efforts and attain the fiscal support needed to fulfill their comprehensive mission, an important consideration for college leaders who serve rural communities facing significant social and economic challenges.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Connor and Calia. Believe in yourself, challenge yourself each day to be better than you were the day before, and always give more than you take. Stay curious.

I love you!

It also is dedicated to my parents, who have been my biggest supporters. You will never convince me to like salmon pea wiggle, but your lessons in integrity, tenacity, and the value of hard work are deeply engrained.

I'm honored to be a first-generation college student.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges have a long history of meeting local educational needs, supporting workforce and economic development, and promoting civic engagement activities (Jones, 2016; Mathews, 2016; Miller & Kissinger, 2007). In 1947, the Truman Commission Report formally called for the establishment of a nationwide network of public colleges and charged them with providing comprehensive program offerings to their local area at an affordable price (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947; Vaughan, 2006). The commission established the three foundational hallmarks of today's comprehensive mission statements and charged colleges to serve as cultural centers with programming that emphasized civic responsibility (Vaughan, 2006). The commission also outlined the following three hallmarks of a public community college: (a) open access, (b) comprehensiveness, and (c) a commitment to the needs of the local community (Vaughan, 2006).

After the Truman Commission Report, there was a period of rapid community college expansion as colleges became established across the country. After the Vietnam war, the country came together, and by the 1970s and 1980s, community engagement became an increasingly important aspect of colleges' service to their area. Not long after this period, sociopolitical forces began to divide the nation, eroding American's sense of democracy and the country increasingly reliant on the government to address problems (Boone, 1997). These changes reduced social capital, negatively impacted Americans' quality of life, and exacerbated other social issues (Boone, 1997).

In 1988, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) identified the need for community colleges to develop a cadre of scholars and citizens committed to building

community both on and off-campus. Globalization dominated public policy and resulted in extensive federal funding for vocational and workforce training (Levin, 2001; Palmadessa, 2017). As a result, community colleges realigned mission priorities away from community building to a focus on globalization and students as individuals. The 2012 AACC report reaffirmed the loss of focus on community dynamics and attention on economic development, access, and completion (AACC, 2012).

Boone (1992) indicated college missions are comprised of two concentric parts. The core of the mission contained operational functions that differentiate the college as an institute of higher education. This included instruction as well as student services such as admissions and advising. Boone (1992) described the outer region of the mission as the edge, or the area the college interacts with its local community, working collaboratively to identify and fulfill the needs of its service area. Since the Truman Commission Report, the mission of community colleges has changed very little; however, the hallmarks that individual community colleges chose to emphasize have fluctuated over time (Cohen et al., 2014; Vaughan, 1988). These fluctuations typically occurred within the portion of the mission Boone (1992) described as the edge.

Present State of the Problem

The social-political climate of 2020 was particularly tumultuous as a global pandemic fractured American society causing extensive educational disruptions, a volatile economy, a fiercely debated presidential election, and the spread of misinformation (Chen et al., 2021; Oyeboode, 2022). Community colleges were forced to pivot to fully online operations rapidly, student services were curtailed, and technology became necessary for all college business (Floyd, 2021). The global pandemic was particularly difficult for rural America, where broadband

connectivity was inadequate, poverty was endemic, poor health outcomes were persistent, public transportation was lacking, and high-quality childcare was sparse (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). The American Rescue Plan Act (2021) allocated nearly 40 billion dollars for institutes of higher education. Community colleges and rural institutions were prioritized for funding due to the high unmet need of the populations they serve (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). These funds were intended to help defray pandemic associated costs for the institution and students. American Rescue Plan funds enabled colleges to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 on campus and provided students with financial support for tuition, books, and student basic needs (e.g., food, housing, childcare) (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

A Call to Action

After months of pandemic isolation, there may be a need to reconnect people in rural communities, promote democratic ideals for pandemic recovery, and address larger persistent social issues. These issues vary greatly among communities and may include socioeconomic disparity, low educational attainment, and high unemployment. Community colleges are well-positioned to lead stakeholder groups to address social issues and be catalysts for community change (Boone, 1997; Cohen et al., 2014; Gleazer, 1980; Harlacher, 1974; Myran, 1969; Williams & Nourie-Manuele, 2018). However, funding shortages and priority realignment may need to be addressed to pursue this undertaking effectively.

Impediments

Chronic federal and state funding reductions have left American community colleges continually underfunded (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). Funding cuts have not abridged the expectations of community colleges, who are "are being called upon with greater urgency to graduate more students, increase transfer rates, and place students into the workforce more

quickly" (Trent & Pollard, 2019, p. 65). Consequently, community college leaders are expected to do more with less, under greater scrutiny, and in addition to the countless stakeholder and governmental mandates (Trent & Pollard, 2019).

These national struggles are also experienced in North Carolina. According to the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee (2016), North Carolina community colleges are funded primarily through state appropriations and an enrollment-based funding formula. Performance measures, which focus on student progress and performance, are a smaller but important funding component. North Carolina community colleges have experienced enrollment (and subsequent budget) declines in recent years. These declines caused a loss of nearly \$1000 per FTE for North Carolina colleges between 2007 and 2017 (Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, 2016). Persistent budget reductions and fiscal tension have been particularly difficult for rural community colleges, where the per-pupil cost for education and wrap-around services is higher than their non-rural counterparts (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). Many rural institutions in North Carolina have grown accustomed to operating on a tight budget, with little room for funding activities not directly related to enrollment and student services.

Historically, North Carolina funding formulas have not included a measure of the myriad of intangible ways the college supports the community outside of their traditional higher education role. North Carolina funding formulas also have not taken into consideration the variety of ways colleges support students outside of the classroom (e.g., counseling and tutoring). Nor have they allocated funds for special projects, such as legislative mandates that require work and resource investment (Artis & Bartel, 2021). Such unfunded mandates compete with student success agendas and a college's ability to attract and retain employees (Artis &

Bartel, 2021). The lack of reporting and funding associated with the community support portion of the Truman commission charge may make it difficult for colleges to prioritize the initiative and thus may limit their ability to excel.

The lack of funding for community support initiatives has been particularly distressing in rural areas, whose "challenges are even more acute, as their needs are greater and the costs of providing services higher" (Rush-Marlowe, 2021, p.1). Chillag and Lee (2020) reported that the synergistic impacts of racial, economic, geographic inequalities, and a diverse set of structural challenges has complicated the implementation of mitigation measures in rural areas. The authors focused mainly on the mitigation of public health emergencies, such as COVID-19, which magnified social disparities, especially in rural areas. Community colleges have been recognized for their role in developing social capital, perceptions of self-identity, and creation of a sense of community (Deggs & Miller, 2011a; Reed, 2019; Thomas, 2013). Rural community colleges have been identified as socially enabling institutions that improve community members' quality of life, foster civic pride, and cultivate community self-esteem (Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Reed, 2019). Through the creation of mutually beneficial partnerships, community colleges could be a driver of rural social capital development in America. There is a clear need for more empirical study of the role of rural community colleges in building social capital. The present research aimed to fill this gap in the literature and also examined college leaders' and partners' perceptions of rural community colleges' effectiveness as social capital developers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of my research was to better understand rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. Data collection techniques, specifically interviews, focus groups, and document analysis,

were used to assess the research questions through a social capital theoretical lens. The study utilized a multiple case study approach, whereby geographic location, rurality of the college, community bounds, and time bound the cases. In particular, I assessed communities associated with two NC community colleges during spring and summer 2022.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do rural community colleges promote community social capital development?
2. How do community partners perceive the college's role and effectiveness as a community partner in social capital development?
3. How do institutional leaders perceive the college's role and effectiveness as a community partner in social capital development?

Professional Significance

My research helped to clarify some of the understudied yet substantial impacts of a community college in rural areas. In the last decade, few studies have discussed the community development role of community colleges. This research helped fill the gap in modern community college literature related to the community-building function of institutions, particularly those that serve rural areas. This research will interest rural community college leaders and administrators, as well as rural political leaders. These individuals may be looking to strengthen local ecosystems by implementing community-based activities that support social capital development in rural areas. The outcomes of this study may help practitioners and academics who seek to understand effective strategies that are employable by college leadership to unite internal and external stakeholders in pursuit of a common goal.

Few studies published in the last decade discuss the role of rural community colleges in social capital development. The lack of data reduces institutional leaders' ability to accurately assess their roles as community conveners and social developers. Consequently, I expect college leadership, administration, and funding agencies to be interested in identifying the ways colleges impact their community that are not evaluated through traditional performance and enrollment-based funding models.

Overview of the Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach and a social constructivist epistemological stance. A qualitative approach was appropriate for the present research because it sought to understand complex interrelationships through a diverse set of contexts (Stake, 1995). This research's constructive approach recognized that each research participant constructs a subjective meaning of their experiences in the world they live in based on their perceptions and social experiences (Creswell, 2014). The constructivist approach enabled me to collect general information before condensing the participants' meanings into a few categories (Creswell, 2014). I identified how rural NC community colleges develop social capital through this process.

I utilized a multiple case-study method in keeping with a constructivist research paradigm. Cases were bound by geographic location (eastern or western North Carolina), the rurality of the college service area, community bounds, and time. All data collected through interviews and focus groups was collected during spring and summer 2022. Documents analysis focused on content produced in 2021 and 2022, though some older materials were included (e.g., undated website content). Use of a multiple case study methodology enabled me to conduct exploratory research and gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context, with questions related to processes instead of outcomes (Hays & Singh, 2011). Data collection

techniques, including interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were utilized to assess research questions through a social capital theoretical lens.

The two cases selected for this study were community colleges in rural North Carolina. One college (pseudonym Eastern Community College) served an area with a mean per capita income of \$22,956, where 20.6% of the population lived in poverty (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). The other college (pseudonym Western Community College) served an area with a mean household income of \$28,101, where 15.0% of the population lived in poverty (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Participants for this study were selected using purposive criterion sampling, which required me to select participants based on predetermined criteria (Hays & Singh, 2011). The criteria used for selection were affiliation with the selected rural North Carolina community colleges and participant designation as either a community partner or college employee.

Data were collected using interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Interviews and focus groups were the data collection method of choice because they effectively collected others' descriptions and interpretations and thus provided me with a sense of the multiple realities associated with rural college social capital development (Stakes, 1995). These data sources gave me with a heightened understanding of the case colleges and what they have done to develop community social capital. Interview and focus group protocols utilized open-ended and issue-oriented questions designed to evoke responses that provide a thick description of the case. Interview and focus group meetings were held using Zoom and recorded (with participant permission). Zoom transcripts were autocreated by the software and were manually verified within one week of each session. Participants were asked to member check the data presented in chapter four, which increased the trustworthiness of my research results. Document analysis

(including electronic documents such as websites, local news sources, press releases, social media posts, meeting minutes, and other statements from the colleges) was used as a source of data, but also assisted with the triangulation of data obtained through interviews and focus groups.

Transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were analyzed using descriptive (primary coding) and pattern coding (secondary coding). Use of descriptive coding as the primary coding technique enabled me to capture critical words from multiple categories (e.g., nouns, adjectives, and verbs). Such codes were low inference and help summarize chunks of data into topics for further analysis (Elliott, 2018). Using pattern coding for the secondary coding method enabled me to categorize the descriptive factors from primary coding and identify commonalities (Elliott, 2018).

Delimitations

According to Creswell (2014), delimitations are the elements that set confines for and limit the scope of a research study. I delimited this study to rural NC community colleges and the community partners and college employees who either work or reside in the case colleges' service areas. The study utilized a qualitative approach, a social constructivist epistemological stance, and a multiple case study methodology. I collected data through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. All data collected through interviews and focus groups was collected during spring and summer 2022. Document analysis (including electronic documents such as websites, local news sources, press releases, social media posts, meeting minutes, and other statements from the colleges) focused on content produced in 2021 and 2022, though older website materials were not excluded.

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms were used during the present study:

- **Collaboration:** The most complex form of partnership that results from elaborate and deep levels of interaction between two or more partners in the pursuit of “common goals that are interdependent, long term, and complex” (Kinsella-Maier & Gala, 2016).
- **Community:** A group of people who (a) share a sense of personal relatedness and belonging, (b) feel they make a difference to the group and that the group matters to its members, (c) feel group resources will meet the members' needs, and (d) have a shared emotional connection via history, shared spaces, time spent together, and relatable experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For the present study, community members must live or work (or both) within the case college service area.
- **Community college:** Publicly supported and regionally accredited institutions of higher education who confer the associate degree as the highest credential (Cohen et al., 2014).
- **Community engagement:** Programs and activities that foster relationships between institutes of higher education and communities (Hutson et al., 2019).
- **Community leader:** Individuals that have either lived in or worked in (or both) the community. In addition, these individuals have held a leadership role through professional or civic involvement that resulted in a thorough understanding of the community. (Reed, 2019)
- **Community partner:** An individual knowledgeable about the college that is not a full-time college employee. This includes members of the college board of trustees, the college foundation board, college program advisory boards, and community leaders.

- Community social capital: The connections and relationships that form within a community as groups work collaboratively towards a common goal that benefits all.
- Cooperation: The third level of partnership development, whereby two or more individuals or groups coordinate efforts on a focused goal (Kinsella-Maier & Gala, 2016).
- Partnership: A collaborative working relationship whose level of involvement increases with increased amounts of time and efforts towards a complex goal (Kinsella-Maier & Gala, 2016).
- Rural: A geographic area with an average population density of fewer than 250 people per square mile (North Carolina Rural Center, n.d.).
- Rural community college: Publicly supported and regionally accredited institutions of higher education who confer the associate degree as the highest credential and serve a geographic area with an average population density of fewer than 250 people per square mile (North Carolina Rural Center, n.d.; Cohen et al., 2014).
- Service area: The geographic and political boundaries served by a single community college.
- Social capital: Social capital is the capital of relationships, the idea that connections between groups of people (the stock) impact resource access amongst those who are a part of the group (the flow or resource exchange) (Yin, 2017).

Summary

Rural community colleges serve their communities in many ways outside of the classroom. These institutions were charged with operating as cultural and civic centers by the Truman Commission in 1947 (Vaughan, 2006). Today, rural NC community colleges struggle with underfunding but are critical social institutions that build social capital in their areas (Joint

Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, 2016; Reed, 2019). There is a need to understand rural community colleges' role as social capital architects in an era of increased fiscal accountability. Such information is necessary if colleges are to advocate and receive funding for the extensive value they provide their community outside of the classroom. This study sought to fill this information gap. A multiple case study approach was used to explore community partners' perceptions of the role and contributions of rural North Carolina community colleges on local social capital development.

The next chapter reviews literature focused on rural community colleges and explores the social capital theoretical framework that guide my research. Chapter three will detail the methodology used in the study, including research design, data collection, and data analysis. Empirical study results will be presented in chapter four, while chapter five will summarize my conclusions and provide recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter describes the theoretical framework of the present multiple case study and the extant relevant literature. The chapter then provides a thorough review of the mission and role of rural community colleges. Such information lays the foundation for the present research designed to describe rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. The intersection of six topics guides the present study. These topics are: (a) the role of community colleges, ascribed by the President's Commission on Higher Education in 1947, (b) the development and use of institutional mission statements, (c) social capital, which is the theoretical framework for the present study, (d) the unique characteristics of rural communities and rural colleges (e) the societal role of community colleges in rural communities, and (f) college resource allocation and institutional reporting requirements. Each of these topics will be explored in-depth in the following sections of this literature review.

Method of Reviewing the Literature

A literature review was conducted through a systematic review of sources within Old Dominion University's Perry Library Monarch OneSearch, ProQuest, the Education Source database, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database, and Google Scholar. Database searches included the following terms: community-based programming, community leadership, community engagement, community involvement, community development, community participation, democratic participation, partnerships, and social capital. A Boolean approach included community colleges, two-year colleges, junior colleges, and rural areas or rural communities. The search included scholarly articles, books, dissertations, and reports from

higher education institutions or governmental agencies. The review excluded all materials printed in languages other than English. Research articles primarily focused on service learning or economic development were excluded.

Community College Mission and Priorities

The need for an intermediary educational unit between high school and the university was identified early in the twentieth century (Cohen et al., 2014). Initially, two-year colleges were known as junior colleges and focused on providing the first two years of a baccalaureate degree (Cohen et al., 2014). The Truman commission has been credited with broadening the focus of two-year colleges, creating a network of public colleges, and charging them with providing comprehensive program offerings to their local area at a low price (Cohen et al., 2014; Vaughan, 2006). The Truman Commission Report established the three foundational hallmarks of today's comprehensive mission statements and charged colleges to serve as cultural centers with programming that emphasized civic responsibility (Vaughan, 2006). Since the Truman Commission Report, the mission of community colleges has changed very little; however, the emphasis on different hallmarks of the mission has fluctuated over time (Cohen et al., 2014; Vaughan, 1988).

Local Service

To fulfill their purpose, community colleges must serve their local area. As a keystone of the community college, service to the local area became a scholarly topic of interest in 1969 with *The Community Dimensions of the Community College* (Harlacher, 1969). This book was among the first in the community services movement. It was recognized for its directness in stating that community colleges needed to involve citizens in the development of programs and offerings (Vaughan, 1997). Myran (1969) further defined the role of community in colleges and identified

community service as one of the five main functions of a college. The author noted that this function should involve all college employees (not just administration or one division) working in “cooperation with organizations and citizen groups to improve the physical and social environment of the community” (Myran, 1969, p. 14). Myran believed that education should remain the primary focus of community colleges and dismissed the idea that colleges would be the primary drivers of societal change. Instead, the author proposed that the college would attain legitimacy if it focused on education and collaborated with others to address broad societal issues through inter-organizational partnerships (Myran, 1969).

The 1970s was a period of increased support for community services, as many turned their attention to how community colleges served local areas. It was the ideal time for community colleges to be recognized as community leaders and catalysts, a role more substantial than the providers of courses and programs (Vaughan, 1997). In 1974 several preeminent scholars gathered for the National Conference on Community Services and the Community College. The goal of this conference was to discuss *how* colleges could look beyond the open door to become truly integrated within the community. Participants presented examples of unique programs focused on improving community services and provided strategies for local implementation (Gollattscheck & Wattenbarger, 1974).

One community service scholar present was Harlacher (1974), who noted that the potential for community services is what sets community colleges apart from other educational institutions. Harlacher declared that colleges would remain mediocre if they did not capitalize on people’s inherent differences by recognizing and developing each person’s strengths. Harlacher believed that societal greatness depends on the well-being of society at large, and the community college should be the place where citizens grow to reach their maximum potential. The author’s

assertion was premised on the notion that the community college is likely the only place where individuals, young and old, from all societal niches would mix. Harlacher (1974) identified colleges' ability to empower these individuals and provide the skills, knowledge, and attitude necessary to restore and improve their neighborhoods, rejuvenate community pride, and reduce generational and socioeconomic gaps.

Gleazer, who also attended the 1974 conference, was a relentless promoter of community services who served as the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges president from 1958 to 1981 (Vaughan, 1992; Vaughan, 1997). As a strong proponent of community services, Gleazer (1980) agreed with Myran's (1969) notion that colleges should be the connection that brings together the community. Gleazer (1980) further asserted that community colleges should be considered nexuses of community learning systems and are well-positioned to take on this role. In keeping with Myran, Gleazer readily accepted that the college could not take on such a monumental task alone. Both authors agreed that the college would only fulfill community needs through collaboration with other community organizations and citizens. Gleazer advanced the argument by articulating why colleges are well-placed catalysts for community change and provided examples of collaborative partnerships. Examples included (a) many community college learners are receiving their education concurrent with employment and engagement in extracurricular civic activities (e.g., unions, library boards, fine arts groups, voluntary association), (b) the abundance of adjunct faculty ("professor-practitioners" Gleazer, 1980, p.17) who teach and serve the community simultaneously, (c) vertical connections within the educational hierarchy, (d) the extensive horizontal relationships with other community agencies (Gleazer, 1980).

Building Communities

In 1988, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) published “Building Communities: A Vision on the Future of Community Colleges.” This report identified the need for community colleges to develop a cadre of people who are both scholars and citizens, individuals who are committed to building community both on and off-campus. Such a group was expected to unite people and initiate the cultural change necessary to combat growing distrust among various subpopulations in the community. The report reiterated the need addressed by earlier scholars for colleges to become strategic leaders that bring together multiple partners to address community change (AACC, 1988).

The 1990s were dominated by the war on terrorism and fighting in the Middle East, which shifted political leaders’ focus towards global issues (Harbour, 2014). Globalization dominated public policy and resulted in extensive federal funding for vocational and workforce training (e.g., Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 [later amended in 1998], the Workforce and Career Development Act of 1996, and the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) (Levin, 2001; Palmadessa, 2017). Community colleges shifted their attention to global competitiveness (Levin, 2001). New priorities drew college leaders away from community building and the latest concerns had them focused more on students as individuals.

The AACC reaffirmed the loss of focus on community dynamics and attention on economic development, access, and completion (AACC, 2012). The focus on individuals seemed to be effective. The United States entered 2020 with a strong economy, thriving institutes of higher education, record low unemployment rates, and a record-high stock market (Floyd, 2021). By March 2020, COVID-19 had swept across the globe, and

with little or no warning, the world was thrown into chaos. No country, no organization, no individual escaped the economic, psychological, and physical impact of COVID-19.

What we had known, relied on, and used to explain the past or to forecast the future seemed irrelevant, in some cases nonsensical. (Floyd, 2021, p.1)

The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread quarantines, social isolation, an unstable economy, and unprecedented educational disruptions in the United States (Oyebode et al., 2022). Oyebode et al. (2022) used social media analysis to document the struggles Americans faced and, in doing so, highlighted significant fractures in American society. The authors found people were stressed with high unemployment, a low supply of essential items, and challenging living conditions. These struggles were compounded by concerns about social distancing policies, controversy over precautionary measures, public protests, the spread of misinformation, and political issues (Oyebode et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic changed the rural higher education landscape, exacerbating the challenges of rural life (Klein, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first national crisis faced by Americans. The US economic and social environment mirrors the climate that preceded the great depression. The early decades of the twentieth century were driven by industrial growth and a shift from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy (Harbour, 2014). Scholars have documented the loss of the idealized rural community, which occurred as small communities were retrofitted into modern society (Plein, 2011). The rural to urban migration meant Americans lived physically close but often had little to no social or cultural interactions, which limited their outlook on life and reduced social capital (Harbour, 2014). Consequently, “a new modern individualism had taken hold and was distinguished by feelings of isolation, insecurity, and fear” (Harbour, 2014, p. 144).

American philosopher John Dewey argued that the best way to recover as a nation was to shift education towards a more problem-solving approach and develop a culture that thought critically about political and social problems (Dewey, 2018; Harbour, 2014). Dewey's recovery plan has been echoed by modern researchers, who have identified community connectivity as a central theme for beneficial recovery interventions (Oyebode et al., 2022). These interventions include more charity or grassroots efforts amongst communities, local distribution of homemade protective equipment (e.g., hand sanitizer and face masks), and public awareness campaigns (Oyebode et al., 2022).

Institutional Mission Statements and Democracy

The ultimate source of purpose for American public community colleges was the Truman Commission Report, which charged colleges with a focus on comprehensive programming, low cost, and a local focus (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947). This mission was further refined by state and regional community college systems and locally at the institutional level. Each college has a specific mission statement enacted through its normative vision.

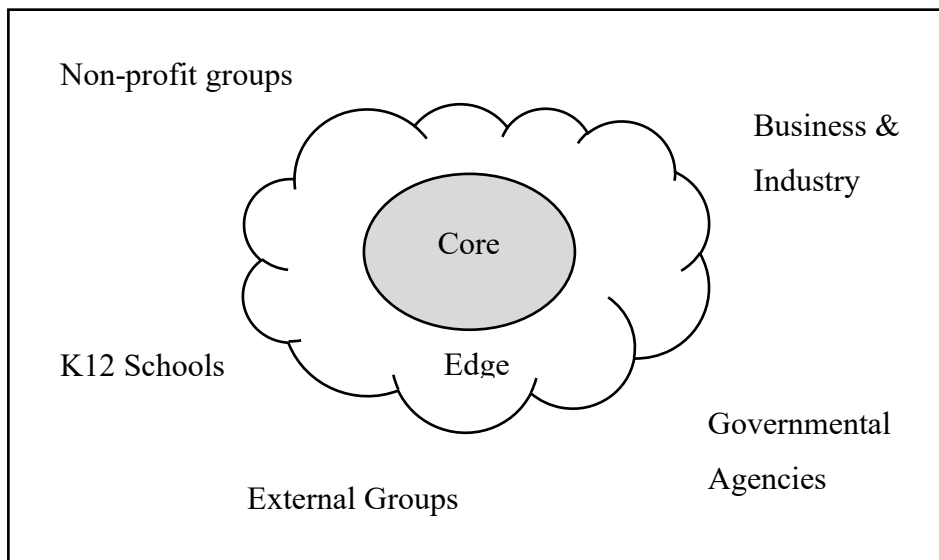
In North Carolina, the state legislature and the State Board of Community Colleges further refined the mission for their 58 public community colleges (Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, 2016). The North Carolina system utilized a shared course library and regulated college program offerings. It also functioned as the liaison between the state legislature and individual colleges, particularly for budgeting. Each college operated independently under a board of trustees, whose members were appointed by local and state bodies. This board directed the actions of a college president who oversaw institutional operations. Each institution's governing board adapted and specialized the state's mission decree to meet the community college's local needs, creating an institutional mission statement. This

mission statement used general terms to describe the educational role of the institution and is the authority used to guide the college's actions (Harbour, 2014). This process caused every community college to have a unique, locally defined mission statement that mirrors the local area's needs (Vaughan, 1988).

