

**Rural Students and College Success: A Narrative Approach to Rural Student  
Support Structures and Barriers Through the Conceptual Model of Student Success**

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## **Abstract**

Students from rural communities face various challenges related to postsecondary educational attainment in the United States. Koricich et al. (2018) explained that "rural populations have historically experienced lower postsecondary educational attainment relative to their peers in metropolitan areas" (p. 282). A study conducted in 2020 by the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (MDHEWD) indicated that students from rural regions tend to fall behind in professional, master's, bachelor's, associate, and certificate degree program completion when compared to students from urban and suburban school districts.

The current study examined rural Missouri student stories about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education and the barriers or difficulties they faced in their pursuit of higher education. The results of the study were then analyzed through Perna and Thomas' (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success to determine contextual levels of influence on the student. 14 participants who graduated from rural Missouri high schools and attended one of two public four-year colleges in northwest Missouri were selected for this study. Seven participants attended Missouri Western State University and Seven participants attended Northwest Missouri State University. Of the 14 participants, 10 identified as female and four identified as male. Six emerging themes surrounding positive influences and supports promoting access and success in higher education included: support by family, support by mentor(s), college resources, high school support, motivation/attitude, and community support. Six emerging themes surrounding barriers or difficulties related to higher education or that inhibited their success in higher education included: lack of high school resources,

college environment, college resources, financial challenges, lack of community support, and lack of family support. Three additional major findings included patterns identified by demographic sub-groups in which the majority described mostly positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education. These included the distance to the college from locale, junior grade level, and female gender. Two major findings included two demographic sub-groups that reported very few positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education. These included male gender, and the distance to the locale related to high school resources. Further research should be conducted to identify beneficial courses of action that could improve rural high school student post-secondary access and success and explore the types of resources most beneficial for rural school districts. Finally, research should be conducted surrounding the college decision-making process of males from rural communities.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to all the students from rural Missouri. Rural Missouri will always hold a special place in my heart. Your stories and experiences inspired me to do my best work to uncover how higher education can provide access and opportunities to each of you. I hope I can serve as inspiration that a kid from rural southwest Missouri can do anything they set their mind to.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures.....	x
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Background.....	4
Statement of the Problem.....	7
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	10
Delimitations.....	11
Assumptions.....	11
Research Questions.....	12
Definition of Terms.....	13
Organization of the Study.....	15
Chapter 2. Review of the Literature.....	17
Defining Rural America.....	19
Characteristics of Rural America.....	21

Rural Students: Cultural and Social Capital.....	24
Types of Rural Students and Their Attitudes Towards College.....	27
Perna and Thomas Model of Student Success.....	44
Summary.....	48
Chapter 3. Methods.....	51
Research Design.....	51
Setting.....	53
Sampling Procedures.....	55
Instruments.....	56
Data Collection Procedures.....	58
Data Analysis and Synthesis.....	60
Research Question 1.....	61
Research Question 2.....	61
Research Question 3.....	63
Research Question 4.....	63
Reliability and Trustworthiness.....	64
Researcher's Role.....	65
Limitations.....	66
Summary.....	67

Chapter 4. Results.....	68
Descriptive Demographics and Participant Profiles.....	69
Research Question 1.....	78
Research Question 2.....	85
Research Question 3.....	94
Research Question 4.....	100
Summary.....	109
Chapter 5. Interpretation and Recommendations.....	112
Study Summary.....	113
Overview of the problem.....	113
Purpose statement and research questions.....	113
Review of the methodology.....	114
Major findings.....	116
Findings Related to the Literature.....	120
Conclusions.....	124
Implications for action.....	125
Recommendations for future research.....	127
Concluding remarks.....	128
References.....	129



Appendices.....	142
Appendix A. Interview Protocol.....	143
Appendix B. Email to Participate.....	147
Appendix C. Informed Consent.....	149
Appendix D. Baker University Institutional Review Board Approval.....	152

## **List of Tables**

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information .....	71
Table 2. Themes of Positive Influences and Barriers or Difficulties Ranked by Percentage .....	93
Table 3. Themes and Alignment with Perna and Thomas Student Success Model.....	108

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Student Success .....	3
Figure 2. County Level Social Capital Levels .....	26
Figure 3. College Enrollment Rates in the First Fall after High School Graduation.....	41
Figure 4. United States Educational Attainment in Rural and Urban Areas .....	44

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

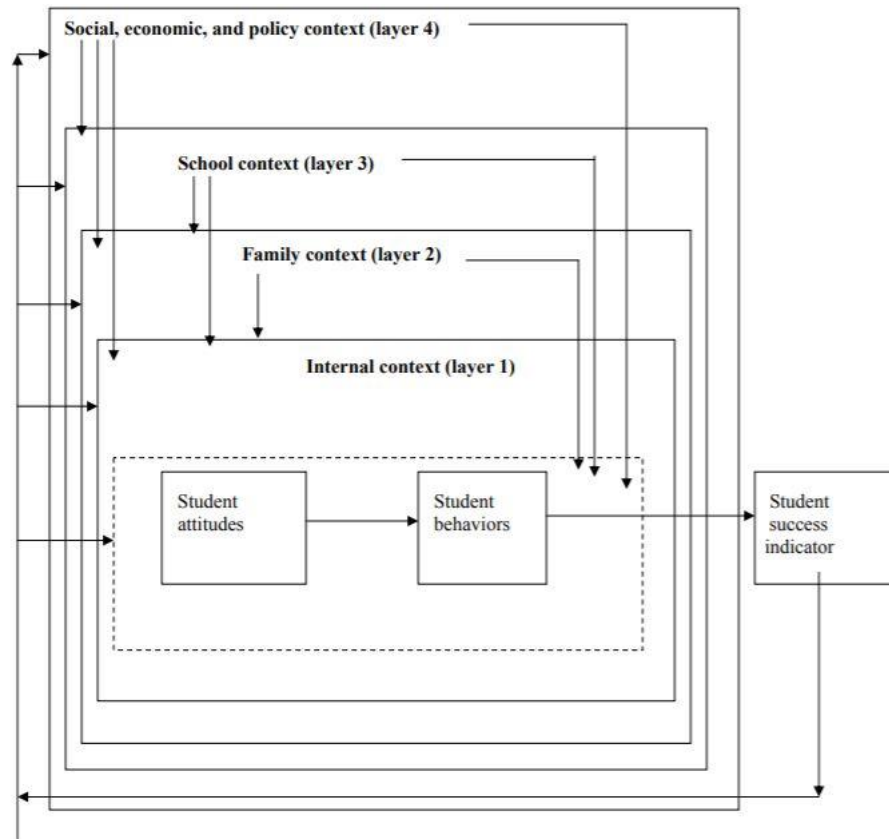
Students from rural communities face various challenges related to postsecondary educational attainment in the United States. Koricich et al. (2018) explained that "rural populations have historically experienced lower postsecondary educational attainment relative to their peers in metropolitan areas" (p. 282). However, national trends show that students from rural public-school districts graduate at higher rates than students from suburban and urban school districts (Dembicki, 2020; McCauley, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015b; United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

Although students of rural public-school districts graduate at higher rates, their postsecondary educational attainment falls behind students from urban and suburban locations. Among students who graduated from a rural public school district for the Class of 2021, 56% attended postsecondary education immediately after high school which was equal to the 56% of students from urban regions and lower than the 62% of students from suburban regions who attend postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).

Holland (2019), Ardoin (2018), and Nelson (2016) have described various challenges that rural students encounter when attempting to access college resources. Nelson (2016) indicated that "on average, rural areas, have lower family incomes and fewer adults who have been to college; rural schools have fewer course options and extracurricular activities, and have lower per-pupil expenditures" (p. 250). Ardoin (2018) found that "while statistics are clear that rural, working-class public schools send fewer students to college and rural students are less likely to aspire to and access higher

education than their suburban and urban peers, those statistics do not represent the complete picture" (p. 1). The complete picture of rural student success should consider the comprehensive influence of mentors, support structures, and social capital that can facilitate student persistence and success.

Perna and Thomas (2006) created a conceptual model of student success that identified multiple layers of factors that can influence a student's postsecondary plans and success. The first two layers address individual traits such as gender, race, school context, and family income, followed by their community's traits and resources. The third and fourth layers of Perna and Thomas' model identify factors that impact postsecondary plans and success address college location, marketing, economic, and public policy decisions. According to Perna and Thomas (2006), the perspectives of students from rural communities are shaped by the social, school, family, and internal influences in their lives. The Conceptual Model of Student Success (Figure 1) displays the multiple levels of influences attributed to student success or failure while in college.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual Model of Student Success. Adapted from Perna and Thomas (2006). Reprinted with permission.

Colleges and universities define student success as enrollment at the institution, persistence to a degree or program completion, and earning a high income (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 4). However, not all students share the same goals. Perna and Thomas (2006) defined student success as a four-level process and that highlights specific results over others. The first level of student success is college preparation which is measured by the student's educational aspirations and the steps taken to prepare for college. The second level is college enrollment which is measured by college access and choice. The third level is the student's college achievement which is measured by the student's grades, ability to transfer, and degree persistence and completion. The fourth and final

level of Perna and Thomas' model of student success is post-college plans which includes graduate school or gainful employment in their field of study (2006).

Perna and Thomas (2006) found that the decisions and behaviors students make are influenced by more than their upbringing and demographics. A major influence is social capital. Dekker and Uslaner (2001) noted that social capital "refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 2). Additionally, Coleman (1988) defined social capital as the characteristics within the relationships people have among each other. The decisions and behaviors of students are influenced by their levels of social capital (Acar, 2011).

While studies have shown a multitude of the statistics for rural student college success or lack thereof, few studies have examined the experiences and perspectives of rural students about the process of getting to college and their experiences during that journey. Beck (2015) stated that "a person's life story is not a Wikipedia biography of the facts and events of a life, but rather the way a person integrates those facts and events internally, picks them apart and weaves them back together to make meaning" (para. 4). The narrative an individual tells is a form of identity and can shape and reflect who that person becomes (Beck, 2015), as well as show what and why something is important to that individual.

## **Background**

Missouri, located in the Midwestern United States, is a state with diverse geography and culture that includes both rural and urban/suburban regions. According to the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (MDHEWD) in fall 2020, Missouri had 554 public or charter K-12 school districts that enrolled

917,325 students. Approximately 70% of all public or charter school districts in Missouri are considered rural (Shelton, 2019; Taketa, 2017). Overall, students from rural school districts have rendered an 87% graduation rate compared to the 83% graduation rate of those from urban/suburban regions (Krupnick, 2018; Lopez & Schwartz, 2019; MDHEWD, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). However, once students from rural communities graduate from high school their future college aspirations vary.

A study conducted in 2020 by the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (MDHEWD) indicated that students from rural regions tend to fall behind in professional, master's, bachelor's, associate, and certificate degree program completion when compared to students from urban and suburban school districts. Multiple studies have shown that students from rural community's face obstacles such as geography (Ardoin, 2018), lower high school rigor (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012), lower socioeconomic status (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015), lower levels of parent education (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012), a lack of encouragement (Ganss, 2016), a lack of information (Goldman, 2019), and cultural differences (Guiffrida, 2008) that can influence their college aspirations and success. Statistically, rural students have traditionally been at a disadvantage for attending college due to community resources (McCauley, 2019), community culture (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; McCauley, 2019), family dynamics (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; McCauley, 2019), distance to the college (Wells, Manly, Kommers, & Kimball, 2019), and broadband internet access (Wells, Manly, Kommers, & Kimball, 2019).



Not only has rural student higher education equity, access, and success been a concern for local and state educational leaders, it has also been of increasing concern for federal lawmakers. The Success for Rural Students and Communities Act of 2020 was introduced by United States Senators Susan Collins and Maggie Hassan. The bill established a grant program administrated by the United States Department of Education. The Success for Rural Students and Communities Act would allow the United States Department of Education to distribute grants that encourage partnerships between higher education institutions, rural school districts, and regional economic development entities, with the purpose of supporting rural students in accessing higher education and degree completion (Success for Rural Students and Communities Act, § 3155, H.R. 7497, 2020).

Access to higher education is an issue for many students from rural communities. Missourians who reside in rural areas may "display a lower level of income, education, healthy behaviors, and access to health care" according to the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (MDHSS) (2015, p. 5). In Missouri, a state of approximately 6 million residents, 37% of its residents are considered rural (MDHEWD, 2020, p. 3). As of 2020, according to Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC) and MDHSS (2019), Missouri includes 16 counties that have been identified as urban. These urban counties are Boone, Buchanan, Cape Girardeau, Cass, Christian, Clay, Cole, Greene, Jackson, Jasper, Jefferson, Newton, Platte, St. Charles, St. Louis, and St. Louis City (MDHSS, 2019; MERIC, 2020). The remaining 99 counties in Missouri are considered rural by county definition. According to MERIC (2020), "the rural Missouri average percentage of population with bachelor's degree is 9.7%" (p. 5). Rural students

who earned degrees have proven that despite the obstacles of being from a rural community, a college or university degree is obtainable.

Social capital seems to play a vital role in rural student success or a lack of college persistence. Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012) described two specific contexts in which social capital has played an essential role for students from rural communities: Family Social Capital and School Social Capital. Family Social Capital, as defined by Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012), refers to relations between family members, especially among parents and their children. School Social Capital is described as the “bonds between parents and schools that can combine to facilitate educational outcomes” (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012, p. 6). Examining both Family Social Capital and School Social Capital together could help researchers understand the influential factors and the barriers experienced by rural students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research has shown that students from rural communities face unique challenges compared to their urban and suburban peers when applying to, entering, and completing higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Goldman, 2019; Holland, 2019). Some studies have found that factors such as socioeconomic status (Ardoin, 2018; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Holland, 2019) and the distance to college (Ardoin, 2018) have a central influence on rural student college access or lack thereof. Other studies found that college preparation (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Goldman, 2019), access to information and resources (Ardoin, 2018; Holland 2019) have factored into rural student success while attending college. Multiple studies have indicated that social and cultural capital (Ardoin, 2018; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Goldman, 2019; Holland, 2019) play

a role in rural student success while attending college. Further studies have shown that social capital (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012), such as mentoring and championing a college-going environment (Ontiveros, 2020), increased the likelihood a student from a rural community would matriculate and complete a postsecondary degree. Students who have successfully navigated the socioeconomical, social, cultural, and accessibility transitions could potentially have greater success, not only during college, but throughout their careers.

To increase the equity of access to higher education, it is crucial to go beyond statistics and better understand the challenges and obstacles rural students face, as well as the supports and resources available to them. Gaining a better understanding of the rural students' perspectives through narratives of their experiences accessing and persisting in higher education could provide helpful insight into the rural student journey. According to Goldman (2019), it is vital to understand and examine the stories that rural students tell to gain a better understanding of their perceived barriers to college access and success. To enhance knowledge available to rural communities for encouraging the success of their students, it is imperative to leverage the positive influences and provide additional needed supports to mitigate the barriers or negative influences.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The current qualitative narrative study examined the stories of students from rural communities and the unique challenges they faced compared to their urban and suburban peers when applying to, entering, and persisting in higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Goldman, 2019; Holland, 2019). The first purpose of the study was to examine the stories of students from rural communities of how pre-college and

college experiences influenced their college enrollment and facilitated student success, and to better understand the challenges and barriers they faced. The second purpose of the study was to interpret rural students' stories through the lens of Perna & Thomas' (2006) Model of Student Success. Rural student narratives assisted the researcher with understanding the complexities of their challenges and types of support they received from their communities, social networks, parents, and their colleges. The defining feature of the narrative approach is the collection of stories from individuals and small groups (Butina, 2020). The narrative research approach allows the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the unique and individual experiences of rural students before and during their higher education journey (Butina, 2020). This type of inquiry collects the stories to become the raw data. Participants eligible for this study were required to have graduated between 2015 and 2021 from a rural school district as defined by MERIC, and be enrolled at the junior or senior -level at one of the northwest Missouri area public postsecondary four-year institutions. Student success, for the current study, was viewed through the framework of Perna and Thomas' (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success with its four different types of influencing contexts and four transition levels for success. Perna and Thomas (2006) devised the model to explain student success as a longitudinal process wherein a student transitions through four levels of success and theorized that student success at one level contributed to success in the next transition (2006). The current study sought to understand the perspectives and experiences of rural students in northwest Missouri pertaining to pre-college and college experiences told through their stories and analyzed through the framework of Perna and Thomas' (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success.

## **Significance of the Study**

Students from rural communities are faced with substantial barriers and obstacles when applying to, entering, persisting, and completing higher education. Goldman (2019) stated that "research is lacking on the college experiences of rural students and how their background, pre-college experiences, and rural culture influences college completion" (p. 16). The significance of the current study was to create a better understanding of rural student community social capital that could inform four-year postsecondary educational institutions' strategies for recruiting, engaging, and supporting rural student success. The stories rural students tell could provide researchers, policymakers, communities, and educators with an in-depth, intimate analysis of the rural student's college journey and experience. The importance of the current narrative research was that it allowed for the voices and experiences of rural students to be told in ways that may not be discovered through other research methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Beck (2015) explained the value of narrative as "a life story doesn't just say what happened, it says why it was important, what it means for who the person is, for who they'll become, and for what happens next" (para. 4).