According to Boone (1992), a college mission statement can be viewed as having two parts – the core and the edge (see Figure 1). Most institutional activity focuses on the core of the college mission as determined by the aforementioned hierarchy. The nuances and uniqueness of the institution's mission are often found in the handling of the mission "edge" (Boone, 1992). The edge is the portion of the mission where the line between the community college operations intersects with society as well as other institutions, organizations, agencies (Boone, 1992). Edge activities help the college to be a catalyst and leader who works collaboratively with partners to address community issues (Boone, 1992). Depending on the type of issue, the college may elect to remain involved in a support role, while other groups take the lead on the project (Boone, 1992). Edge activity can be useful in the identification of areas for growth or improvement (which can be assimilated into the mission core), but it can also position the college as a key player and partner in the community (Boone, 1992). In addition, participation in edge activity helps colleges to stay abreast of the evolving social, economic, technological, and political environments that can change the local community's needs (Cohen et al., 2014; Vaughan, 1997).

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Community College Mission Relative to Other Community Leaders



Note. Adapted from Boone (1992) p. 38

Accrediting agencies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2017), require institutions to articulate and accomplish their mission. As such, it is an institutional best practice to review the mission statement regularly (Vaughan, 1997). In this way, the “mission statement can be seen not as a straightforward representation of organizational action but as a discursive negotiation of legitimacy within an evolving institutional environment” (Ayers, 2015, p. 196). If the college is to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of its external stakeholders, it must respond nimbly to current community needs and be prepared to anticipate and move slowly towards future needs (Myran, 1969). Colleges can accomplish this through a normative vision.

Normative Vision

The mission of a community college is an authoritative statement derived from internal and external entities to the college and its service region that serves as the guide for college operations. According to Ayers (2017) the mission statement functions as a public relations document, guides strategic planning and budgeting, and reflects the college's response to navigating a turbulent environment. The mission statement defines what the college *must* do, but it does not specify *how*. The college's normative vision articulates the priorities and values that direct college operations (Harbour, 2014), thereby putting the mission into practice. The normative vision is developed through formal and informal conversations where stakeholders discuss what the college should or should not do (Harbour, 2014). Should and should not are personal terms often defined differently by individuals, lending a lot of subjectivity to the normative vision. The normative vision for North Carolina community colleges is under the purview of the college president. The normative vision is not a designated entity. It is not always recorded, typically is not tracked with data, and it reflects those who are invited or allowed to participate in conversations about college operations. College leaders need to advocate for a shared vision that aligns closely with the local community's needs and is developed with community input. Doing so will support the college's purpose to serve its area, but it will also facilitate civic engagement and democratic objectives.

Full Participation

The concept of full participation is in keeping with the vision for community colleges described by Myran, Harlacher, and Gleazer decades earlier. College administrators have the option to hear the voices of internal and external stakeholders and fold them into discussions related to the institution's normative vision. Doing so would demonstrate the college's

commitment to the local community, facilitate the fulfillment of the community portion of its mission, and outline the college's "edge" activity. Inviting more participants would promote a Deweyan democracy amongst stakeholders and initiate the architecture necessary for full participation (Harbour, 2014; Strum et al., 2011). Strum et al. (2011) described full participation as the involvement of people from all communities associated with the institution, including those who live, work, or are otherwise affiliated with the area. The authors advocated that colleges are rooted in and accountable to these communities and, through full participation, could become "both *in* and *of* the community, participating in reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships between campus and community" (p. 4).

Deweyan Democracy and Group Dynamics

Other scholars have argued for higher education to adopt the ideals of full participation. One of the foremost proponents was John Dewey, an American philosopher, educator, scholar, and prolific early 20th-century writer (Peters & Jandrić, 2017). Dewey envisioned education as an essential democratic establishment that built civil society and citizenship (Dewey, 2018; Peters & Jandrić, 2017). Dewey believed "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience." (Dewey, 2018, p.93). Dewey thought that a system, where free interactions between people of different social groups, with a variety of perspectives, could come together to solve problems (Dewey, 2018; Harbour, 2014). Dewey felt success was facilitated when interactions included everyone affected, happened organically and was not driven by an external authority. "Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education" (Dewey, 2018, p.93). Dewey

advocated for and believed that education enabled people to address societal needs collaboratively (Dewey, 2018).

Dewey's democracy relied heavily on the creation and maintenance of social capital. Dewey's philosophy centered on the idea that knowledge arises from human experience, democracy is a social inquiry, and decisions should be made through discussion and debate (Peters & Jandrić, 2017). Nearly a century later, Dewey's insight remained relevant (Harbour, 2014). Harbour (2014) agreed with Dewey's views on education and democracy and furthered that 21st-century colleges should strive to become more community-focused. The author asserted that radical reconstruction of college services or curricula was unnecessary (Harbour, 2014). Matthews (2016) agreed with this philosophy and added that the identification of existing college programs is among the first steps to improving a college's democratic practices. Existing programs offer a natural starting point for garnering support for democratizing and integrating the college mission. Such initiatives are typically student, faculty, and staff-driven; therefore, they already have internal stakeholder buy-in and could be scaled up (Jones, 2016). Existing initiatives are typically not the response of an institutional requirement and instead represent campus community members' personal and professional interests (Mathews, 2016). Harbour (2014) indicated that colleges should perceive democratizing changes as an incremental process that helps people understand their community's challenges and then stimulates personal growth and collaboration to develop solutions.

There are many benefits associated with normative vision development through full participation. Full participation creates synergies that enhance postsecondary institutions' legitimacy, engagement, diversity, and robustness and is a critical attribute of successful public programs (Strum et al., 2011). Full participation also builds social capital as it increases the

interactions between community members. Such interactions would increase knowledge sharing and foster positive identity shifts in constituents, creating a stronger community (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

Social Capital

Capital refers to “stocks that have the capacity to produce flows of economically desirable outputs” (Goodwin, 2003). There are several types of capital, including financial (facilitated economic production), natural (natural resources and ecosystem services), produced (manufactured goods or services), human (an individual’s productive capabilities), and social (Goodwin, 2003).

Social capital is the capital of relationships, the idea that connections between groups of people (the stock) impact resource access amongst those who are a part of the group (the flow or resource exchange) (Lin, 2002). Such interactions create ties that build solidarity and trust among community members as well as confidence in institutions (Sawhill, 2020). Social capital is often used in reference to societal characteristics that facilitate collective action (Reimer et al., 2008) and has been described as “the glue that makes a society work” (Sawhill, 2020, p. 1). In this sense, social capital represents synergistic relationships that create something more significant than the sum of the individual parts (Coleman, 1990). Such relationships facilitate a situation where social structure and its actors reinforce each other (Lin, 2002). Reimer et al. (2008) note, “with each successful transaction, the existing social capital is reinforced and at the same time, used for productive ends” (p. 258). The authors indicated that social capital development is difficult to identify because of the close association between the asset itself and its creation. Consequently, there is a lack of clarity and distinction between the stock (networks, institutions) and flow (social participation and collective action) (Reimer et al., 2008).

Properties of Social Capital

Social capital has properties that distinguish it from other capital. This form of capital applies to communities in both the relational and geographic sense and is, therefore, an ecological rather than individual characteristic (Lochner et al., 1999). It is an attribute of an entity's social structure and not private property and represents resources available through social relationships (Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2002). Therefore, it has a value that cannot be exchanged (Coleman, 1990). Lin (2002) expanded on the uniqueness of social capital and claimed it facilitates information flow, creates social ties that can influence individuals who have a role in decision making, and provides individuals or organizations with social credentials (measured by their access to resources). In addition, social capital functions to reinforce the entity's mental health maintenance through emotional support and signifies their entitlement to resources. In other words, social capital has four elements that set it apart from other forms of capital (a) information, (b) influence, (c) social credentials, and (d) reinforcement (Lin, 2002).

Scholars widely agree essential components manifest social capital, including trust, mutual understanding, shared values (norms), and networks (Coleman, 1990; Goodwin, 2003; Makridis & Wu, 2021; Putnam, 1995; Reimer et al., 2008). Community traits, including strong local leadership, public-private partnerships, ties to a local institute of higher education, a centralized downtown, and an openness to outsiders, have all been identified as important drivers of community social capital (Fallows & Fallows, 2019). Interactions are powerful and are recognized for their ability to create emergent benefits to society. Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) contend that interactions, whether face-to-face or otherwise, are a precondition of social capital. The authors found a positive correlation between the frequency and intensity of social interaction

and the development of social capital. They also noted that the quality and quantity of interactions determined the extent to which social capital was created (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

Weaver's (2018) Framework on Bonding and Bridging Capital

There are two dimensions of social capital, each based on the players involved in the relationships. Bonding social capital consists of interactions within groups who have similar shared identity (e.g., social classes, race, religion) or who have a place-based collective identity (Flora et al., 2018; Weaver, 2018). This type of capital is common in small communities where everyone knows each other and may interact in a variety of settings or roles (e.g., at the local school ball game and at the grocery store) (Flora et al., 2018). Weaver (2018) found that in communities with high bonding capital “it is reasonably clear to all or most community members precisely who ‘belongs to’ their community, and who does not.” This created an environment where community member actions are constantly compared against local norms, which can be positive (e.g., strong reciprocation) and negative (e.g., sanctioning). (Weaver, 2018). Communities that have low bonding capital lack the capacity for change or may resist change (Flora et al., 2018). Bonding capital can be developed through events that bring together the community, particularly those that draw large crowds such as festivals that celebrate local culture (Weaver, 2018).

Bridging social capital consists of interactions between social groups that have different shared identity (e.g., social classes, race, religion) (Flora et al., 2018; Weaver, 2018). Such interactions can be horizontal, between people or groups from the same community context; or vertical, between people or groups of people who are in different levels of the community hierarchy (e.g., citizens and decision-making authorities) (Weaver, 2018). Bridging capital typically brings people together for a purpose and fosters an environment where a diversity

breeds idea generation (Flora et al., 2018). Communities that have low bridging capital tend to have predominantly vertical relationships with less trust, less communication, and more individualism (Flora et al., 2018).

Bonding and bridging connections are not mutually exclusive and can occur simultaneously. For example, a local festival may bring together people with a shared identity (e.g., all are a part of the same community), but may also function to create bridges between people with different individual identity (e.g., different religions) (Weaver, 2018). According to Flora et al. (2018), Bonding and bridging capital can reinforce each other. When both are low, individualism and community disorganization dominate. Community action is difficult because members tend to be apathetic towards their community. When both are high, effective community action can occur and community priorities are based on the common good (Flora et al., 2018).

Measuring Social Capital

There is no widely accepted best practice or definitive guide to measuring social capital (Lochner et al., 1999). Several factors complicate the analysis and measurement of social capital. For example, it is difficult to determine whether the elements of social capital were created through the relationship or were the product of the connection (Lee, 2018; Sawhill, 2020). In addition, there can be tension between the different elements of social capital, where social capital gains in one relationship can hinder development in another connection (Lee, 2018). The geographic scale of the variables can impact the contextual effects of social capital (Helliwell et al., 2017). These challenges, coupled with the construct's seemingly intangible and amorphous definition, make it challenging to compare empirical findings.

Relationships

The presence of social capital does not automatically equate to collective action. For social capital to work, people (or groups) must enter a coordinated relationship (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Weaver, 2018). Partnerships and collaborations are among the terms used to represent working relationships that manifest social capital through collective action. Interinstitutional partnerships have been classified into typologies based on the level of involvement between the parties as well as the investment of time (Kinsella-Meier & Gala, 2016; Sockett, 1997). These studies classified partnerships based on levels of involvement and time. Stronger partnerships were associated with increased levels of involvement, as defined by the amount of interdependency and time spent together. Time together promoted formation of shared goals, processes, and expectations, which facilitated increased interdependency (Kinsella-Meier & Gala, 2016).

The Centers for Disease Control (2011) expanded the classification of relationships. They noted a direct relationship, whereby partnership strength and community impact grew as levels of community involvement, trust, and communication increased. The authors indicated that successful relationships are built when all partners internalize the cultural dynamics of their own group as well as that of the other group. Reciprocal cultural understanding facilitates mutual respect and co-learning in a partnership, which builds the foundation for development of respect, trust, and, ultimately, relationships. Cultural understanding is particularly important when partners seek to have an impact on the community level, because of the diversity that exists between different entities that comprise the group (e.g., neighborhoods, community organization, religious groups). (Centers for Disease Control, 2011).

Impact of Social Capital

Considering the difficulties associated with interpreting, measuring, and analyzing social capital, one may ask whether it matters and whether it is worth trying to assess. Scholarly works have noted significant correlations between the construct and social outcomes, demonstrating its importance, validity, and worth. Researchers have documented the positive effects of social capital on individual and collective well-being (Helliwell et al., 2017; Sawhill, 2020). Helliwell et al. (2017) found “the quality of the social fabric can affect subjective well-being. Whether in the workplace, in the home, in the community, or among nations, tighter and more reliable social connections are linked to happiness” (p. 25). Sawhill (2020) also noted that relationships provide an intrinsic value for the individual. However, the author also found relationships delivered value to society at large through (a) being a resource for collective action, (b) the establishment and maintenance of social norms and values, and (c) the provision of networks of information. These relationships create ties, bringing people together in solidarity, thereby developing trust in others and institutions (Sawhill, 2020).

Helliwell et al. (2017) reiterated the importance of social capital as “a resource that can be tapped into collectively in times of need, supplementing or even standing in for more formal institutions” (p. 11). In short, interactions between members of society have an intrinsic value for the individual (e.g., creates feelings of connection and belonging), but they also provide a venue for social capital development, which can be a resource for the collective good, behavioral norms, and solidarity during times of crisis (Sawhill, 2020).

Social capital has also been associated with more macro scale community benefits and is considered “one of the most important characteristics of growth and development of any society” (Tonkaboni et al., 2013, p. 47). Tonkaboni et al. (2013) recognized the central role of

social capital in economic, social, cultural, and political functions. The construct is also associated with more effective government (Putnam, 1995). Lower levels of social capital have been associated with higher delinquency, higher rates of violent crime and were “strikingly correlated with age-adjusted all-cause mortality rates” (Lochner et al., 1999, p.260). Goodwin (2003) recognized an association between social capital variability and differences in economic development on both local and larger scales. While Makridis & Wu (2021) noted that a calm, peaceful, collective response and favorable rebound from outbreaks and national emergencies were associated with high levels of social capital. This finding correlates well with earlier findings that communities with high levels of social capital recover more quickly from natural disasters (Helliwell et al., 2017). The research findings mentioned earlier support the notion that increased social capital is associated with a favorable standard of living.

Changes in Social Capital

Scholars have recorded declines in the everyday interactions that lead to social capital within local communities (Lee, 2018; Putnam, 1995; Sawhill, 2020). Such loss has left communities less equipped to cooperatively solve community problems (Lee, 2018). Sawhill (2020) reported declines in interactions between neighbors in a community, considerable drops in religious attendance, and reduced participation in social organizations (e.g., fraternal groups, labor unions, political groups) (Sawhill, 2020). A variety of factors attributed to these reductions, including “time squeeze,” advances in home entertainment, web service expansion (e.g., shopping, streaming), movement of women into the labor force, increased movement and resettling of people, and an overall emphasis on personal performance (Putnam, 1995; Sawhill, 2020).

Social Capital and Higher Education

Higher education has been recognized as a noteworthy producer of social capital. Tonkaboni et al. (2013) discussed the connection between higher education, human capital development, and socialization. Academic socialization positively affects social capital by developing trust, links, networks, and the transfer of academia's norms, values, and culture. Postsecondary institutions create new social connections and opportunities for students. They build networks between students and faculty and strengthen intergroup capital amongst students (Tonkaboni et al., 2013).

Scholars have studied the relationship between social capital and college access (Crawley et al., 2019; Simmons, 2011), data-driven community college reform (Kerrigan, 2015), academic motivation (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015), and service-learning (Dahan, 2020). These studies represent an analysis of intrinsic value at an individual level and not society at large. Consequently, there is an underrepresentation of community social capital in the extant higher education literature, particularly as it relates to community colleges.

Social Capital Development

There are various ways in which social capital can be developed that have been explored in extant higher education literature. Community engagement and community-based programming are two examples. Unlike social capital, which refers to a collection of relationships (Lin, 2002), these two terms represent strategies that promote relationship building (Boone, 1997; Hutson et al., 2019). They are processes instead of outcomes.

Community Engagement

Community engagement (sometimes called community development) describes various programs and activities that foster relationships between higher education and communities

(Hutson et al., 2019). Community engagement is an umbrella term that describes a collection of best practices for community work (Hutson et al., 2019). Other researchers have extended the concept and defined a community as a group with shared interests instead of a geographic region (Furco & Miller, 2009). The flexibility afforded by the breadth of the descriptor has enabled institutions to align the community engagement strategy with a variety of institutional priorities. The term has been widely used in the literature to discuss relationship building between communities and universities (Cunningham & Smith, 2020, Hutson et al., 2019; Sgoutas-Emch et al., 2021), as well as between communities and health centers (Ahmed et al., 2017; Centers for Disease Control, 2011). The construct has become increasingly popular in the last two decades as universities responded to the call to strengthen the town-gown relationship and reaffirm their public purpose (Cunningham & Smith, 2020; Sgoutas-Emch et al., 2021). Klein (2022) noted the importance of public education working in tandem with communities, however, the author did not identify best practices for these interactions. Scholars, including Williams (2002), cited institutes of higher education as a major component of community development, yet, to date, there is a lack of scholarly articles on community colleges and community engagement in the extant literature.

Community-based Programming. The second method of social capital development explored in the literature is community-based programming. Boone (1992) was a profound advocate for the community building function of colleges. He believed that community colleges were the ideal organization to bring together the skills and expertise of people within the community, with the goal of creating a measurable impact on local issues (Boone, 1992). The author hypothesized that colleges were unable to fulfill this role without a more conceptual

approach to address and resolve broad social issues (Boone, 1997). To fulfill this niche, Boone developed the community-based programming strategy.

Community-based programming is a cooperative process that involves a series... of processual tasks in which the community college serves as the leader and catalyst in effecting collaboration among the people, their leaders, and other community-based organizations and agencies within its service area in identifying and seeking resolution to major issues that are of critical concern to the community and its people. (Boone, 1992, p.10)

Boone's series of processual tasks articulated a strategy designed to help colleges become a community catalyst that stimulates and sustains teamwork among local organizations and addresses complex issues that have a negative impact on the community (Boone, 1992). Unlike community engagement, this approach is more community college-specific but is nearly absent from the scholarly publications of the last twenty years.

Rural Communities

The term rural often evokes images of a small, pastoral, and isolated area with a relatively homogenous culture, a strong sense of local identity, and an economy primarily based on natural resources (Flora et al., 2018). Rural areas have been idealized and romanticized as model communities that are self-sufficient, friendly, and civically engaged (Plein, 2011). This has led many Americans to embrace a generalized and stereotypical American pop culture depiction of rural areas rather than the actual image, which has been determined through empirical study (Plein, 2011). According to Flora et al. (2018), this is an outdated perception as globalization, technology, and changes to income distributions have led to lifestyle changes that reduced rural isolation and increased the diversity of rural areas. Improved transportation has

enabled some individuals to commute to nearby towns for work and easily travel to small cities and metropolitan areas for goods and services (Flora et al., 2018). For some, the “lack of resources, or a lack of ability to access resources or amenities easily” is a contributing factor for defining rural (Reed, 2019, p. 95). Flora et al. (2018) also noted that communication technologies, such as satellite television and the internet, enabled rural citizens to connect with others and explore the world. Globalization and conflicts in other parts of the world have made rural areas attractive destinations for resettling refugees and migrants. Such moves have increased some American rural areas' religious and racial heterogeneity (Flora et al., 2018).

The concept of community is a social construction that has been difficult to define (Plein, 2011). For some, community refers to a location where people interact, and others use the term to refer to the organizations that enable a group to meet their needs, while sociologists have used it to describe a group of people with a shared sense of identity (Flora et al., 2018). The concept of community has also included the identity of the occupants and the behavioral expectations of the actors (Plein, 2011).

Rural communities are somewhat unique and have distinct social elements. Bushy (2000) found that residents typically know each other and frequently are related. The familiarity of inhabitants often leads to increased informal interactions and has made anonymity difficult, especially for outsiders. Informal interactions often occurred at churches and schools, including colleges (Bushy, 2000). Reed (2019) also noted the importance of personal connections, trust, and relationship building, which became a central component of research participants' responses when asked to define a rural community. One participant is quoted “I think about friendliness. People that – kind of like you know everyone or if you don’t know everyone, you are one or two people away from being connected with pretty much everyone.” (Reed, 2019, p.71). Such social

interconnectedness has been shown to create a ripple effect that provided rural colleges with the ability to impact the entire community when new programs were begun (Miller & Kissinger, 2007).

Rural Community Colleges and Their Communities

Community colleges have a history of meeting local educational needs, supporting workforce and economic development, and promoting civic engagement activities (Jones, 2016; Mathews, 2016; Miller & Kissinger, 2007). One of the hallmarks of community colleges is their open-door philosophy, which is best characterized as a

philosophy of total education; a belief in the incomparable worth of all human beings, whose claims upon the state are equal before the law and equal before the bar of public opinion; whose talents (however great or however limited or however different from the traditional) the state needs and must develop to the fullest possible degree. (Herring, 1966, para 1)

Later in the same speech, Herring summed up the primary mission of the community college as an entity that will “take people from where they are and carry them as far as they can go” (Herring, 1966, para 2). This democratizing mindset purported to equal treatment of students with similar needs regardless of their age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, educational attainment, or other variables (Romano & Palmer, 2016). The open-door philosophy considerably increases access to postsecondary education, particularly among individuals who face multiple barriers to postsecondary success (Bailey et al., 2005; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

Historically, community colleges have enrolled higher numbers of women, people of color, low socioeconomic, and older students than their four-year counterparts, thereby

contributing to social mobility within these at-risk populations (Cohen et al., 2014; Dougherty et al., 2017). This can be particularly important in rural areas, where generational poverty remains a significant challenge (Williams & Nourie-Manuele, 2018). The diversity of needs created by the breadth of community college stakeholders necessitates an extensive array of community college programs if the college meets all constituents' needs.

Diversity of Rural College Programs

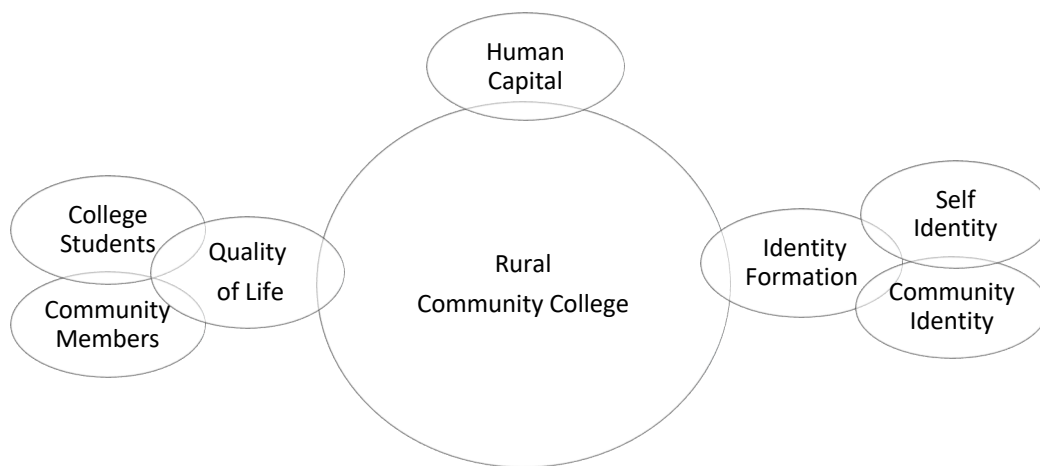
Community colleges are widely recognized for their conferral of curriculum certificates, diplomas, and Associate's-level degrees. Colleges offer these credentials through vocational and general education and transferrable courses. In addition to postsecondary degree programs, these institutions offer extensive occupational and short-term training, developmental coursework (including General Educational Development (GED) and Adult Basic Education credentials), academic and career counseling, as well as lifelong learning and recreational programs (Dougherty et al., 2017; Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Community colleges are more than a purveyor of scholarship; they also have an understated impact on the communities they serve (Miller & Deggs, 2012); Williams, 2013). Rural community colleges often serve as cultural and community hubs (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Miller & Kissinger, 2007), architects of identity and quality of life (Miller & Deggs, 2012; Miller & Tuttle, 2006; Reed, 2019), engines of economic development (Nickoli, 2013), job placement mediators (Nickoli, 2013), and small business development catalysts (Small Business Center Network, n.d.). Rural community colleges, in particular, strive to be all things to all people; a lofty goal that is essential to the fulfillment of their mission (Cavan, 1995; Williams, 2013).