The results of this study could add to the knowledge of postsecondary educational institutions and rural high schools with data beyond statistics about the challenges and needs of rural students. Results of the current study could also inform postsecondary educational institutions about supports for or barriers against student success, student enrollment, and persistence towards graduation. Additionally, the results of the current study could advise rural communities about what factors or influences are vital for student support systems within their communities and school districts. Actions taken

based on that new knowledge could help to increase the number of students from rural communities attending a college or university, which in turn could improve diversity and enrollment at four-year postsecondary educational institutions. Understanding the narratives that rural students tell about their experiences through different personal stories could enhance the knowledge of K-12 educators, colleges, and rural communities; possibly promoting success for rural students by leveraging positive influences and creating supports at rural high schools and postsecondary educational institutions to better meet the needs of rural students.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are "self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 134). The scope of the current study was delimited to participants who were enrolled at a junior-level or senior-level standing at any Missouri four-year public postsecondary educational institution in the northwest, Missouri region. These institutions included Missouri Western State University and Northwest Missouri State University. Criteria for participation included having graduated from a public rural high school in Missouri within the three-year period of 2019 to 2021. Rural school districts were identified using their location in a rural county as defined by MERIC. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were limited to 14 participants in face-to-face Zoom rooms at 60 minutes per participant.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are "postulates, premises, and propositions that are accepted as operational for purposes of research" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 135). Assumptions provide a basis for researchers to interpret data and draw conclusions regarding their

study (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). For the current qualitative study, assumptions included that:

- participants interviewed understood the questions asked of them, remembered accurately to the best of their abilities, and answered honestly;
- interviewees were open about the types of interactions, social networks, and social capital developed with school counselors, peers, community members, college employees, siblings, and parents;
- college students at a junior or senior -level standing possess the degree of self-awareness necessary to communicate their experiences accurately and cogently; and
- the demographical information such as high school attended and high school graduation date used to identify the participants of this study had been updated and entered correctly at the college or university.

### **Research Questions**

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) described research questions as "critical components of the dissertation" (p. 126) that guide the direction of the study. The research questions for this narrative qualitative study sought to articulate and understand the stories rural students tell about their culture and background that provide insight into their college journeys. Narrative inquiry is the study of experiences as understood through stories and provides a way of thinking about and studying experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18). Four research questions guided the current study.

**Research Question 1.** What stories do rural students tell about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education?

**Research Question 2.** What stories do rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties of their pursuit of higher education?

**Research Question 3.** How do the stories rural students tell about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education, align with Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success?

**Research Question 4.** How do the stories rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties of their pursuit of higher education, align with Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success?

### **Definition of Terms**

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), researchers should "define all key terms central to a study and used throughout a dissertation" (p. 118). When research involves words used in novel or discipline-specific ways or are not commonly known, these terms are defined for the reader. Terms specific to the current study are operationally defined.

**Family Context.** The Family Context is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as a family's ability to manage the educational experience a student has by influencing and promoting the various indicators of student success. The Family Context is the second layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success and "recognizes that both within and outside the home, families can manage their children's experiences to promote various indicators of student success" (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 14).

**Internal Context.** The Internal Context of student success is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as the attitudes and behaviors of individual students. The Internal



Context is the first layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success and "focuses on the cognitive and motivational processes that shape an individual's behaviors" (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 11).

**Rural Communities.** Communities are defined as rural in Missouri by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (MDHSS) if "there are less than 150 people per square mile, and it does not contain any part of a central city in a Metropolitan Statistical Area" (MDHSS, p. 4).

**School Context.** The School Context is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as a "seamless continuum from primary school through college" (p. 16) and represents the third layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success. The School Context level "enables the identification and understanding of compounding effects associated with educational resources, academic preparation, and educational orientations that are necessary for success at the college level" (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 16-17).

**Social Capital.** Social Capital, as defined by Stephan (2013), consists of college-related "resources available through social relations that students can invest to improve their college enrollment outcomes" (p. 7). The combination of social relations and resources equates into Social Capital (Stephan, 2013).

**Social, Economic, and Policy Context.** The Social, Economic, and Policy Context is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as the external forces influencing college choice for a student. The Social, Economic, and Policy Context is the fourth layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success and is the cumulative representation of external forces. This context "recognizes that numerous external forces also influence student

college choice, both directly and indirectly through other layers of context” (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 20).

**Student Success.** Student Success is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as the “completion and maximization” (p. 4) of ten indicators. These indicators include educational aspirations; academic preparation; college access; college choice; academic performance; transfer; persistence; post-bachelor’s degree enrollment; income; and educational attainment (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

### **Organization of the Study**

The current study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction and background information about rural communities and rural students’ access to and success in higher education. A statement of the problem and the purpose of the study, as well as the significance of the study to the existing knowledge of rural community students, were also provided in Chapter 1. Delimitations and assumptions of the study were noted to provide a framework for the boundaries in which the study was conducted. Additionally, the research questions that guided the study were stated, along with the definitions of essential terms. Chapter 2 will consist of a review of the existing literature surrounding national and Missouri rural communities including rural student culture and higher education aspirations, as well as rural student college access and success. Chapter 3 will provide a description of the methodology used to conduct the study, including the research design, selection of the participants, interview questions, data collection processes and procedures, data analysis, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 will present the results of the study. Chapter 5 will include a summary of the

results, an interpretation of the findings, implications of the findings, and recommendations for further research.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

Students from rural America face many challenges related to enrollment, persistence, and graduation at colleges and universities across the country. To understand the challenges rural student's face, it is essential to comprehend rural culture, rural communities, and the obstacles that prevent rural student college enrollment and persistence towards graduation. Equally important, it is vital to grasp the support systems that lead to rural student success while in college. Some of these challenges are well documented: distance to college, financial barriers, strong community ties for most people from rural communities (Atkin, 2003). However, there is little research on the cultural and social capital aspects that define rural student success and persistence at the college or university level. Students from rural communities tend to graduate from high school at higher rates than their peers from urban and suburban communities. The Lumina Foundation (2019) indicated that students from rural community's graduate from high school at a rate of 80%, which is higher than the national average. However, rural students attend college at a lesser rate than students from suburban and urban communities. The Lumina Foundation (2019) stated that "right after high school, 59 percent of rural residents go on to college, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, compared to 62 percent of urban graduates and 67 percent of suburban graduates" (para. 2).

In the United States, rural America accounts for approximately one in seven students from public education (Thier, Longhurst, Grant, & Hocking, 2021). Additionally, half of the nation's school districts lie in areas defined as rural (Thier et al.,

2021). More than half the states in the country have rural public schools that make up one third to one-half of their total school districts (Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 2019; Tieken, 2014). In Missouri, approximately 70% of all school districts are rural (Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, 2019). Rural America is synonymous with places like Missouri. Missouri is a midwestern state that has a diverse geography, diverse culture, and diverse populations. Missouri is a diverse state in terms of population, culture, and regional identities. Missouri is home to two major urban areas, Kansas City and St. Louis. The state is also home to several smaller urban areas such as Columbia, Joplin, and Springfield. Between all of these urban locations lie areas that can be considered rural across the state. These rural areas reside in the Bootheel, Mark Twain National Forest, the Northern Plains, the Ozark Highlands, and the Western Plains of Missouri. Each of these areas are distinctively inside the borders of Missouri and are part of the state's rich culture and heritage.

The chapter begins with a review of defining rural America and, more specifically, the difficulty of defining rural America. Next, I then move on to the characteristics of rural communities and the support systems that rural students have in these communities. In addition to the support systems, I highlight the lack of resources many rural students face when making decisions about college enrollment and the decision to stay in college when they arrive. Most research on rural public education focuses on secondary student experiences, but I have highlighted the findings that focus on pre-college characteristics and college access. I then review literature about developing and building social and cultural capital related to rural students and college attendance. Social capital is a function of relationship development and how those

relationships move individuals towards their desired goal. For rural students, the development of social capital can help or inhibit their college aspirations and persistence. I reviewed the research on how student attitudes and behaviors and institutional factors interact to shape rural student retention and persistence, including the role of faculty and student affairs professionals in aiding student connection to the university. Finally, I summarized Perna's model for Student Success, including empirical research of the model and its limitations.

### **Defining Rural America**

The term "rural" means different things to different people based on your social or cultural upbringing. According to Donehower (2014), rural can be described by some as more "felt" than a "technical" term (p. 168). Defining rural America can be a case study in bureaucracy. Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer (2016) mention that "giving a place a particular characteristic suggests how people and institutions act toward it" (p. 8). The United States and other countries use the term "rural" as more of an administrative purpose of definition for governmental programs (Flora et al., 2016). According to the United States Census Bureau (2016), the "average American believes rural is an abstract concept of rolling hills and farmland" (para. 1). A narrow definition of rural America can be further from reality. The United States Census Bureau (2020) defines rural areas as areas that are not urban. Rural areas within the United States are communities that are diverse and expansive. One in five Americans lives in an area that the United States Census Bureau (2016) considers rural. Tieken (2014) provides a unique perspective of Rural America:

Rural America covers Native American reservation communities in the West, small primarily white New England fishing villages, Midwestern farm towns with

growing Latino populations, African American communities scattered along the Mississippi Delta, and isolated hamlets tucked into the Appalachians and Rockies (p.6).

Some people may imagine that rural means farmland, rolling hills, gravel roads, cattle, and tractors. Rural can also be thought as geographical areas such as the Appalachian region, the Ozarks, remote areas in the Western United States, and the Northern Great Plains. The United States Census Bureau (2016) explains that many Americans think of rural America as a mental concept of rolling hills and farmland rather than a concrete definition. According to Koricich et al. (2020), for much of the United States history, "the majority of the American population resided in rural places" (p. 283). The rural population has changed dramatically in recent years, as more areas of the United States have changed the classification to suburban or urban locales. However, many people live in rural communities across the United States. Koricich et al. (2020) indicated that 60 million people, or one in five Americans, live in an area defined as rural (p. 59).

Additionally, 97 % of the United States landmass is considered rural, yet only 19% of the United States population lives there. In Missouri, 36.6% of the population lives in rural areas (MDHEWD, p. 3, 2020). Additionally, the United States Census Bureau (2016) reports that 64.4% of the rural population in America resides east of the Mississippi River. Nearly half (46.7%) of all rural communities are located in the Southern Region of the United States. This area includes Texas to Delaware and Florida to Oklahoma (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Located in the Northeast United States, Maine and Vermont have the highest percentage of rural populations in the United

States at 61.6% and 61.3%, respectively. In the Midwest United States, South Dakota has the most significant rural population at 42.9% (United States Census Bureau, 2016). In Missouri, 31 counties have a population that is 100% rural (United States Census Bureau, 2016). In rural areas access to a college, much less attending a college and being successful, could be a daunting task.

In contrast to rural areas, urban areas are areas that consist of 50,000 or more residents. In Missouri, urban/rural designations are determined by county using data from the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC) and the Missouri Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS). Missouri has identified 14 counties that are considered entirely urban based on population density. The remaining counties in Missouri are either urban/rural or completely rural (Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, p. 7, 2020). Rural can be defined by the location, culture, and attitudes of the people who live in those areas. Therefore, rural can mean more than just small towns and rolling hills, it can mean areas of less than 1,000 people, and it can be the cultural assimilation of people that have lived in a remote area for many generations. Rural communities can be defined by families that live there, the closeness of the community, and the norms and values those people have within the community.

### **Characteristics of Rural America**

**Rural Population.** The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS, 2019) indicated that rural America consisted of 46.1 million people in 72% of its landmass. According to the USDA ERS (2019), these figures represent a .4% decline during this past decade. Areas that are entirely rural and



not adjacent to metropolitan areas saw the most significant reduction in population of nearly 2%. Recent decades have seen a sharp decline in rural populations. Reasons for the decline in rural populations include the recession of 2007-2008 and the outmigration of rural people to areas with more significant economic opportunities (Flora et al., 2016, USDA ERS, 2019). Additionally, outmigration of rural youth to areas of more significant social and economic opportunities and an aging and retiring community have impacted rural populations (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, Herzog & Pittman, 1995, Whitener & McGranahan, 2003).

**Demographics of Rural Areas.** The United States Census Bureau (2016) tells us that rural is much more than just a place on a map and is characterized by more than the people that live there. Rural America is about 80% white, but rural communities in the Southern United States are characterized by larger African-American populations (Lumina Foundation, 2019). In addition to recent population declines in Rural America, there has also been a sharp change in the demographics and population shifts. Growth in the rural populations occurred at high rates in the southern and western portions of the United States. At the same time, areas in the Midwest and Northeast experienced declines in the rural population (Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). There was also an increase in non-white and Hispanic populations across most rural regions (Kochhar et al., 2005; Lichter, 2012). Rural communities experienced a significant increase in people of color between the years 1990 to 2010 (Lichter, 2012). Rural America has long been considered predominately white when compared to the national population. This is especially true in the Midwestern and Western regions of the United States.

Data provided by the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (MDHEWD, 2020, p. 3) indicates that the residential population of Missouri is 36.6% rural and 63.4% urban. MDHEWD (2019) reported that 31.7% of the students enrolled in college for the 2017 school year came from rural counties in Missouri (p. 12). The report also indicates that 35.1% of all first-time degree-seeking undergraduates in 2017 came from rural counties in Missouri (p. 12). Both figures represent a slight underrepresentation of rural populations in college enrollment throughout Missouri.

**Rural Locale.** In the United States, rural areas are areas that are not urban (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Urban locales are defined by the United States Census Bureau (2020) as "densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial and other nonresidential urban land uses" (para. 1). Urbanized areas can be classified into areas of 50,000 or more people and clusters of 2,500 to fewer than 50,000 people. Everything that lies beyond these factors is considered rural. Urban areas and urban clusters comprise only 3% of the entire landmass of the United States and contain 80.7% of its population. On the other hand, rural areas consist of 97% of the landmass in the United States but only 19.3% of its people.

**Rural School Districts.** Within these rural areas and communities are numerous public-school districts that educate students. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2014) counts 13,491 public school districts in the United States. Of public-school districts, the NCES considers 7,156 school districts rural. In Missouri, the NCES (2014) counts 521 public school districts. This number includes 14 city public schools, 49 suburban school districts, 96 town school districts, and 362 rural school districts.

Within the United States, 53% of all public-school districts are rural according to the NCES (2014). In Missouri, the percentage of rural school districts is 69%, according to the NCES (2014). Compared to most of the United States, Missouri has a higher percentage of rural school districts.

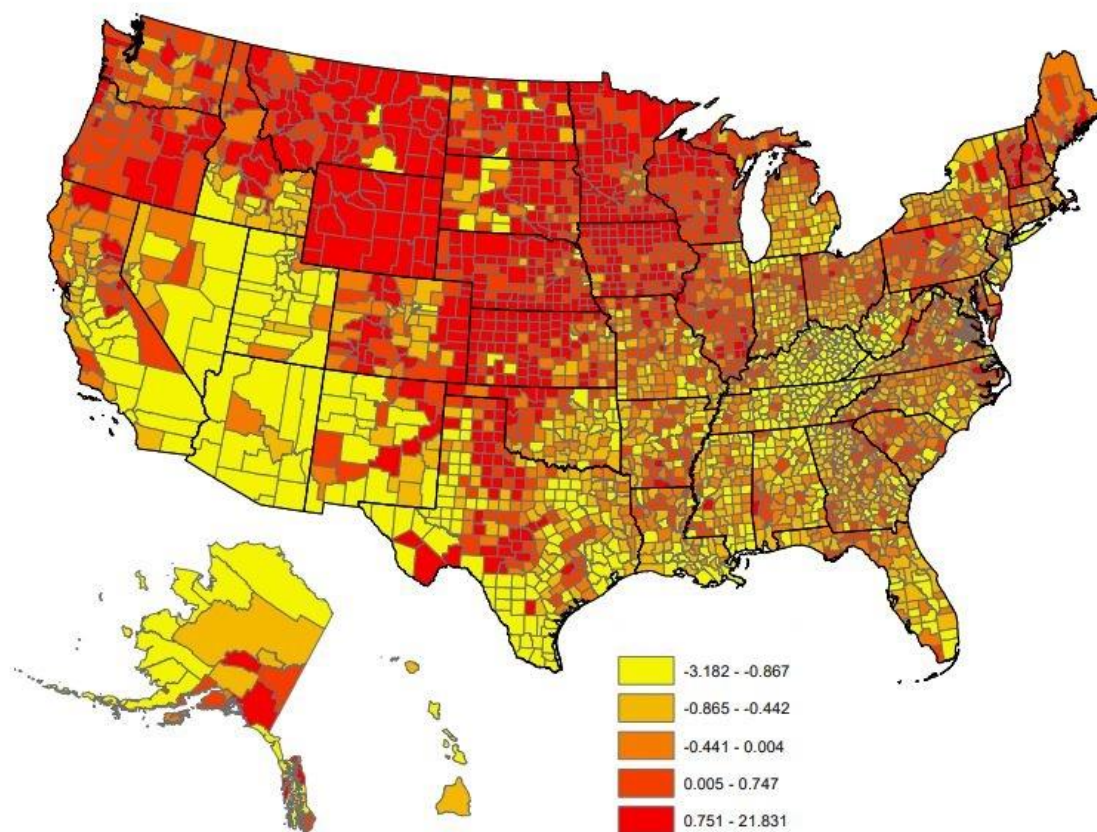
### **Rural Students: Cultural and Social Capital**

**Cultural Capital.** Cultural capital can be best explained as a system of attributes, language, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms derived from the familiarity of the dominant culture in one's society (Bourdieu, 1977). Their cultural and social capital shapes rural communities. Bourdieu (1977) defines cultural capital as the acquisition of knowledge, language, and culture. Cultural capital is transmitted by families that have strong bonds between the children and the parents. Cultural capital is transmitted through families and defines one's social class (Ardoin 2018; Bourdieu, 1977; Perna, 2006). Examples of an individual's cultural capital include the type of food they eat, the kind of music they may listen to, the spoken dialect, and even clothing choices (Flora et al., 2016).

Cultural capital is strengthened through school districts and colleges (Ardoin 2018; Flora et al., 2016). School systems reinforce the values and norms of the dominant social group among students through hegemony. This process supports the dominant values as the norms for that society (Flora et al., 2016). Rural communities tend to be an underrepresented group. Dominant societal values (typically those from larger urban-centric areas) compete and counteract the importance of rural communities (Ardoin, 2018; Flora et al., 2016).