Spillover Effects of the Rural Community College

In addition to their role in rural education, community colleges have had a documented impact on human capital development, identity formation (including both self-identity and community identity), and quality of life (see figure 2). Many rural institutions are deeply embedded in their community (Cavan, 1995) and have historically played a vital role in economic development and forming their community's identity (Miller & Deggs, 2012). Scholars, including Deggs & Miller (2011a, 2011b), Miller and Tuttle (2007), Reed (2019), Schudde & Goldrick-Rab (2015), and Siegfried et al. (2007), have studied the role of community colleges in creating spillover effects; however, there is a scarcity of literature related to community colleges and social capital development. The following sections will explore some of the documented impacts of rural community colleges on their service areas.

Figure 2

Empirically Derived Relationships between Rural Community Colleges and Their Service Areas



Human Capital

Colleges indirectly impact human capital by increasing the overall education attainment level of the region (Siegfried et al., 2007). Colleges have done this through the conferral of degrees and by employing individuals with high levels of education (Deggs & Miller, 2011a). Such individuals often live in the community and interact informally with its citizenry, thereby increasing their exposure to an educated workforce and facilitating the development of a community that values educational attainment and desires lifelong learning (Deggs & Miller, 2011a).

Educational attainment correlates with improved economic status through increased occupational status, higher wages, and protection from unemployment (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015; Torche, 2011). Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah (2009) found conclusive evidence to support postsecondary education benefits. The authors note that although degree completion confers the greatest advantage, any postsecondary education provides an economic benefit. Belfield and Bailey (2011) reiterated these findings and added that annual earnings increase with college credits completed. The authors found that even without credential completion:

- individuals who completed one semester of college earned up to 7 percent more per year than a high school graduate,
- one year of college increased annual earnings by up to 9 percent more,
- three semesters of college increased annual earnings up to 17 percent more per year, and
- two or more years increased annual earnings up to 25 percent more per year (Belfield & Bailey, 2011).

Marcotte (2019) noted that by age 26, the employment rate of an individual with some college was six percent higher, with average annual earnings of \$3,500 more, relative to peers who only

had a high-school education. Increased lifetime earnings contribute significantly to social mobility. These findings support community colleges' ability to increase the social mobility of all students, regardless of degree completion. They also indicate that community colleges play an intricate role in developing local human capital.

Jobs in rural communities tend to pay less than their urban and suburban counterparts (Katsinas, 2007; United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2017), which can lead to a "brain drain" as educated individuals out-migrate to more populous areas (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). In addition to the resources offered by the local community college (e.g., educational credentials, job placement assistance, industry training, etc.), strong community connections can help retain skilled workers locally. The presence of a robust skilled workforce is key to local economic development through the recruitment, retention, and growth of local industries (Crookston & Hooks, 2012).

Quality of Life

Quality of life is a subjective term that depends on an individual's needs, desires, and experiences (Reed, 2019). Using a focus group-based methodology, Reed (2019) found that individuals measure the quality of life based on the fulfillment of needs, safety, and opportunity. Though difficult to measure, education has been associated with reductions in crime, improved health, and increased civic responsibility (Siegfried et al., 2007). The literature scarcely covers this topic, especially for community colleges (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Using a literature review method, Belfield and Bailey (2011) found a robust linear association between years of education, health status, and healthy behaviors. The authors also noted that education could impact future generations as college-educated mothers tend to encourage healthy habits in their children. Such information implies that the benefits of a college education extend to beyond those educated at

the college and have the potential to have a lasting impact on the family line (Belfield & Bailey, 2011).

Quality of life in a rural area is also impacted by a community's friendliness, natural environment, and accessibility to the opportunities found in more populated areas (Reed, 2019; Thomas 2013). A community college has a limited impact on the natural environment; however, the college can affect the social environment, including facilitating the formation of personal connections and relationships that increase community friendliness and accessibility to education, recreation, culture, and opportunities (Reed, 2019). Miller and Tuttle (2007) found that colleges with significant community involvement positively impacted community members' quality of life and desire to maintain a home in the area. Colleges can indirectly affect the accessibility of an area through an increased tax base as well as through business and industry recruitment and expansion. Such changes would eventually bring improved roads and infrastructure.

Identity Formation

Identity is a measure of how individuals make sense of who they are relative to the world around them and impacts (a) occupational choice, (b) personal relationships, (c) community involvement, and (d) value formation (Miller & Tuttle, 2006). Empirical research has documented community colleges' impact on identity formation at the self and community levels.

Self-Identity. Deggs and Miller (2009) created a model that outlines the impact of home life as well as community institutions (such as schools, churches, civic agencies, friendships, or other informal relationships) on an individual's life choices and behavior. Later, in 2011, the authors found that home life and community institutions act collectively and significantly impact social norms, including how individuals behaved and what they valued (Deggs & Miller, 2011b).

Community organizations, such as colleges, “help individuals begin to identify value in learning, diversity, and employment” (Deggs & Miller, 2011a, p.25). In doing so, community organizations, including colleges, directly influence individual growth and identity formation (Miller & Deggs, 2012).

Miller and Tuttle (2006) conducted interviews with 79 individuals to explore the ways rural mid-south community colleges influenced identity development. Research participants noted the college gave the area “a very cultured feel with lots of different ideas and opinions” (p.61). Participants appreciated that the college brought diverse individuals to the area as these “outsiders” shaped their views and attitudes. Civic leaders remarked that exposure to diversity created employees who were better prepared to work with dissimilar groups of people and ideas (Miller & Tuttle, 2006).

Frequent early interactions with the college facilities, faculty, and staff have been shown to impact individuals’ perceptions of the college and led to a greater appreciation of higher education (Miller & Tuttle, 2006). One participant in Miller and Tuttle’s 2006 study was quoted as saying:

You know, I went over there a lot. I hung out at the library for homework or just to hang out, to look for guys, or whatever. But I was over there so much as a kid that I didn’t think twice about going to college over there. I don’t think I would have ever considered it otherwise, and my parents weren’t too thrilled about me still going to school. I don’t think that they discouraged me from going to college, but they certainly weren’t excited about it. They wanted me to get a job. But, I was so comfortable on campus, I ended up in college there and that led me to transfer to [another university]. You could say that those early trips to the college changed my life. (p. 63)

This research participant illustrates the importance of frequent interactions between community members and the college and the unintentional influence on their life choices. In this instance, a student was recruited to the college and became a scholar primarily because the college campus was inviting to nonstudents and provided a safe space for community members to congregate.

Community Identity. Community colleges provide resources and opportunities (educational and social) that have made them an integral part of community success (Miller & Tuttle, 2006). As a result, colleges have been shown to improve a community's self-perception (Miller & Tuttle, 2006). Miller and Tuttle (2007) documented the role of community colleges on the community identity of the areas they serve. Using a grounded theory approach, the researchers identified four primary themes that describe how rural community colleges affect the social dynamics of their communities: inclusiveness, pride, value-add, and town definition.

Colleges have been recognized as politically neutral organizations that are committed to serving all people (Boone, 1992). In this role, colleges provided a nurturing environment where all members of the community have gathered to openly discuss matters of public concern, which enabled the community to build "a visionary social, political, and economic architecture upon the key values of the broad-based citizenry" (Boone, 1992, p.19). This role has boosted colleges' roles as community leaders, and colleges have become an important gathering place for civic and municipal activities. A 2001 survey of community colleges across the country revealed the breadth of community facility usage, whereby 96 % of responding colleges provided meeting rooms, 80 % invited the public to use the campus library, and 78 % made the auditorium available for public use (Phinney et al., 2002). Miller and Tuttle (2007) found that many groups relied on college facilities, including users needing space for dance classes, political party meetings, church services, and wedding receptions. Through the myriad of extracurricular uses,

the colleges became established as focal points for nearly all stakeholders, making it difficult for citizens to avoid visiting campus often. This visibility fostered civic pride, whereby locals were boastful about their college and the accomplishments of its students.

Miller and Tuttle (2007) found colleges were at the center of community self-esteem development. In effect, the college was able to embed itself into various social circles that demonstrate the value of educational culture and its value to stakeholders (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Many participants referred to the area as a “college town,” indicating the significance of the college’s presence to the region’s identity (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). When external constituents integrate the college into the local identity, it is evident that they have bonded with the institution and are likely to have great pride in its contribution to the community (Leist, 2007). Thomas (2013) found that colleges that appeal to a diversity of local individuals evolve to become “a gem in the crown of the community” (Thomas, 2007, p. 92). Many of the individuals interviewed by Miller and Tuttle (2007) and Thomas (2013) indicated their local colleges were so intertwined with the town that there was little distinction between the two entities.

Community College Funding

Community college funding challenges have amplified the disconnect between college’s workforce and civic goals (Jones, 2016). The societal view of community colleges as an institution that improves student lives and the greater public has weakened because of this disconnect (Mathews, 2016). Colleges need to deepen the discussion to highlight their combined workforce and civic mission (Jones, 2016); and align their work with the work of citizens and communities to reestablish their public mandate (Mathews, 2016). It is imperative that the breadth of actors involved includes a mix of both internal and external stakeholders, crossing academic and civic boundaries (Jones, 2016). Only then can the college successfully support

local democracy and reestablish a more deliberate, self-sustaining college climate that integrates civic and workforce goals (Mathews, 2016).

There is a strong need to understand colleges' comprehensive impact on their community, yet the information can be challenging to measure and report (Thomas, 2013). The macro-level contributions of community colleges are absent from state-level reporting and tracking. Consequently, college outcomes are reported in terms of enrollment and student success, the factors that drive state-level funding in North Carolina (Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, 2016).

North Carolina community college budget allocations and FTE have dropped considerably over the last decade (Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, 2016; North Carolina Community Colleges, n.d.). To counter prevailing funding trends, college leaders will need to articulate their school's entire value, both instructional and noninstructional. Knowledge of community college impact will be critical for stakeholders to advocate for increased funding effectively. An understanding of the public benefit of community colleges is crucial in rural areas, where institutions have been shown to enhance community development, quality of life, and identity development (Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Reed, 2019; Thomas, 2013). The lack of data inhibits institutions from accurately assessing and representing their roles as community builders and social developers.

Conclusion

This chapter described the historical roots of community college missions and their role as community developers. The chapter explained social capital, which will serve as the theoretical framework for my present research. Finally, it provided an overview of extant

literature related to community colleges' contributions to rural communities, especially as it relates to human capital development, quality of life, and identity formation.

Community colleges are well suited to addressing citizen concerns and widespread community problems due to physical location and intimate relationships with local people, culture, and civic initiatives (Boone, 1992; Mathews, 2016). In doing so, colleges would help develop community social capital. If college leaders were to leverage the interests of internal stakeholders with that of external stakeholders, they could foster collaborations. These strategic alliances will bolster social capital and are essential for improving the college's democratic value (Mathews, 2016) and addressing barriers such as funding (Jones, 2016).

Extant research supports the idea that community colleges can develop local social capital through collaboration. Local social capital development is anticipated to be increasingly important as the United States responds to the COVID-19 pandemic as previous scholars have identified community connectivity as a central theme for beneficial recovery interventions (Oyebode et al., 2022). Previous studies have focused on the impact of rural community colleges on human capital development, quality of life, and identity formation (Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Reed, 2019; Thomas, 2013). Each of these benefits is peripherally associated with social capital theory; however, there is a need for more research on the role of community colleges in social capital development. The present study seeks to fill this void and assess how rural North Carolina community colleges function as community conveners. It will also address community perceptions of their college's effectiveness in this role. This information will be necessary if colleges want to advocate and receive funding for their community's extensive value outside of the classroom.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology used for a study that sought to clarify rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and local leaders' perceptions of such programs. The multiple case study approach facilitated a deeper understanding of how two rural North Carolina community colleges promote community social capital development in their service regions. The study adds to the body of knowledge demonstrating the macro-level contributions of community colleges, which are absent from state-level reporting and tracking. This chapter outlines the research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques; then concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and limitations.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to better understand rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. My research was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do rural community colleges promote community social capital development?
2. How do community partners perceive the college's role and effectiveness as a community partner in social capital development?
3. How do institutional leaders perceive the college's role and effectiveness as a community partner in social capital development?

I addressed RQ1 through interviews with community college administrators and college-affiliated community members at both Eastern Community College and Western Community College. Appendix A indicates which protocol questions align with each research question.

Interviews were conducted with each college president and their designated community relations liaison and with at least one member of each board of trustees and each foundation board of the respective institutions (see Appendices B and C) . Additional interviews were held with key participants at each institution based on their level of community engagement. I also used focus groups to collect data from each institution (see Appendices D and E). Two focus groups were held at each college to collect data from middle-level administrators (e.g., deans, department chairs, directors). Two additional focus groups were held with other community members who were college affiliated (e.g., program partners). This resulted in at least four interviews and four focus groups for each institution. Interview and focus group data were triangulated with document analysis of electronic documents including websites, local news sources, press releases, social media posts, and meeting minutes.

RQs 2 and 3 were addressed through interviews and focus groups (see Appendices A-E). Data collection for research question two included interviews with at least one member of each college's board of trustees and at least one member of each college's foundation board. The second research question is also supported by data collected during a community member focus group. Research question three was addressed through interviews with each college president and their designated community relations liaison. Additional support was obtained through focus groups with middle-level administrators (e.g., deans, department chairs, directors). Document analysis assisted in knowledge building, supported the refinement of interview and focus group participant selection, and facilitated protocol development. Although not explicitly identified in Appendix A, document analysis was a valuable source of information for each of the three RQs.

Methodology

This study utilized a multiple case study methodology and a social constructivist research paradigm. Two community colleges within the North Carolina system were selected using defined boundaries. Study participants were selected from each location using purposive criterion sampling, then interviewed either individually or as part of a focus group. Data analysis included two cycles of coding using both deductive (descriptive) and inductive (pattern) methods. This approach supported the exploration of the following research questions: How are rural North Carolina community colleges developing community social capital, and what are local leaders' perceptions of such activities?

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach and multiple case study methodology. According to Stake (1995), while "quantitative researchers have pressed for explanation and control; qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists" (p.37). Qualitative research focuses on the holistic treatment of phenomena through a diverse set of contexts (e.g., cultural, political, personal, and historical) (Stake, 1995). My research conformed to the qualitative tradition and explored the factors associated with community college social capital development. I focused on the meaning of social capital from the participants' perspective and use data collected within the participants' natural environment (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because I conducted exploratory research to address questions related to processes instead of outcomes (Hays & Singh, 2011). An inductive and recursive research design enabled me to synthesize data from multiple sources (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and public information) into patterns and themes that accurately reflect the participants' perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Consistent with a relativist case study approach, this study is grounded in a social-constructivist research paradigm (Yin, 2017). Social constructivists recognize that each person's individual development and social structures create a subjective meaning for their experiences (Grundmann, 2018). The social constructivist approach allowed me to elicit and refine patterns from general information and data collected while interacting with participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In keeping with this tradition, I made sense of how participants' historical, personal, and cultural interactions have shaped their realities through the use of broad, open-ended questions and follow-up probes (Creswell, 2014). Using a social constructivist stance supported the investigation of the research questions by enabling the collection of general information before inductively developing a theory or identifying a pattern of meaning (Creswell, 2014). This process allowed me to effectively describe rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and local leaders' perceptions of such programs.

Yin (1981) indicated that case studies are suitable for research with unclear boundaries between phenomenon and context. Yin (2017) suggested a case study when (a) addressing research questions that seek to provide an in-depth explanation of the way a social phenomenon works, (b) the researcher does not control participant behavior, and (c) the circumstance under study is contemporary. My research met all of these criteria as it (a) sought to answer questions that address "how" or "why," (b) did not manipulate participant behavior, and (c) focused on a modern period. The case study is a research strategy that enables a scholar to intensively study a contemporary unit or system bounded by space and time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2017). One strength of this methodology is the ability to explore a context-dependent phenomenon when there are variables of interest that are "an order of magnitude greater than the number of data points (i.e., the number of cases)" (Yin, 1981, p.98). The present research's social

constructivist roots, coupled with the triangulation of multiple data sources, present a considerable number of variables, further justifying using a case study design.

Using case study methodology, I triangulated the data from multiple sources of evidence to develop converging links of inquiry, thereby increasing the study's construct validity (Yin, 2017). The rich descriptions elicited from an in-depth examination of the phenomenon enabled me to find commonalities and infer themes from various data sources, making case study methodology the best method for my study.

Role of the Researcher

The nature of my role as the primary data collection instrument necessitates becoming a part of the study (Creswell, 2014). I am a white, middle-class, cisgender, straight, non-disabled female that has lived in a rural, small-town environment her entire life. I am a first-generation traditional college student, and I have worked within the North Carolina Community College System for over 17 years. My first nine years of service were spent working within various instructional and administrative roles at rural community colleges. In this role, I worked directly with students. I learned the struggles faced by others in rural areas and was exposed to the breadth of microcosms and nuances of small town life. This was important in my growth as a scholar because the rural community I was raised in was in a northern state and had different cultural dynamics from the southern community where I worked (and now live).

I spent six years working in a system office role serving all 58 colleges in North Carolina. In this capacity, my role was to develop activities and events to assist community colleges with outreach. My team sought to create hands-on activities that exposed young adults to the variety of careers available through their local community college. We trained community college employees on the different activities, and facilitated the events. This program enabled colleges to

bring community members on campus and expose them to the college without the burden of activity development and event planning. I have not been employed by either community college in the case study; however, I have supported outreach efforts at both institutions. This support took place more than three years before the time delineated by the case bounds.

My last few years of community college service have been spent as the senior administrator on a small satellite campus of a rural North Carolina community college. In this position, I oversee campus operations, including instruction, student services, facilities, information technology, library services, tutoring, and external partnerships. I represent the college on several external committees and routinely engage with internal and external executive leaders.

I have extensive training in research design and have been trained in research methodologies and data collection. I have conducted numerous interviews as part of hiring committees and have practiced this data collection method informally as part of doctoral coursework. In keeping with a social constructivist paradigm, my experiences as a community college practitioner and scholar impacted this research. My expertise facilitated relationship development with participants and enabled me to facilitate participant discussions that extracted detailed descriptions.

Case Study Bounds

The unit of analysis, or case for this study, were individual colleges within the North Carolina community college system. Two rural community colleges, one in the eastern region and one in the state's western area were matched based on comparable student enrollment (headcount of 2,000-3,000 students with 25-30% dual high school enrollment) and nearly identical number of employees (200 each) (NC Community Colleges, n.d.). These two colleges

(cases) were selected to clarify or deepen my understanding of the role of community colleges in social capital development while enhancing the knowledge of the phenomenon gathered through past empirical research (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). My research focused on documents (including digital content), interviews, and focus groups to gain an understanding of the college as an entity that impacts community social capital development. Cases were bound by time (the July 2021-June 2022) and their designation as rural colleges within the North Carolina Community College System. Document analysis and conversations with stakeholders provided me a heightened understanding of the case colleges and what they have done to develop community social capital.

Eastern Community College Demographics

Eastern Community College has a service area that has been designated as most distressed by the NC Department of Commerce (2021). The college's campus is not within the geographic bounds of the largest town, nor is it centrally located within the service area. Table 1 shows the demographic information for Eastern Community College. The data presented represents the average of the college service area and surrounding counties as reported by the United States Census Bureau (n.d.). Eastern Community College's service area is approximately 900 square miles, has less than 50,000 people, and has a density of 60 people per square mile. This population density is significantly lower than the threshold of 250 people per square mile, which is the metric used to determine rurality (North Carolina Rural Center, n.d.). The area around Eastern Community College has a population that is 54% White, 30% Black or African American, 14% Hispanic or Latino, and 3% American Indian or Alaska Native. Nearly 14% of the residents speak a language other than English at home (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

Table 1 shows that, according to the United States Census Bureau (n.d.), educational attainment in the area of Eastern Community College is 6.8 percentage points lower than the NC

average, and there are significantly fewer Bachelor's degree holders relative to the state average (15% vs. 32%). The area has nearly double the poverty rate of the state (20.6% vs. 12.9%), the average annual per capita household income is significantly (\$9,000) less than the state average, and almost half of the civilian workforce over age 16 are unemployed.

Table 1

Demographic Information for the State of North Carolina and the areas served by Eastern Community College and Western Community College

| | College | | State of NC |
|--|----------|----------|-------------|
| | Eastern | Western | |
| Land area in square miles, 2010 | 893 | 449 | 48,618 |
| Population, Census, April 1, 2020 | 46,995 | 47,610 | 10,439,388 |
| Population per square mile, 2010 | 60 | 104 | 196 |
| High school graduate or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+ | 81.7% | 87.4% | 88.5% |
| Bachelor's degree or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+ | 15.0% | 24.5% | 32% |
| Persons under 18 years | 29.0% | 23.3% | 27.7% |
| Persons 65 years and over | 20.3% | 25.0% | 16.7% |
| Black or African American | 29.2% | 4.9% | 22.2% |
| American Indian and Alaska Native | 3.0% | 0.6% | 1.6% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 14.3% | 5.4% | 22.2% |
| White, not Hispanic or Latino | 53.8% | 87.5% | 62.6% |
| Language other than English spoken at home | 13.7% | 5.9% | 11.8% |
| Total population age 16 years+ in the civilian labor force | 52.8% | 54.2% | 61.2% |
| Per capita income in past 12 months (in 2020 dollars) | \$22,956 | \$28,101 | \$31,993 |

Table 1 (continued).

| | | | |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Persons in poverty | 20.6% | 15.0% | 12.9% |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|

Note. These data are from U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts (n.d.). This table contains information derived by averaging the statistics for the counties served by my research sites and surrounding areas.

Western Community College Demographics

Western Community College is centrally located in the service area and the college's main campus is within the boundaries of the largest city in the area. Western Community College serves a region that has been designated as moderately distressed by the NC Department of Commerce (2021). As shown in Table 1, the United States Census Bureau (n.d.) reports that Western Community College is about half the size of Eastern, with a population density of 104 people per square mile. This density is significantly below the threshold of 250 people per square mile used to define rural (North Carolina Rural Center, n.d.). The residents of this area are more educated than those near Eastern Community college. However, they are still below the state averages for high school and baccalaureate graduates. Western Community College serves an area with a percentage of individuals over 65 that exceeds the state and Eastern Community College averages. The population is also drastically less diverse, with over 94% of households speaking English at home and 87% of the population identifying as White, not Hispanic or Latino. Poverty levels in the area served by Western Community College are consistent with the rest of North Carolina (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

Participant Sampling

I selected participants for each case through predetermined criteria and purposive criterion sampling. Purposive criterion is a nonprobability sampling method commonly used in

research (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). This study analyzed community college social capital development through the lens of internal and external college stakeholders. The same process was used to sample participants at both case institutions. Internal college stakeholders included individuals employed by the college, including the president, public relations officer, and mid-level administrators. External stakeholders consisted of individuals who are not employed by the college but have a robust understanding of the college's community involvement. This group included members of the board of trustees, foundation board, and representatives from organizations who regularly partner with the college (as identified through document analysis).

Purposive sampling for mid level administrators and external stakeholders was informed by document analysis. Individual invitations were prioritized based on the frequency of the persons mention in documents (such as social media posts and meeting minutes) and recorded meeting attendance. This approach enabled me to prioritize individuals who have had the most college engagement and, therefore were expected to be more knowledgeable than others who have been less involved.

Data Collection Procedures

Technically, my case study data collection began when I became acquainted with each case (Stakes, 1995). The present study included data collected through a series of document analyses, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Document analysis was used to analyze college involvement in social development as evidenced on the digital sources such as websites, local news sources, press releases, social media posts, and meeting minutes. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were the data collection methods of choice because they are effective ways to collect others' descriptions and interpretations (Stakes, 1995). Documents for analysis were the first data I collected. Documents were collected throughout the study period.

Internal interviews and focus groups were scheduled before external and both were scheduled based on participant availability. The selected procedures provided me with a sense of the multiple realities associated with the research phenomenon (Stakes, 1995), which lead to a better description of the role of rural community colleges in social capital development.

Document analysis

Documents analyzed included electronic documents such as websites, local news sources, press releases, social media posts, meeting minutes, and other statements from the colleges. Data collected from social media posts included those generated by the college and those where the college is tagged. I gathered screenshots of public posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that highlighted relationships with external organizations for analysis. Posts related to regular college operations (e.g., registration announcements) were excluded. I obtained meeting minutes from college websites and committee secretaries for meetings held during the 2021-22 fiscal year.

Document analysis was a continuous source of data during my study. Early in the study, I used it to identify existing community partnerships, which informed interview and focus group participant selection. Document analysis continued throughout my research as a third source of data. Continuous analysis of documents informed me of changes in community relationship development and partnerships. In addition, the iterative analysis of documents helped build trustworthiness when I compared the results to information collected via interviews and focus groups.

Interviews and Focus Groups

I used semi-structured interviews to collect data from college administrators and college-affiliated community members at Eastern Community College and Western Community College.

Semi-structured interviews lasted about 45 minutes, enabling me to collect in-depth descriptive data from the individuals who are the primary liaisons between the college and the public. The college president and their designated community relations liaison were interviewed individually as internal stakeholders (Table 2). I also individually interviewed at least one member of each college board (the board of trustees and college foundation board), representing the primary external stakeholders (Table 2). All board members were invited by the college board liaison to participate. The most active participants with each board were selected.

I also used focus groups to collect data from each institution. Focus groups were held at each college to collect data from middle-level administrators (e.g., deans, department chairs, directors) (Table 2). Additional focus groups were held with other community members who were knowledgeable about the college but were not employed by the institution (e.g., program advisory committee members, members of partner organizations) (Table 2). Each focus group was held via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes. I used data obtained from the document analysis to identify the college-associated community members that I invited for the focus groups. Focus group invitations were prioritized for individuals who were most active within college partnerships. My goal was to have three to five participants in each focus group. Attendees self-selected into focus groups based on their availability. The largest focus group I had included four participants and no willing participant was turned away. Key participants as well as volunteers who were unavailable for scheduled focus groups were interviewed individually, thus ensuring their voice was included in the study. I continued to recruit participants until the data ceased to provide new insight into the phenomenon, indicating saturation was reached (Cresswell, 2014). A list of participants from each institution is provided in Table 2.

The protocol I used for interviews and focus groups included several open-ended, issue-oriented questions. Questions were designed to evoke responses that provided a thick description of the case. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify or attain additional depth from participant responses when necessary. My research protocols were piloted with volunteers from a North Carolina community college that is not a case in this research study. Appendices B through E contain my interviews and focus groups protocols.

Interview and focus group meetings were held via Zoom (recorded with participant permission). This ensured participant privacy while keeping participants within their natural environment, a best practice recommended by Cresswell (2014). Zoom was used for initial transcription. The Zoom transcript was verified against recordings and corrected to ensure accuracy prior to data analysis.

Table 2

Data Collection Techniques and Participants

| | Participant | | | Data Collection Technique | |
|---------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|-----------|
| | Type | Pseudonym | Role | Focus Group | Interview |
| Western Community College | Internal | Emari | College President | | Yes |
| | Internal | Maria | Community Relations Liaison | | Yes |
| | Internal | Pat | Mid-level College Administrator 1 | | Yes |
| | Internal | Shannon | Mid-level College Administrator 2 | | Yes |
| | Internal | Dana | Mid-level College Administrator 3 | | Yes |
| | Internal | Camden Jesse Casey Taylor | Mid-level College Administrators 4-8 | Yes | |
| | External | Edgar | College Trustee and Foundation Board Member | | Yes |

Table 2 (continued).

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------|---------------------|---|-----|-----|
| | External | Ali | Foundation Board Member | | Yes |
| | External | Brooks | College Trustee and Community Partner | | Yes |
| | External | Harlowe Morgan Rumi | Community Partners 1-3 | Yes | |
| | External | Peyton Dakota | Community Partners 4 & 5 | | Yes |
| | | | Total Participants | 7 | 10 |
| Eastern Community College | Internal | Heidi | College President | | Yes |
| | Internal | Oscar | Community Relations Liaison | | Yes |
| | Internal | Cameron | Mid-level College Administrator 1 | | Yes |
| | Internal | Quinn Val | Mid-level College Administrators 2 & 3 | Yes | |
| | Internal | Alex Angel | Mid-level College Administrators 4 & 5 | Yes | |
| | External | Jordan | College Trustee | | Yes |
| | External | Jayden | College Trustee and Foundation Board Member | | Yes |
| | External | Tracy | Community Partner 1 | | Yes |
| | External | Lupe | Community Partner 2 | | Yes |
| | External | Erin | Community Partner 3 | | Yes |
| | External | Shea Brock | Community Partners 4 & 5 | Yes | |
| | | | Total Participants | 6 | 8 |

Ethical Considerations

The study was subject to review by the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Committee (HSC) as an exempt study. I obtained HSC approval before the initiation of data collection. Additionally, I: (a) ensured all participants were over age 18, (b) required all participants to sign the Old Dominion University Informed Consent Document modified for this study (see this document in Appendix G), and (c) informed them of their participant rights. The use of pseudonyms maintains participant and college privacy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a reflective process whereby I analyzed data after each collection point. Such continuous analysis provided a more comprehensive and thorough evaluation of the research questions (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). I relied on the theoretical propositions of social capital theory to guide data analysis (Yin, 2017). The analysis began with data organization, followed by reflection on the data's overall meaning, tone, and other impressions (Creswell, 2014). I created an initial codebook based on the research questions, which increased code coherence and enabled pattern matching analysis (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2017). My codebook was a dynamic list, initially developed using keywords from Weaver's (2018) theoretical framework. My coding process included both primary and secondary coding, which enabled me to organize and distill the data, facilitated the derivation of code patterns, and enabled me to make sense of the data in relation to my research questions (Elliott, 2018).

Document analysis

Data obtained through document analysis was used to inform participant selection and also to confirm interview and focus group findings. The documents analyzed added to the data and helped to clarify each case's role in community social capital development. As such, the

documents add to the significance of the case study methodology. During document analysis I used Weaver's (2018) social capital theoretical framework as a lens while I searched for passages of text or images that demonstrated how the college has facilitated community social capital development. This process was used for all documents analyzed including websites, meeting minutes and social media posts. All content used for analysis was derived from publically available information, manually extracted, and recorded. Document analysis occurred continuously throughout the study period and was used to inform the selection of new protocol questions (Bowen, 2009).

Websites and Meeting Minutes

Each college website was reviewed in depth. I searched websites for clearly identified community partners, publically available meeting minutes, and press releases (or similar documents) discussing recent community partnership projects. I used website data to verify that Twitter and Facebook were among the primary social media platforms utilized. In addition, I closely reviewed each college's directory to gain an understanding of the college's organization chart. Meeting minutes were reviewed to inform participant selection, to identify potential community partners, and to obtain insight into the culture of the college staff. I also searched the websites of local news outlets for articles about each case college.

Social Media Posts

Social media analysis included public posts on Twitter and Facebook for both institutions. Posts made within private groups were excluded from this study. I used a passive analysis, whereby I identified and recorded who was posting (the college or a partner tagging the college), the frequency of interactions, words, and phrases that indicate perceptions of the relationships, and the frequency that outside entities mention the college in their social media

posts (Franz et al., 2019). I used each college's name as a search term within each platform to identify all public pages associated with each institution. This enabled me to capture data associated with special groups on campus (e.g., the college library or career and technical education division) in addition to what was posted on the college's primary page.

Consistent with Franz et al. (2019), the social media data I analyzed included publically available user-generated content such as text (posts, status updates, and comments), videos, images, and reactions. During analysis, I considered the original purpose of the post and the target audience (Bowen, 2009). I also considered the overall presence and types of social media posts, which enabled me to adjust for the overall activity level of organizations. If, for instance, the college was recognized on a partner's social media account, the partner's overall social media activity (e.g., frequency of posts or tags with other organizations) was assessed to gain insight into the account holder's perceived value of the event. Such bidirectional analysis provided additional context and facilitated a deeper understanding of the data (Franz, 2019).

Coding

Interview and focus group transcripts were subject to two cycles of manual coding. The first coding cycle was deductive and descriptive, which enabled me to focus my analysis on the theory under study (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). My descriptive codes were deductively derived, grounded in social capital theory, and included key words and phrases related to relationship development and participants' perceptions of the college's effectiveness in creating social capital (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). My initial codebook (see Appendix F) contained keywords associated with a group's capacity for collective action based on Weaver's (2018) collective action framework. This included words related to social trust, engaged citizenship, reciprocity, empowerment, and social networks.

Use of deductive and descriptive coding facilitated labeling and enabled me to chunk the data into critical words or short phrases that aligned with Weaver's (2018) theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2013). These codes created an overview of the data and facilitated the identification of patterns during the second cycle (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). My codebook was dynamic, which ensured participants' voices were represented from their perspectives, enabled me to add codes when interesting information arose late in the data collection period, and allowed me to separate codes when I began to see differences emerge within a code (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

The second coding cycle was inductive and utilized pattern coding techniques. Pattern codes are inferential codes that identify emergent themes or explanations into parsimonious units of analysis (Saldaña, 2013). Pattern coding relies on my logic and interpretation to accurately identify and describe patterns found within data (Bouncken et al., 2021). Pattern coding was identified as a desirable technique for case studies (Yin, 2017). Pattern coding is more analytical than descriptive, which enabled me to categorize the descriptive factors from primary coding and identify commonalities (Creswell, 2014; Elliott, 2018; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). I sought to find commonalities among the deductively derived descriptive codes (from primary coding) through pattern matching, which enabled me to identify patterns that extend beyond Weaver's (2018) theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Such similarities were interpreted as non-random and grouped as patterns (Bouncken et al., 2021). These patterns were analyzed through the lens of my social capital theoretical framework as I generated themes that display multiple participant perspectives within and across cases (Bouncken et al., 2021; Creswell, 2014). Using both deductive and inductive strategies as well as pattern matching increased the findings' validity.

Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis

All data collected during my research was analyzed using identical primary and secondary coding techniques. I initially focused on a within-case analysis of each college. My goal was to identify the trends or themes that emerged when all data associated with each case was combined. This within-case analysis gave me a broad overview of each institution and a better understanding of the role of the college (case) in community social capital development. The result was a well-rounded picture of each case as a whole through Weaver's (2018) theoretical lens. Once this was completed, I utilized cross-case analysis to address each of my RQ.

First, I addressed RQ3 (How do institutional leaders perceive the college's effectiveness as a community partner in social capital development?) by aggregating data collected from institutional leaders at both colleges. This analysis focused on data collected via document analysis, answers to interviews with the college president and community relations liaison, and data collected during focus groups with mid-level college administrators. Appendix A shows the alignment of protocol questions to RQ3. Next, I used cross-case analysis to explore data relevant to RQ 2 (How do community partners perceive the college's effectiveness as a community partner in social capital development?). This included interviews with college board members, focus groups with community members strongly associated with the college, and document analysis (see appendix A). Lastly, I assimilated data from within-case analysis and cross-case analysis to generate a holistic picture that will address RQ1 (How do rural community colleges promote community social capital development?).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a measure of the quality of empirical research. Guba (1981) identified truth value (i.e., credibility), applicability (i.e., transferability), consistency (i.e., dependability), and neutrality (i.e., confirmability) as the primary aspects of trustworthiness. My research and data analysis design demonstrates that these properties have been considered. In doing so, the research's overall trustworthiness has been increased (Elo et al., 2014). Strategies employed include well-established research methods, including literal replication, triangulation, frequent debriefing, and peer review (Yin, 2017). I enhanced trustworthiness through the rapid turnaround of interview transcription (within one week) and member checking of the data. During member checking, participants were asked to verify (or correct) my interpretation of the study findings from their institutions as well as individual's quotes and intent. Updates were made as necessary based on feedback from participants.

Data comparisons between document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups also increased the trustworthiness of my data. Using these three data sources facilitated the identification of convergence or contradiction within the data, a signal that further research may be necessary (Bowen, 2009). By seeking corroboration amongst the three data sources, I have greater confidence that my findings are not artifacts, and the study has more credibility for readers (Bowen, 2009). The use of document analysis also provides an additional level of protection against potential bias (Bowen, 2009).

Limitations

There are limitations associated with my research. The limitations of this study include the size of each cases' service area and the effectiveness of each college's community communication and media engagement (including social media). There are additional limitations

associated with the use of interviews. Such methods are subject to bias responses due to my presence, and variability in participants' perceptiveness, reflectiveness, recall, and articulation capabilities may impair data collection (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2017). The nature of case study research will limit the generalizability of the study results. I sought to reduce this issue through study design, including replication logic and thorough descriptions of cases, protocols, and analysis.

Conclusion

My research methodology clarified some of the unmeasured yet important impacts of community colleges in rural North Carolina. There is a strong need to understand colleges' comprehensive impact on their community, yet the information can be challenging to measure and report (Thomas, 2013). An understanding of the public benefit of community colleges is essential in rural areas, where institutions have been shown to enhance community development, quality of life, and identity development (Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Reed, 2019; Thomas, 2013). The lack of data inhibits institutions from accurately assessing their roles as community conveners and social developers.

My study used a multiple case study methodology, rooted in social constructivism and viewed through a social capital lens. Two rural North Carolina community colleges, representing both the eastern and western regions of the state, were studied using interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. This chapter explained the research design, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, and study parameters. The next chapter, Chapter four, will provide the findings of the present research study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS OF STUDY

This multiple case study aimed to clarify rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. This chapter reports the findings of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis from a multiple case study using a social capital theoretical framework. This chapter is organized by college (Western Community College [WCC] and Eastern Community College [ECC]). I initially presented a picture of the college ecosystem and the college's community relationships. This provided the reader with an understanding of the college and its community culture as well as their interrelationships. At the end of each college section, I summarized the results through the lens of my three RQs, which are:

1. How do rural community colleges promote community social capital development?
2. What are community partners' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development?
3. What are community college leaders' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development?

The final section of chapter four compares the role of WCC and ECC in addressing some of the large social problems faced by their respective communities.

Western Community College

A core tenet of the WCC mission is to "enrich the community" (WCC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, 2022). In 2021, WCC adopted a five-year strategic plan to accomplish this goal. My research indicated that the college mission and goals are thoroughly embedded in institutional operations and are echoed in the college culture. In this section, I will highlight

WCC's efforts to ensure college operations reflected the business needs as well as the societal needs of the internal and external community it served.

Western Community College's internal stakeholders strongly desire to support their community. According to Pat, a mid-level administrator, they want to do

Anything we can do to really just be that community support. I hate to say it like this because it's cliché, but we want to be that beacon on the hill ... for people to really just feel like they are able to come here and do things. ... simple stuff like that of just being more than just a college conferring degrees and diplomas and certificates; it's about providing the community support that's needed and to bring people together.

College representatives recognized the need to focus on "what the community wants, not what we feel like they have to have or need" (Jesse, mid-level administrator). To identify these needs and fulfill the college's mission, WCC implemented a new strategic plan in 2021. The new plan's development was intentional and included input from college board members, county economic development, the chamber of commerce, the K12 system, students, faculty, staff, and community partners. Both internal and external college stakeholders were eager to provide input to help guide the college's future. Through focus groups and meetings with community partners, it became "...very obvious that this community feels like this is their college, they want us, like [Maria] said, to be the leader of economic development in this region..." (Emari, President). Emari noted that while most of the strategic planning goals and objectives are college centric, many were intentionally included to ensure it was "not just the college's plan, but the community's plan." The inclusion of a diverse set of stakeholders in college planning demonstrated WCC's desire to meet community needs. It reflected the college's core values of being supporting, reliable, available, and sincere (WCC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, 2022).

Document analysis indicated that WCC's mission and strategic plan remained central to college operations more than a year after their introduction. The college's weekly Facebook live video titled "tech talks" demonstrated that the mission remains central to operations. These live streamed videos are saved and available as a recording on the college's Facebook page. These videos were an engaging way for the college to discuss issues important to the college and community. The informal nature of the videos made college administrators and staff seem affable and approachable. During Community College Month, Emari used the college's weekly tech talks to introduce each of the college's primary strategic goals. Each week focused on a particular strategic goal, presented as an informal discussion between the president and the guest. The format was unscripted and conversational, resulting in videos with a friendly and approachable feel. During the videos, Emari met with community college partners who discussed how they experienced WCC's efforts to learn, grow, and better serve the community.

The time delimitation of my research inhibited my ability to ascertain the temporal relationship between mission and strategic plan development and college culture. However, the data collected for this study indicated that the college mission and strategic plan were profoundly entwined in the college culture. Study participants expressed an overwhelming desire to be active in the community. Numerous employees talked about their participation as volunteers in civic groups, including Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce, Community Forum Leadership Committees, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, festival planning committees, religious groups, charities, and local food banks. Pat felt civic connections were an important way for the college to connect with the community. They mentioned, "the ability to know everybody is there, and so, if you are willing to step out there and get to know everyone in the community by being a part of the community, then the college can go so much farther."

Frequent participation in civic groups enabled college employees to stay abreast of community happenings and provided them with insider knowledge of how the college could best serve the area.

College employees seemed to genuinely feel it was everyone's job to be involved in the community and to promote the college, regardless of whether community relations were explicit in their job descriptions. Pat stated that

We really expect that from everybody, and I think that's the cool thing here is that so many people are actively involved in the community... it's not a matter of "it's my role to do this, or it's [Shannon]'s role to do this, or it's [Emari]'s role. Everybody just steps up and does it, but again it's a small community, so I don't know; it just works here.

Pat described a college culture that values community service. When asked what the motivation was for college employees to be so involved, Taylor, a mid-level administrator, quickly replied, "I think it's people's interests, but also, just the love for what the school is doing." Culture had a strong influence on WCC employees' desire and willingness to participate in community engagement efforts on behalf of the college. Respondents indicated they do not receive monetary rewards for their involvement but were recognized informally through emails or newsletters. Pat stated, "but do you want people to do it for the money, or do you want people to do it because they're invested in your community? I think here, most folks are invested in the community." Employee civic and community engagement enabled them to network extensively, deeply embedding college associates throughout the community. Casey, a mid-level administrator, suggested that networking was a byproduct of community service. Through repeated interactions, these individuals formed strong, self-perpetuating bonds. Pat indicated:

I don't know how to put it, really, it's just such a collaboration between everybody, and you get to know people, and it's hard to say no when they call and ask for something because I know I'm going to turn around and call for something.

The dedication of college employees to civic engagement outside of work indicated that the college's mission to "enrich the community" propagated through their work and home lives (WCC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, 2022). Camden, a mid-level administrator at the college put it this way:

I think everyone at [WCC] tries to listen to what the needs are in the community. Because of that, the community has responded in appreciation that we are asking the questions, listening, and trying to serve and respond in a positive way to meet their needs.

The mission became a part of the fabric and culture of their world. Such consistency between messaging and actions enabled the college to build trust among stakeholders and contributed to community social capital development.

Bonding Capital

Western Community College's mission to "enrich the community" was consistent with the values external college stakeholders expressed (WCC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, 2022). All three college board members interviewed revealed they gave back to their community through civil service careers and in their personal lives through civic activity. Other community participants also demonstrated shared values and a desire to actively seek ways to foster friendliness and collaboration throughout the area. There was a collective desire to align efforts and make the community a better place for all concerned, and these shared values led to the formation of strong social bonds.

Collegial

Five different participants used the word “welcoming” to describe the college and community. The friendliness and collegiality of the college and community were demonstrated when WCC was challenged on social media by an industry partner to participate in the random acts of kindness day. The college responded by creating an internal shared document where college employees listed all the community colleges in the NC system. Then employees collaborated to do internet research on each college and developed a short social media post for each. Western Community College tagged other sister colleges in their posts, which included everything from posts about mascots to accolades for innovative programs. WCC’s community partners were tagged in posts and publicly acknowledged for being inspiring pioneers, future-focused, and excellent partners. WCC’s response to this simple challenge symbolized the college’s friendly, open, genuine, and collaborative culture.

Community Openness

Every year, the area welcomes thousands of visitors from across the southeast region for festivals. The largest of these festivals has historically attracted over 70,000 visitors, had media coverage from major American and global media outlets, and included educational panels and speakers from major television networks such as Animal Planet. Widespread collaboration was required for a rural town to host such a big event. Although the festival was not associated with any college-specific programs, WCC volunteered in-kind contributions. The college partnered with festival organizers to offer 1500 offsite parking spaces (with shuttles to the festivities) as a location and host of educational lectures, and college volunteers (including the college president and other executive leaders) spent the weekend assisting with parking, traffic, and the preparation of facilities for events.

Western Community College has a demonstrated history and maintains a prominent presence at local festivals including photo opportunities with the college mascot for festival attendees, featured floats in festival parades, and information booths staffed with college representatives. WCC has regularly hosted a children's area for one of the festivals that provided interactive activities, local entertainment, and a famous "best-dressed pet" contest. In addition, WCC health program students are provided opportunities to develop their talents through voluntary work at college-sponsored health tents. The diversity of college involvement is intended to facilitate interactions with various individuals and increase the likelihood that festivalgoers will engage with the college during the festivals.

Transparency

Western Community College maintained a strong virtual presence. The college used its website as a repository of information for potential students, current students, and external stakeholders. The website prominently displayed the college branding and was well organized. Website information was easy to find within a few clicks, making the site user-friendly. Internal study participants reported that communication used to be much more closed. In their opinion, the college has done a better job disseminating decisions and detailed information about what was discussed during meetings. Study participants felt this shift has helped a lot, especially in keeping board members knowledgeable, so they were well equipped to present current college affairs to others in the community.

Western Community College's commitment to transparency was observed on the main college website, which conveyed a large amount of information. Board of Trustee meeting agendas were posted and minutes were published, archived, and available dating back to January 2017. The meeting minutes for WCC's President's Council were publicly available on the

website dating back to 2016. The President's Council was composed of college employees who the president has selected to advise and assist with the planning, implementation, and execution of college operations. The website had a page dedicated to partner agencies and several pages highlighted college programs designed to engage community members (e.g., summer camps). The college also posted state performance measures, the primary accountability data used by the North Carolina Community College System. The data in this report enabled individuals to compare WCC to the college system's baseline and goal performance measures.

Western Community College's website pointed users to their four primary social media outlets: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. These platforms spotlighted what was happening on campus and events where students, faculty, and staff were engaged. Facebook and Twitter appeared to be the college's preferred social media platforms; both averaged two daily posts. Instagram was regularly used, but at a lower frequency, while the college YouTube channel was rarely utilized. The college Facebook page had over 6,500 likes, and interaction with the college Facebook posts were high. Most posts had likes and loves, while nearly every post had multiple shares. WCC's Twitter feed showed less public engagement. Although the Twitter feed had about 400 followers, there were few tweets with replies or likes, and retweets were rare.

A Recent Shift

The population served by WCC has strong social bonds; however, this was not always the case. Camden recalled,

We saw a shift in this county, and it's probably been at least 10 years; we saw the shift where people wanted to see a change. And I see everyone on this call nodding, we wanted to see a change, and I think everybody realized, at the same time, we wanted to

see that change in our county and our community. And so, we were all like, ‘okay, what is it gonna take? Let’s work together, and let’s not duplicate efforts if we can, and how can we improve where we live?’ Then, it happened, and we improved the environment. Other employees corroborated that through collaboration, the community has transformed itself, and, as mid-level administrator Jesse explained, now “booming like we never had before.” My research participants indicated the change in mindset and collective action differentiate their community from others in the region. Pat previously worked at a different rural community college. Familiar with the inner workings of both communities, Pat recognizes significant differences. They found that in the other community,

...each organization is out for themselves. And here, you just don’t see that; we work very closely with all our public safety organizations. They’re always donating items to the college, and we do everything we can just for them. It’s just, I don’t know, it’s just a different atmosphere, and I’ve talked to people from [previous employer], and they see the differences as well.

Some college associates indicated internal changes may also have contributed to the institution’s focus on community. Edgar (college trustee and foundation board member) said that having people who work at the college and live in the community has had a big impact on the college’s community focus. In the past, the board did not require the administrative officer to live in the county, which “didn’t work” because those individuals did not “have any skin in the game.” Community partners also recognized a shift in the college. Community partner Rumi noted the importance of leadership style and staff retention:

I know the college, especially lately, last couple of years, has done a really good job of tracking where they are and where they want to be, maybe more importantly, so that’s

what's really impressed me. They're not just 'all right, we're good.' Instead, they're saying, 'all right, how can we respond to the community and then measure that success' so we're excited to see that. I know [Emari], and I know him well enough that he's a pretty smart guy, Ph.D. and all that, but he is very deferential to his staff that are there, that are doing a lot of great things. I think he's a big part of that, but a lot of great people that have been on board for a while...all that to say, they have done a great job reflecting the community's needs.

Rumi made it clear the college's community focus was positively impacting the institution's ability to form social bonds.

Bridging Capital

College representatives created bonding social capital through informal engagement with a diverse and sizeable population of the college service area through civic engagement. WCC representatives also engaged in the development of bridging social capital through participation in regularly scheduled meetings and purposeful gatherings, which helped WCC develop and maintain relationships with other governmental groups and community partners.

Regular Meetings

Regular meetings were foundational for developing and maintaining relationships between the college and its partners. WCC also utilized a series of regularly scheduled, formal meetings to maintain and strengthen bonds with partners.

... In having that one county focus and just kind of the area we're in, it's the partnerships we have here and kind of the seamless relationship it feels like we have with our community leaders, civic organizations, and non-profits, etc. They're stronger than I've ever really seen anywhere...." (Emari, WCC President)

Such formal meetings include a group dedicated to educational alignment, a group focused on economic pipeline development, and a group focused on small businesses.

Education Committee. The education committee consisted of executive leadership from the county school system, the county commissioners, the county manager, and WCC. President Emari and two WCC trustees represented the college, while the local K12 schools were represented by their superintendent and two board members. The county commissioners are credited with initiating the group, which is not considered an official committee as there is no specific agenda or minutes taken. The educational pipeline committee met once per month over lunch. The gathering provided a dedicated time for the three groups to check in. The groups used this time to proactively discuss what was going on in the county, how it impacted education, and to plan for upcoming impacts to the area. Research participants stated these monthly meetings were critical for reciprocity and collaboration among the partners. Brooks, college trustee and foundation board member, explained,

One of the things that this community college has provided us is a partner who's not stagnant and a willingness to listen and say, 'why not' rather than 'why.' And that's kind of a cultural piece that there's been a shift here that I'm proud to have been a part of.

In addition, the meetings provided dedicated face time between educational institutions and the county commissioners, who contributed a local portion of the public K12 and community college budgets. In North Carolina, public community colleges are partially funded through local appropriations. These funds are allocated by county officials and are used to pay for facilities and maintenance. County officials are required to support the local community college; however, the amount they provide varies and is not regulated by the state. President Emari discussed the effectiveness of monthly education committee meetings, saying:

You often get to present to your county and say, ‘hey, this is our annual budget request, and here’s all the great things we did this year in our annual report.’ And they ask a bunch of questions; then it’s over. But we literally sit for an hour and a half monthly and have lunch, and we talk through what’s happening with our respective entities and how we can help each other and learn from each other. And we all interact and serve the community...the relationship is very strong and feels very reciprocal as well.