**Social Capital.** While similar to cultural capital, social capital can be defined as the social networks developed between people and groups (Coleman, 1988). This form of capital is generated through membership in a group (Bourdieu, 1977; Flora et al., 2016). Social capital is developed by relations among peer and near-peer members and may include unspoken responsibilities, expectations, and norms (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017). Social capital is used to communicate beliefs, norms, authority, and standards that an individual must understand to succeed in their environment (Perna & Steele, 2011). Parents, in particular, have an essential role in the development of social capital. The relationship between the student and their parents is important, especially as the relationship pertains to making decisions about college choice, college attendance, and career choice. Additionally, Coleman (1988) identified that the relationships between the student's parents and other adults, such as high school teachers, high school administrators, community members, and college representatives, are important in developing social capital.

Rural communities can often have substantial social capital due to their small size, but the value of those social connections may not extend outwards to other locales such as colleges (Flora et al., 2016). Students from rural communities may be socially disadvantaged when attending college due to cultural differences and social structures. Figure 2 represents county by county social capital levels. The rates of social capital are higher in areas that are considered rural.



*Figure 2.* County level social capital levels. Areas with higher levels of county-wide social capital are represented as darker colors. Used with permission from The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (2014).

**Rural Identity.** Rural identity refers to a rural individual's bonds to rural communities. According to DelReal and Clement (2017), individuals that live in rural communities find a "deep-seated kinship in rural America" (para. 2). Additionally, DelReal and Clement (2017) found that people from rural communities also believe that their values differ from urban and suburban environments. Rural individuals felt a deep divide in fairness regarding the economy, immigration, and federal government treatment. DelReal and Clement (2017) found that rural people felt their communities look out for each other, and their communities are more compassionate towards one another when compared to urban and suburban locales. There is also a strong belief

amongst rural communities that American Christian values are under siege. DelReal and Clement (2017) referenced a survey by the Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation that found that “nearly 6 out of 10 people in rural areas believe Christian values are under attack” (Distrust and Estrangement section, para. 9). These concerns build upon rural identity and the belief system of people who relate to rural areas' narratives.

Rural students have a strong identity related to a sense of family responsibility, respect for parents, a solid connection to their immediate and extended family, and the need to stay close to the community in which they were raised (Agger, Meece, and Byun, 2018). Family and community are central to the context of rural identity and belonging.

### **Types of Rural Students and Their Attitudes Towards College**

Students from rural communities have several challenges to attendance at a college or university. First and foremost, students from rural communities face the challenges associated with separating place and culture. Rural communities are defined as places by their distance from metropolitan and suburban areas. Rural students have a solid connection to their communities and their families due to strong societal bonds. These bonds are sometimes hard for students from rural communities to break. Carr and Kefalas (2009) explained that some rural students are "unwilling to break ties to friends and family, especially boyfriends or girlfriends back home" (p. 44).

Additionally, rural students may be unwilling to change or give up on the familiar comforts of small-town life (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 44). Carr and Kefalas (2009) also explained that many students from rural communities faced cultural changes once they attended a college. These changes involved entirely new peer groups from different backgrounds. For example, rural students may find that the clothing they once preferred

to wear is entirely out of sync with what most college students deem as appropriate. This may be partly due to the abundance of students who attend college from suburban and urban environments, and many of these students coming from better social-economic backgrounds (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

Rural students face obstacles from family, culture, academic preparation, and social-economic factors. In light of these obstacles, rural students also have their supporters. Carr and Kefalas (2009) discuss some of the support rural students have from their communities and what social aspects lead to their likelihood of success and leaving their rural communities. In their narrative, Carr and Kefalas (2009) found that rural students fall into several categories after graduation from high school. These categories are the Achievers, the Stayers, the Seekers, and the Returners. Each of these categories of rural students faces unique and challenging societal, economic, and academic challenges to leave their rural communities and attend college. Carr and Kefalas (2009) noted that the Achievers group had similarities that lead to them attending college and being successful, "the most striking feature of the Achiever's lives is how all of them get so much of their teachers, and everyone else's positive attention" (p. 31). The Achievers group tended to be students who did well in school academically, exhibited good behavior, and earned praise from teachers, counselors, and the community. The school, societal, and academic success of the Achievers group led to the group having special privileges and access to additional benefits other rural students may not have had.

The Stayers group of rural students tended to be one's who "knew where they were headed by the time they reached junior year" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 57). These are the rural students who come from several generations of families from the rural

communities in which they were raised and have no encouragement or support to leave the rural community. Carr and Kafalas (2009) go on to say that Stayers are aware of the differences between themselves and the Achievers “simply by the way they dressed” (p. 57). The Stayers in rural communities are the rural students who when they graduate from high school, go on to jobs within their community. Carr and Kafalas (2009) go on to notate that many Stayers worked while in high school, many times on the farm or family business, and had little time to participate in extra-curricular activities while in high school. Carr and Kafalas (2009) state that to Stayers “just surviving high school feels like a major accomplishment” (p. 60). Stayers are also recognized as the group that does not prefer to change or move on from an environment in which they are comfortable. Many Stayers like the towns and communities in which they live and do not have a strong urge or need to leave. The Stayers like that they do not have to lock doors, navigate through traffic, deal with high crime rates, and feel a comfort knowing that “people feel as if they know you as well as you know yourself” (p. 81). Stayers are the groups of students who have a high desire to be around people who are like-minded and value homogeneity.

The third group of rural students categorized by Carr and Kafalas (2009) are those from the Seekers group. Carr and Kafalas (2009) describe Seekers as a group of students who receive very little support or encouragement while in high school, yet still see a future for themselves outside of the rural community in which they grew up in. According to Carr and Kafalas (2009) Seekers know “with the utmost certainty, is that they do not want to stay in the countryside all of their lives” (p. 95). The Seekers are often the types of rural students that the military prefers to recruit. The Seekers are



students who have little family income or other opportunities to leave their rural community. The military can provide these students the chance to leave their small town and come back as a hero. The Seekers also see the military as a strategy to potentially pay for college once they are discharged. Although attending a college or university may not occur for many Seekers, having the option to attend makes the military attractive to these students.

The Returners are seen as the rural students who end up back in their hometowns after attending a college or university. Carr and Kafalas (2009) refer to these types of rural students as being similar to a boomerang. These students start out as the Seeker group of students who want to get out of their hometown and experience what is outside of their rural community. Unfortunately, the lives these students expected when they left, such as attending a college or university or going to the military, do not work out as planned. Carr and Kafalas (2009) indicate that rural students who fall into this category end up being absorbed back into the Stayers group with very little fanfare. Carr and Kafalas (2009) additionally characterize the Returners as students who have many times completed a vocational program or two-year program at a community college. They return to their rural communities possessing “more education than Stayers but far less than the Achievers” (p. 108). The Returners can be categorized in high school as someone who had a higher-class rank than Stayers but below those in the Achievers category. Carr and Kafalas (2009) also indicate that many females fall into the Returners group while many males fall into the Stayers grouping. Although rare, Carr and Kafalas (2009) did indicate some Returners do come back as four-year college graduates mainly

because they want the stability of the rural community in their lives and seek to be close to their families.

**Rural Students and College Aspirations.** According to Friesen and Purc-Stephenson (2016), "a university education can provide an individual with greater employment options, higher income potential, and improved health and quality of life" (p. 138). Although these benefits seem to be a good reason to leave a rural community and attend college, people from rural communities are still less likely to attend a university or college when compared to non-rural counterparts (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Friesen and Purc-Stephenson (2016) further elaborate that rural students face challenges with limited exposure to colleges. The limited exposure of rural students to colleges can make them feel uncomfortable attending one. The limited exposure to colleges leaves rural students worried about fitting in with peers from suburban and urban communities. Social Scientist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) explains that habitus, which refers to unconscious learned habits and norms through family upbringing, guides how a person thinks, feels, and acts. Students from rural communities view their world through the lens of what they know from their upbringing, family, and community. The norms and values associated with rural communities can differ when the student attends a college environment.

Psychological factors can lead to students from rural communities not attending college. Friesen and Purc-Stephenson (2016) discuss the impact of fear of the unknown. Rural students can have limited access to information about colleges and universities, can have difficulty traveling to visit a college or university, and may have challenges finding peers who have attended. These factors can lead to the fear of the unknown. Factors

such as college size, classroom size, big cities, and safety can lead to the fear of the unknown. Rural students come from tight-knit communities that can provide support and encouragement. Leaving these resources can leave rural students without those support mechanisms. Rural students are also challenged with maintaining their rural identity. Friesen and Purc-Stephenson (2016) noted that students fear becoming a different person and having their lives change dramatically. Rural students also believed that living in a college environment will change who they are and their rural values, specifically the thought of being better than another person who is not college-educated.

The college-going aspirations of rural students show they are less likely to attend a college or university when compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018). Although rural students may attend college less than urban and suburban students, it does not necessarily mean rural students do not aspire to attend college. Wells, Manly, Kommers, and Kimball (2019) explain that the suppression of higher education enrollment and outcomes could be partially explained by rural students having a lower socioeconomic status and a strong sense of community. Additionally, Wells et al. (2019) indicate that there has been a slow and steady increase in college attendance of students from all locales since 1991. In 1991, 45% of all high school completers enrolled in a college or university (Wells et al., 2019). By the year 2000, the number of high school completers who attend college had risen to 48%. Although these numbers are encouraging, the attendance, retention, persistence and college completion of rural students have not followed the overall trends. Wells et al. (2019) indicate that "growth was less strong in rural areas, resulting in an increasing rural-urban gap in college completion" (p. 4). The authors noted other factors

and correlations associated with rural student college enrollment and attainment, such as “regional economic prosperity, poverty, unemployment, and population loss” (p. 4).

Rural students face many challenges related to attending college and leaving their hometown communities. Economic development and resources can lead to some rural students deciding to leave their communities. Carr and Kefalas (2009) explain that some rural students see post-secondary education as a means to leave their home communities for better opportunities. Most rural communities have limited career prospects when compared to urban and suburban areas. The limited opportunities can provide a strong urge for rural students to leave their communities and seek better career prospects through higher education (Wells et al., 2019).

Irvin, Byun, Meece, and Farmer (2012) noted that several factors likely contribute to rural students' post-secondary aspirations. One of these factors involves the type of work that is historically associated with rural communities. This type of work includes agriculture, labor, mining, and service-oriented jobs. These jobs require little to no post-secondary education (p. 73). Irvin et al. (2012) also show that many rural students also have limited economic resources, as poverty rates in rural areas are higher than those in urban and suburban locales. The consequences of limited economic resources lead to a "negative relationship between low socioeconomic status and rural youth's educational aspirations" (p. 73).

Geographic isolation also has a role in rural student college enrollment and degree completion. Geographic isolation in combination with social and cultural differences can pose a challenge for students from rural communities (Irvin et al., 2012). Specific to a rural student's college aspirations is the distance to a post-secondary institution. Students

from rural communities usually must drive long distances to attend a post-secondary institution. If driving is not an option, those students must move from their rural homes to attend a post-secondary institution. Rural students show a solid willingness to stay near family and their support systems. Moving from this safe and comfortable setting can be stressful (Irvin et al., p. 73, 2012). Rural students may "lower their educational aspirations and pursue more limited post-secondary opportunities" closer to home to maintain meaningful connections with family and support (p. 73).

**Parent and Family Influence.** Parents play an essential part in a student's decision to attend a college or university. Byun, Meece, and Agger (2017) show that families shape adolescents' educational outcomes. These outcomes are driven by parental educational attainment and parental support for college attendance. Agger et al. (2018) found that 20% of rural parents "expect their child to obtain two or more years of post-secondary education" (p. 2555).

Additionally, parents from rural areas have greater expectations for their children to receive at least a bachelor's degree (37%). Similar expectations are held by parents from urban and suburban locales. Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins (2012) noted that parents have a major impact in the college decision-making process and influence of rural student educational aspirations and success. Agger et al. (2018) also notes that "in rural areas, it is quite common for adolescents to feel a sense of family responsibility and strongly identify with and respect their parents" (p. 2556). Rural students, as a group, have a strong sense of connection to their immediate and extended families. This familism creates strong bonds of respect between members of the family. These strong bonds can both increase educational aspirations and hinder educational aspirations. The

strong bonds can make the decision about college attendance and persistence difficult for rural students. Rural students have aspirations of success, yet they feel a deeply rooted connection towards their family that makes moving away difficult. The decision to move away is challenging for rural students who are talented and support their families. These rural students are pulled by the need to support their families, monetarily or by assisting on the farm. However, the rural student understands that attending college presents an opportunity for them to have more significant career opportunities. Rural identity (Agger et al., 2018) is central to the decision-making process for students from rural communities. Agger et al. (2018) explains that "rural identity is defined as the extent to which adolescents understand themselves to be members of the rural community and the emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 2556). Students who have high levels of rural identity are more likely to find jobs in the workforce immediately after high school graduation and have lower chances of being college-bound (Agger et al., 2018).

Agger et al. (2018) found that rural identity and traits associated with rural communities can predict post-secondary enrollment. The study determined that strong familial bonds, in particular with parents, can lead to college enrollment. Female rural students showed higher academic achievement, higher post-secondary aspirations, higher parental expectations, and higher family responsibility when compared to their male peers. Male rural students reported higher rural identity and higher perceptions of suitable local employment. The differences in perceptions between rural male and female students can lead to higher enrollment and persistence for rural female students in

higher education. Byun et al. (2017) and Agger et al. (2018) found that family relationships, size, and structure are essential to rural student college attendance.

**Cultural Influence.** Culture is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2021) as “the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time.” Cultural influences have an important role in rural student decision-making processes. Rural sociologists believe that students from rural places have deep-rooted interests in family, friends, and being rural. Memoirs by rural-centric authors such as Sarah Smarsh and J. D. Vance illustrate how hard it is to move on from families in rural, working-class communities. For rural youth, family relationships are important to college going decisions. The association between family relationships and college enrollment may conflict with one another (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, Snyder, 2010). Parents, siblings, and relatives all have a central role in the rural family and help share a rural student's cultural experience. Demi et al. (2001) describe the "bond between rural students and parents/families tend to be more traditional and interdependent with strong kin social exchanges" (p. 4). Additionally, parenting practices in rural areas tend to be more autocratic, meaning the parents exert more influence and direction over the rural student than similar peer groups from other locales. This type of relationship can lead to a less than desirable relationships with parents and less parental oversight (Demi et al., 2010).

Parents of rural students also serve as a connection to the area's culture by providing their children with social networks and resources similar to those of professional-class families in metropolitan areas (McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001). These social connections serve to further the cultural indoctrination of rural

students and their belief systems. McGrath et al. (2001) indicated that rural families who operate farms have successfully sent their children to higher education because of strong community ties, better resources, and the higher value on education they have compared to non-farming rural families.

Exposure to college culture does promote college attendance in rural students. Students from rural communities exposed to college culture and norms have less fear of leaving their rural roots behind. Hudacs (2020) indicated that rural students accustomed to behaviors, social interactions, and the cultural capital of non-rural people might have a more effortless adjustment to college communities. The cultural capital gained from a prior college experience (i.e., a campus visit, attending a sporting event, peers who attend college) can lead to college attendance and better persistence for the rural student.

**School Influence.** Schools serve as an important developmental context for rural students. Byun, Meece, and Agger (2017) mention that “schools contain unique sets of norms, expectations, resources, and learning activities” (p. 819). Outcomes associated with school, academic achievement, and educational attainment are vital in making successful educational and developmental transitions (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017). An essential piece of the school context is the school counselor.

School counselors can be seen as a form of social capital for students from rural communities. The college information school counselors can provide students can provide a valuable resource to students and their parents. Additionally, school counselors play a vital role in college counseling and encouraging rural students to attend college. Rural student access to school counselors provides a critical link to the college counseling process that includes admission information, financial aid information, choice,



and enrollment (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). Ontiveros (2020) discusses the influence of high school counselors on rural student college perceptions. According to Ontiveros (2020), "Counselors emphasized to students that college is necessary for securing a career path" and obtaining a well-paying job after high school (p. 61). Ontiveros (2020) emphasized that "Counselors were students' primary motivation when considering higher education opportunities and this ultimately caused students to believe a college education was necessary for career attainment" (p. 61). Bryan et al. (2011) indicated that the number of school counselors in a school building and the number of times a student visits with the school counselor for career and college information appear to affect college application rates. The study also found that higher numbers of school counselors per building had a positive effect on students applying to two or more colleges.

School counselors provide an essential role in mentoring rural students about opportunities after high school graduation. Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, and Pierce (2012) indicated that "certified, professional school counselors, when allowed the time, resources, and structure of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs, contribute to positive student academic success, the entry in college and post-secondary training, and career development" (p. 109). This can include college, technical schools, apprenticeships, and the military. Although high school counselors are a primary resource for rural students' information about colleges and after-school opportunities, school counselors have a high student to counselor ratio in which to work. The state of Missouri recommends that there be one school counselor for every 400 students (Lapan et al., 2012). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2020) recommends a

figure of 250 students per counselor. There are approximately 336 students per counselor in public schools within Missouri (Delany, 2019; ASCA, 2020), thus making the time school counselors must spend with individual students regarding career planning and post-high school plans more difficult. School counselors have a crucial role in rural student college decision-making.