Emari valued the relationships that have formed as a result of the education committee and highlighted the significance of connecting with county commissioners to educate them on college needs and demonstrate how their funding is supporting the community.

The essence and structure of the education committee were unique to the WCC service area. There was no equivalent at ECC. The education committee has helped strengthen the rapport between WCC and the county K12 system, who see each other as a resource, not a competitor. With time their strong relationship continues to grow. As a result of this committee, K12 and WCC combined efforts to address local public safety needs by creating a public safety academy. Brooks explained the value of this partnership,

... the first year or two, we had EMT classes at our high school, they were articulated with the community college, and actually, a community college employee teaches them. I employed the fire instructor, and he teaches dually, and all that FTE is generated too, whereas I would have had to start one program at a time. But with that collaboration and their willingness to think differently, we were able to roll out fire and EMT all at once. Where it would probably take me a few years to do both, and it worked so well that we were able then to, then, the next year, add Law and Justice. So now we have a true public safety academy that you can get into fire, EMT, or law. And a lot of kids do all three of

them, so that's one I tout when I want to talk about their [WCC] willingness to be flexible and to listen and to be adaptive and to be innovative.

The public safety academy has grown, and its students annually visit WCC to display their skills and compete in a public safety challenge and expo. The expo is in partnership with dozens of area public safety providers (e.g., police, fire, and rescue departments) who cheer for the students and talk to them about career opportunities. This public safety academy and the combined efforts of K12 and WCC have created a workforce pipeline in the region. WCC's public safety sector is expected to continue to grow, and the college has acquired grant funding to construct a new public safety training facility and a driver training track. In response to the grant funding, Emari stated, "This public safety training allocation is not for [WCC] – it is for our community. The funds will help improve the quality of the training provided with partners in our region." Brooks elaborated in a similar vein:

When you truly collaborate, and I don't mean just talk about collaborating, but when you truly collaborate, and you commingle funding or figure out ways and some workarounds there, and you don't care about who gets credit, it's a wonder, I mean it's amazing what can be accomplished. ... so just I would say, a lot of the key to our success here is just a partnership, and when I say a partnership, I mean a true partnership, not we just got our name on a billboard together, but we are really working.

In addition to the public safety academy, WCC and the local K12 system collaborated and supported two cooperative innovative high schools on WCC's main campus. Such cooperative educational partnerships enable students to dual enroll in high school and college, then graduate with a high school diploma and an associate degree in five years. In NC, cooperative innovative high schools are publicly funded and target specific student populations, including first-

generation college students, those who may not otherwise pursue college, and students who would benefit from the additional rigor and support. According to Brooks,

A lot of our Latinx kids started and believed in the early college model percentage-wise more quickly than our other populations. The Latinx community now looks at [WCC] and the early college as a great partner and a great champion for them.

WCC's early colleges have a higher percentage of Latinx students relative to other county schools. The early college model in this county was credited for increasing Latinx student HS graduation rates. Brooks indicated that the graduation rates of students of color in their region were higher than in most districts, and, unlike most districts, there was no educational gap. In fact, Brooks reported that their largest at-risk population was white males.

Workforce Pipeline Committee. The workforce pipeline committee was led by WCC, the local K12 system, the workforce development board, and NC Works (a statewide non-profit employment resource center). The committee also included business partners from various industries in the area. Although the education committee functioned at an executive level, this group consisted of those who work directly with employees. This included career and technical education faculty, career coaches, the chamber of commerce, the workforce development board, job recruiters, and other local employers. Group meetings were open to all local manufacturing representatives. The group was initially formed to address an aging workforce and a lack of qualified local employees. It now meets for just over an hour once a month over lunch. Taylor proclaimed,

It is amazing and awesome to see the collaboration that comes from just being in the same room for the workforce pipeline. Then you get these conversations going, and that's what you hear so often, especially from other counties. There's *just a spirit of*

collaboration in this county [emphasis added] with so many different agencies and organizations and industries, so I think a lot of that does stem from the pipeline and from having lunch together and having the meeting.

Camden, a member of the same focus group, was quick to add

I think it's unique to this county because, like you said, other counties are looking at us, and they're asking how do you do this because we've got people in the same room before, and we got the county right next door, and they tried it, and they're like we can't get people to talk we can't get people to give. Or to say 'I'll give this if you give that' and kind of work together. They say we just can't get it to work and don't understand.

Taylor and Camden associated significant value with in person meetings, which stimulate conversations, collaborations, and a collective feeling of unity. Over time, word spread about the effectiveness of the workforce pipeline group, and more employers began to participate.

Employers began to assist with K12 and WCC curriculum development, which resulted in graduates with solid credentials. Employers gave students in these programs apprenticeship opportunities and offered preferences in hiring. Companies were rewarded with a strong talent pipeline of well-prepared, highly skilled employees. The group has become increasingly robust and grown to include community service organizations. They are credited with developing a local strategic employment plan as well as several different leadership programs. The strength and uniqueness of this partnership were recognized when the committee was presented a significant statewide award. My document analysis revealed several articles and media releases of the award. In one such article, the local NCWorks Director was asked about the initiative's success. Their response was,

This is another indicator of the cohesive nature of the [county name] community, with all working together for the collective success ... Perhaps the close-knit nature of the community lends itself more readily to the development of shared goals and cohesive actions.

It is clear the workforce pipeline committee stimulated a spirit of collaboration, interconnectedness, and unity, all of which support bridging social capital.

Small Business Group. Another group that met regularly addresses the needs of small businesses in the area and seeks ways to increase economic impact in the community. On a dedicated Tuesday of the month, the WCC Small Business Center gathered small business owners, members of the local business association, and members of the local chamber of commerce. The meetings were held during either breakfast or lunch, with monthly rotations. Meetings were also rotated to different locations around the county. Temporal and geographic changes were intentional and aimed to reduce attendance barriers, making it easy for people to attend. The agenda for meetings varied and was determined by participants. Some meetings were designed as roundtable discussions to facilitate collaboration among attendees, and others were more structured around the best practices for navigating the business's challenges.

Partnerships

Western Community College's mission to "enrich the community" was enhanced by the institution's strong local and regional partnerships (WCC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, 2022). Some of WCC's partnerships could be directly tied to conversations had during the regularly scheduled meetings. This included K12 projects such as the public safety academy, cooperative innovative high school expansion, as well as the development and growth of countywide leadership programs. Other college partnerships developed independently. Examples of such partnerships

exist with affiliates wholly within the WCC service area and others focusing on different regions of western NC.

Shared Space

Nearly 10 years ago, WCC's county officials were presented the opportunity to purchase a former manufacturing site adjacent to the college campus. The site included a building with over 300,000 square feet on over 300 acres of land. Faced with a need to grow and train a local advanced manufacturing workforce, a public/private partnership formed and purchased the parcel and building. Collaboratively, the county government, county commissioners, economic developers, the business community, and the college devised a plan for space utilization. The county funded over half the cost, but over 10 organizations and five businesses contributed to the design and worked together to fund necessary renovations. Stakeholders envisioned a space that would facilitate interaction between local industry, the college, and economic development by putting all entities under one roof. The building became a mixed-use space that provided over 50,000 square feet for WCC's industrial trades programs and small business center. The rest of the building provided office space for local economic developers and small industries. According to Morgan, a community partner, it "...kind of seems almost like a hub, you know there's lots of different folks in that particular building that are maybe not so much community focused but focused on things that are good for the community." Morgan's description demonstrated the collaborative project successfully achieved its goal of creating an economic growth center for the area.

The land associated with the former manufacturing plant contained multiple large fishing ponds and a former railroad spur. The college initially brought together internal stakeholders, who collectively decided to transform the unwanted railway into an exercise path. The group

intended the path to be used by physical education and law enforcement classes as well as the public. Grant funding was procured to support trail construction and a shaded picnic area. Recently, the college and county partners began phase two of the park, which includes lengthening the trail, creating roads to enable public access to the fishing ponds, and additional picnic areas. The group hoped to incorporate the area into the county greenway trail system eventually.

Fiscal Agent for Community Collaborative

Western Community College is a member of a countywide program whose goal is to bring together people from diverse groups and facilitate community engagement. This community collaborative comprises WCC, the city, and a non-profit group whose mission is to improve county residents' quality of life and build bridges to overcome racial barriers. The partners' work began in one area of the county and has grown to include four of the primary areas with concentrations of ethnic minorities in the county. They host monthly community forums that serve as a safe space for residents to have an open dialogue, develop a shared vision for their neighborhoods, and create an action plan. Thus far, the group has tackled community problems such as housing and transportation issues, substance abuse, and obesity. They have also worked to improve access to existing county resources and produced recommendations to city and county officials, influencing policy changes.

As a partner in this initiative, WCC is highly engaged in the monthly meetings and uses its social networks to connect community members to resources. Such interactions enable the college to earn trust and develop a rapport with participants. Monthly meetings also allow WCC to ensure the voices of underrepresented areas of the county are considered during college planning. WCC's partnership extends beyond participation in monthly meetings; the college acts

as the fiscal agent for the non-profit collaborative and provides office space for the program manager and event space. The partnership has been mutually beneficial partly because of the shared community enrichment goal. In addition, the association has formed bridges between the college and underserved populations. It has also allowed the college to have an early role in activities that fall within the scope of college operations.

Regional Approach

The data presented thus far demonstrated WCC's relationships with stakeholders within the college service area. Other data reflected WCC's willingness to collaborate with out-of-county partners to develop programs that address needs that impact the WCC service area and the region. These collaborations enabled WCC to initiate programs that were too resource-intensive to handle independently but were needed in the community. Three programs that best exemplified this were WCC's healthcare program consortium, grant consortium, and the ecotourism consortium.

Healthcare Program Consortium

A rural location can impede new college program development, especially those that are expensive to run or require a significant upfront expenditure. Compounding this problem is the lengthy return on the investment, which results from a small recruitment area and initially low enrollment. WCC and other small, rural community colleges were all facing the same issues. In response, three rural colleges (including WCC) partnered to offer these career opportunities and meet the needs of local employers.

WCC and two other sister community colleges formed a regional healthcare program consortium to produce graduates to meet the needs of the area healthcare facilities. This consortium was under the leadership of a single director, who created a student handbook and

scheduled classes at all three colleges. Students would register at their home institution, even for courses held on sister campuses. This way, the colleges could cohort students from all the schools together, increasing class sizes enough to make them cost-effective. After nearly 30 years of partnership and over 1500 graduates, each college has grown its resources. The consortium is in the process of being amicably dissolved as the colleges finalize their program accreditations and initiate independent programs.

Economic Development Grant Consortium

One of the products of the workforce pipeline committee is a local strategic employment plan. This plan identified that the players needed for economic growth were present; however, they were siloed. In response, WCC serves as the lead institution for a \$1.5 million-dollar federal grant designed to promote economic resilience through providing training and education to economically disadvantaged individuals, those with substance abuse disorders, and the previously incarcerated. The grant targets traditionally underserved residents, including those who identify as Black or Latinx, and will provide the necessary education, training, financial assistance, and student support services for success.

The grant will enable WCC and its partners to address the local skills gap in high-demand and high-wage areas such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and construction trades. The grant supports students in the WCC service area and those in two adjacent counties, which sister community colleges serve. Other program partners include a local Latinx non-profit and NCWorks (North Carolina's state workforce development system), who will assist with program recruitment and career placement. The program will also help individuals with English language acquisition classes and high school equivalency. During a press conference that was recorded and posted on Facebook, the president of a partner college stated:

...collaboration, again, is key. So, by working collaboratively to systemically address the needs of our residents, not in silos, but by coming together and working as partners and as one. We look forward to seeing a significant increase in the completion of workforce credentials.

The program was expected to serve 923 participants over the next three years, of which over 100 are expected to identify as Hispanic or Latinx. In the same video, the president of the partner college stated, “the project will promote social and economic well-being for those who participate but also for their families.” They went on during their speech to discuss the generational impacts of the program as well as the demographic benefits for society.

Ecotourism Consortium

Western North Carolina is known for the Blue Ridge Mountains. Federally protected land is widely distributed through this region, which includes the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and multiple tracts of national forest. The area served by WCC is roughly 75% forested and home to abundant flora and fauna, scenic vistas, and natural attractions. Residents and visitors partake in outdoor recreation, which has become important to the Western NC economy and is expected to flourish in the future economy.

According to Peyton, a community partner, the local economy relied on timber extraction until around the early 1900s, when manufacturing and textiles began to dominate. By the late 1900s, the county “became a little directionless” as those jobs moved overseas. In 2019, a large furniture manufacturer, the primary employer in a small town within the county, announced nearly 75% of its employees were to be laid off. Understanding the need to support this community, the chamber of commerce, WCC, elected officials, non-profit groups, and others gathered. Dakota, a community partner, noted that the group realized “we’ve got to diversify this

community, especially the [town] community because there's manufacturing in all of [county name], but nothing as concentrated as in [town]." Recognizing that recreation was a relatively untapped resource in the county, they developed a plan to capitalize on the natural beauty and budding outdoor recreation economy. Peyton recalled:

...we were at the table early on, with the trial project, you know, the light bulb kind of went off on in everybody's mind like 'Oh, this could work' when you're talking about 1/3 your county be in federal land, and the Federal government's going to allow you to build trail on it, that's an industry. So, it's not only bringing the tourism economy here, but it's also helping to grow the next generation of trail stewards and the next generation of volunteers, and potentially the next generation of companies that are building and maintaining trail on public land. It's just an example of how when you're in the room together with education and community development, and business developments, you can get it right.

The result is a partnership between the National Forest Service, the chamber of commerce, WCC, and two non-profit groups. WCC offers multilevel non-credit courses, while non-profit partners seek funding for trail construction and work collaboratively with the chamber of commerce to grow local small businesses that support outdoor recreation. The team also works on marketing and the development of ecotourism in the area. These collaborative efforts have enabled the area to build resilience through economic diversification.

Formal Measures of Institutional Effectiveness

Western Community College internal constituents made it apparent that they hold the college, their community, and each other in high regard. They are heavily invested in seeing everyone in the area succeed. Often, what is needed to succeed requires the college to invest

assets (e.g., human or physical resources) but does not contribute to the metrics that are used to determine NC community college funding, which is primarily based on course enrollment.

College administrators must balance the desire to support the community with the fiscal needs of the college. Pat explained this delicate balance:

I can easily look at [WCC] and go; you know what, we've got to make FTE, we've got to have our numbers for our programs, and that's what we've got to do, and that's what we've been focused on. But. I look at it that sometimes we take a loss on things. Because it's not about me and not about you, it is about the college as a whole. For example, ... when an organization calls me and says hey, we need to run this; we've got this training that we really want to run. And that training is going to cost me a lot more than what it will bring in through FTE. *I understand that; yes, we are a business, but at the same time, sometimes you have to do things that support your community, even though it means taking a loss.* [emphasis added]. I will make it up somewhere else. *To me, it's not about making money at the community college. It's about breaking even,* [emphasis added], as long as we can support our equipment and support our staff. And so, to me, when I look at the college as a business; we are a nonprofit basically. So, it's not my goal to make money here at the college; it's my goal that we can support our programs and the equipment it takes to run it and support our faculty. So, if I take a loss over here, I know I'm going to gain it back over here, and that's fine. But *I've got to look at my community as a whole, and if that means I sometimes have to take a loss to support somebody, I'm going to do that* [emphasis added].

Pat recognized the importance of enrollment; however, they also recognized sometimes a loss is necessary in order to fulfill their mission and provide the best service to their constituents. There

is no question that WCC highly values the public's opinion of the institution. The college makes it a point to utilize multiple measures to determine whether or not they are meeting its mission to "enrich the community." This information includes formally and informally collected qualitative measures (WCC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, 2022). Pat indicated

You can look at the numbers ... and all that good stuff. The numbers can show only so much, but it can't show what is going on in the community. The impact that one student can make in the community is unreal. So, I prefer to look at it from the standpoint of how our community perceives the college."

To measure this, WCC sends out an annual survey to the students and the community to ascertain what they think of the college. The wide distribution enables them to collect input from anyone and everyone who wants to participate. The college uses this information to identify areas of success, areas that need improvement and to determine "are we doing the job or not, are we supporting our community, because, for a community college, that's what it's about - your community" (Pat, mid-level administrator).

Informal Measures of Institutional Effectiveness

Western Community College's community partners recognize and appreciate the institution's community contributions. Partners described the college as a reliable source of hope and connectivity within the county. Dakota indicated that WCC has excelled at showing its value to the community and adds

[WCC] has done a really great job of branding themselves as this isn't just a technical school; this is a place where you can go and get your notary stamp. This is a place where you can go and take driver's education courses and ballroom dance and all these

amazing, great programs, so this isn't just for the kids that can't afford an education, this is for everyone, and I think that that's for me that's the biggest asset in our community. Through service diversification and a conscious effort to serve all citizens of their service area, the college has shown it is open and available for everyone, not just traditional college students. Brooks, indicated that WCC's openness to others and willingness to try new things makes others seek them out as partners.

...in this community [WCC] is a usual suspect to be a partner, so whether it's something that is traditionally under the purview of what a community college would be offering, or whether it's just something else, they think 'Well, we know they're willing to look at a lot of different things so let's ask them.' There's a real neighborly approach to things here.

Shannon, a midlevel administrator, indicated the college's success as a partner could be traced to the frequency of collaborations. In their opinion, partners requesting repeated collaborations is indicative of shared success. Dakota extended the thought:

I think success is when you can all come together and work through current challenges and issues that face the community, but in a collaborative way, I mean that is, to me, that is the definition of success, but for specific projects, I think success is just simply measured by the people that are still showing up years later.

Shannon recognized the college's ability to evoke feelings from stakeholders. They indicated WCC provided a "sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose, and being welcomed. That's the biggest things I've had students tell me when they come to [WCC]." Shannon indicated, "that's one of the reasons I stay; like I said, here it's a family, and the community feels that warmth when they come on campus, and they want to come on campus."

Shannon talked about how the college is recognized for providing basic needs to community members. WCC helps connect the community with basic needs such as access to health care, clothes (an onsite clothing bank), food (an onsite pantry), and they've held shoe drives to collect shoes for elementary kids in need. Although these services are primarily for students, the college recognized that supporting student families benefits the student as well. Therefore, services are offered to students' families as well. Students in need can acquire food and clothes for their families from the on-campus banks. Shannon noted that the telehealth program has been particularly helpful for keeping students in class, especially students who have a sick child. The child can be seen through the college telehealth program, and the student can pick up a prescription on their way home from class. In Shannon's opinion, WCC's efforts are rewarded when "just having the community come in and tell us how thankful, they are that we're we are a presence out in the community and helping them have food, shelter. Others also recognize the college as a hub for the community. Peyton described WCC as:

... *it's a place of common ground* [emphasis added], ... whereas, in like a rural community it kind of provides *that town square feel in a lot of respects* [emphasis added] you go in there, and you're seeing people from all walks of life, I mean you could bump into a county commissioner, you could bump into somebody who's retooling to get another job in here somewhere else in the county, so I think it just provides *a lot of glue* [emphasis added] for lack of a better term. And yeah, there's *just not too many spaces like it anymore* [emphasis added].

The college and its employees express an authentic desire to serve each other and those whose lives they touch. Such authenticity was substantiated through messages and stories and was prevalent amongst every individual I encountered while studying WCC. Brooks said, "...I think

that's a little bit of the secret sauce that we have that allows us to do some things here that not everybody has been able to." WCC has endeared itself to its stakeholders in many ways and has touched people's lives using various methods. As a result, the community is proud of it. Rumi said that if they were writing a newspaper headline, it would say "[Western] is the best community college in the state, and the sub headline would say [Emari] is the best college president." The community recognizes the college's success reflects its own achievements, "and we want to help make sure they stay growing and doing better, not just with our financial support but just supporting them to where they continue to do great things."

Western Community College and Research Questions

RQ1 sought to understand how rural NC community colleges promote community social capital development. WCC is heavily involved in many aspects of community engagement, has an internal culture that reflects values well aligned with external stakeholders, and has a direct impact on the formation of strong social bonds in the community. These social bonds enable the college to stimulate bonding and bridging capital development. The college is engaged in projects that support multiple geographic levels- town level (e.g., community forums), county level (e.g., festivals, education pipeline committee) and regional level (e.g., healthcare program consortium, grant consortium). Sometimes the college's role is more supportive of ventures that other partners initiate. Other times the college is an equal partner, and others, the college is central to a project. Table 3 consolidates the WCC programs that demonstrate social capital development.

Table 3*Western Community College's Efforts to Promote Community Social Capital Development*

| Activity Leader | Example |
|-------------------|---|
| Community Partner | <p>Participation in local festivals, including parade entries, informational booths, developing and organizing a children's area, hosting lectures, and facilitating parking</p> <p>Acting as fiscal agent and providing physical space for a community engagement non-profit</p> <p>Hosting the K12 public safety challenge and expo</p> |
| Shared Leadership | <p>Regular meetings (e.g., education committee and workforce pipeline committee)</p> <p>Two cooperative innovative high schools</p> <p>K12 public safety academy</p> <p>Development of a mixed-use building on campus to pull together economic development partners</p> <p>Regional partnerships (e.g., healthcare program consortium, economic development grant consortium, ecotourism consortium)</p> |
| College Led | <p>Use of an inclusive process to develop the college strategic plan</p> <p>College staff involvement (and leadership) in civic groups</p> <p>Extensive informal interactions with community members throughout the county</p> <p>Maintaining a campus that is open to the public, which enables the community to use college facilities (e.g., the auditorium or the walking trail)</p> <p>Creating a campus environment (physical and digital) that is welcoming and amicable</p> <p>Forming and maintaining a small business group</p> <p>Providing basic needs to students and their families (e.g., telehealth, food pantry)</p> |

RQ2 focused on community partners' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development. Community partners in this study expressed highly favorable opinions of WCC and the school's effectiveness. External research participants were eager to meet with me and discuss their interactions with WCC. It was obvious they had a vested interest in the college and perceived the college as integral to the success of their region. Partners were impressed by college efforts to support their community, the drive for continuous improvement, and the eagerness to work collaboratively for the greater good. Economic development and industry partners perceive the college as a resource and partner and ensure the college is involved. They recognize the college as a proactive and collaborative institution that seeks to support all community members and ensure they are prepared for the future. Community members are proud to be associated with WCC. They clearly articulate the college's workforce development and educational role in the community. In addition, they recognized the college's social impact. Partners indicate the college provides a sense of belonging, a "town square" feel and effectively pulls diverse groups of people together. External partners expressed an in-depth knowledge of the breadth of college resources. It was clear they were well informed of the college's responsibilities, its engagement in community affairs, and perceive its role as a community anchor.

RQ3 focused on community college leaders' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development. WCC made it clear that they perceive community enrichment as a priority and desire to create a strong local ecosystem. Community enrichment was articulated in the college mission and values and was also deeply embedded in the college culture. Internal stakeholders are leaders within the college and the

community at large. College leaders developed the strategic plan with extensive stakeholder input, which led to a plan that aligns college business needs with societal needs. Internal research participants expressed an overwhelming desire to ensure their work at WCC supported the greater community good, be it through the provision of basic needs, education, workforce development, or civic involvement. They perceived their role as college employees as ambassadors who respond to ensure community needs are met, regardless of whether it is a part of their job description. For them, their job at the college was an extension of their role as active members of the community they live in. They sought ways to use their community connections as antennae to identify ways the college could best meet their constituents' needs, then follow through with integrating the college. College leaders were very collaborative and willing to put the time into regular meetings and forming partnerships with numerous external groups at the local, regional, and state level. Their transparency and project follow through increased their reliability and trustworthiness, which has led to stronger existing partnerships and increased the college's desirability as a partner for groups who have not previously worked with them. College leaders felt they were an effective community development partner; however, they were not complacent and continued looking for ways to improve.

Eastern Community College

The mission statement for ECC heavily focused on instruction but also aspired for the college to add cultural enrichment and be a part of the local and global communities it served (ECC Mission Statement, 2022). The college's vision is to be student centered, future-focused, and to enhance the quality of life of everyone it serves. ECC is implementing its mission through a new strategic plan, which began in 2022.

The college's strategic plan was designed to be aligned with a recently developed 10-year county strategic plan. Development of the county strategic plan was a large undertaking, which the college supported. Strategic planning meetings were held on the college campus, and several college employees led working groups. County commissioners want the strategic plan to be a living document that remains relevant. Multiple college employees worked on strategic planning teams, including college President Heidi, who was the leader of the strategic plan's education committee. They have volunteered to continue to chair that subcommittee and provide quarterly reports to the commissioners.

Research participants were excited about this new era of county planning, which provided optimism for the future. Lupe, a community college partner, noted that the strategic plan "... forced us to tighten the partnership that was very loose before between economic development, the chamber of commerce, the community college, and even bringing in some of the outlying municipalities." When asked about the alignment between the county and college strategic goals, Heidi replied:

I think it's another way we can show that we're all working together and working as citizens to make our county a better place because we're all working towards the same goals. I'm excited that we were able to do that, and we've even hired the same company that did the county strategic plan do it.

Heidi hoped such alignment would ease conversations when discussing college appropriations with county officials. Jayden, a college trustee and foundation board member, felt there was a strong need to build and maintain a strong relationship with county commissioners. In NC, county funding is used for facilities and maintenance, making it a critical component of a college budget. According to Jayden, ECC is one of the "poorest funded community colleges in the state

from a local standpoint.” Jordan, college trustee, also indicated a growing need for the college to strengthen its rapport with county officials, especially as other college funding decreases. They stated

So, you’ve got to establish a great relationship with your commissioners and politicians too, your town councilman, your mayor’s economic development people. More than ever before, you’ve got to do it now. That wasn’t as strong of importance a long time ago, but you’ve got to do that now. Going forward with the way the funds come down for the community college.

Jordan noted that the county has done more to support the college in recent years and attributed the additional financial support to improved relationships. Community partner Erin indicated the college had been in transition under Heidi’s leadership and the new strategic plan. She noted

I think that leadership is so vital. I would not have had the same responses if we had this conversation four years ago. Because the leadership today in [Heidi]’s position is much more, I think, representative of the college mission and vision. Her approach has been accepted throughout the county ... she has made the college open and has allowed her team to do what they do best.

Jayden attributed increased county funding to Heidi’s effectiveness as a leader but also to the commissioners who may be “looking more at long term results in our county rather than just short-term things and being more open-minded and understanding the role of the community college and how critical its success is to the growth of our county.” Lupe, a community partner, also credited Heidi’s leadership and indicated, “...she has great support staff that understands her vision and can implement it. So, I think that’s important they have a strong foundation of

governance.” Lupe also praised Heidi for restarting a defunct community program, whose goal is to grow future county leaders.

Bonding Capital

The county served by ECC is very large and rural. Distance was frequently cited as a barrier by research participants. Tracy, a community partner, talked about the county's remoteness and how it impedes getting everyone together and leads to isolation between municipalities. My research indicates distance is not the only factor affecting social capital development in the area. Jayden talked about reductions in community social capital on a large scale:

You know, civic clubs have almost gone by the wayside, and in our community, *a lot of civic clubs that used to be leaders in the community 25 years ago cease to exist or exist on a very small scale* [emphasis added]. Rotary, interestingly enough, seems to have grown and thrived. The president of our college is a member of Rotary. But I don't know, and it just seems that *the financial demands and the time constraints that younger generation have, and their priorities just don't always match what I think people felt 25 years ago* [emphasis added], and it's difficult to get some of those folks. I mean, look at church membership. It's so difficult for churches to grow their membership. Some do, but the traditional denominations, at least in our county, are having difficulty growing our membership.

Jayden's comments indicated a lack of community social capital, consistent with data collected from several sources at ECC. While working with participants from ECC, it was rare that anyone mentioned civic group participation. Shea, a community partner, has lived in the area for about five years. They have found that “we just don't give back enough. We all have the ability to learn

and give back.” Shea also noted “a lot of people put on a façade and aren’t genuine around here.” Reduced community capital was also evident to Oscar, a community relations liaison, who recalled:

I remember when we were developing the food pantry. We presented it to the board; it was me and one of my other colleagues, and we presented it to the administration. They loved it like ‘yes, we definitely need to do this,’ but I remember one of our board members was like, ‘Why? There’s a food pantry in [town name],’ and it’s like, ‘well, sir, if a student can’t afford a 35-cent can of beans, they’re not going to be able to afford the gas or the vehicle to drive 30 minutes across the county to get this resource’.

The lack of community civic engagement has had profound impacts on operations at ECC. ECC has experienced a decline in non-credit offerings, especially adult enrichment classes and public services training. Quinn, a mid-level administrator, said:

We’ve tried doing community services classes like basket weaving and artsy kind of stuff, and because we’re rural, it’s hard to get the capacity for it. So, a lot of that stuff tends to fall by the wayside. If you don’t have enough people to justify it, it just kind of dies on the vine.

Heidi indicated that the college had a part-time person coordinating these efforts. However, when they voluntarily left, the college had to decide

do we even fill that position? Are we really getting enough out of that to continue doing some of that effort because not only is it hard work, but the technology on the non-credit side has also not kept up. So, it’s not a smart process, and it takes longer to get things done on the non-credit side.

ECC also struggled to recruit enough participants for public safety training. According to Heidi, there is a lack of volunteers in local fire departments, some of whom struggle to have enough volunteers to remain open. These groups need training, but ECC must “find that sweet spot of how you do a training with enough people to make it worth your time.” As a result, the college struggles to offer fire training programs, forcing local volunteers to travel out of county. This causes extra travel expenses and increases the time burden on individuals who are volunteers in understaffed agencies.

On Campus Events

Eastern Community College hosts campus events that facilitate the development of social bonds. These events are open to the public and designed to attract community members to the college campus. ECC recognizes the importance of face-to-face interactions for relationship development. Such interactions are a critical part of Heidi’s vision, which is to make the college

...the hub of our community, I want us to be a beacon that people come to ... I hope that after spending time on our campus they have a self confidence that they did not have otherwise. They have a pride in their community that maybe they didn’t appreciate before spending time on our campus.

In keeping with this vision, the institution hosts public on-campus events in the hopes that the interactions will foster relationships. Cameron, a midlevel administrator shared,

Get people on your college campus, do whatever you can to get people on your campus.

In my experience, whatever you can give them that is free will get people on your campus. When you get people on your campus, then you start building those partnerships.

Those are the people that are working in these other organizations that you want to be a part of your community partnership.

Oscar echoed the importance of these events.

We're engaging with potential students ... those are relationships that we're establishing and hopefully nurturing and continuing to grow and build so that them and their families or maybe potential students will come out for a credential or need assistance, and they know where they can go.

Under Heidi's leadership, ECC is bringing the community together on campus. Cameron and Oscar denote how Heidi's vision permeates the college culture and facilitates a desire to create bonding capital.

Eastern Community College also allows external groups to use its facilities. Few spaces in the county can hold large groups. The auditorium has hosted private school graduations, beauty competitions, and ghost stories. The space has also hosted cultural events, including lectures, symphonies, and opera singers. Jayden indicated these events fill an important community need: "We probably need to focus more on having more cultural events, particularly in a rural county. People just are not exposed to things of that nature, a great deal."

One group that makes heavy use of campus facilities is the local cooperative innovative high school, which ECC hosts. This new partnership within the last few years was minimally mentioned during participant interviews but noted during document analysis. The partnership is too new to have produced any graduates yet, but it seems to be a growing opportunity that will benefit the community.

Vehicle Rodeo. Each summer, community members can visit campus and interact with large vehicles in an event called "Vehicle Rodeo." This annual event fills the ECC parking lots with large vehicles such as ambulances, bucket trucks, firetrucks, 18-wheelers, and farm equipment. During the event, community members can explore and sit in vehicles they typically

only see in books, on tv, or from far away while in use. This event, held in early summer, also serves as marketing for the institution's summer camp offerings. According to Cameron:

The [event] brought businesses to our campus that would not be here otherwise; I mean, we had a big monster truck. What are they doing on a college campus? You know these little ATVs. *You get business leaders and members on your campus that are not going to come here for anything else. I mean, they've got a thriving business; what do they need the community college for?* [emphasis added]

Cameron underscored that not only does the Vehicle Rodeo promote bonding capital between the college and community, it also facilitates bonds between the college and local business. In particular, they noted that without the event, some business leaders may not otherwise recognize the possible connections between their company and the college.

Back-to-School Open House. The second event hosted by ECC for the public is a Back-to-School open house for K12 students. This event is held on the college campus with support from several local groups, including churches, local businesses, the county library, and the health department. The purpose of this event is to open the college campus to the community and to provide back-to-school necessities to those in need. During the event, participants visit different departments on campus. Each station provides an opportunity for the community to meet ECC faculty and learn about the college's offerings while they fill a backpack with school necessities. Event sponsors and partner groups provide everything that is needed for back-to-school, including backpacks, uniform pieces, and school supplies. The county health department is also present (offering COVID vaccines), and local barbers and stylists offer free haircuts. The event serves over 500 students, and there is such a need in the area that people lined up for over an hour before the event's scheduled start time. The impact on the community is pronounced;

Cameron remembered: “We’ve had parents and grandparents with tears rolling down their eyes saying, ‘I’m so happy you did this, you know you filled such a need for me, for my children, my grandchildren’.” The feelings and emotions expressed by these families is sure to create lasting feelings that are deeper and more persistent than attainable by any marketing campaign. Not only is the college supporting their community, they are also building positive community perceptions of the college and expanding citizens understanding of what the college has to offer.

Patriot Day Memorial. September 2021 was the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attack. A college employee at ECC wanted to ensure Patriot Day was memorialized on campus. The employee and students created a commemorative path through the campus. The path was open to the public, and the college hoped the route would provide education and a space for quiet reflection. President Heidi said, “The path is our way to honor those who gave so much for our country twenty years ago on that unforgettable day.” Social media posts show that several from the community attended the event, one noting the walk “gave them chills.” By offering this memorial the college was able to provide a free event that promotes patriotism, democracy, and the college’s history courses. It was a way for the students to proudly display their work to friends and family, and it provided an opportunity for people to visit the campus and become familiar with college resources.

STEM Outreach. Social media analysis revealed many references to a monthly on-campus STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) event, although the program was rarely mentioned during interviews. Cameron, a midlevel administrator, described this program as an outreach event for upper elementary students and their families. Parents and students would attend the event together, doing hands-on learning activities with college faculty and staff. Erin said these events are important because “...in a rural county, there’s just not much for kids today,

especially when a third of the kids live in poverty.” Each month focuses on a different college program, introducing participants to various career and technical careers. Oscar felt the program has helped strengthen the relationship between ECC and K12 schools and allowed the college to reach a population they have not previously worked with. The event’s success has enabled ECC to secure grant funding to support the purchase of more materials, allowing them to expand and add robotics to the STEM programming.

Coffee on Campus. Several study participants from ECC were sipping coffee while I met with them. Perhaps coincidentally, nearly all of them mentioned the college’s new on-campus coffee shop. They were not alone. Nearly every participant from ECC discussed the partnership between the institution and the small business. Document analysis revealed numerous social media posts about the coffee shop, as well as several newspaper articles. According to Shea President Heidi approached them and asked if they would be interested in opening a coffee shop in the college library. Shea seemed surprised and flattered to have been asked to be a partner. Shea opened the small, family-owned shop in early 2022. Heidi cited the partnership as an example of how the college is “trying to be very creative, very innovative, and very intentional about getting people from all walks of life on our campus.” The coffee shop served over 200 patrons in the first two days. Sales have continued to meet or exceed expectations, and the library has experienced an increase in traffic. The coffee shop on campus has also become a draw for local high school students, who frequently visit the establishment when school gets out in the afternoons. Shea said their other business, a sandwich shop, had several student workers, and between the two businesses, the owners employ over 50 students from local schools. It is their goal to have all the coffee shop labor be students. During our

discussion, it was clear Shea has a desire to help young adults find themselves, access the resources they need, and blossom into productive citizens.

... We're very rural ... we had 300 transactions in town the other day. A lot of these kids have never dealt with 300 people in a day and have to be nice 300 times and make sure people like their drink and close out \$1,000 register at the end of the day, and make sure there's two cases of cups around and I know it sounds miniscule, but that's going to add to their life experiences, and how they perform in their next job, we call it the 'big girl job'.

Shea hoped that student workers will increase the "cool factor" of the shop while providing students with income, responsibility, job skills, and business experience.

Off-Campus Interactions

Eastern Community College did not present a robust presence off campus. Jordan discussed a satellite campus that was in a rural town of 500 citizens, which was over 30 miles away from the main campus. Jordan indicates the campus was a benefit that added value to the community because the cost to travel such a distance from the town to the main campus prevents many residents from accessing higher education. Document analysis revealed that the satellite campus closed in 2018 after sustaining storm damage.

The only indication of ECC off-campus interactions was through community festivals and student clinical sites (e.g., medical offices for health program students). There are multiple festivals in the area; each is hosted by a different municipality and celebrates something special to the town. The festivals provide an opportunity for the college to engage with the public in an open and relaxed environment. It also helps the college to interact with community members who are unable or may not otherwise visit the college. Angel, a mid-level college administrator,

spoke about the college's wide breadth of impact and presence at "pretty much every community event that may be going on outside of what the college has established itself." Alex, also a mid-level college administrator, indicated the college has strong bonds with those it serves and ensures they feel valued and like they are part of a family. They also mentioned the college's role in bringing hope to these students by showing them they are loved and can be successful.

One research participant indicated the college's presence at such events may not be enough. When asked about opportunities the college may be missing out on to build relationships among the people in the community, Tracy indicated the college has a presence at local parades

... but I think they need to go out. I know they're talking to the commissioners behind the scenes, and they're doing a lot of things you to talk to the agencies they talk to. Still, I think their instructors need to go out in the community, become more involved...there needs to be more of a partnership rather than 'you do your thing, and I'll do my thing.'

Shea also indicated a need for college staff to spend more time in the community. Shea felt the college should have a position that focuses on in-person engagement with K12 students, a person who can visit every school in the county to talk about the opportunities available at ECC and to share success stories that will resonate with the kids. Shea felt this is important for increasing educational attainment in the area and said:

We need to change the community mindset to it's okay to have a vocational job. Many kids do not even know what is available. They need to know they can afford college, and they need the self-confidence to believe they can do it.

Val, a mid-level administrator, indicated there is a local stigma associated with attending community college, whereby it is "...like the lesser of the choices you can make in life." Erin, a community partner, felt the problem was much deeper. They value the college and are grateful

for dual enrollment programs that enable high school students to take college classes. “We’re praying from the time our children leave eighth grade until they can get to 10th grade so we can send them to the college. The college shouldn’t be the high school, but it is a safer place.” Other participants also recognized educational attainment concerns and expressed concern over brain drain. Jayden explained,

We need to continually try to create an awareness of how critical it is for the college to grow and prosper and be a center of learning and a leader in the community to get students to understand that the way that the key to their economic future is to go to the community college, get some type of certificate, or graduate. To enhance their ability to earn money and make a living in [name] county rather than moving out of the county, everybody wants to go to Raleigh, Greenville, Charlotte, or somewhere with the bright lights and all the attractions. We lose a huge number of young people from our county ... a lot of talent just leaves our county because of a lack of opportunity and jobs commensurate with their abilities and what they want to do in life.

ECC is working to spread the message through its new mission through face-to-face events on campus.

Bridging Capital

There are nascent efforts to increase bonding capital in the ECC service area; however, bridging capital was not observed. There is a demonstrated need for community partners to unite as the current silos inhibit the development of social capital in the region. ECC’s mission and strategic plan articulates a desire to work collaboratively with others. However, there is a lack of evidence that the desire has manifested into deep relationships with shared goals, bidirectional communication, and trust.

Exclusive of the community strategic planning meetings, document analysis and interviews consistently showed limited mention of consolidated efforts between groups in the ECC service area. There was evidence of repeated interactions with the county health department. Disease prevention, obesity, and lifestyle management are identified issues in Eastern County. Val said the college is working with the health department to increase awareness and educate residents about these issues. Events like the back-to-school open house and COVID vaccine clinics have provided venues on the college campus for the health department to share information with the public. Val recognized that these are large, complex issues, but they are proud that the college can provide a venue to unite people and inform them of the available resources.

Marketing

The issue is compounded by a lack of media outlets and scarce public information on the college webpage. College trustee Jordan talked about the variety of ways the college spreads the word, which “just might be to the real strong family in the area or to a real strong farmer in the area that reaches out to a lot of folks in those little areas, we are very rural here.” Word of mouth appeared to be the preferred form of communication. Later in our conversation, Jordan described the variety of places they visit to network with community members and the importance of such activity, saying,

In a little rural town like this, it might be down at the morning coffee place. That we meet because I know about three of them eat down there every day at the corner grille. So, I make a point to go to the corner grille at least three times a week to see them, talk to them, and establish relationships with them before we come into the commissioners' meeting asking for all this money. We need to have a relationship with them, so we talk it

up. We talk it up while going to church; some of our members will do it on the golf course, and some going to do it while playing basketball. But you've gotta establish relationships. So, when you really need something, they're aware of it, and it's kind of out there. Same thing with state representatives."

This strategy is inefficient and complicates the role of community conveners. Heidi explained, "... that's probably the busiest and hardest part of the job is staying connected with each group and making sure each group is as informed as they can be about what we what we're doing and what we need." Heidi and the college value the relationships they have with community members who have demonstrated a willingness to collaborate.

External participants spoke favorably about the college and its partnerships. Brock, a community partner, shared, "You ask them to do it. They do it. You would be hard pressed to find any group or agency in the county that is doing the job they're doing, is more appreciated, or the institution is considered more important than our community college." Participants are optimistic the new community strategic plan will help create synergies and grow partnerships. ECC appears to be doing the best they can to rally the community and excel within a fractured social ecosystem. Shea said,

Take [Eastern] Community college out of this county, and there would be such a sense of gloom and hopelessness. So, to me, it *creates positivity, it promotes professionalism, it promotes education, and it generates hopefulness* [emphasis added], if you will. ...That is incalculable. I realize it's abstract, and there's no metric for it, but it would be devastating to a small place like us to lose the atmosphere, the professionalism that it supplies, and again just the overall experience of saying, *hey, we're [name] county* [emphasis added]. ... We're the fourth or fifth largest landmass county; we got 29 -

30,000 residents, but *we're still important* [emphasis added]. It would really damage the psyche of this community.

Rural colleges are challenged by limited communication channels, especially outlets that are locally focused. As a result, social bonds represent a critical connection for both community engagement and college marketing. It is difficult for rural schools to attain the reach necessary to effectively promote the diversity of programs offered, which can make it difficult to sustain (and grow) enrollment and impacts college funding. ECC is working diligently to form social bonds and promote the college. Shea made it clear that although not a part of college funding formulas, ECC is making an impact on its community.

Eastern Community College and Research Questions

RQ1 sought to understand how rural NC community colleges promote community social capital development. My research indicated that some ECC employees want to promote social capital development, but this desire is not ubiquitous nor a part of the college culture. The community culture also does not reflect a desire to grow social capital, which hinders the college's efforts. Groups in the area struggle with membership, and those who are motivated to unite in pursuit of a greater cause have not yet found a way to inspire others. The united vision created by the new county strategic plan should help to connect the individuals who desire a change. Perhaps the new plan will unite community members and stimulate the formation of a shared culture. My research revealed college social capital development through primarily college-led events that bring people together. These events facilitate bonding social capital but do so weakly since they are predominantly isolated and unique events that target different populations within the community. ECC activity that supported bridging capital was not detected. Table 4 consolidates the ECC programs that demonstrate social capital development.

The table categorizes activities based on the college's role, either as a support for a program that another partner initiates, an activity where the college shares leadership with another party, or an activity that the college initiates and leads.

Table 4

Eastern Community College's Efforts to Promote Community Social Capital Development

| Activity Leader | Example |
|-------------------|---|
| Community Partner | Participation in local festivals and parades |
| Shared Leadership | Coffee shop on campus |
| College Led | ECC staff led sub-committees for the county strategic plan |
| | Cooperative Innovative High School |
| | Patriot Day Memorial |
| | Maintaining a campus that is open to the public, which enables the community to use college facilities (e.g., the auditorium) |
| | STEM Outreach events |
| | Vehicle Rodeo event |
| | Back-to-school open house |
| | Providing basic needs to students and their families (e.g., food pantry) |

RQ2 focused on community partners' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development. ECC community partners did not express an understanding of the comprehensive community college mission. Community partners generally feel the college is there whenever they need them. However, many partners appear to lack an understanding of the breadth of college capabilities, which may limit their

requests. There was limited evidence of partnerships between the college and external partners. Some of the partnerships documented (e.g., ECC and coffee shop, ECC and cooperative innovative high school) were relatively new and seemed to be growing strong. In general, partners expressed favorable opinions of the college, especially those who have partnered with the college and those who have benefited from the college's outreach efforts (e.g., back-to-school open house participants). Partners also identified areas for improvement. In particular, they noted a need for more community involvement off campus with visits to K12 schools. Partners also indicated a need for more cultural activities in the area and suggested the college expand in this direction. The college may not be reaching most community residents. However, it demonstrated social capital gains with whom it interacted, and, in those situations, both parties seemed pleased with the results.

RQ3 focused on community college leaders' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development. Internal partners seemed to love the college and desire to improve the lives of those in the community. Alex, a mid-level college administrator, mentioned that President Heidi starts every meeting encouraging college staff to think about "why the community college exists, which is to provide service to the community." This idea has not fully permeated the college culture. However, President Heidi is relatively new to the college. In addition, the college has a new strategic plan to enhance the quality of life of those it serves. Cultural changes take time, and it is possible that this study occurred at the beginning of a cultural shift. At present, the college seeks to increase campus traffic and uses word of mouth as the primary way to market college activities. The region served by ECC is vast. There is a shortage of local media and a lack of reliable internet. In the words of Heidi, "rural communities just don't have all the things they need, but what we do have is very

precious and very special and being valued by us.” Heidi is committed to doing the best they can with what they have. As such, though inefficient, the current college strategy may be the best option available at this time.

Comparing Two Rural Community Colleges

This section compares WCC and ECC in terms of their contribution to social capital as it relates to the large issues rural institutions face.

Marketing, Civic Engagement, and Existing Social Capital

Eastern and Western Community Colleges are located hundreds of miles apart, yet they share some of the same struggles. Residents of both counties struggle with internet access, limited mass media, and rely on word of mouth. Poverty and a lack of broadband reduce internet accessibility. Both institutions utilize media but rely on word of mouth to learn about what is happening in the community and spread the colleges’ message. Word of mouth is a strategy that is more effective in communities with more social capital, where the connections between people increase the message's spread (Flora et al., 2018). The WCC area has a strong social culture and a lot of social capital. Community college employees are heavily engaged in the community through personal, civic activity but also their work as part of the college. The community culture and college culture are tightly intertwined, making it difficult to discern between college duties and civic duties in participants' answers to interview questions. WCC employees expressed a genuine desire to do anything they could to make their community a better place and perceive the college as an integral part of that goal. These strong social bonds gave the impression of a strong engine that drives much local engagement. Extensive informal and formal meetings with community members enables the college to build trust and to effectively spread college

messaging. Some formal meetings are scheduled monthly with no formal agenda. Instead, they are designed solely to share information and discuss ways the partners can support one another.

The ECC community does not have strong social bonds or an abundance of social capital. Residents and social groups appear to be more isolated, and there was a distinct lack of civic engagement by both ECC employees and other community members. Unlike WCC, I could not clearly distinguish between ECC participants' civic and work-related interactions. In addition, participants rarely discussed their personal and civic engagement, giving the impression that they compartmentalized the interactions. Civic isolation makes it difficult for the college to build strong relationships and trust among constituents, which may negatively impact the public's perception of ECC. More than one ECC participant discussed community college stigma, but the issue was never discussed with WCC constituents. Although they may occur, I did not document any regular meetings between ECC and external partners (e.g., industry partners, economic developers, K12). It appears that all communication occurs informally or during sporadic meetings.

Poverty, Basic Needs, and Transportation

Both WCC and ECC discussed the impact of poverty on their communities. Both colleges have programs in place to assist students with poverty-related issues. This includes resources to assist students with basic needs, especially food and health care. Food insecurity is an issue in both counties and colleges that have created on-campus food banks that provide sustenance for students and their families. WCC provides students and their families with telehealth medicine, while ECC provides access to virtual mental health resources and connects students to the local health department. Both communities have health concerns. Western County struggles with addiction issues, while Eastern County battles with obesity. WCC and ECC discussed efforts

they make to combat these issues. Jesse, a mid-level administrator at WCC, said the county is taking a collaborative approach to this issue:

I think we used to look at that problem like that's their problem, not ours, and now, because so many of our people, and now we're coming together, and we're loving the people to health, instead of condemning them right and left.

WCC supports local recovery rallies and similar events, while some college employees (including Jesse) serve on county-level committees working on the issue. ECC works together with the local health department to provide education on obesity and healthy living. In addition, college allied health students complete clinical time with the health department in their main offices and on their mobile care unit.

Endemic poverty in rural areas is also a problem for both ECC and WCC. Neither county has an extensive public transportation system. However, both counties have a regional service with vans that operate in the mornings and afternoons. These vans will drop citizens off at the college, but they are primarily marketed for helping people get to doctors' appointments and grocery stores. Each college has established methods to assist students with transportation to campus. ECC has worked with the college foundation to provide gas cards, while WCC has an arrangement with the K12 system to use school buses. Transportation and distance are a greater problem at ECC for two reasons. Firstly, ECC does not have satellite operations, so all residents must travel to the main campus for service. WCC has small satellite offices in other parts of the county. Secondly, unlike WCC, the ECC campus is not centrally located within the county. Some residents must travel 40 miles to the ECC campus, whereas the farthest points away from WCC are 25 miles from the main campus. The provision of gas cards to students provides a

temporary solution to a larger problem. However, it is not a sustainable solution, nor does it enable ECC to expand its reach and to adequately cover the entire service area.

Regional Collaboration

WCC has successfully established regional collaborations with partners from other counties. ECC is beginning to explore regional collaborations; however, the approach is severely impaired by distance. For example, ECC recognizes there is a need for truck drivers in the area; however, the college does not have a truck driver training program. ECC and other area community colleges are working collaboratively to create a regional approach to meet the demand. However, the distance between students and the trucks is a large impediment.