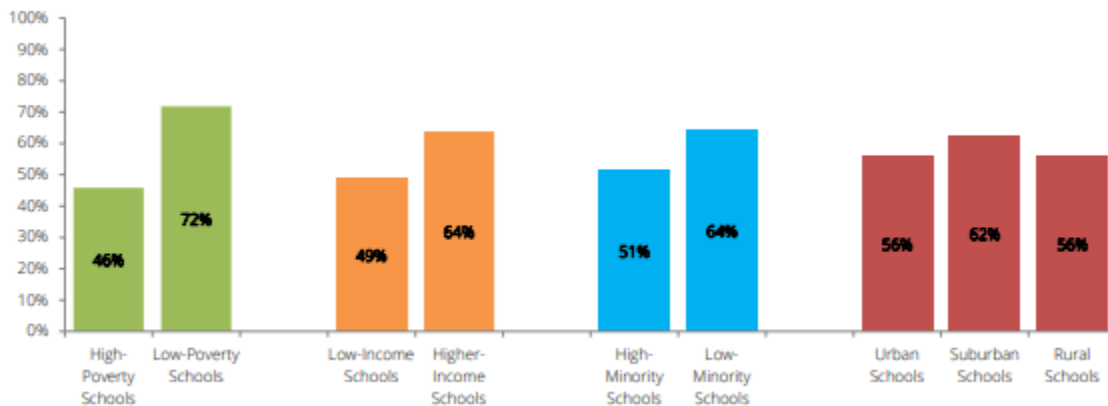
**Rural Student Educational Aspirations.** The aspirations of rural students to attend post-secondary institutions can differ significantly. Students from rural communities, as a whole, tend to be underrepresented at colleges and universities across the United States. Students from rural communities tend to have lower educational aspirations when compared to those from suburban and urban locations (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Wang, Hagedorn, & McLaughlin, 2021). Additionally, Demi et al. (2010) and Wang et al. (2021) noted that students from rural communities tend to have lower occupational aspirations than their peers from urban and suburban communities. Not only do students from rural communities have lower aspirations to seek higher education, but they also have a mindset for lower-paying jobs that may or may not need a college degree.

Parent education level and parent involvement do have an essential role in students from rural communities attending college. Multiple studies (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017; Demi et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2021) have shown that parent education levels and parental encouragement increase educational aspirations in students.

**Rural Student College Experiences.** Rural students across the United States face challenges to their experience in colleges and universities (Goldman, 2019). These challenges, when compared to students from other geographical areas, can lead to lower

persistence and graduation rates for students from rural communities. Some of the challenges rural students face when attending college come from their “background, pre-college experiences, and rural culture” (Goldman, 2019, p. 16). Other social factors can influence persistence and retention of rural students at college. Influences such as friends and parental expectations also factor into a rural college students’ success. When combined, these factors influence the rural student’s college experience and likelihood of persistence and graduation.

**College Attendance and Persistence for Rural Students.** There are multiple studies about the likelihood of rural student college attendance and success (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012; Herzog & Pittman, 1995;). Even though the high school completion rate has now moved to be similar between rural and urban groups (see figure 3), students from rural communities still attend college at lower rates, according to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI, 2020) and National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020). PNPI (2020) mentions that as recently as 2015, 29% of students aged between 18 and 24 from rural areas enrolled at a college, university, or trade school, compared to 48% from urban areas. Additionally, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022) showed that college enrollment rates immediately after high school graduation still favored students from suburban (66%) schools over rural (56%) and urban (56%) school districts (see figure 3).



*Figure 3.* College Enrollment Rates in the First Fall after High School Graduation, Class of 2021, Public Non-Charter Schools. Used with permission from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022).

Herzog and Pittman (1995) outlined the similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses between students from rural and urban educational communities. Herzog and Pittman (1995) note that “from 1960 through 1980, high school completion was approximately 10% lower for the rural population than the metropolitan population” (p. 7). However, the gap between those two groups dropped to 7.8% between 1980 and 1990. Herzog and Pittman (1995) attributed much of the high school graduation rates and college going rates for rural students to the outmigration of highly educated families to urban and suburban areas. Additionally, Herzog and Pittman (1995) blamed rural school district student graduation and college going rates squarely on a lack of resources at rural schools. Herzog and Pittman (1995) mention that:

Although consolidation has resulted in bigger districts and bigger schools, rural schools are still smaller and poorer than nonrural schools. Historically, student population has determined funding allocations, and smaller numbers mean fewer dollars. Fewer dollars mean fewer teachers and fewer advanced or specialized courses, thus putting students in rural schools at a disadvantage (p. 8).

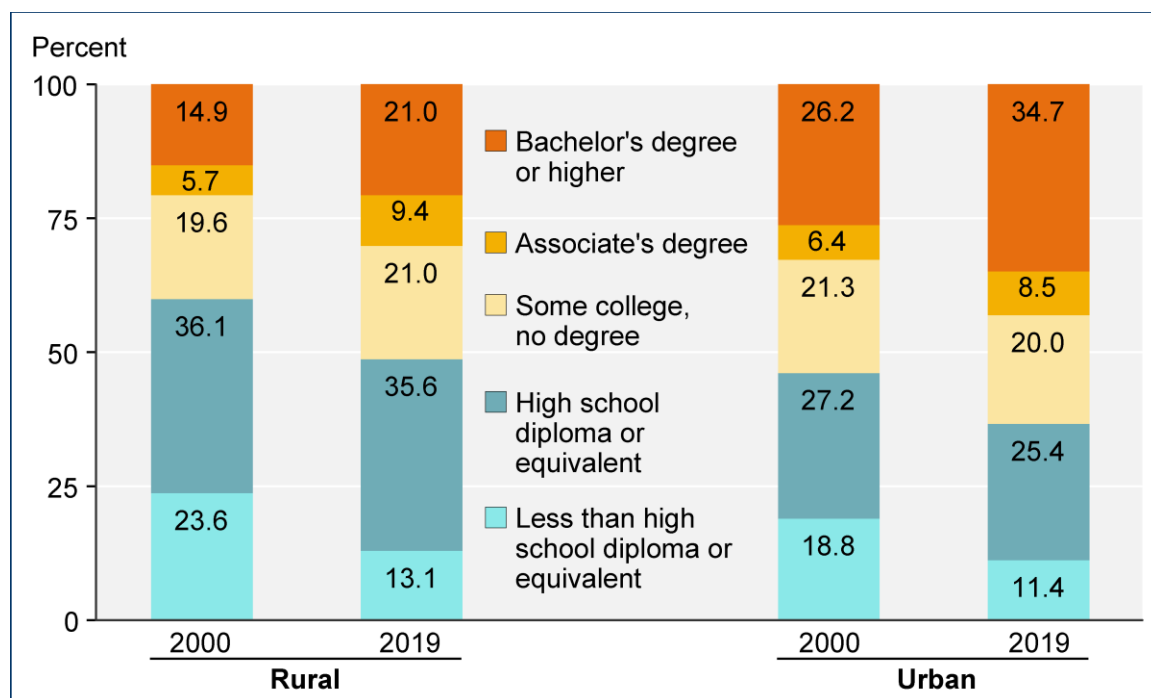
According to Herzog and Pittman (1995), the lack of resources at rural high schools led to over 25% of students from poor rural communities who attended the University of North Carolina to take remediation courses upon entrance into the university. The study also revealed that when compared against the five wealthiest counties in North Carolina, students from poor rural counties had SAT scores 120 points lower than those from wealthier counties. For rural communities, the outmigration of working-aged adults and their families has led to smaller populations, leading to less tax funding and resources for rural schools and less opportunity for those students to attend or be successful at a postsecondary institution.

Studies show that students from rural communities are less likely to persist and graduate than those from urban and suburban locations (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins 2012; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Byun, Meece, & Agger 2017; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). Students from rural communities are challenged by the cultural changes that arrive when attending college, and these changes can influence their success or lack of success while attending college. Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012) describe the social and cultural change as a mitigating factor towards rural student success and persistence in college. Their research supports that family and school social capital are equally important when predicting if a student from a rural community will attend a postsecondary institution. Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012) and Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) argued that rural student college attendance goes beyond community, school, and family structure and adds that the social conditions within each of these areas also influences a rural student's decision to attend

college. In Byun, Meece, and Agger's 2017 study, they found that parental education, college preparatory work, extracurricular and cocurricular experiences, along with teacher expectations, predicted rural student college attendance patterns. The combination of these experiences, along with family support, added to rural student college trajectory patterns. The study also notes the importance of transition programming for students coming from rural backgrounds. Byun, Meece, and Agger (2017) support the development of programming that considers "family support, academic preparation, and cultural discontinuities in their bridging and transition to college programs" (p. 832). Their research indicated that these types of supports lead to better educational trajectories for rural students.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015a) reports that 29.3% of rural students aged 18-24 are enrolled at a college or university. In comparison, students from all other locations are enrolled at a much higher rate of 42%. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (USDA Economic Research Service) (2021), one in five adults aged 25 and greater from rural communities have a college degree. While small in proportion to adults from urban communities (35%), this number represents an increase from 5% from 1960 (USDA, 2021). The USDA Economic Research Service (2021) notes that the college completion gap between young adults (ages 25-34) in rural and urban areas has increased during the past 20 years. Rural young adult college completion rose from 15 in 2000 to 21 percent in 2019, while urban young adult college completion rose from 26% in 2000 to 39% in 2019 (see figure 4) (USDA Economic Research Service, 2021). The USDA Economic Research Service (2021) attributes the lower college completion rate of young adults from rural areas to

much lower levels of income and distance to an institution of higher education. These factors can add to the likelihood that individuals from rural communities choose to stay close to home and seek employment within their local communities.



*Figure 4.* United States educational attainment in rural and urban areas, 2000-2019. Used with permission from the United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (2021).

### **Perna and Thomas Model of Student Success**

Perna and Thomas (2006), in collaboration with the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, developed a framework to reduce the college success gap and promote successful college completion for all students. Their framework sought to define and increase student success across all demographics of higher education. In particular, Perna and Thomas (2006) note that most "institutional programs that are designed to promote retention of college students typically focus only on the barriers to persistence with no attention to enrollment processes" (p. 1). Perna and Thomas (2006)

mention that students from rural area "are still not only less likely than other students to go to college, but when they do enroll, are also concentrated in lower quality, less prestigious, and less costly postsecondary educational institutions" (p. 1). Research by Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012), Hoxby and Avery (2013), Lopez and Schwartz (2019) also support that despite rural students having strong academic credentials, they are not attending colleges that have more robust academic programs, greater student support resources, have a higher probability of graduation, or provide a more significant opportunity for upward social mobility.

Perna and Thomas' (2006) model complements existing studies and research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1993, 2005) that show how college affects students from multiple backgrounds. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have conducted several decades of research towards the effects of college on students both developmentally and systemically. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) can fall into two broad categories: student developmental theories and college impact models (p. 18). Student developmental theories "address the nature, structure, and processes of individual human growth" (p. 18). College impact models "emphasize change associated with the characteristics of the institutions students attend or with the experiences students have while enrolled" at the college (p. 18). The framework and model of student success developed by Perna and Thomas (2006) complement the college impact models researched by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note several college impact models that affect student change. One model is Astin's Impact-Environment-Outcome Model and Theory of Involvement. According to this model, a student's college outcomes are viewed as



functions of three elements: inputs, environment, and outcomes (p. 53). Inputs refer to "demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and the academic and social experiences students bring to college" (p. 53). The environment refers to the people, programs, policies, cultures, and experiences the student will encounter while attending college. Outcomes refer to change in the student's skills, knowledge, values, beliefs, and behaviors after they exit the college environment. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) mention that this model emphasizes that the college has a critical role in providing students the academic and social experiences they need to succeed so long as the student capitalizes on the opportunities the college provides. This construct is similar to that in Perna and Thomas' model (2006) in that the Internal Context of student attitudes and behaviors can lead to student success.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) additionally review Tinto's Theory of Student Departure. Tinto's Theory of Student Departure is primarily concerned with the integration of students into the college environment. The model explains that "rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution presumably lead to greater student integration in these systems and thus to persistence" (p. 54). Tinto's Theory of Student Departure is similar to the School Context in Perna and Thomas' model (2006). Tinto's model postulates that the college should provide stimulating academic and extracurricular activities that lead to student success and persistence.

Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change in college students is another model of student success. This model examines several elements of impact on student success. The model explains that student growth produces "direct and indirect effects of

five main sets of variables" (p. 56-57). Two of these variables are concerned with the student's background and precollege experiences and the college's demographics. Both variables feed into the college's environment. These three variables influence the student's interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. In turn, all these variables influence the student's learning and development. Compared to Perna and Thomas' Conceptual Model of Student Success (2006), the model presented by Pascarella is the most similar in structure. Both models showcase the relationships and layers of precollege disposition, college characteristics, and socialization that interact and affects each other to lead to student success.

The model developed by Perna and Thomas (2006) serves as a framework for higher education practitioners and policymakers to improve upon the outcomes and gaps in the achievement of students from marginalized groups. The model utilizes "10 indicators of student success representing four key transitions in the education process" (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 4). Perna and Thomas (2006) define student success as the completion or maximization of those 10 indicators. Perna and Thomas (2006) define the four transitions of student success as: college readiness, college enrollment, college achievement, and post-college attainment. The 10 indicators defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) for student success: educational aspirations, academic preparation, college access, college choice, academic performance, transfer to another college or university, retention and persistence, post-bachelor's degree enrollment income attainment, and educational attainment. All these factors are responsible for student success. As several studies have shown (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece,

Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018), students from rural communities' lack in several transitions and indicators responsible for student success and college aspirations. These transitions and indicators include social capital (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012); college preparation (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012), rural school structures and resources (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017), a sense of belonging, ability to gain meaningful employment (Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015), and access (Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018).

Rural students face challenges and gaps in college enrollment and college achievement. Perna and Thomas' (2006) model serves as a reference point for the narratives that students from rural communities may share about their journey to college and what has helped them become successful in college. The stories they tell will inform this study about what gaps may exist in the transition to college and what barriers may exist towards their success. Conversely, this study will seek out what has defined their successes, assisted with their success, and what resources ultimately played a defining role in their successful retention and persistence towards college graduation.

### **Summary**

Several studies have shown that students from rural communities attend college at a lesser rate than their peers from urban and suburban environments (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Koricich et al., 2020). However, there seems to be a lack of agreement in rural definition, leading to studies and research with significantly different results and interpretations. Federal, state, and local municipalities have differing definitions of rural. For example, the Washington Post (n.d.) provided 15 results of rural from the federal government alone. The United States Department of

Agriculture alone has 11 definitions of rural (Washington Post, n.d.). The Missouri Economic and Research Information Center (MERIC) defines rural using a county-based system that includes counties not located in Metropolitan Statistical Areas. In contrast, the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development uses the American Community Survey (ACS) definitions. In order to simplify studies and research of populations from rural areas, an agreed-upon definition of rural communities, rural areas, and rurality should be established. Additional gaps discovered are the lack of narratives from students with rural backgrounds and the stories of their experiences accessing higher education. Carr and Kefalas (2009) provide some of the richest details of rural students and their experiences. However, little information is available beyond their work about the narrative of the rural student experience. It will also be essential to recognize the social and structural constructs and how those affect rural students. Students from rural community's value the support of families and friends and worry about the cultural differences between themselves and the urban and suburban students who are the majority at college campuses across the country.

As colleges and universities seek new pipelines for students, providing additional support mechanisms to recruit and support student retention and persistence for students from rural communities becomes more critical. Rural students are underrepresented on college campuses across the United States. Students from rural communities have among the lowest educational attainment rates. The education gap between urban and rural students appears to be growing. College campuses should seek to understand the needs of students from rural communities by providing programming that supports and eases those students' concerns before and during the collegiate experience.

Colleges and universities across the country value diversity, equity, and inclusion. Postsecondary institutions need to remember that diversity, equity, and inclusion are more than just race and sexual orientation. Regional demographics and culture are of equal importance across the country. Colleges and universities need to provide support mechanisms to break down the barriers in the recruitment and admissions process, provide a safe campus culture, and work with rural students in career preparation. The diversity and experiences students from rural communities bring to the collegiate community enriches the college experience and brings value back not only to the college but back to the rural communities.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

The current qualitative narrative study examined the stories of students from rural communities and the unique challenges they faced compared to their urban and suburban peers when applying to, entering, and persisting in higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Goldman, 2019; Holland, 2019). The first purpose of the study was to examine the stories of students from rural communities of how pre-college and college experiences influenced their college enrollment and facilitated student success, and to better understand the challenges and barriers they faced. The second purpose of the study was to interpret rural students' stories through the lens of Perna & Thomas' (2006) Model of Student Success. Chapter 3 provides the methodology used to conduct the study. The chapter includes a description of the research design, the selection of participants, the procedures and instruments used to collect the data, explanation of the data analysis and synthesis, and the limitations associated with the study.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative, phenomenological, narrative design was chosen for the current study to examine the stories of students from rural communities and the unique challenges they face accessing and completing higher education. Qualitative research is appropriate for developing a rich and deep understanding of participants' narratives of their experiences (Merriam, 1998). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), in qualitative studies "the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the view of the participants" (p. 17). Narrative inquiry was used to better understand the lives of students from rural communities. The stories of rural student experiences before

and during college was then retold in a chronological order to better understand the challenges they faced and the successes that occurred. The most important feature of the narrative study approach is that it consists of the “collection of narratives (stories) from individuals or small groups” (Butina, 2015, p. 190).

There are common characteristics that define qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). One characteristic is that the researcher is the key instrument. This includes the experience of personally collecting the data, observing participant behavior, and interviewing participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research also utilizes alternating inductive and deductive data analysis. This process involves collecting the narratives told by rural students and organizing, analyzing, and developing themes based on the narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition to these characteristics, it is essential for the researcher to understand the participants’ meanings throughout the study. The researcher should keep a focus on learning the meaning that rural students hold about a problem or issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and search for meaning through their stories. The researcher should also show a high degree of reflexivity throughout the qualitative research process. Reflexivity allows the researcher to use their own personal experience and background to shape interpretations about the meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) described the characteristics that define a phenomenological study. These characteristics include recognizing phenomena through the eyes of the participants (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008) and gathering deep and rich descriptions of the phenomena through interviews (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Additionally, Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that the description of participants’

lived stories culminate “in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (p. 13).

Clandinin and Connelly (as cited by Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 100) described narrative analysis as “how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves.” Furthermore, narrative analysis has been described as “a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories of their lives” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). The narrative analysis for the current study was framed by an orientation that described the setting and character, an abstract that summarized the events or incidents of the story, an evaluative commentary of events, conflicts, and themes, and a resolution that illustrated the outcomes of the story or conflict (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

### **Setting**

The setting for the current study was defined by students who graduated from a public school district in northwest Missouri that lies within the borders of a rural county defined by the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC) and matriculated to a public four-year institution in the northwestern region of Missouri. The postsecondary institutions included in this study were Missouri Western State University and Northwest Missouri State University.

Missouri Western State University, located in Saint Joseph, Missouri, is classified as a public, 4-year or above institution with a student population of 4,911 during the fall semester of 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, December 2021a). Missouri Western State University has an undergraduate student population that is approximately



38% male and 62% female. Additionally, 74% of the student population identifies as Caucasian or White (National Center for Education Statistics, December, 2021a).

Missouri Western State University is an open-admission institution. Applicants who demonstrate a minimum 2.5 cumulative high school grade-point-average are accepted for admission to the institution (Missouri Western State University, 2021a). Missouri Western State University offers student development resources that include, career development, counseling, a center for diversity and inclusion, a nontraditional student center, and centers for student life, and residential life (Missouri Western State University, 2021b).

Northwest Missouri State University, located in Maryville, Missouri, is classified as a public, 4-year or above institution with a student population of 7,267 during the fall semester of 2020. Northwest Missouri State University has an undergraduate student population that is approximately 41% male and 59% female. Additionally, 83% of the student population identifies as Caucasian or White (National Center for Education Statistics, December, 2021b). A total of 80% of applicants are accepted for admission to the university (National Center for Education Statistics, December, 2021c). Applicants who demonstrate a minimum 3.0 cumulative high school grade-point-average and complete a high school college-preparatory curriculum are accepted for admission to the institution (Northwest Missouri State University, 2021a). Northwest Missouri State University offers federally funded student support services to students who are considered first-generation, those who are eligible for financial aid, and those who have documented disabilities. The student support services include academic advising, financial aid advising, exclusive scholarship opportunities, career advising, personal

development, peer mentoring, resource materials, and cultural/social involvement opportunities (Northwest Missouri State University, 2021b).

### **Sampling Procedures**

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) explained that “sampling in qualitative research is almost always purposive” (p. 176). The sampling procedure utilized for the current study was Criterion Sampling. Criterion Sampling includes the selection of participants that meet specific criteria (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The eligible population of participants for this study were students enrolled at a junior-level or senior-level standing at one of the two public Missouri post-secondary institutions located in the northwest region of Missouri. These institutions included Missouri Western State University and Northwest Missouri State University. Additional criteria for participation in the study included graduation from a public high school that resided within a Missouri county identified as rural by the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC). Participants for this study must have graduated from their public rural high school during a period of 2015 to 2021. Semi-structured interviews were delimited to 14 participants for face-to-face Zoom room discussions at 60 minutes per participant.

Participants had to meet all criteria for inclusion in the study. Northwest Missouri State University assisted with identifying students who met the criteria through Student Services and contacted those students encouraging participation in the study. The list of students who agreed to participate in the study along with their student email addresses was provided to the researcher, and seven were randomly chosen to schedule for Zoom interviews. Missouri Western State University assisted with identifying students who met the criteria through the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and

Enrollment Management. A list of students who met the selection criteria for the study along with their student email addresses was provided to the researcher, and seven were randomly chosen to schedule for Zoom interviews. A total of 14 potential participants were selected for this study. Other potential participants, after the initial seven from each institution, were placed on a wait list in case any of the seven cancelled or withdrew their participation from the data collection.

### **Instruments**

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the researcher serves as the key instrument to “examine documents, observe behavior, and interview participants” (p. 181). The researcher for the current study created the Zoom rooms, scheduled and conducted the interviews, constructed participant’s personal narratives, and interpreted the data. The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to encourage rural students to tell their stories, but attention was paid to wording of the questions to ensure the participants felt safe and secure. Additionally, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, extra precaution was used by conducting the individual interviews via Zoom.

Participants were allowed to express their opinions, thoughts, and real-world experiences about being from a rural community. Interview questions were designed to highlight the positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education, along with the barriers or difficulties they faced during their pursuit of higher education. The semi-structured interview protocol included six demographic questions, followed by 10 standardized interview questions that aligned with the research questions for this study, with optional follow-up questions to probe for more details or to clarify. Demographic questions are asked to assist the researcher with the development of a full narrative of

each participant. Demographic questions help to identify patterns or trends that may exist between gender, race, location, and locale among the participants. Demographic questions for the current study included the following:

1. From what public rural high school did you graduate?
2. What year did you graduate from high school?
3. Did you grow up on a farm/ranch or within a town/city/village?
4. How far (distance-wise) is your hometown from the university?
5. As what gender do you identify?
6. What is your race/ethnicity?

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008) during the process of an interview, questions should be sequenced to ask factual basic questions first, to get the participant involved. The researcher should then ask present-based questions before asking any past-based or future-based questions. The semi-structured interview protocol aligned with the research questions for this study. The interview questions (Appendix A) were focused on each layer of context for Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success and served as a guide to the participants' narrative of their experiences as a student from a rural community. The semi-structured interview questions were asked in a back-and-forth process between positive influences promoting their access and success in higher education and barriers or challenges in their pursuit of higher education. Finally, the researcher allowed the interviewee to add any additional information at the end of the interview (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to data collection, a request to conduct the study was submitted to the Baker University Institutional Review Board (IRB) on February 11, 2022. Approval to conduct the study was received from Baker University IRB on February 24, 2022 (Appendix E). Approval to conduct the study was received from Missouri Western State University on March 1, 2022 (Appendix F), and approval to conduct the study was received from Northwest Missouri State University on February 25, 2022 (Appendix G). An email was sent by the researcher to both institutions asking for assistance identifying participants meeting the criteria for this study and lists of email contacts for the eligible population (Appendix B). Students who met the eligibility requirements were identified by the institution and their names and student email addresses were provided to the researcher. The researcher then emailed the eligible participants to invite them to participate in the study using a two-phase process (Appendix B). Seven random participants were chosen from Missouri Western and seven random participants were chosen from Northwest Missouri State University. If the researcher failed to make contact with a random participant within one-week, random selection without replacement was utilized. In the email to schedule the one hour face-to-face Zoom interview, each potential participant was provided the informed consent to review (Appendix E). The informed consent included details about the purpose of the study, the research questions, and information on confidentiality and opting out of the study or leaving the study at any time. Those participants who agreed were scheduled for a one hour face-to-face Zoom interview. Each participant was made aware that the face-to-face Zoom interview would be video and audio-recorded and then transcribed. Each participant was also made aware of the

measures taken to protect their identity and confidentiality prior to signing the informed consent. To protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants, each were assigned a number ranging from 1A to 7A or 1B to 7B throughout the course of the study. The informed consent detailed the method by which the researcher would assign each participant with a number ranging from 1A to 7A for one institution and 1B to 7B for the other institution. This coding method was developed to protect the identity of the participants during the data analysis, presentation of the findings, and summary of the results.

Interviews were conducted in a face-to-face Zoom setting at a time that was convenient for both the participant and the researcher. Participants were encouraged to schedule their interview during a time they would have no interruptions and be able to complete the entire one hour face-to-face Zoom interview in its entirety during one setting. For qualitative interviews “the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants, telephone interviews, or engages in focus group interviews” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). The advantages to interviews as a qualitative data collection method include the collection of data when the participants cannot be directly observed, participants can provide historical information, and interviews allow the researcher to control the line of questioning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interviews were semi-structured and allowed the participants to engage with open-ended questions that elicited a response that was free from the opinions or views of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Each interview began with a review of their informed consent, reminder that the interviews were being recorded, and the six demographic questions. Then the

participants were posed the open-ended questions. During the course of the conversation, pre-determined but optional follow-up questions were asked by the researcher to elaborate or clarify specific responses from the participants. The follow-up questions allowed the researcher to understand the context of the participants' responses more fully. The face-to-face Zoom interviews occurred between April 29, 2022, and September 28, 2022. The average length of the 14 face-to-face Zoom interviews was approximately 49 minutes.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Narrative inquiry makes sense of an individual's experiences through the stories they tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Creswell and Creswell (2008) stated that "narrative research is a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives" (p. 13). The data collected during the study is then retold in a narrative chronological order and combines the viewpoints of both the participants and those of the researcher in a collaborative narrative form (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher sought to better understand how the participants framed, remembered, and reported their experiences through their own stories.

At the conclusion of each interview the researcher for the study labeled the Zoom interview using an alpha-numeric indicator based upon the higher education institution and individual student participants associated with the institution. Students who participated from Missouri Western State University were coded 1A-7A, while students from Northwest Missouri State University were coded 1B-7B. The alpha-numeric system was developed to ensure anonymity among students from both institutions while allowing

data to be aggregated by institution. After the completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the interviews using an online software tool named Trint (n.d.). The use of the software allowed for quicker and more accurate transcriptions of the interviews. After each participants' transcript was edited against the recorded interview and finalized, the researcher submitted that transcript to the participant for member checking. Immediately after each transcript was approved for accuracy by the participant, the researcher added additional notes and context from the interview onto the transcript. These notes included any pertinent information hand-written during the interview that may not have been captured in verbal format. This included the participants' level of engagement and demeanor during the interview.

After the completion of member-checking each interviewee's transcripts, the researcher read each transcript several times to construct each participant's narrative. Next, the researcher determined any demographic sub-groups that may exist to complete each narrative. Demographic sub-groups helped the researcher identify trends that may exist between the data. The researcher then analyzed each transcript through an online qualitative analysis software called Quirkos (n.d.). The tool allowed the researcher to quickly review and establish recurrent patterns of positive and negative themes throughout the transcripts.

**Research Question 1.** What stories do rural students tell about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education?

**Research Question 2.** What stories do rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties of their pursuit of higher education?



Demographic data obtained from interview questions 1-6 were categorized to determine trends. In addition, demographic data provides the researcher with a picture of the participants in the study and helps to identify any trends that may exist in the data (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Responses to interview questions 7-17 regarding positive influences and supports that aligned with Research Question 1, and responses to interview questions 18-29 regarding challenges or barriers that aligned with Research Question 2, were gleaned and constructed from the 14 interview transcripts. Creswell and Creswell (2008) suggested five steps that should be taken for data analysis: (1) organize and prepare the data, (2) read and look at all the data, (3) code the data, (4) generate themes, and (5) represent the description and themes into a narrative passage (p. 193-195). This approach, in addition to using Tesch's (1990) eight steps in the coding process as described by Creswell and Creswell (2008), were incorporated into the data analysis and synthesis for this study. Tesch's (1990) first step of coding qualitative data includes the researcher reading the transcripts carefully and understanding the entire picture of the story. This allows the researcher to recall any important information or observations that may be important to the study and add from the hand-written notes retained from the interview. In step two, the researcher selects one transcribed interview and asks themselves, "What is this about?" (Creswell & Creswell, 2008, p. 196). The researcher should review each transcript to determine if any underlying meaning exists (Creswell & Creswell, 2008, p. 196). The third step of Tesch's coding process involves developing themes and patterns from the reviewed transcripts. During this portion of the process, major themes and patterns will develop from reviewing the transcripts, including those based on participants' responses to the demographic questions that create sub-

groups such as gender, farm, race, etc. Step four involves taking the themes that have emerged from the transcripts and developing/assigning codes for each theme and topic. Step five of Tesch's (1990) process is to "find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories" (Creswell & Creswell, 2008, p. 196). Creswell and Creswell (2008) declared that this step in the analysis allows for reducing the total number of categories by grouping together similar themes that relate to one another. Step six in the coding process outlined by Tesch (1990) requires decisions be made on the abbreviation for each theme then alphabetizing these codes. Step seven is the preliminary analysis of the coded data, which enables a visual representation of what is included in each category including demographically based patterns. Finally, step eight of Tesch's (1990) qualitative data coding process, is to recode the data if necessary.

The positive and negative themes were then coded to the related Perna and Thomas Conceptual Model of Student Success construct and level.

**Research Question 3.** How do the stories rural students tell about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education, align with Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success?

**Research Question 4.** How do the stories rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties of their pursuit of higher education, align with Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success?

The researcher discovered how each positive and negative theme including any demographically based sub-group patterns from Research Questions 1 and 2 aligned with each construct and level of Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success for Research Questions 3 and 4. This was accomplished by analyzing participant

narratives with the online qualitative analysis tool, Quirkos (n.d.). After the analysis of each participants' narrative, their stories were mapped onto Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success context. The themes from the narratives were categorized by the internal context, family context, school context, and social, economic, and policy context to allow the researcher to discover any recurring patterns among the participants of the study.

### **Reliability and Trustworthiness**

It is important for the researcher to “convey the steps they will take in their studies to check for the accuracy and credibility of their findings” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 199). Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended using multiple methods of validity procedures to check for accuracy. For the current study, the researcher used three methods to promote and establish reliability and trustworthiness of the data. First, the researcher completed member checking. Member checking involves taking the transcripts, findings, or reports to the participants of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After each participant was interviewed, a completed transcript was provided to the participant to allow for corrections and clarifications. The second method for establishing credibility was using a rich, thick description of the findings. Through the participants' narratives, the researcher was able to provide detailed descriptions of the unique and individual experiences of these rural students before and during their higher education journey. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the purpose of rich, thick description is to provide many perspectives of a theme. In turn, this allows the results to become more realistic and genuine, adding to the validity of the findings. The third method for promoting reliability and trustworthiness was to clarify the potential bias of

the researcher. For this study, it was important to note the researcher came from a rural community in Missouri, grew up in rural Missouri culture, graduated from a rural Missouri high school, and earned a degree from a Missouri public four-year college or university directly after high school graduation. The researcher acknowledges the need to remain objective, but that their background and experiences as a rural Missouri high school graduate and attendee at a Missouri four-year public college or university could help the researcher better understand the experiences of a student from a rural community.

### **Researcher's Role**

The role of a researcher in a qualitative study is to act as the “primary instrument in data collection” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 204). As the primary data collection instrument, it is essential for the researcher to identify personal values, assumptions, and possible bias at the beginning of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that “good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretations of the findings are shaped by their background, such as their gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origin” (p. 200-201), and that the researcher must take time to identify reflexivity and bias in their study.

The researcher for the current study grew up in a rural Missouri environment, graduated from a rural Missouri high school, and earned a degree from a four-year Missouri public college or university. The researcher, therefore, identified with portions of the participants’ journeys to college from a rural perspective and had a deep understanding of rural culture and norms. These factors contributed to the researcher knowing the importance of positive influences promoting college success, along with a

personal understanding of many of the difficulties rural students may have faced in their journey to a college or university. In addition, the researcher understands the need to remain objective and that each participant's high school experience and journey to college may not be similar to those of the researcher.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of a study can be described as possible influences that are not under the control of the researcher (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). "Limitations are factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings and the generalizability of the results" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 133). In addition, according to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), limitations can arise from the methodology, data, and the method of analysis. The results of the current study are limited by the following factors.

- The study was conducted in the northwest quadrant of Missouri. Although the area is highly rural, statistically, student experiences in these regions may not represent rural students' experiences matriculating to college in other parts of the state or other parts of the United States.
- The participants of the study may not be representative of the entire population of students that met the eligibility criteria.
- Qualitative narrative inquiry is "overly personal and interpersonal" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which could have led to participants not feeling entirely comfortable sharing their story with others or answering questions honestly.
- The study relied on participants understanding the interview questions and recalling events correctly.

## Summary

Chapter 3 described the use of a qualitative research design that examined the perceptions and experiences of participants who graduated from a rural high school district and attend a public four-year college or university in the northwest quadrant of Missouri. The researcher conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with fourteen participants via Zoom video conferencing software. The first research question focused on the stories rural students tell of positive influences promoting access and success to higher education and the second research question focused on the stories rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties in their pursuit of higher education. The third and fourth research questions aligned the positive and negative rural student influences, respectively, with Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success. Optional but pre-determined follow-up questions were used as needed to obtain more details or make clarifications throughout each face-to-face Zoom interview. The methodology of the study including the sampling procedures, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis were explained. Additionally, Chapter 3 described the reliability and trustworthiness of the data, the researcher's role, and the limitations of the study. Chapter 4 contains the results of the data analysis.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The first purpose of the current qualitative narrative study was to examine the stories of students from rural communities of how the pre-college and college experiences supported their college enrollment and facilitated student success and to better understand the barriers and difficulties they faced matriculating to four-year universities. The second purpose of the study was to interpret rural students' stories through the lens of Perna and Thomas' (2006) Model of Student Success. Through interviews rural student participants for this study shared personal narratives about the barriers and difficulties they experienced when enrolling and attending college, as well as their influences and types of support they received from their communities, high schools, social networks, parents, and colleges. The defining feature of the narrative approach is the collection of stories from individuals and small groups (Butina, 2020).

Fourteen students participated in the current study between April 29, 2022 and September 28, 2022. Each participant engaged in an hour-long, face-to-face interview with the researcher via Zoom. The Zoom interviews were audio and video recorded, transcribed, and member-checked. The participant's narratives were then analyzed using the Quirkos qualitative data analysis software. Chapter 4 includes descriptive demographics and participant profiles for those interviewed. In addition, Chapter 4 presents the thematic analysis of the stories rural students shared about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education, along with any barriers or difficulties they may have had in their pursuit of higher education. The identification and explanation of the themes that emerged during coding and analysis of the interview

transcripts for RQ1 and RQ2 are provided. Finally, the stories were analyzed through Perna and Thomas' (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success to address RQ3 and RQ4.

### **Descriptive Demographics and Participant Profiles**

A total of 14 students who graduated from rural public high schools in Missouri between 2015 and 2021 were interviewed for the current study. All were enrolled with a junior or senior standing at either Missouri Western State University in St. Joseph, Missouri or at Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri. Of the 14 participants in this study, seven (50%) were seniors and seven (50%) were juniors. Ten participants (71.4%) identified as female, and four participants (28.6%) identified as male. Interviewees for this study were predominately white, as 13 participants (92.9%) identified as Caucasian, and one (8.1%) identified as Hispanic. Nine participants (64.3%) indicated they grew up on a farm or outside a city, town, or village municipality in Missouri. In comparison, five of the 14 participants (35.7%) indicated they grew up primarily inside a city, town, or village municipality in Missouri. Nine of the participants (64.3%) indicated that the rural public high school they graduated from was one hour or less travel time distance from the university they were attending, while four participants (28.6%) indicated a time frame between one hour and two hours travel time distance, and one participant (7.1%) indicated four hours travel time distance. Three of the 14 participants (21.4%) attended a community college first before transferring to the four-year institution they were attending. Table 1 presents relevant demographic information for interviewees and includes the participant identification code, university attended,



gender, race, year in college, degree, the total minutes to the college from their hometown, and the locale of the rural environment.