Once they're ready for that truck driving experience, it's a minimum of 45 minutes' drive to even get to where a truck is. And we're talking about, often, people who don't have transportation. So, how do we do all of that? And is it doable? We just haven't quite figure it all out yet" (ECC President).

ECC continues to work to provide opportunities, however, the difficulties associated with rurality make it an arduous task.

Summary

This chapter presents the findings of my study. Although both rural and comparable in size, WCC and ECC exist within very different social ecosystems. The community served by WCC has a rich culture and a social fabric that self-perpetuates community social capital. There is a strong desire among the college and community members to initiate and follow through on activities that will improve the social environment for all residents of the area. In this environment, WCC thrives as an educational institution and as a partner in numerous robust relationships. The college is highly integrated and is an anchor in the community. ECC operates

within a community that is not focused on communal values and does not exhibit a widespread strong desire to collaborate. There are more social silos, less civic engagement, and low levels of community social capital. ECC leaders are working to shape the college culture and to develop community social capital; however, it is a new initiative that has not had the time to produce results. Without help from other community members and partners, ECC may struggle to significantly increase social capital county-wide.

The next and final chapter of this dissertation will summarize the study then discuss interpretation and implications of these findings.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Chapter V summarizes Chapters I through IV, then situates my research with extant literature on the topic. This chapter presents my conclusions and recommendations, particularly as they apply to community college scholars and practitioners, rural political leaders, and funding agencies. Chapter V concludes with suggestions for future research.

Background

Rural community colleges serve their communities in many ways outside of the classroom. These institutions were charged with operating as cultural and civic centers by the Truman Commission in 1947 (Vaughan, 2006). Today, rural NC community colleges struggle with underfunding but are critical social institutions that build social capital in their areas (Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, 2016; Reed, 2019). There is a need to understand the role of rural community colleges as social capital architects in an era of increased fiscal accountability. Such information is necessary if colleges are to advocate and receive funding for the extensive value they provide their community outside of the classroom. However, the information can be challenging to measure and report (Thomas, 2013). This study addresses the gap in the current literature regarding rural community colleges' role in social capital development.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

This study sought to better understand rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do rural community colleges promote community social capital development?

2. What are community partners' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development?
3. What are community college leaders' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development?

In the last decade, few studies have discussed the community development role of community colleges. The current study was designed to gain insight into the lived experiences of rural community college stakeholders and their perceptions of the impacts of a community college in rural areas. This research helps fill the gap in modern community college literature related to the community-building function of institutions, particularly those that serve rural areas. This research will be of interest to rural community college leaders, administrators, and political leaders. Particularly, individuals who seek to strengthen local ecosystems and those who value community-based activities. The outcomes of this study will help practitioners and academics who seek to understand effective strategies that are employable by college leadership to unite internal and external stakeholders in pursuit of a common goal. The current study will also assist institutional leaders who seek to enhance their roles as community conveners and social capital developers. College leaders, administrators, and funding entities should be interested in identifying how colleges impact their community beyond what is evaluated through traditional performance and enrollment-based funding models.

Review of the Methodology

This study utilized a multiple case study methodology and a social constructivist research paradigm. Interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were used to assess the research questions through a social capital theoretical lens based on Weaver's (2018) collective action framework. Two rural community colleges, one in North Carolina's eastern region (Eastern

Community College or ECC) and one in the western area (Western Community College or WCC), were matched based on several factors (e.g., comparable student enrollment, number of employees, and single county service area).

The current study analyzed the data from interviews and focus groups, as well as documents (including digital content), to understand the college's impact on community social capital development. Cases were bound by time (July 2021-June 2022) and their designation as rural colleges within the North Carolina Community College System. Document analysis of digital material (e.g., websites, meeting minutes, etc.) and conversations with stakeholders (both internal and external) provided me with a heightened understanding of the case colleges, stakeholder perceptions, and community social capital development activity. Internal college stakeholders comprised individuals employed by the college, including the president, public relations officer, and mid-level administrators. External stakeholders consisted of individuals who were not employed by the college but had a robust understanding of the college's community involvement. This group included members of the board of trustees, the foundation board, and representatives from organizations who regularly partner with the college (as identified through document analysis). Study participants were selected from each location using purposive criterion sampling, then interviewed individually or as part of a focus group.

Data analysis included two cycles of coding using both deductive (descriptive) and inductive (pattern) methods. The initial analysis focused on a within-case analysis of each college. The goal was to identify the trends or themes that emerged when all data associated with each case were combined. This within-case analysis provided a broad overview of each institution and a better understanding of the role of the college (case) in community social capital development. The result

was a well-rounded picture of each case using Weaver's (2018) collective action framework. Once this was completed, cross-case analysis was used to address each research question.

Summary of the Major Findings

The findings of this study confirm that rural areas do not have consistent levels of community social capital, and community engagement differs greatly among rural community colleges. In particular, I identified considerable differences in the level of community social capital surrounding WCC and ECC. Western Community College is situated in a community with extensive civic engagement and a unified collective desire to support one another. The college is heavily engaged in robust, well-established, inclusive partnerships that address the community's needs. Eastern Community College is in a community that does not have strong social bonds or an abundance of social capital. Residents and social groups appear to be more isolated, and there was a distinct lack of civic engagement by both ECC employees and other community members.

The research revealed a breadth of rural community college community engagement efforts. These activities can be classified by the college's role either as a support for a program that another partner initiates, an activity where the college shares leadership with another party, or an activity that the college creates and leads. Both colleges support community partner programs by participating in local festivals and both build bonding capital by maintaining an open campus and allowing outside groups to utilize college facilities such as the grounds and auditorium. Western Community College is more extensively involved in shared leadership activities with partners in their community. This includes several regularly scheduled meetings with partner organizations such as K12, county leaders, and business partners. The institution also provides physical space for community partners and acts as the fiscal agent for a local non-

profit. In addition, WCC hosts two innovative cooperative high schools and is part of multiple regional consortiums. In comparison, ECC has a robust and recent partnership with a local small business that runs a coffee shop on campus, hosts one cooperative innovative high school, and has a leadership role in developing the county's strategic plan. Eastern Community College hosts many events on campus, each event targets different audiences and can be classified as individual, unidirectional outreach efforts that support bonding capital development. The community engagement efforts led by WCC are more diverse, extensive, and bidirectional. College-led actions at WCC have a longer duration and do not all occur on the college campus. WCC social capital activities stimulate bonding and bridging capital development among community members. Overall, the breadth and diversity of WCC's community engagement have increased the college's impact on community social capital development, supporting the development of a stronger and more resilient community.

The second research question focused on community partners' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development. I found participants at WCC were highly versed in the college's comprehensive mission and breadth of college involvement in the community. External WCC participants perceived the college as integral to community success and described the institution as proactive, collaborative, and eager to work for the greater good of the area. Participants from ECC did not express an understanding of the comprehensive community college mission. Community partners said that they felt the college was there whenever needed. The results of the current study suggest a link between the college's inability to demonstrate relationships with outside parties and their resulting lack of awareness of the range of its capabilities.

The findings generated by research question three focused on community college leaders' perceptions of the community college's role and effectiveness as a partner in community social capital development. Research participants from WCC indicated they perceive community enrichment as a priority and desire to create a strong local ecosystem. Community enrichment is articulated in the college mission and values and is deeply embedded in the college culture. Internal stakeholders are leaders within the college and the community at large. They expressed an overwhelming desire to ensure their work at WCC supported the greater community good through providing basic needs, education, workforce development, or civic involvement. For them, their job at the college is an extension of their role as active members of the community where they live. College leaders feel they are effective community development partners; however, they are not complacent and are constantly looking for ways to improve. College leaders at ECC expressed a desire to improve the lives of those in their community; however, the efforts appear to be foundational and in the early stages of cultural indoctrination. ECC is focused on efforts to build bonding social capital through community outreach events.

Rural Community Concerns

Eastern and Western Community Colleges are hundreds of miles apart, yet they share some of the same struggles. Residents of both counties struggle with internet access and limited mass media and rely on word of mouth to reach their constituents. Word of mouth relies on social connection; therefore, it is a more effective strategy in areas with existing social capital. Consequently, the strategy is more effective for WCC than ECC. Participants from both WCC and ECC discussed the impact of poverty on their communities. Both colleges have programs in place to assist students with poverty-related issues. This includes resources to assist students with basic needs, especially food and health care. Both communities have health concerns. Western

County struggles with addiction issues, while Eastern County battles with obesity. Endemic poverty in rural areas is also a problem for ECC and WCC. Neither county has an extensive public transportation system. Each college has established methods to assist students with transportation to campus. ECC has worked with the college foundation and provides gas cards, while WCC has an arrangement with the K12 system to use school buses.

Findings Related to the Literature

Community colleges are well suited to address citizen concerns and widespread community problems due to physical location and intimate relationships with local people, culture, and civic initiatives (Boone, 1992; Mathews, 2016). Previous studies have focused on the impact of rural community colleges on human capital development, quality of life, and identity formation (Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Reed, 2019; Thomas, 2013). Each of these benefits is peripherally associated with social capital theory; however, there is a need for more research on the role of community colleges in social capital development. This study's thick descriptions and relationship to the extant literature can be consolidated into three primary themes: community college mission, stronger partnerships create more social capital, types of partnerships and levels of capital, and spillover effects.

Community College Mission and Social Capital

The community college mission sets the foundation for institutional operations. Community colleges are expected to provide a comprehensive program at a low price to their local communities (Cohen et al., 2014; Vaughan, 2006). Since the Truman Commission Report (1947), the mission of community colleges has changed very little; however, the emphasis on different hallmarks of the mission has fluctuated over time (Cohen et al., 2014; Vaughan, 1988). Boone (1992) indicated college missions are comprised of two concentric parts. The core of the

mission contains operational functions that differentiate the college as an institute of higher education. This includes instruction as well as student services such as admissions and advising. Boone (1992) described the outer region of the mission as the edge, or the area the college interacts with its local community, working collaboratively to identify and fulfill the needs of its service area (Boone, 1992). The current study focused on edge activities, where most community-level social capital development occurs.

Consistent with Harbour (2014), the two colleges in the current study have unique institutional mission statements and normative visions guiding the college operations. In addition, both colleges operate in areas with different levels of community social capital. ECC serves a county that did not demonstrate notable social capital and, as predicted by Flora et al. (2018), lacked collaborative relationships that foster community action. ECC struggles in this environment to form the connections needed to expand edge activity, resulting in an institutional focus on the mission core. That said, recent changes at ECC (including a new mission statement and strategic plan) indicate the college intends to pursue more edge activity. ECC is not alone, as Boone (1992) found it rare that colleges consistently and efficiently deal with the activities on the edge of the mission. It is more common for colleges to focus on the core mission rather than collaborating with others to address larger social issues (Boone, 1992).

Unlike ECC, Western Community College operates in an area with a wealth of community social capital. The current study supports Flora et al.'s (2018) assertion that high levels of social capital breed trust, communication, and collective action based on the common good. WCC is heavily engaged in external partnerships and exhibited perseverance in pursuit of its mission to "enrich the community" (WCC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, 2022). This mission is thoroughly embedded in institutional operations and is echoed in the college culture. Consistent

with this institutional mission, WCC demonstrated significant edge activity that fosters bonding and bridging capital.

Edge Activity Builds Social Capital

Cohen et al. (2014) and Vaughan (1997) reported that edge activity helps colleges to stay abreast of the evolving social, economic, technological, and political environments that can change the local community's needs. Through edge activity, WCC has created an extensive social network with strong relationships that enable the college to anticipate and quickly respond to changes in community needs. WCC's extensive social network demonstrates the essential components that manifest social capital: trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and networks (Coleman, 1990; Goodwin, 2003; Makridis & Wu, 2021; Putnam, 1995; Reimer et al., 2008). In addition, WCC's activities are consistent with the literature on bonding and bridging capital (e.g., Flora et al., 2018 and Weaver, 2018); therefore, the current study supports the notion that edge activity is aligned with the formation of social capital. Examples of edge activity that support this assertion are the creation of a healthcare program consortium, an economic development grant consortium, and a ecotourism consortium.

Healthcare Program Consortium

Through edge activity, WCC has improved its ability to attain core mission objectives. WCC and two other small rural colleges were asked to increase the number of graduating nurses, yet none of the colleges were able to afford the startup costs of a program. Through regional collaboration, all three schools could combine efforts, share costs, and respond to industry needs. The healthcare program consortium enabled these three colleges to address a regional shortage of healthcare workers without the confinement of political boundaries such as college service areas. The shared resources, collective action, and duration of this partnership align with the Centers

for Disease Control's (2011) and Kinsella-Meier and Gala's (2016) descriptions of relationships that create more social capital. The healthcare program consortium supports Sawhill (2020), who acknowledged that relationships bring people together in solidarity and are a resource for collective action that delivers value to society. In this instance, societal benefits include social mobility for students who complete the program and benefits to healthcare systems that need highly skilled workers. In addition, the increase in local healthcare graduates is expected to improve healthy behaviors in rural areas that experience persistent poor health outcomes (Belfield & Bailey, 2011; Rush-Marlowe, 2021). The current study also supports the findings of Williams (2002), who identified that pooled resources between nearby institutions facilitates the creation of community development initiatives that would not have been possible for one college to undertake on its own.

Economic Grant Consortium

The success of this healthcare program consortium led to the pursuit of grant funding and a continued interinstitutional partnership as part of the Economic Grant Consortium. Through edge activity with the workforce pipeline committee, WCC sought (and was awarded) a federal grant. WCC and its partners will address a regional skills gap through the grant. They will provide traditionally underserved residents with the necessary education, training, financial assistance, and student support services for successful employment. According to the president of the partner college, the program breaks down silos and leverages collaboration to address the needs of residents. The program is expected to promote social mobility for those who participate and fill a community need for highly skilled workers. The premise of the grant consortium is aligned with Sawhill's (2020) findings that relationships create ties, promote solidarity, and develop trust in others and institutions. Through this project, WCC is reinforcing bridging capital

with the sister community college (from the healthcare program consortium) and other local community partners (e.g., North Carolina's state workforce development system) while creating bridging capital with leaders of the local Latinx non-profit. In keeping with Myran (1969), this partnership is expected to build institutional legitimacy. The project also facilitates bonding capital between the citizens of historically underserved communities and the two community colleges. The consortium will also provide historically underserved individuals with increased access to resources and social credentials (Lin, 2002).

Ecotourism Consortium

After decades of manufacturing closures, a small town in the WCC service area was left directionless. In 2019, when the last large furniture manufacturer closed, laying off 75% of its employees, WCC and other community partners united and developed a plan to diversify the local economy. Leveraging existing social capital, the group developed a strategic plan that included creating a new college program, economic development, small business incubation, and support from a federal agency. The response created community hope and is transforming a small town with a devastated economy into one with more economic resilience. Consistent with Myran (1969), WCC and partners' nimble responsiveness and ability to anticipate and prepare for future needs improve the partners' legitimacy. The community partnership strengthened bonds between WCC and other community agencies. These interactions increased WCC's bridging capital, creating a stock that will help the college identify and quickly respond to community needs again in the future (Helliwell et al., 2017).

ECC's and WCC's edge activity is congruent with extant literature on edge activity and social capital development. ECC, which demonstrated limited edge activity, was part of a community with low social capital. WCC, which demonstrated significant edge activity, was part

of a community with high social capital. What is unknown is whether WCC's increased edge activity is a precursor to extant social capital or is the result of existing social capital. The distinction of which came first could clarify differences in edge activity and community social capital at the two institutions studied. Previous researchers have also reported difficulty differentiating between social capital creation and social capital stocks (Reimer et al., 2008).

Fiscal Strain and Reductions in Mission Compliance

Chronic federal and state funding reductions have forced community colleges to meet their Truman Commission (1947) mission with fewer resources and under greater scrutiny (Rush-Marlowe, 2021; Trent & Pollard, 2019). The situation has been particularly difficult for rural community colleges, which have higher operational costs (per FTE) and serve areas of greater need (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). The current study adds to the discourse on this topic and provides evidence to support the impacts on community social capital development. One example is the closure of ECC's only satellite campus, which reduced the college's ability to serve community members who live the greatest distance from the main campus. Other examples include the loss of non-credit offerings, including adult enrichment and public safety courses.

Eastern Community College was forced to discontinue its adult enrichment program when a cost-benefit analysis indicated that enrollment was insufficient to justify the position. In rural areas, community colleges are often the primary source of cultural activity, and the loss of adult enrichment classes creates a void in these communities. The loss of the adult enrichment program impacts the college's ability to provide cultural offerings and meet the expectations for a comprehensive curriculum set forth by the Truman Commission (1947). Miller and Kissinger (2007) noted the loss of cultural and leisure activities at rural community colleges reduces identity formation, inhibits the college's ability to serve all community members, and reduces

exposure to different people and ideas. Loss of adult enrichment at ECC reduces community exposure to cultural activity and inhibits community social capital development.

Eastern Community College also demonstrated the impact of fiscal strain on rural colleges through their public safety training. Eastern County has struggled to recruit volunteers for local public safety positions (e.g., fire and emergency medical). The situation is dire, as a participant in the current study stated that some Eastern County public service departments struggle to remain functional. The loss of volunteers has made it difficult for ECC to have enough participants to justify training the public safety volunteers. Consequently, they have reduced their offerings, making it more difficult for volunteers to attain the training necessary to protect the community and respond to emergencies.

Stronger Partnerships Create More Social Capital

The Western Community College (WCC) service area underwent a cultural shift a decade ago when several community members noted a disconnect within the constituency and took action to increase collaboration among citizens and groups. Responding to the call to action, WCC joined in the effort and quickly assumed an integral role, showcasing its leaders' willingness to be flexible and responsive to community needs. Brooks, a college trustee and foundation board member, describes WCC as "a partner who's not stagnant and a willingness to listen and say, 'why not' rather than 'why.'" The WCC leaders' attentiveness to area needs and openness to try new things makes them valued community partners. The result has been positive, and, as mid-level administrator Jesse explains, the community is now "booming like we never had before." The success demonstrated by the collaboration between WCC and its service area echoes the findings of The Centers for Disease Control (2011), who found that strong

partnerships, trust, communication, and greater community involvement increase community impact.

Interactions, whether in-person or otherwise, play a crucial role in social capital development (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). The current study highlights WCC's vital role in successful community partnerships, supported by research findings. WCC regularly met and actively engaged local partners through its membership in cooperative groups such as the education committee, economic pipeline committee, and small business associations. According to Emari, WCC President, these meetings have fostered seamless relationships between the college, civic organizations, community leaders, and non-profit groups, creating some of the most robust partnerships he's ever seen. The Western County partnerships increased the groups' ability to impact their community and contributed to the progressive development of social capital (Flora et al., 2018). The State of North Carolina recognized the strength of the Western County partnerships with the presentation of a significant statewide award.

The current study also supports the findings of Kinsella-Meier and Gala (2016). The authors found that spending more time together promotes shared goals, processes, and expectations, which increase interdependency between partners. This is demonstrated by the WCC education committee's partnerships, leading to the formation of the joint K12 and community college Public Services Academy. This partnership is considered one of the strongest possible relationships due to its complexity, strong bidirectionality, shared goals, and long-term impact (Kinsella-Meier & Gala, 2016; The Centers for Disease Control, 2011).

Spillover Effects of a Rural Community College

Quality of life has been associated with the fulfillment of needs, safety, and opportunity (Reed, 2019). Quality of life in a rural area is impacted by a community's friendliness, natural

environment, and accessibility to the opportunities found in more populated areas (Reed, 2019; Thomas, 2013). Consistent with the work of Reed (2019) and Miller and Tuttle (2007), the findings of the present study indicate that WCC's extensive community and civic engagement positively impact community members' quality of life and desire to live in the area. WCC promotes positive quality of life through participation in local social events such as festivals, scholarly lectures, and cultural events. WCC also supports the concept when it allows the community to use facilities, including the community walking trail. WCC's impact on quality of life was emphasized by participants who described the college as a place of common ground that provides a sense of unity, belonging, and purpose.

Basic Needs

Community colleges are more than a purveyor of scholarship; they also have an understated impact on the communities they serve (Miller & Deggs, 2012). Rural community colleges are recognized as organizations that strive to be all things to all people (Cavan, 1995; Williams, 2013). Rising to this challenge can be particularly difficult in rural areas, where poverty is endemic and the needs are significant (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). WCC and ECC recognize their students' struggles and have developed programs to support their basic needs. Both colleges have food pantries on campus that provide necessities to nourish students and their immediate families. WCC offers students and their family members access to telehealth services and an on-campus clothing bank. WCC and ECC staff recognize that helping students' families helps to alleviate student stress and reduces their barriers to success. Reed (2019) noted that the fulfillment of needs is foundational to quality of life in a rural area. The author concluded that community colleges contribute broadly to quality of life. However, they did not consider basic

needs. The current study extends Reed's (2019) findings to demonstrate that community colleges contribute to the quality of life by helping students meet basic needs.

Previous scholars have stated that transportation in rural areas has improved (Flora et al., 2018), while others noted the lack of public transportation in rural areas (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). The current study is in conversation with both reports, as fledgling public transportation systems serve both Eastern County and Western County; however, they primarily assist with doctor visits and trips to the grocery store. Donations to the ECC foundation enable the institution to provide gas cards to students in need, whereas, WCC has leveraged its relationship with K12 to establish a transportation system using school buses to transport college students. The strong partnership between WCC and K12 has allowed the college to leverage its social capital and reduce a community barrier to social mobility.

Self-Identity

Western Community College has established connections with numerous community partners and has developed strong relationships with community members. Frequent early interactions with the college facilities, faculty, and staff have impacted individuals' perceptions of the college and led to a greater appreciation of higher education (Miller & Tuttle, 2006). Programs such as the elementary shoe drive, kids' zone (during festivals), and summer camps facilitate frequent interactions with youth. The findings of the current study support the findings of Miller and Tuttle (2006). For example, through the cooperative innovative high school program, WCC and its K12 partner have built a strong rapport with the Latinx populations. In doing so, they have increased graduation rates for students of color and reduced the educational gap to such a point that white males are the largest at-risk population. The partnership between WCC and people of color in the community are anticipated to grow with the recent acquisition of

grant funds and the initiation of the economic development grant consortium. This partnership resulted in the perception of educational institutions being Latinx allies and champions within that community.

In keeping with Miller and Tuttle (2006), my findings show that ECC is working to establish relationships with younger students. The college demonstrated efforts to engage youth through events such as a vehicle rodeo, back to school open house, and STEM outreach. The new coffee shop on campus has demonstrated an ability to draw high school students to campus, which will impact these students' perceptions of the college and higher education.

Discussion

Rural community colleges' missions position them as anchors in their community. Their mission allows them to have a wide social circle and stimulate community social capital development. A college's impact on community social capital is related to the amount of college activity at the edge of its mission. More edge activity indicates the college is more engaged with external partners and, thus, has a greater impact on social capital development. In addition, increased edge activity enables a college to respond to community needs more nimbly as it fulfills its core mission. In keeping with previous research (e.g., Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, 2016; Rush-Marlowe, 2021), this study finds rural public community colleges struggle with inconsistent state funding, and the current study extends the literature to include the impact funding has on colleges' ability to fulfill the mission as originally described by the Truman Commission in 1947. The Truman Commission Report (1947) called for a nationwide system of two-year colleges offering a comprehensive curriculum at little or no tuition and serving a specific service region's economic, workforce, and community development needs. Lack of state funding and a perceived need to prioritize other aspects of the mission have

caused many colleges to reduce their role as community developers. Rural communities need community social capital if they are to be responsive, resilient, and sustainable. In order to fulfill their Truman Commission (1947) charge, community colleges must have the fiscal resources needed to provide support to, and engage with, their community in ways that extend beyond the classroom.

The current study supports the literature related to the spillover effects of colleges regarding the quality of life and self-identity (e.g., Miller & Tuttle, 2007). In particular, WCC and ECC demonstrated they enhance the quality of life by providing social events, scholarly events, and youth educational opportunities. The current study also supports the work of Miller and Tuttle (2006), who determined that youth educational events help to impact individuals' perceptions of college and increase their appreciation for higher education. Both WCC and ECC have established programs designed to engage youth and ensure they are exposed to their college multiple times as they mature. Through such interactions, WCC has successfully increased the appreciation for education among people of color. As a result of their efforts, WCC has reduced the educational gap in their county and is considered a champion for the Latinx community.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Leaders

The current study provides information about the role of rural of North Carolina community colleges in social capital development. Rural community college leaders must balance their core and edge mission if they are to completely fulfill their original Truman Commission (1947) charge. The core mission, to provide education, establishes the college as an institute of higher education. In contrast, the edge of the college mission is where institutions interact with society most frequently, carry out needs analyses, and allocate resources to meet the diverse requirements of the community. In rural areas, community colleges are often the primary

post-secondary option for students and play a critical role as community conveners. Community social capital in rural areas provides a foundation for collaboration. In particular, the current study found a relationship between social capital and the revitalization of a rural town after a major employer downsized and laid off 75% of the employees. Existing community social capital enabled the college and other stakeholders to respond swiftly, and as a result, the town is thriving. Through this example, the current supported previous research which found that colleges with more activity along the edge of their mission generate more community social capital and are well-positioned to increase local educational attainment and rejuvenate struggling rural areas. Rural areas struggle with large, persistent issues such as socioeconomic disparity, poor health, lack of broadband, low educational attainment, and high unemployment. The current study demonstrates such obstacles can be mediated through community social capital, thus supporting rural community revitalization. It is suggested that community stakeholders, including college leaders, foster partnerships and pursue opportunities for collaboration to cultivate bonding and bridging social capital in their areas.