**Table 1***Participant Demographic Information*

Participants	Gender	Race	Year in College	Degree	Minutes to college from locale	Locale
1A	Male	White	Senior	Pre-Law	240	Town
2A	Female	White	Senior	Sociology	60	Town
3A	Male	White	Senior	Biology	30	Farm
4A	Female	White	Junior	Criminal Justice	90	Town
5A	Female	White	Junior	Physical Education	90	Farm
6A	Female	White	Junior	Nursing	120	Farm
7A	Female	White	Junior	Nursing	45	Farm
1B	Male	White	Senior	Business	60	Farm
2B	Female	White	Senior	Business	60	Town
3B	Male	White	Senior	Emergency Management	60	Farm
4B	Female	White	Junior	Childhood Education	30	Town
5B	Female	Hispanic	Junior	Graphic Design	15	Farm
6B	Female	White	Junior	Biochemistry	45	Farm
7B	Female	White	Senior	Financial Management	90	Farm

*Note.* Participant demographic information, with exception of year in college, was self-reported. Participants 1A - 7A are Missouri Western State University students. Participants 1B – 7B are Northwest Missouri State University students.

**Participant 1A.** Participant 1A was a senior at Missouri Western State University majoring in Pre-Law. Participant 1A identified as a white male and came from a single-parent household within the city limits of a rural community. He described his hometown as “welcoming, at least it was welcoming to me.” He continued by stating that “I thought it was a good place to raise a family, I would say.” Participant 1A’s high school graduating class had approximately 250 seniors. He explained that growing up he had little direction for post-high school plans, but going to college felt like the next step in life. “I applied to college sort of as an afterthought,” and explained, “it was the winter of my senior year, and up until that point, I had not considered what I would do after high school at all.” Participant 1A reported having strong academics, was involved in high school athletics, and had plenty of friends. He mentioned that his academic experience in college was trial and error, and he had changed degrees multiple times. Missouri Western State University was the third college he had attended. At the time of the interview, Participant 1A had been accepted to a law school and planned to attend immediately after graduation.

**Participant 2A.** Participant 2A was a senior at Missouri Western State University majoring in Sociology and identified as a white female. She indicated that she grew up within the city limits of her rural community and graduated from a high school with a class of approximately 35 students. She indicated that while she was a good student in high school both academically and athletically, getting accepted to college was a challenge for her because of a prior criminal record stating, “I was a good student, but yeah, that is probably the only thing.” She continued to explain that “I feel like if I were in a bigger city, I would not have got in trouble like I did.” She first attended a regional

community college before matriculating to Missouri Western State University and expressed that her goal was to become a social worker and assist individuals who may have had similar barriers to her own.

**Participant 3A.** Participant 3A was a senior, Biology major at Missouri Western State University. Participant 3A identified as a white male who grew up on a farm raising cattle and sheep and planting soybeans and wheat. Participant 3A had wanted to be a conservation agent and thus started his academic career majoring in Criminal Justice, only to find his true passion was Biology. At the time of the interview, he had a job waiting for him after graduation to work as a Biologist for the Missouri Department of Conservation. Participant 3A graduated high school with a class size of approximately 40 students. His parents had not attended college but were supportive of whatever direction he took after high school and stated, “my parents pushed us to go to college, but they did not have any schooling.” Participant 3A married right after high school, only to divorce his spouse after two years of marriage.

**Participant 4A.** Participant 4A was a junior, Criminal Justice major at Missouri Western State University and identified as a white female who grew up in a rural town. She indicated that her high school graduating class had approximately 20 students. Participant 4A worked full-time to help pay her way through college. Although she had felt strong support from her family, high school, and community to attend college, she reported that she was socially awkward and was a shy person. Participant 4A explained that “being social is an issue for me, I was pretty shy, and I did not know anybody.” Participant 4A mentioned that, “the college is a cliquey school because many of the kids that go there live locally or somewhere close by, a barrier that I had in college was

making some friends.” While in college, Participant 4A changed her degree program four times before settling upon Criminal Justice. She believed her success in college was due to her desire to learn and adapt, which were strengths brought from her rural upbringing.

**Participant 5A.** Participant 5A was a junior at Missouri Western State University majoring in Physical Education. Participant 5A identified as a white female who grew up on a farm and had a high school graduating class of 18. She described her community as surrounded by farms and saw college as a way out of that community. However, she mentioned that her high school had difficulty hiring and retaining teachers stating, “so the teachers, they [the school district] are just hiring leftover teachers; no one wants to come here to be a teacher.” Participant 5A started her college experience as an athlete at a community college before transferring to Missouri Western State University for her junior year. She conveyed that her single mother and the school counselor had roles in supporting her postsecondary educational pursuits.

**Participant 6A.** Participant 6A was a junior majoring in Nursing at Missouri Western State University. Participant 6A identified as a white female who grew up on a farm and had a high school graduating class of 15. She explained that “the community I grew up in is very family-oriented, and I would say if our neighbor had some issue like cattle being out, other people would not have any trouble putting them back in for them if they were not home.” Participant 6A was active in many extracurricular activities during high school and was encouraged by her parents to try new activities even if she was not comfortable doing those activities. Participant 6A also mentioned “she was ready to get out of” her hometown.

**Participant 7A.** Participant 7A was a junior majoring in Nursing at Missouri Western State University. Participant 7A identified as a white female who grew up on a farm and had a high school graduating class of 20. She explained that she was active in high school sports stating, "I was able to do volleyball, cheerleading, basketball, and I was able to do it all," and that "the town very much rallied around school sports." However, she criticized her hometown because of the closeness of many families and local gossip explaining that, "everybody knew everybody's business, so that was sometimes a little rough to deal with." Participant 7A said she believed attending college was a way out of the community to experience better things.

**Participant 1B.** Participant 1B was a senior, Business major at Northwest Missouri State University. Participant 1B identified as a white male who grew up working at the orchard on his family's farm and reported a high school graduating class of 45. Before attending a four-year college, he enrolled at a local community college and used the A+ Program to save money for his four-year program. He touted the benefits of attending a community college and not having student loan debt. He described the interactions during visits to both the community college and Northwest Missouri State University as being influential on his postsecondary education choices. Specifically, he noted, "class sizes, the class sizes at both colleges are very nice, there is at max 30 students per class." He continued by explaining "you know, you build closer relationships with the faculty that way." Participant 1B credited his college success to his work ethic and his rural upbringing.

**Participant 2B.** Participant 2B was a senior, International Business major at Northwest Missouri State University. Participant 2B identified as a white female who

grew up in a town in her rural community and reported a graduating class of 40. She explained that she was one of the few at her high school who did not grow up on farm and own cattle. Participant 2B recalled that she always wanted to go to college and that college was a way for her to leave her hometown. She reported that her high school supported going to college, but promoted attending a community college or a technical school above a four-year college stating, “they are supportive of going to college, but for them to believe that you are going to be successful in college, you have to be one of the big names or rich people in town.”

**Participant 3B.** Participant 3B was a senior majoring in Emergency Management at Northwest Missouri State University. Participant 3B identified as a white male who grew up on a farm and had a high school graduating class of 10. He described his upbringing as “a community where everyone knows everyone in the school,” and mentioned that “all the teachers knew every student.” Participant 3B believed his small class size led to the teachers' strong connection with the students. He felt challenged by the cultural differences between himself and students not from rural communities while attending college.

**Participant 4B.** Participant 4B was a junior majoring in Childhood Education at Northwest Missouri State University. Participant 4B identified as a white female who grew up in a town in her rural community and had a graduating class of approximately 140. Participant 4B took a gap year before attending college after high school. She mentioned that she had anxiety about attending college and wanted to make sure she made the correct decision of which college to attend before enrolling. During the gap year, she focused on working to save money for college. A main factor for her when

deciding which college to attend was safety. Participant 4B decided to attend Northwest Missouri State University because of the smaller size, closeness to home, and because the campus felt safe.

**Participant 5B.** Participant 5B was a junior majoring in Graphic Design at Northwest Missouri State University. Participant 5B identified as a Hispanic female who grew up on a farm and had a graduating class of 120. She described herself as an artistic student who had always felt supported by her parents and family to achieve her dreams and goals in life. She continued by explaining, "my parents made learning not just about getting a good grade on a test, but they really incited a love of learning and lifelong learning in me." Participant 5B believed that rural students "have an excellent support system and that many people are more involved with each student's success because there are fewer students."

**Participant 6B.** Participant 6B was a junior majoring in Biochemistry at Northwest Missouri State University. Participant 6B identified as a white female who grew up on a farm and had a graduating class size of 31. She described her rural community as a "small, closed community," and said, "I was always around the same people constantly; I had the same role models, my parents." Participant 6B conveyed that she had been actively involved in many extracurricular activities during high school, including basketball, volleyball, Future Farmers of America, and the National Honor Society. She credited her parents for pushing her to attend college and indicated that her parents wanted a better life for her than what they had experienced.

**Participant 7B.** Participant 7B was a senior, Financial Management major at Northwest Missouri State University. Participant 7B identified as a white female who



grew up on a farm and reported a high school graduating class size of 62. She explained that her parents both attended college and that going to college had always been her expected next step. She said, “even though we lived in a very rural community and had cattle and horses, it was always an expectation from my parents that I would go to college.” Participant 7B reported having been actively involved in extracurricular activities during high school and claimed her career choice was influenced by her mentor.

To better understand the participants' success in their pursuit to access and receive a higher education, the participants were asked open-ended pre-defined questions during the interview process. The questions posed inquired about the support and involvement for their access to higher education provided by their community, high school attended, family, and peers. In addition, questions were asked about the participants' motivation and attitudes toward attending college and how those may have affected their outlook. The following themes of positive influences promoting access and success in higher education emerged from this study.

**RQ 1. What stories do rural students tell about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education?**

The 14 participants had a combined 493 mentions of positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. Through coding and analysis of those 493 mentions of positive influences promoting access and success in higher education, distinct themes emerged from the stories told by the participants. The six distinct themes surrounding positive influences included:

- Support by Family
- Support by Mentor(s)

- College Resources
- High School Support
- Motivation and Attitude
- Community Support

The first theme that emerged among participants for positive influences promoting access and success in higher education was the support and encouragement provided by the family. Family support and encouragement was mentioned by all 14 (100%) of the participants 107 times (21.7%) of the total 493 positive influence statements. The family support and encouragement theme can be described as the parents having an active role in supporting and encouraging the participant's college endeavors. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 2A and 5A. Participant 2A said “my mom always would tell me I could do anything I wanted to do, so I believe that.” Participant 5A stated, “if I did not have my parents, I do not think I would have done as well as I have in college.”

The second theme that emerged among participants for positive influences promoting access and success in higher education was the support and guidance of mentors. The mentor theme can be described as an individual outside of the immediate family that provided the participant with encouragement, assistance, and motivation to be successful. The impacts of various types of mentors were mentioned by all 14 (100%) of the participants 93 times (18.9%) of the total 493 positive influence statements. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 2B and 6B. Participant 2B discussed the value of personal interaction with faculty as an example of support from the college perspective saying, “The teachers know my name, you know, like a lot of them

know me personally.” Participant 2B added, “I can go into their office and talk to them about life, not just homework.” Participant 6B stated, “my parents, my counselor, and my aunt and uncle are big influences.” Participant 6B continued, “my aunt is a pharmacist, and my uncle is a dentist, so they helped move me in the right direction.” She added that, “I shadowed them a lot in high school, so I knew going into it (college) what I wanted.”

The third theme that emerged among participants for positive influences promoting access and success in higher education was the resources provided by the college for access and success. This theme was marked by the college providing resources that can lead to student success. Support and resources provided by the college attended was mentioned 90 times (18.3%) of the total 493 positive influence statements by 13 of the 14 participants (92.9%). Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 1B and 7A. Participant 1B specifically mentioned the community feel of the college campus, stating, “I love the campus the most; the size of the campus was appealing to me in that it was not super big, but also still has that small town community feel for sure.” Participant 7A mentioned the tutoring center at the college and how it had contributed to her success. “I love [the tutoring center], I was going to fail my first-semester college algebra class.” Participant 7A continued, “math is not my strong suit and I was going to fail, but going to [the tutoring center] website, using the tutoring lab and their resources helped.” Participant 7A followed by saying, “I passed the class because of them.”

The fourth theme that emerged among participants for positive influences promoting access and success in higher education was the support provided by the rural

high schools for college enrollment. This theme can be described as the teachers, counselors, staff, resources, activities, and coursework at the high school level. All 14 participants (100%) in the study mentioned their rural high schools as a positive influence for access and success in higher education. This positive theme was mentioned 88 times (17.8%) of the total 493 positive influence statements throughout the study. Several examples supporting this theme came from Participants 6B and 7B. Participant 6B spoke about the encouragement she received from her high school teachers stating, “[the teachers] kind of were there along the way for everything.” Participant 6B added, “[the teachers] encouraged us to go to these study groups that they would hold at night and they tried to ensure us that they would always be there as a support system.” Participant 7B described her positive experience at her rural high school by promoting the closeness of the school district and the number of activities in which she was able to participate. “That is the one thing about our rural town and high school is that everybody is involved in all sports because we try to cater to all of our sports, so everybody has time to do them.”

The fifth theme that emerged among participants for positive influences promoting access and success in higher education was their motivation and attitude to attend college. This theme can be described as the internal drive and determination of the student to have a successful career, leave their community to expand their opportunities, or as having a positive attitude about attending college. This theme was mentioned by all of the 14 participants (100%) in the study a total of 69 times (14%) of the total 493 positive influence statements. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 2A and 6A. Participant 2A mentioned that going to college was important to her because

she wanted to choose her career and not be limited saying, “It was important that I go, so maybe I could have a career that I prefer.” Participant 6A mentioned the need to explore what was outside of her rural community. “I was ready to get out of my small town, there is so much more in the world that I want to see and do, and that was super exciting.” Participant 6A followed by saying, “but what drove me is to be successful and not just successful in my small town, but in a career and to continue to make my parents proud of me.”

The sixth theme that emerged among participants for positive influences promoting access and success in higher education was the support provided by the rural community outside of the high school. This theme can be described as support from acquaintances, businesses, farmers, and community organizations. Support of their rural community was mentioned 46 times (9.3%) of the total 493 positive influence statements by 11 of the 14 participants (78.6%) in the study. Several examples supporting this theme came from Participants 4B and 5B. Participant 4B discussed the support she received from her community and the closeness of the people living in the community. Participant 4B explained, “I think being able to be a part of something where everybody kind of knows each other and you are able to get to know each other well, was super supportive.” Participant 5B mentioned that, “it is a very family-oriented community, and continued by saying, “there are many interconnections with other people, everybody knows my family and me, and we all support what other people want to do with their careers.” Participant 5B went further to explain that “community members were able to help recommend me to different schools and be recommendations for character and

judgment and things like that when it came to applying [for college].” She added, “that probably was a big help, a big support.”

Patterns by demographic sub-groups were examined among the six themes of positive influences and supports for higher education. The analysis of all student narratives showed that six of the 14 participants (42.9%) interviewed for the current study reported mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. Only two of the seven (28.6%) participants interviewed from Missouri Western State University described mostly positive mentions of influences promoting access and success in higher education while four of the seven (57.1%) participants from Northwest Missouri State University described mostly positive mentions of influences promoting access and success in higher education. Of the 14 participants in the current study, six of the 10 females (60%) reported mostly positive mentions of influences promoting access and success in higher education, while none of the four (0.0%) of the males indicated mostly positive mentions of influences promoting access and success in higher education.

The positive themes related to influences promoting access and success in higher education were disaggregated by participants’ year in college. Of the senior-level participants in the study, only two of the seven (28.6%) conveyed mostly positive supporting influences while four of the seven (57.1%) junior-level participants conveyed mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. The positive themes related to influences promoting access and success in higher education were disaggregated by participants’ college degree program. Twelve different degree fields were represented in the current study. Of the degree fields that had more than one participant, one of the two (50.0%) nursing major participants indicated mostly positive

influences promoting access and success in higher education. None of the two (0.0%) of the Business major participants indicated mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education.

Positive influences and supports themes by participants' locale were also examined for the current study. Of the participants who lived in a rural town, only two of the five (40.0%) participants reported mostly positive mentions of influences promoting access and success in higher education, while four of the nine (44.4%) participants who lived on a farm mentioned mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. Nine of the 14 participants (64.3%) in the current study came from a farm. Five of the 14 participants (35.7%) in the current study came from a rural town environment. Four of the nine participants (44.4%) who came from a farming environment conveyed mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. Conversely, two of the five participants (40.0%) who came from a rural town environment conveyed mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education.

The distance of the participating students' rural locale to the college attended was the final demographic sub-group examined for the current study. Participants who attended college within a 45-minute distance of their rural locale reported the greatest number of positive influences promoting access and success in higher education among all demographic groups. Four of the five (80.0%) participants who attended college within a 45-minute distance of their rural locale mentioned mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. One of four (25.0%) participants who attended college that was a 60-minute distance of their rural locale reported mostly

positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. One in three (33.3%) participants who attended college that was a 90-minute distance from their rural locale reported mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. None of the two (0.0%) participants who lived more than 120-minutes from college reported mostly positive influences promoting access and success in higher education. Of the sub-groups analyzed for the current study, race was a factor not scrutinized at length due to a lack of racial diversity among the group. Only one of the 14 participants (7.1%) for the current study represented a race other than white or Caucasian.

**RQ 2. What stories do rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties of their pursuit of higher education?**

In addition to the positive influences supporting and promoting access and success in higher education, six themes emerged among the interviewees' reported barriers or difficulties related to pursuing postsecondary education at their chosen four-year colleges. Participants mentioned barriers or difficulties related to their pursuit of higher education a total of 531 times throughout the interviews. The six distinct themes surrounding barriers or difficulties included:

- Lack of High School Resources
- College Environment
- College Resources
- Financial Challenges
- Lack of Community Support
- Lack of Family Support



The first emerging theme mentioned by participants for barriers or difficulties related to the participants' pursuit of higher education was challenges related to a lack of resources and experiences at the rural high school. Thirteen of the 14 participants (92.9%) mentioned their high school as barrier or difficulty related to their pursuit of higher education. This barrier or difficulty was mentioned 124 times (23.4%) of the total 531 barrier/difficulty statements by the participants. This theme can be defined as a lack of support or resources from the rural high school the student attended. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 4A and 6A. Participant 4A mentioned that their high school did not openly promote a college-going atmosphere by saying, "the school itself, I do not feel like promoted going to college or said they support it." Participant 4A felt their rural high school, "did not openly promote anything." Participant 6A indicated that "sometimes the support system can lack in our high school if I am being truthful, and I do not sometimes think the teachers truly challenged us to go outside of what they knew; they either encouraged community college or the workforce."

A second emerging theme for barriers or difficulties mentioned by the participants in their pursuit of higher education was the college environment. All 14 participants (100%) described the environment of going to and attending college as a barrier or difficulty associated with their pursuit of higher education a total of 109 times (20.5%) of the total 531 barrier/difficulty statements in this study. This theme can be described as challenges related to the student's uneasiness at the college campus, noise at the college campus, social uneasiness, and unawareness of college cultural norms. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 3A, 2B, and 3B. Participant 3A stated, "it was definitely a challenge learning to live in the city, I mean, I managed to do it, but

yeah, that was a challenge because, again, as I said, I never really felt like I was at home.” Participant 2B stated they experienced challenges making new close friends in college:

It is honestly a challenge for me, and I have not been able to place my finger on why it has been tough for me to make friends in college. I was not sure if it was a me problem or if it was something like where I grew up and how it was very cliquey. Even to this day, I have had a lot of trouble making friends in college, more than just acquaintances, having people I hang out with outside of classes and stuff. That has been a major struggle.

Participant 3B mentioned the difference between growing up in a quiet rural community versus moving and living in a busier atmosphere by saying “I grew up on this quiet little spot where we were the only house on the road, so it was super quiet there,” and added, “you had all this space,” but indicated that, “college is different for me.”

A third emerging theme for barriers or difficulties mentioned by participants in their pursuit of higher education was the resources available at the college. This theme can be described as the challenges of rural students coming from a small community, small school, and being overwhelmed with the changes inherent in attending college. This challenge or barrier was described by all 14 participants (100%) a total of 85 times (16%) of the total 531 barrier/difficulty statements in this study. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 6A and 1B. Participant 6A described the challenges of understanding college resources and speaking with the college faculty by stating:

The first two semesters, I did well because they were Gen Eds. I did not struggle as much. However, there were classes that I had to learn how to study or and that

was the trickiest part for me, learning how to study. I still feel like I am still trying to learn how to learn, you know. But I learned how to meet with the professors and ask them questions and email, and it was not terrifying like they are people too. My freshman year, my first semester, I did not talk to many of my teachers unless I had a bad grade. The bad grade I considered bad was like a 'C'. There was one time when I did not go to my teacher soon enough and missed extra credit opportunities, but I ended up getting the grade up to a 'B'.

Participant 1B mentioned that class sizes affected them by saying, "I think colleges would see more success if they would reduce their class sizes to smaller sections."

The fourth emerging theme for barriers and difficulties mentioned by participants in their pursuit of higher education was the financial challenges of attending college. This theme is characterized by the worries or challenges the students or their families had with paying for and attending college. Twelve of the 14 (85.7%) participants in the study mentioned financial challenges associated with attending college as a barrier or difficulty toward their higher education a total of 82 times (15.4%) of the total 531 barrier/difficulty statements. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 1A, 3B, and 7B. Participant 1A believed other students who were not concerned about money did better in college:

It seemed like the most successful students were the ones who did not have to worry about finances, who were able not only to pay for their classes but could afford lots of extras and were able to socialize more.

Participant 3B echoed a similar sentiment by stating:

I had friends who graduated before me and had already racked up thousands of dollars in debt. I knew that I did not want to do that, and so that was a barrier for me. If I cannot afford it (college), I am not going to do it.

Participant 7B explained that many of their fears were about paying for college and not being saddled by student loan debt. Participant 7B explained that, “most of my fears about attending college were probably financial, I did not want to take out loans.”

A fifth emerging theme for barriers and difficulties mentioned by participants in their pursuit of higher education was a lack of resources and support from the rural community. This theme can be described as the participant's perception that a college-going culture was not crucial in their rural community and the need to leave the community for better career aspirations. Twelve of the 14 participants (85.7%) in the study mentioned a lack of resources and support from their rural community as a barrier of difficulty in their pursuit of high education a total of 81 times (15.3%) of the total 531 barrier/difficulty statements. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 2A, 6A, 2B, and 6B. Participant 2A plainly stated, "I want to get out of my community because there are not that many decent job opportunities." Participant 6A mentioned that:

The biggest challenge is where I come from. Many people in the community do not know what is out there (outside of the community) and only push the technical schools or community colleges, if at all. I think this causes challenges because we do not realize how many different people and cultures there are.

Participant 2B stated, “I would never be able to find a job with want I am wanting to do here.” Participant 6B reported a similar cause for concern:

I have always known of opportunities outside of my community and not just inside my community, unlike so many people from here. For most people who live and work here, this is all they know or want to know or do.

The sixth emerging theme for barriers and difficulties mentioned by participants in their pursuit of higher education was a lack of support from the family. Thirteen of the 14 participants (92.8%) in the study mentioned a lack of support from their family as a barrier or difficulty in their pursuit of higher education a total of 50 times (9.4%) of the total 531 barrier/difficulty statements. This theme is characterized by a lack of family or parental support for college and included financial assistance, a lack of college knowledge, assistance with college-related processes, or casting doubt into the student's future. Examples supporting this theme came from Participants 4A, 5A, 6A, and 7B. Participant 4A indicated that her parents were not pleased with her initial college choice and stated, "my parents were not happy about my decision to go to Missouri State before I ended up at Missouri Western, it was further from home and it was a last-minute decision to attend there." Participant 5A indicated she felt guilt by attending the college she chose after being a community college athlete and explained:

My parents did struggle with my decision financially to go to Missouri Western instead of continuing at another college to participate in athletics. They liked that I had always been involved in athletics in high school and college, so attending Missouri Western and not being involved in athletics was heartbreaking for them.

Participant 5A further stated, "they did not want me to spend all that money, so I was nervous about that." Participant 6A is very close to her immediate family but felt that, "maybe I was afraid to hurt my parents because I wanted to go away to college."

Participant 6A also seemed to feel guilty about the financial burdens stating, “I never really wanted to burden my parents with the cost of college because I grew up in a family with seven siblings.” Participant 7B had to apply for financial aid and other college documents without parent assistance. Participant 7B explained:

I am the one responsible for applying for scholarships, all of that. I have been the one who has done all the financial aid stuff besides getting their information for the FAFSA. My parents did not know much about financial aid because they have not been to college in a long time, and everything is digitized now.

Patterns by demographic sub-groups were examined among the six themes of barriers or difficulties for access and success in higher education. The analysis of all student narratives showed that eight of the 14 participants (57.1%) interviewed for the current study reported mostly barriers or difficulties of access and success in higher education. Five of the seven (71.4%) participants interviewed from Missouri Western State University described mostly barriers or difficulties for access and success in higher education. All four males (100%) in the current study indicated mostly barriers or difficulties of access and success in higher education.

Of the participants who mentioned a lack of high school resources as their top mention of barriers or difficulties of access and success in higher education, five of the six (83.3%) participants were female. Three of the four (75.0%) participants who mentioned the college environment as their top barrier or difficulty of access and success in higher education, were male. All three participants (100%) who had indicated that college resources were the top barrier or difficulty of access and success in higher education, were female. Two of the three (66.7%) participants were from farming

environments who had indicated college resources as a top barrier or difficulty of access and success in higher education. All six participants (100%) who mentioned a lack of high school resources as their top barrier or difficulty came from a rural locale more than 60 minutes from the college. Due to the lack of diversity in the current study, participant race was not analyzed for barriers or difficulties. No trends of barriers or difficulties emerged from reported degree programs of the participants from the current study.

Table 2 provides a summary of the positive and negative themes ranked. The table includes the percentage of mentions as a positive and negative influence as well as the percentage, and includes the percent of participants citing that factor.

**Table 2***Themes of Positive Influences and Barriers or Difficulties Ranked by Percentage*

Positive Influences	Mentions ( <i>N</i> = 493)	Participants ( <i>N</i> = 14)
Support by Family	21.7%	100%
Support by Mentor(s)	18.9%	100%
College Resources	18.3%	92.9%
High School Support	17.8%	100%
Motivation and Attitude	14%	100%
Community Support	9.3%	78.6%
Barriers or Difficulties	Mentions ( <i>N</i> = 531)	Participants ( <i>N</i> = 14)
Lack of High School Resources	23.4%	92.9%
College Environment	20.5%	100%
College Resources	16%	100%
Financial Challenges	15.4%	85.7%
Lack of Community Support	15.3%	85.7%
Lack of Family Support	9.4%	92.9%

*Note.* Themes emerged from Quirkos qualitative data analysis coding of interview transcripts.



**RQ 3. How do the stories rural students tell about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education, align with Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success?**

Perna and Thomas (2006) created a conceptual model of student success that identified multiple layers of factors that can influence a student's postsecondary plans and success.

- The Internal Context of student success is the first layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success and is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as the attitudes and behaviors of individual students.
- The Family Context of student success is the second layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success and is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as a family's ability to manage the educational experience a student has by influencing and promoting the various indicators of student success.
- The School Context is the third layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success and is defined by the compounding effects of both secondary and postsecondary educational resources, experiences, and preparation.
- The Social, Economic, and Policy Context is the fourth layer of the Conceptual Model of Student Success and is defined by Perna and Thomas (2006) as the external forces influencing college choice for a student.

Perna and Thomas (2006) believed that student success is a longitudinal process and that a students' movement through the four layers provide a feedback loop that can minimize or maximize their success in college. The themes from the narratives of the rural students regarding their positive influences centered around the contexts identified

by Perna and Thomas. Students' perspectives from rural communities are shaped by the social, school, family, and internal influences in their lives. The six emerging themes from participant narratives surrounding positive influences in the participant's pursuit to access and succeed in higher education can be categorized into layers of Perna and Thomas' (2006) model:

- Support by Family
- Support by Mentor(s)
- College Resources
- High School Support
- Motivation and Attitude
- Community Support

**Internal Context.** All 14 participants (100%) in the current study expressed a positive attitude and an internal motivation as a positive support factor in promoting access and success in higher education. The participants motivation and attitude to attend college can be described as the student's internal drive and determination to have a successful career, leave their community to expand their opportunities, and have a positive attitude about attending college. Motivation and attitude towards attending college aligned closely with the first layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, Internal Context. Perna and Thomas (2006) explained that ultimately student behavior is shaped by their attitudes and behaviors. Analysis of the participant stories showed that none of the 14 participants (0%) in this study identified motivation and attitude towards attending college as the chief influencer in positive support promoting access and success in higher education. Participants 1B, 3B, and 7B provide examples of positive

motivation and attitude to attend college. Participant 1B mentioned that he felt his internal motivation was instilled early on in his life and credited the “values being instilled by my family” for his motivation and success in high school and college. Participant 3B added that, “I pushed myself to do what was next, and to not let down other people in my family or community.” Participant 7B explained going to college was always the next step she planned to take after high school by stating that, “even though I lived in a rural community, it was always my expectation that I would attend college.”

**Family Context.** All 14 participants (100%) interviewed for the current study mentioned family as a positive support factor in promoting access and success in higher education. Family support aligned to the second layer of Perna and Thomas’ Student Success Model, the Family Context. According to Perna and Thomas (2006), the student’s family can promote, manage, and impact a student’s success inside and outside the college. Analysis of the participant stories showed that five of the 14 participants (35.7%) reported their family as the primary influence of positive support promoting access and success in higher education.

Participants 1A, 2A, and 3A shared how their family was a primary influencer of positive support promoting access and success in higher education. Participant 1A stated, “my mom nudged me in that direction to apply and attend a college.” Participant 2A explained, “they [my parents] definitely wanted me to go because no family member had gone to college before, it was kind of important that I go.” Participant 3A had parents who encouraged the entire family to attend college. Participant 3A stated, “my parents pushed us all to attend college because they did not have any schooling.”

**School Context (High School and College).** All 14 participants (100%) in the current study mentioned the support provided by the rural high school as a positive influence promoting access and success in higher education. Support provided by the rural high school as a positive impact included the environment, attitudes towards higher education, resources expended to support college-going students, and extracurricular involvement. Support provided by the rural high school aligned closely with the third layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, School Context. Resources and experiences at the high school level impact the student's success towards college enrollment, preparation, and persistence. Analysis of the participant stories showed that three of the 14 participants (21.4%) in this study identified the support provided by the rural high school they attended as the primary source of positive support promoting access and success in higher education. Examples of the positive support provided by the rural high schools come from Participants 6A, 7A, and 1B. Participant 6A spoke about how she felt the high school helped her prepare academically for college and the workforce by stating, "I did sports, but I did a lot of leadership things which were very, very beneficial to me and learned to try new things and think outside of the box and be open to new ideas." Participant 7A had similar sentiments about her high school experience and how it prepared her for college by adding, "I was involved in every sport which I know a lot of bigger city kids do not get to do and because of this, I was not to be afraid to be involved in activities in college." Participant 1B stated that, "I think the biggest influence the high school had on me is that coming from a small town and a small school, is that we are involved in everything, activities and sports."

Thirteen of the 14 participants (92.9%) in this study mentioned the support and resources from the college as a positive support factor in promoting access and success in higher education. Support from the college as a positive influence included resources, programs, faculty, and staff in one theme. Support and resources from the college aligned closely with the third layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, School Context. Students in this context understood the importance of resources being offered by the college and how those resources can lead to their success. Analysis of the participant stories showed that three of the 14 participants (21.4%) in this study identified the college as a primary source of positive support promoting access and success in higher education. Examples of the support provided by the college come from Participants 5B, 6B, and 7B. Participant 5B discussed the value of being involved on campus by stating, "I am involved in the Art Club and get to go around the community doing art projects." Participant 6B stated how the college advisors have assisted her by saying, "they [the advisors] understand if you do not know what to do and give you freedom, but are also there to bring you back in if you need it." She added, "they will tell you if you are doing something wrong." Participant 7B spoke about the affordability of attending Northwest Missouri State University and the assistance she received from the Financial Aid Office by indicating that, "I knew I would not be able to live in the dorms if I attended a private university or went out of state because I would not have been able to afford it." Participant 7B added, "they [the Financial Aid Office] explained everything well."

**Social, Economic, and Policy Context.** Eleven of the 14 participants (78.6%) in the current study mentioned support from their rural community as a positive support

factor in promoting access and success in higher education. Support from the rural community as a positive influence included supportive resources provided by the rural community outside the high school. Supportive resources from the rural community can be described as acquaintances, businesses, farmers, and community organizations that promote postsecondary attendance. Supportive resources from the rural community aligned closely with the fourth layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, Social, Economic, and Policy Context. Perna and Thomas (2006) define this as numerous forces that can influence student success through all the other layers. Analysis of participants' stories showed that none of the 14 participants (0%) in this study identified the supportive resources from their rural community as the primary source of positive support promoting access and success in higher education. Participants 5B and 6B provided examples of rural community support. Participant 5B indicated that, "it [my hometown] is a very family-oriented community and it [the community] is supportive of people who want to go to college." Participant 6B added that the support she felt from her rural community by stating, "the community made me feel like I was cared for, and they wanted me to succeed in life."

**Support and Guidance Provided by a Mentor.** All 14 participants (100%) interviewed for the current study mentioned a mentor as a positive support factor in promoting access and success in higher education. Mentors included people in the student's social network whom they felt impacted their college decision, and aligned closely with three layers of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model: Family, School, and Social Economic Policy Contexts. Students can be motivated, encouraged, and supported by outside entities, such as mentors in their lives. Perna and Thomas (2006)

explain that, ultimately, student behavior is shaped by their attitudes and behaviors.

Analysis of the participant stories showed that three of the 14 interviewees (21.4%) for the current study identified a mentor or a specific person as the top influencer of positive support promoting access and success in higher education. Participant 2A mentioned her teachers and a community member who impacted her decision to attend college by stating, “my teachers and a community member kind of took me under their wing and has helped me pay for school.” Participant 3A mentioned his FFA Advisor for increasing his interest in Forestry and Conservation and reported that his FFA advisor “was a big influence and encouraged me to be active in the forestry team and horse judging.”

Participant 4A had a similar experience with her school counselor. She explained that the school counselor encouraged her to apply for available scholarships and assisted with the essays by stating, “they [the counselor] always pushed me to apply for scholarships and complete the FAFSA.”

**RQ4. How do the stories rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties of their pursuit of higher education, align with Perna and Thomas’s Conceptual Model of Student Success?**

To better understand the barriers and difficulties experienced by the participants during their pursuit to access and succeed in higher education, the participants were asked opened-ended pre-defined questions during the interview process. The interview questions asked about barriers and challenges related to the participant's access to and success in higher education related to their community, high school, college, family, and peers. In addition, questions were asked about participants’ motivation and attitudes toward attending college and how those factors/influences may have affected their

outlook. The six emerging themes from interviewee narratives surrounding barriers and difficulties limiting access and success to higher education included:

- Lack High School Resources
- College Environment
- College Resources
- Financial Challenges
- Lack of Community Support
- Lack of Family Support

The six emerging themes of barriers or difficulties can be aligned with three layers (Family, School, and Social Economic Policy Contexts) of Perna and Thomas' 2006 model of student success. No emerging themes related to barriers or difficulties were attributed to the first layer of Perna and Thomas' Conceptual Model of Student Success, Internal Context.