To create community social capital, colleges need to focus on relationship development, which takes time and human resources. Federal and state funding reductions have continually underfunded American community colleges (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). Persistent budget reductions and fiscal tension have been particularly difficult for rural community colleges, where the per-pupil cost for education and wrap-around services is higher than their non-rural counterparts (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). Many rural North Carolina colleges have limited capacity to financially support initiatives not directly tied to enrollment and student services. As a result, rural colleges struggle to fund the resources necessary for edge activity and community social capital development. North Carolina community colleges are recognized for their core mission as

educational institutions; however, their role as community builders is less pronounced and often overlooked. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that college presidents and community leaders articulate the value of colleges not only for their role in economic and workforce development but also as agents of community development who hold immense promise for the future of rural North Carolina.

The findings of the current study indicate the act of building community social capital will benefit the college in multiple ways. Increased social capital will expand a college's web of contacts and build trust amongst community partners. The social capital will also function to expand the understanding of business and civic leaders, as well as the general public, regarding the breadth of college opportunities, including its multifaceted impact on local capital. This, in turn, will strengthen the voice of college advocates who lobby for increased college allocations from elected officials. It is suggested that presidents remind partners, the public, and policymakers of the college's ability to help shape the area's future and enable it to compete with regional suburban and urban counterparts.

The findings of the current study indicate that stronger partnerships are associated with frequent face-to-face interactions, shared goals, clear expectations, and interdependency. Community partners who participated in such meetings expressed more knowledge of college engagement, enthusiasm for the institution, and great support for the college. As a result, college leaders should frequently meet with a variety of diverse civic and business leaders. In particular, rural NC college presidents should consider establishing monthly or bimonthly regular meetings with K12 executive leaders and county government officials to build and preserve trust and reciprocity. Data from the current study established the high valuation of regular joint meetings

between community college presidents, K12 leadership, and county officials; however, despite the value placed, not all presidents participate in such meetings.

The current study documented one college successfully establishing this recurring meeting. Based on that feedback from stakeholders who attend that meeting regularly, it is suggested that the agenda be minimal and focused on discussing each organization's activity, needs, and vision. College and K12 leaders expressed the importance of transparency and the significance of articulating their institution's vision and perceived needs. Participants in the current study indicated the meetings provide an opportunity for educational leaders to demonstrate to county officials how they are using county funds and to keep them abreast of both short- and long-term needs. The meetings are perceived by both internal and external college affiliates as extremely beneficial and have led to multiple large-scale partnerships with high levels of interagency interdependence. These meetings should supplement (not supplant) regular meetings between college administrators (e.g., Deans and Program Directors), industry partners, and community partners focused on educational alignment, student job placement, and similar managerial tasks.

Senior college leaders should foster a college culture of service. This will empower college employees at all levels to become more involved and will expand the college's community connectivity. The current study found increased community engagement among college employees when they were able to mingle personal, civic engagement, and college duties (e.g., employees helping to park cars on campus and facilitating public lectures during a large local festival or employees leading K12 outreach events on a topic they are passionate about). When college-organized extracurricular activities align with the intrinsic values of college employees, they are more willing to volunteer. Participants in the current study indicated they do

not receive incentives from their employers for extracurricular community involvement. College culture appears to be the driving force in employees' desire and willingness to participate in community engagement efforts on behalf of the college. Driven by a college culture of service and community involvement, WCC participants cultivated significant social capital and deep community roots. Their involvement helps them to stay abreast of community happenings, provides a continuous evaluation of community needs, and enables college representatives to connect and build relationships with potential partners. Such interactions develop a cadre of college ambassadors who extend the college's social network. It is recommended that these relationships be leveraged to allow the community college to identify and address a greater variety of community needs. In the event community needs are beyond the institutional mission's scope, the college's larger social network will enable it to act as a liaison to connect community needs with external partners whose work may better align.

The community development role of the community college has, perhaps, never been needed more in rural America than it is today. Still, many rural community colleges cannot fully execute this role due to a lack of state funding and leaders who prioritize the educational core of the mission. There is pressure to prioritize workforce programming, which can bring more immediate benefits to local citizens and businesses. Building social capital takes time and sustained effort, and the rewards are not always immediately observable. Community colleges are arguably the best candidates to revitalize rural areas, preventing *brain drain* and acting as a liaison and link to unite society and battle the large social problems that plague them. Leaders of North Carolina's community colleges should push for changes to the state's funding formulas that would acknowledge and support these institutions' community service activities outside of the classroom.

Recommendations for Further Research

The current study provides an initial review of rural NC community colleges' role in community social capital development. Analysis of empirical data from this research suggests a relationship between the level of community social capital and community college edge activity in rural areas. Although this is a great start, the literature gap is large. The following outlines suggestions for future research.

- Repeat the current study in other states. Assess other American community colleges and rural areas to gather additional evidence of the relationship between college edge activity and community social capital.
- A longitudinal study with quantitative measures of social capital and community college edge activity would assist with the determination of the sequent relationship between college involvement, capital development, and capital stock.
- Additional studies comparing college edge activity and community social capital in areas of varying population density would help clarify community colleges' relative impact on social capital development.
- The effect of philanthropy on the growth of social capital in communities was not considered in the current study. Philanthropic donations could help defray the expense of college-edge events and promote the growth of social capital in the region. Additional indicators for philanthropic program evaluation would be provided by this research.
- Each mission statement developed by the two colleges employed in this study articulated a different set of institutional goals. In addition, the levels of community social capital varied between institutions. The function of mission statements in

colleges and their impact on college operations have been studied by past researchers (e.g., Ayers, 2017). Future studies should examine how college mission statements have changed over time and how they relate to the creation of social capital in the local community.

- The current study indicates there a relationship between a college's level of social capital, community engagement (edge activity), and its ability to respond quickly to community needs. More research is necessary to ascertain if this relationship is unique to the institution used for this study or if it is valid for other community colleges. Scholars, practitioners, and political leaders could benefit from future research into the connection between community social capital, community college engagement, and rural areas' rebound after significant disruptions (e.g., major losses of employment and natural disasters). Such research could assist local leaders with the acquisition of resources necessary to increase rural communities' resilience to debilitating events.

Conclusion

The Truman Commission (1947) provided an overview of expectations for comprehensive community colleges. As time has progressed, these institutions have faced fiscal constraints that have challenged their ability to fulfill their comprehensive mission. Such challenges are exacerbated in rural areas where community colleges are among the largest and most prominent public institutions. The current study provides insight into the impact of rural NC community colleges on local stocks of community social capital. This research rejuvenates the work of past scholars who argued for the comprehensive community college mission. In addition, it provides evidence of the value of rural college engagement on rural citizens' quality

of life as well as the impact of the college on rural community success and resilience. Rural areas need active, engaged community colleges to compete with their suburban and urban counterparts. Community colleges are well positioned to be social capital architects that liaise and unite their community; however, college leaders need to speak publicly to build the political support necessary to advocate for and attain the fiscal support needed to fulfill their comprehensive mission.

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APPENDIX A

Research Question (RQ) and Data Collection Method Alignment

| | Interviews with | | Focus Groups with | | Document analysis |
|------|---|--|----------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| | College President and Community Relations Liaison | College Board of Trustees and Foundation Board | Mid-level college administrators | Community members who are college affiliated | |
| RQ 1 | 2,4,5,8,9 | 2,4,5,8,10 | 2,3,4,7 | 2,3,6 | ☑ |
| RQ 2 | ----- | 3,4,7 | ----- | 3,4,5 | ☑ |
| RQ 3 | 3,5,7 | ----- | 4,5,6 | ----- | ☑ |

Note. The numbers in each column represent the protocol question that addresses the RQ.

Checkmark indicates the data collection method will be used to address the RQ.

APPENDIX B

Community College Leader Interview Protocol

Opening Script

Welcome. My name is Tanya McGhee, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Community College Leadership program at Old Dominion University. My dissertation research focuses on community colleges and social capital development. I appreciate your willingness to be interviewed. Our discussion today is expected to last less than one hour. With your permission, I will record this interview. Both you and your college will be anonymous during transcription, analysis, and all research-related write-ups. Your college will be referred to by its geographic location (either Eastern or Western Community College), and a pseudonym will be used to refer to you. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. The questions prompt discussion, and I encourage you to answer however you are comfortable. If you have questions or add additional comments, please do so. If you become uncomfortable, we can stop the interview at any point.

I have emailed you a copy of the informed consent form, which you have returned to me with your signature. Do you have any unresolved questions about the form or our discussion today?

The purpose of this research is to understand better rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. For this study, social capital represents collaborative relationships that create something more significant than the sum of the individual parts.

You were selected for this interview because you are one of the primary information liaisons to the external college community.

Before we begin, please select a pseudonym and change your screen name. To change your screen name: find your picture on the screen, click on your name, and select rename.

Okay, now that everyone has changed their name, I will now begin the recording (start recording)

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Ask interview questions

1. What is your position with the community college? How many years have you been associated/employed at the college? Do you have experience at any other community colleges? If so, please describe.
2. Tell me some of the ways community college X is integrated into the greater (service area) community.
 - a. How often would you estimate the average community member visits the campus?
 - b. What draws them to the campus?
3. How important is it for a community college to facilitate relationship development between community groups? Why?
 - a. Would you have had the same answer before the pandemic?
4. Who at the college is responsible for identifying, building, and supporting community relationships?
 - a. What do you think motivates individuals to do it?
 - b. Is this a part of their job duties? If not, are there rewards for their service?
 - i. What are the expectations for those individuals?
5. How has the college been the liaison or leader for projects that promote community collaborations?

- a. Do any specific examples come to mind?
 - b. How do you determine if this was successful?
 - c. How has the project been promoted to the community (social media, press release, etc.)
 - d. How effective are these collaborations at bringing together diverse groups?
6. What other avenues should the college pursue to foster relationship development between community groups and the college?
 7. Community colleges' educational opportunities and economic impacts are well known and documented. From your perspective, what other benefits does your college provide to the community?
 8. What community groups does the college struggle to engage?
 - a. How has the college tried to engage these groups?
 9. Tell me about a time you touted the college's ability to pull together diverse groups.
 - a. Who were you with? What did you tell them about?
 - b. Roughly how often do you have conversations like this?

Closing

Thank you for your time today. I will analyze and draw conclusions from my research data in the upcoming months. Once complete, I will send you a copy of the data interpretation and ask you to verify (or correct) my use of your quotes (if applicable) as well as my interpretation of your statements. You will have the opportunity to correct any mistakes or amend your statements.

Do you have any questions, or is there anything else you would like to add?

If you think of anything, please do not hesitate to contact me at XXXXXX@odu.edu, or you can call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Have a wonderful day!

End recording

APPENDIX C

Community College Partner Interview Protocol

Opening Script

Welcome. My name is Tanya McGhee, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Community College Leadership program at Old Dominion University. My dissertation research focuses on community colleges and social capital development. I appreciate your willingness to be interviewed. Our discussion today is expected to last less than one hour. With your permission, I will record this interview. Both you and your college will be anonymous during transcription, analysis, and all research-related write-ups. Your college will be referred to by its geographic location (either Eastern or Western Community College), and a pseudonym will be used to refer to you. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. The questions prompt discussion, and I encourage you to answer however you are comfortable. If you have questions or would like to add additional comments, please do so. If you become uncomfortable, we can stop the interview at any point.

I have emailed you a copy of the informed consent form, which you have returned to me with your signature. Do you have any unresolved questions about the form or our discussion today?

The purpose of this research is to better understand rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. For this study, social capital represents collaborative relationships that create something more significant than the sum of the individual parts.

You were selected for this interview because of your role as a community partner and board member.

Before we begin, please select a pseudonym and change your screen name. To change your screen name: find your picture on the screen, click on your name, and select rename.

Okay, now that everyone has changed their name, I will now begin the recording (start recording)

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Ask interview questions

1. What is your affiliation with the community college? How many years have you been associated with the college?
2. Tell me some of the ways community college X is integrated into the greater (service area) community.
 - a. How often would you estimate the average community member visits the campus?
 - b. What draws them to the campus?
3. How important is it for a community college to facilitate relationship development between community groups? Why?
 - a. Would you have had the same answer before the pandemic?
4. How has the college been the liaison or leader for projects that promote community collaborations?
 - a. Do any specific examples come to mind?
 - b. How did you become aware of these projects (e.g., word of mouth, social media, press release, etc.)?
 - c. How would you determine if the project and collaboration were successful?
 - d. How effective were these collaborations at bringing together diverse groups?

5. What other avenues should the college pursue to foster relationship development between community groups and the college?
6. Roughly how often do you hear or see public information about the college that is NOT an advertisement for the college?
 - a. What was the source? (radio, news, billboard, social media, etc.)
 - b. How did it expand your knowledge of the impact of the college on the community?
7. Community colleges' educational opportunities and economic impacts are well known and documented. From your perspective, what other benefits does your college provide to the community?
8. What community groups does the college struggle to engage?
 - a. How has the college tried to engage these groups?
9. Who at the college should identify, build, and support community relationships?
10. Tell me about a time you touted the college's ability to pull together diverse groups.
 - a. Who were you with? What did you tell them about?
 - b. Roughly how often do you have conversations like this?

Closing

Thank you for your time today. I will analyze and draw conclusions from my research data in the upcoming months. Once complete, I will send you a copy of the data interpretation and ask you to verify (or correct) my use of your quotes (if applicable) as well as my interpretation of your statements. You will have the opportunity to correct any mistakes or amend your statements.

Do you have any questions, or is there anything else you would like to add?

If you think of anything, please do not hesitate to contact me at XXXXXX@odu.edu, or you can call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Have a wonderful day!

End recording

APPENDIX D

Community College Leader Focus Group Protocol

Opening Script

Welcome. My name is Tanya McGhee, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Community College Leadership program at Old Dominion University. My dissertation research focuses on community colleges and social capital development. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this focus group. Our discussion today is expected to last less than one hour. With your permission, I will record this interview. All focus group participants and the college will be anonymous during transcription, analysis, and all research-related write-ups. Your college will be referred to by its geographic location (either Eastern or Western Community College), and a pseudonym will be used to refer to each of you. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. My goal is to use the questions to prompt discussion, and I encourage you to answer however you are comfortable. If you have questions or would like to add additional comments, please do so. If you become uncomfortable, we can stop the interview at any point.

I have emailed each of you a copy of the informed consent form, which you have returned to me with your signature. Do you have any unresolved questions about the form or our discussion today?

The purpose of this research is to understand better rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. For this study, social capital represents collaborative relationships that create something more significant than the sum of the individual parts.

You were selected for this interview because of your mid-level community college administrator role.

Before we begin, please select a pseudonym and change your screen name. To change your screen name: find your picture on the screen, click on your name, and select rename.

Okay, now that everyone has changed their name, I will now begin the recording (start recording)

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Ask protocol questions

1. Let's begin by learning who we have in the group. Could each of you please tell me your:
 - a. preferred pseudonym
 - b. position with the community college
 - c. an estimate of the number of years have you been associated/employed at the college
2. Tell me about how community college X is integrated into the greater (service area) community?
 - a. How often would you estimate the average community member visits the campus?
 - b. What draws them to the campus?
3. Who at the college is responsible for identifying, building, and supporting community relationships?
 - a. What do you think motivates individuals to do it?
 - b. Is this a part of their job duties? If not, are there rewards for their service?
 - i. What are the expectations for those individuals?
4. How has the college been the liaison or leader for projects that promote community collaborations?
 - a. Do any specific examples come to mind?
 - b. How did you determine if this was successful?

- c. How was the project been promoted to the community (social media, press release, etc.)
- 5. Community colleges' educational opportunities and economic impacts are well known and documented. From your perspective, what other benefits does your college provide to the community?
- 6. Roughly how often do you hear or see public information about the college (e.g., news, etc.) that is NOT an advertisement for the college? Where do you see it?
- 7. What other avenues should the college pursue to foster relationship development amongst community members?

Closing

Thank you for your time today. I will analyze and draw conclusions from my research data in the upcoming months. Once complete, I will send you a copy of the data interpretation and ask you to verify (or correct) my use of your quotes (if applicable) as well as my interpretation of your statements. You will have the opportunity to correct any mistakes or amend your statements.

Do you have any questions, or is there anything else you would like to add?

If you think of anything, please do not hesitate to contact me at XXXXXX@odu.edu, or you can call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Have a wonderful day!

End recording

APPENDIX E

Community College Partner Focus Group Protocol

Opening Script

Welcome. My name is Tanya McGhee, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Community College Leadership program at Old Dominion University. My dissertation research focuses on community colleges and social capital development. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this focus group. Our discussion today is expected to last less than one hour. With your permission, I will record this interview. All focus group participants and the college will be anonymous during transcription, analysis, and all research-related write-ups. Your college will be referred to by its geographic location (either Eastern or Western Community College), and a pseudonym will be used to refer to each of you. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. My goal is to use the questions to prompt discussion, and I encourage you to answer however you are comfortable. If you have questions or would like to add additional comments, please do so. If you become uncomfortable, we can stop the interview at any point.

I have emailed each you a copy of the informed consent form, which you have returned to me with your signature. Do you have any unresolved questions about the form or our discussion today?

The purpose of this research is to better understand rural North Carolina community colleges' efforts to develop community social capital and community partners' perceptions of such programs. For this study, social capital represents collaborative relationships that create something more significant than the sum of the individual parts.

You were selected for this interview because of your role as a community college partner.

Before we begin, please select a pseudonym and change your screen name. To change your screen name: find your picture on the screen, click on your name, and select rename.

Okay, now that everyone has changed their name, I will now begin the recording (start recording)

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Ask protocol questions

1. Let's begin by learning who we have in the group. Could each of you please tell me your:
 - a. preferred pseudonym
 - b. position with the community college
 - c. an estimate of the number of years have you been associated/employed at the college
2. Tell me about how community college X is integrated into the greater (service area) community?
 - a. How often would you estimate the average community member visits the campus?
 - b. What draws them to the campus?
3. How has the college been the liaison or leader for projects that promote community collaborations?
 - a. What specific examples come to mind?
 - b. How did you become aware of these projects (e.g., word of mouth, social media, press release, etc.)?
 - c. How would you determine if the project and collaboration were successful?
 - d. How effective were these collaborations at bringing together diverse groups?

4. Community colleges' educational opportunities and economic impacts are well known and documented. From your perspective, what other benefits does your college provide to the community?
5. Roughly how often do you hear or see public information about the college that is NOT for recruitment?
 - a. What was the source? (radio, news, billboard, social media, etc.)
 - b. How did it expand your knowledge of the impact of the college on the community?
6. What other avenues should the college pursue to foster relationship development amongst community members?

Closing

Thank you for your time today. I will analyze and draw conclusions from my research data in the upcoming months. Once complete, I will send you a copy of the data interpretation and ask you to verify (or correct) my use of your quotes (if applicable) as well as my interpretation of your statements. You will have the opportunity to correct any mistakes or amend your statements.

Do you have any questions, or is there anything else you would like to add?

If you think of anything, please do not hesitate to contact me at XXXXXX@odu.edu, or you can call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Have a wonderful day!

End recording

APPENDIX F

Code Book

Based on Weaver (2018)

1. Behavioral Norms and Conventions (these are the core investments into and determinants of a community's aggregate capacity for collective action)
 - a. Social trust
 - i. Built through
 1. Open communication
 2. Repeated social interactions
 - b. Engaged citizenship
 - i. Citizens actively engaged in social action in pursuit of change (regardless of political elections)
 1. Solidarity
 2. Advocacy
 3. Open communication
 4. Democratic activism
 5. Participation in non-electoral decision-making
 6. Participation in voluntary/civil society organizations
 7. Cultural competency and empathy
 8. Leadership training
 - c. Strong reciprocity and empowerment
 - i. Cooperation
 - ii. Trust
 - iii. Active engagement in the affairs
 - iv. Defending the community
 - v. Punishing those who are not following community behavioral norms
 - vi. Expects others to reciprocate – no free riders
 - vii. Reciprocates or upholds in social interactions (does not free ride)
 - viii. Consciously sanctions free riders
 - ix. Citizens are able to participate in “rule-setting, planning, and decision-making processes”
2. Mobilizing for collective action (network/group structures that exist in communities)
 - a. Bonding network – connections between people with shared identity (religion, ethnicity, or place-based identity)
 - i. Defined group boundaries (e.g., “west side of town”, housing subdivision)
 - ii. People “know one another”
 - iii. People know who is a part of their community and who is not
 - iv. Events or festivals
 - b. Bridging networks (connections between dissimilar entities)
 - i. Horizontal (same community context tied together)
 - ii. Vertical -aka linking networks (community entities are tied to decision-making authorities)

APPENDIX G

Informed Consent Document

PROJECT TITLE: The role and contribution of rural North Carolina community colleges in community social capital development

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say YES or NO to participation in this research and to record the consent of those who say YES.

The role and contribution of rural North Carolina community colleges in community social capital development. The research will be conducted via Zoom.

RESEARCHERS

Primary Investigator: Mitchell R. Williams, EdD, Associate Professor, Darden College of Education and Professional Studies, Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership, Old Dominion University.

Investigator: Tanya McGhee, MS, Doctoral Candidate, Darden College of Education and Professional Studies, Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership, Old Dominion University

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

Several studies have been conducted looking into the impact of community colleges on their geographic regions. None of them have examined the impact of rural North Carolina community colleges on social capital.

If you decide to participate, then you will join a study that seeks to assess how rural North Carolina community colleges facilitate the development of relationships and the perceived effectiveness of their actions. Your participation will last for about 45 minutes via an online Zoom meeting if you say YES. Approximately 25 individuals will be participating in this study. All participants will be either community college employees or college-associated community members.

EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA

You should be 18 years old or older.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

RISKS: If you decide to participate in this study, then you may encounter minimal risks, including the potential inconvenience of scheduling the interview/focus group and/or the possibility of anxiety or unpleasant experiences during the interview/focus group. The researchers will reduce these risks by providing an informal, conversational, virtual setting for interviews and focus groups.

BENEFITS: There is no benefit to you or others who participate in this study.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS

The researchers want your decision about participating in this study to be absolutely voluntary. You will NOT need to pay anything to participate in the study. However, you will need to access the internet to join the Zoom meeting. The researchers are unable to give you any payment for participating in this study.

NEW INFORMATION

If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision to participate, they will give it to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information obtained about you in this study is strictly confidential unless the law requires disclosure. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researcher will not identify you.

WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later and walk away or withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University.

COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY

If you say YES, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them; please contact the researcher, Dr. Mitchell Williams, at mrwillia@odu.edu, Dr. John Baaki, the current Darden College of Education & Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Committee chair at 757-683-7055 at Old Dominion University, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research at 757-683-3460 who will be glad to review the matter with you.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them:

Dr. Mitchell R. Williams 757-683-4344

Tanya McGhee XXX-XXX-XXXX

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should call Dr. John Baaki, the current Darden College of Education & Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Committee chair at 757-683-7055, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757-683-3460.

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher should give you a copy of this form for your records.

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Subject's Printed Name & Signature: | Date: |
|--|--------------|

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

I certify that I have explained to this subject the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and any experimental procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws and promise compliance. I have answered the subject's questions and have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

| | |
|---|--------------|
| Investigator's Printed Name & Signature: | Date: |
|---|--------------|

VITA

Tanya J. McGhee

Old Dominion University | Darden College of Education | Norfolk, VA 23529

Education

- 5/2023 Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
PhD in Community College Leadership
- 12/2005 University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC
MS in Marine Sciences
- 5/2001 Long Island University - Southampton College, Southampton, NY
BS in Environmental Sciences

Professional Experience

- 2021-present **Dean of Havelock Campus**, Craven Comm. College, Havelock, NC
- 2015-2021 **Senior Director of STEM Outreach**, Pitt Comm. College, Winterville, NC
- 2013-2015 **Chair of General Studies and Allied Health**, Pamlico Comm. College,
Grantsboro, NC
- 2009-2012 **Chair of Math, Science, and Social Sciences**, Craven Comm. College, New
Bern, NC

Awards

- Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges Travel Grant, 2022
- League for Innovation in the Comm. College Innovation of the Year Award, 2020
- STEM in the Park Higher Education Program of the Year Award, 2018
- NC State Board of Comm. Colleges and R.J. Reynolds Foundation Excellence in Teaching Award Finalist, 2015
- Pamlico Comm. College Excellence in Teaching Award ("Teacher of the Year"), 2014
- Craven Comm. College Excellence in Teaching Finalist Spring, 2009
- Delta Kappa Gamma Intl. Honor Society for Educators (Alpha Psi Ch.) Inductee, 2008

Peer-Reviewed Publications

- Bean T. J., Morris, Jr. J. A., Noble, R.T., & Fowler, P.K. (2008). Comparative microbial dynamics in *Crassostrea virginica* and *Crassostrea ariakensis*. *Journal of Shellfish Research*, 27(3),559-565. 2008.
- Afonso, C. L., Piccone, M. E., Zaffuto, K. M., Neilan, J., Kutish, G. F., Lu, Z., Balinsky, C. A., Gibb, T. R., Bean, T. J., Zsak, L, Rock, D. L. (2004). African swine fever virus multigene family 360 and 530 genes affect host interferon response. *Journal of Virology*, 78(4), 1858-1864.