**Family Context.** Thirteen of the 14 (92.9%) participants in the current study mentioned a lack of support from their family posed a barrier or difficulty in their pursuit of higher education. The theme is characterized by a lack of family support for college attendance. Lack of support from the family included financial assistance, a lack of college knowledge, assistance with college-related processes, and casting doubt into the student's future. The lack of family support theme aligned closely with the second layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, Family Context. A lack of family support or interest in the student's college aspirations can become a barrier to college success. Participant 1A mentioned that "in terms of filling out the applications for admission and financial aid, I did that all myself, my parents did not help me at all." Participant 3A



added that, “I will be the first person in my family to go to college and graduate college and had to learn everything on my own.”

**School Context.** Thirteen of the 14 participants (92.9%) in this study mentioned a lack of resources or limited experiences at their rural high school as a barrier or difficulty in their pursuit to access and succeed in higher education. A lack of resources or experiences at the rural high school as a barrier or challenge can be described as limited dual credit courses, feeling underprepared for college academically, limited extracurricular experiences, and little to no assistance for college-related processes. The lack of resources or experiences at the high school theme aligned closely with the third layer of Perna and Thomas’ Student Success Model, School Context. A lack of resources and experiences at the rural high school level can be discouraging to a student and leave them feeling underprepared or overwhelmed during their college experience. Analysis of the participant stories showed that six of the 14 participants (42.9%) in this study identified a lack of resources or experiences at their rural high school as the top barrier or difficulty in their pursuit of higher education. Participants 5A, 6A, and 2B provided examples of this theme. Participant 5A mentioned, “I wish they would hire more people who can teach dual-credit coursework in the high school.” Participant 6A explained how her experience in high school lacked the support and rigor that could have better prepared her for college by explaining that “sometimes the support system was lacking in our high school, if I am being truthful. I do not think the teachers challenged us, like really challenged us think of college outside of encouraging community college or the workforce.” Participant 2B added that she wished her rural high school would have

provided more career exploration opportunities by stating, “knowing the importance of potential career options would have been nice.”

All 14 participants (100%) in the current study mentioned specific obstacles associated with college resources as a barrier or difficulty in their pursuit to access and receive higher education. This theme can be described as processes, staff, faculty, or experiences at the college that the participant identified as a challenge or barrier in their pursuit of higher education. College resources aligned closely with the third layer of Perna and Thomas’ Student Success Model, School Context. Specific interventions and resources can lead to student success at the college level. A lack of specific interventions or resources can lead to students having negative thoughts about their college experiences. Analysis of participants’ stories showed that three of the 14 participants (21.4%) in this study identified barriers and challenges with college resources as the main difficulty in pursuing higher education. Participant 6A summarized the challenges she believed rural students face when attending college by saying, “the transition from high school to college is rough for people from rural communities because they do not know what to expect. College is just completely different than high school.” Participant 4B indicated that her biggest challenge at the college level is the college's size. She mentioned, “I feel like sometimes when you go from high school to college, you really do not know where to start because it is such a large environment.” Participant 5B noticed that the sheer volume of clubs and organizations at the college had posed a problem for her college experience. She stated, “it is a bit of a challenge to balance class, friends, activities, and find priorities, I wish the college would help out with time management more.”

**Social, Economic, and Policy Context.** All 14 participants (100%) in the current study mentioned the college environment as a barrier or difficulty in their pursuit to access and receive higher education. This theme can be described as the fear of going to or attending college due to the student's identity as a rural student. The college environment aligned closely with the fourth layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, Social, Economic, and Policy Context. The college environment and experience between rural, urban, and suburban students can lead to certain demographic groups feeling uneasy on the college campus. Analysis of participants' stories showed that three of the 14 participants (21.4%) in this study identified the college environment as the top barrier or difficulty in their pursuit to access and receive higher education. Participant 3A and 2B provided examples of the challenges rural students face in a college environment. Participant 3A indicated he felt uncomfortable initially in his college surroundings due to differences he felt between himself and other non-rural students:

I felt like a fish out of water for a while. A big part of it was just the shock of going to a big community. You know, St. Joseph is huge. I had drove there a few times before college growing up. I lived in the dorms for a semester and when I walked into the commons area to meet my new roommate, he was playing a video game. He was a white kid, but had dreadlocks and was from Poland and had a thick accent. I saw him and spoke to him, but I was honestly freaked out for a minute. I'm like what am I doing? You know, this guy is from a completely different culture and I can't even understand what he is saying because he has such a thick accent. I guess you could say I had serious culture shock.

Participant 3A later indicated, "I look forward to the day when I can go back out into a rural setting, a rural community, I still feel like I do not belong here." Participant 3B added, "there seems to be differences between college culture and my upbringing." He continued by saying "there seems to be different values that get pushed on campus and different ideas." Participant 2B mentioned the challenges making friends in a college environment by indicating that she "was not sure if it was a me problem or if it was because I grew up in a small town. I have trouble making friends in college, just like more than acquaintances, having people I hang out with outside of classes."

Twelve of the 14 (85.7%) participants in the current study mentioned financial challenges as a barrier or difficulty in their pursuit to access and receive higher education. This theme is characterized by the worries or challenges the students or their families had with paying for and attending college. The financial challenges theme aligned closely with the fourth layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, Social, Economic, and Policy Context. Economic concerns, such as affordability and the ability to pay for college, factor into college access and success. Analysis of participants' stories showed that one of the 14 participants (7.1%) in this study identified financial barriers or challenges as the primary difficulty they had attending college. Participant 6A mentioned that she worked during the summer mowing lawns to pay for college and did not expect her parents to help her by stating, "I am the one who pays for college. I pay for all of my college; my parents do not help out." Participant 2B indicated his frustration with taking student loans to help pay for college by explaining that, "I am like \$20,000 in student loan debt right now, which everyone tells me is not a lot. But as a 21-year-old, \$20,000 seems like a lot."

Twelve of the 14 (85.7%) participants in the current study mentioned a lack of rural community resources and support as a barrier or difficulty in their pursuit to access and receive higher education. The lack of community resources and support theme can be characterized as the perception the participant had that a college-going culture was not important in their rural community and that there was a need to leave the community for better career aspirations. The lack of rural community resources and support theme aligned closely with the fourth layer of Perna and Thomas' Student Success Model, Social, Economic, and Policy Context. Students can be influenced by social, economic, and public policies within their communities for college education and success. Analysis of participants' stories showed that one of the 14 participants (7.1%) in this study identified the lack of community resources and support as the top barrier in their pursuit to access and receive higher education. Participant 4A mentioned that she needed to leave her rural town because "there is nothing to do here, there is not much more than farms and small businesses." Participant 5A mentioned the lack of diversity in her community as an issue. Participant 5A stated, "It is a small community; families all know each other, hopefully, no one takes this the wrong way, but it is a white community full of farmers."

Table 3 provides a summary of the alignment of Perna and Thomas's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success with the six themes for positive influences for support and the six themes of challenges or barriers that emerged from participating rural students' narratives. All themes aligned with one or more of the four layers (Internal, Family, School, Social Economic Policy Context) of Perna and Thomas's Conceptual Model of Student Success. The School Context (Layer 3) of Perna and Thomas's model

provided the most positive supports or influence, while the Social, Economic, and Policy Context (Layer 4) provided the most barriers and difficulties.

**Table 3***Themes and Alignment with Perna and Thomas Student Success Model*

	<b>Positive Influencers of Support</b>	<b>Barriers or Difficulties</b>
<b>Internal Context (Layer 1)</b>	Motivation and Attitude	
<b>Family Context (Layer 2)</b>	Support by Family Support by Mentor(s)	Lack of Family Support
<b>School Context (Layer 3)</b>	College Resources High School Support Support by Mentor(s)	Lack of High School Resources College Resources
<b>Social, Economic, and Policy Context (Layer 4)</b>	Community Support Support by Mentor(s)	Financial Challenges Lack of Community Support College Environment

*Note.* Themes emerged from analysis of 14 rural student interview transcripts.

## Summary

Chapter 4 presented the analysis results of interviews conducted with 14 participants who graduated from rural public high schools in Missouri and were enrolled at a junior or senior standing at Missouri Western State University or Northwest Missouri State University. Interview questions focused on the positive influences of support and the challenges or barriers mentioned or discussed throughout the stories told by students from rural communities, and how pre-college and college experiences influenced their college enrollment and facilitated or inhibited student success. The six emerging themes surrounding positive influences and supports promoting access and success in higher education included:

- Support by Family
- Support by Mentor(s)
- College Resources
- High School Support
- Motivation and Attitude
- Community Support

The six emerging themes surrounding barriers or difficulties related to rural students' access to higher education or that inhibited their success in higher education included:

- Lack of High School Resources
- College Environment
- College Resources
- Financial Challenges
- Lack of Community Support



- Lack of Family Support

Demographic sub-groups emerged from the study that had mostly positive mentions of influence supporting access and success in higher education emerged from the current study. Female participants reported mostly positive mentions related to access and success in higher education compared to male participants. Junior-level participants had mostly positive mentions of influences promoting access and success in higher education compared to senior-level participants. Participants who lived closer to their rural locale from the college reported mostly positive mentions of influence supporting access and success in higher education compared to participants that lived further away from their rural locale.

Demographic sub-groups emerged from the study that represented higher levels of barriers or difficulties for access and success in higher education. Male participants displayed more barriers or challenges in access and success in higher education. Participants who came from a rural locale further away from the college exhibited more barriers or challenges in access and success in higher education. Participants from Missouri Western State University mentioned more barriers or challenges in access and success in higher education compared to participants from Northwest Missouri State University. Senior-level participants mentioned more barriers or challenges in access and success in higher education compared to junior-level participants.

Each theme of positive influences and challenges or barriers that emerged from participant narratives aligned with one or more of the four layers (Internal, Family, School, Social Economic Policy Contexts) of Perna and Thomas' 2006 Conceptual Model of Student Success. Chapter 5 summarizes the study, relates the current findings

to the literature, provides conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for further research.

## Chapter 5

### Interpretation and Recommendations

The participants of the current study were students who graduated from a rural high school in Missouri and were enrolled at a junior-level or senior-level standing at Missouri Western State University or Northwest Missouri State University. The study sought to gain a better understanding of rural students' perspectives surrounding the following two research questions:

- What stories do rural students tell about positive influences promoting access and success in higher education?
- What stories do rural students tell about the barriers or difficulties of their pursuit of higher education?

The stories rural students shared were then analyzed for emerging themes within the positive influences and supports then the barriers or challenges within their stories.

These themes were also analyzed for trends or patterns among demographic sub-groups of participants' college institution, year graduated, gender, race/ethnicity, farm or town, or distance of their rural community from the university attended. The rural students' positive influences promoting access and success in higher education and the barriers or difficulties were then categorized into the contexts of Perna and Thomas' 2006

Conceptual Model of Student Success. Chapter 5 is organized in three major sections.

The first section is a summary of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, methodology, and the major findings. The second section describes how the findings in the current study relate to the research literature. The third section includes implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

## **Study Summary**

Students from rural communities face various challenges related to postsecondary educational attainment in the United States. Perna and Thomas (2006) found that students' decisions and behaviors are influenced by more than their upbringings and demographics. Nelson (2016) indicated that "on average, rural areas, have lower family incomes and fewer adults who have been to college; rural schools have fewer course options and extracurricular activities, and have lower per-pupil expenditures" (p. 250).

**Overview of the problem.** Research has shown that students from rural communities face unique challenges compared to their urban and suburban peers when applying to, entering, and completing higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Goldman, 2019; Holland, 2019). Some studies have found that factors such as socioeconomic status (Ardoin, 2018; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Holland, 2019) and the distance to college (Ardoin, 2018) have a central influence on rural student college access or lack thereof. Other studies found that college preparation (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Goldman, 2019), access to information and resources (Ardoin, 2018; Holland 2019) have factored into rural student success while attending college. Further studies have shown that social capital (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012), such as mentoring and championing a college-going environment (Ontiveros, 2020), increased the likelihood a student from a rural community would matriculate and complete a postsecondary degree.

**Purpose statement and research questions.** The first purpose of the study was to examine the stories of students from rural communities of how pre-college and college experiences influenced their college enrollment and facilitated student success, and to

better understand the challenges and barriers they faced. The second purpose of the study was to interpret rural students' stories through the lens of Perna & Thomas' (2006) Model of Student Success. Four research questions guided this study focused on the stories of positive influences and barriers or difficulties that rural students faced in their pursuit of higher education. Next, the emerging themes of positive influences and supports as well as themes surrounding barriers and obstacles from participants' stories were then aligned through Perna and Thomas's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success.

**Review of the methodology.** A qualitative, phenomenological, narrative design was chosen for the current study to examine the stories of students from rural communities and the unique challenges they face accessing and completing higher education. Qualitative research is appropriate for developing a rich and deep understanding of participants' narratives of their experiences (Merriam, 1998). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), in qualitative studies "the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the view of the participants" (p. 17). Narrative inquiry was used to better understand the lives of students from rural communities. The stories of rural student experiences before and during college were then retold in a chronological order to better understand the challenges they faced and the successes that occurred.

Approval to conduct the study was received from Baker University, Missouri Western State University, and Northwest Missouri State University. An email was sent by the researcher to both cooperating institutions asking for assistance identifying participants meeting the criteria for this study and to receive lists of email contacts for the eligible population. Students who met the eligibility requirements were identified by the

institutions and their names and student email addresses were provided to the researcher. The researcher then emailed the eligible participants to invite them to participate in the study using a two-phase process. Of all those eligible that responded, seven random participants were chosen from Missouri Western and seven random participants were chosen from Northwest Missouri State University. Those participants who agreed were scheduled for a one-hour face-to-face Zoom interview. Each participant was made aware that the face-to-face Zoom interview would be video and audio-recorded and then transcribed. At the conclusion of each interview the researcher for the study labeled the Zoom interview using an alpha-numeric indicator based upon the higher education institution and individual student participants associated with the institution. Each transcription was assigned a number ranging from 1A to 7A for Missouri Western State University or 1B to 7B for Northwest Missouri State University to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants.

Interviews were conducted in a face-to-face Zoom setting. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed the participants to engage with open-ended questions that elicited a response that was free from the opinions or views of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each interview began with a review of their informed consent, reminder that the interviews were being recorded, and the six demographic questions. Then the participants were posed the open-ended questions. During the course of the conversation, pre-determined but optional follow-up questions were asked by the researcher to elaborate or clarify specific responses from the participants. The researcher used three methods to promote and establish reliability and trustworthiness of the data; member

checking, using a rich, thick description of the findings, and clarifying the potential bias of the researcher.

After the completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the interviews using an online software tool named Trint (n.d.). After each participants' transcript was edited against the recorded interview and finalized, the researcher submitted that transcript to the participant for member checking. After the completion of member-checking each interviewee's transcripts, the researcher read each transcript several times to construct each participants narrative. Next, the researcher determined any demographic sub-groups that may exist to complete each narrative. The researcher then analyzed each transcript through an online qualitative analysis software called Quirkos (n.d.). The tool allowed the researcher to quickly review and establish recurrent patterns of positive and negative themes throughout the transcripts as well as by demographic sub-group patterns/trends; then the emerging themes were aligned with layers of the Perna and Thomas (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success.

**Major findings.** Major findings from the current study resulted in six positive themes for positive influences promoting access and success in higher education.

- **Support by Family.** This theme was mentioned by all (100%) of the participants in the study, 107 times (21.7%). Support and encouragement by family members was a significant factor in the participant wanting to access, attend, and be successful in college.
- **Support by Mentor(s).** This theme was mentioned by all (100%) of the participants in the study, 93 times (18.9%). The participants were influenced by individuals outside of their immediate family to access and attend college.

Individuals such as school counselors, community members, family friends, and teachers, provided guidance and encouragement to the participants to attend college.

- **College Resources.** This theme was mentioned by 13 of the 14 participants (92.9%) in the study, 90 times (18.3%). The participants felt the college had adequately supported and provided resources that led to their success while in college. Examples of resources provided by the college included academic advising, financial aid, campus-based extracurricular programming, and a safe environment.
- **High School Support.** This theme was mentioned by all (100%) of the participants in the study, 88 times (17.8%). The participants felt their rural high school encouraged them to attend college after high school to seek a higher education, leave their rural community, and become successful.
- **Motivation and Attitude.** This theme was mentioned by all (100%) of the participants in the study, 69 times (14.0%). The students in the study each described a strong and deep desire to attend college and to make their families and community proud.
- **Community Support.** This theme was mentioned by eleven of the 14 participants (78.6%) in the study, 46 times (9.3%). Participants in the study felt strong encouragement from their community to attend college and become successful.

Major findings from the study also produced six themes surrounding barriers or difficulties in their pursuit of higher education:



- **Lack High School Resources.** This theme was mentioned by 13 of the 14 participants (92.9%) in the study, 124 times (23.4%). The participants were critical of the lack of academic resources and experiences provided by their rural high school that prepared them for college. Participants felt they were at a disadvantage or academically underprepared when compared to college students who came from larger school districts.
- **College Environment.** This theme was mentioned by all (100%) of the participants in the study, 109 times (20.5%). The participants in the study felt challenged by the size, noise, and culture of college campuses.
- **College Resources.** This theme was mentioned by all (100%) of the participants in the study, 85 times (16.0%). The participants felt that not enough specific resources were dedicated to students from rural communities, and the college could provide additional resources to assist in their success.
- **Financial Challenges.** This theme was mentioned by 12 of the 14 participants (85.7%) in the study, 82 times (15.4%). The participants mentioned the expenses related to attending college were challenging. Additionally, the participants did not want to take out student loans or for the financial burden of attending college to fall to their parents.
- **Lack of Community Support.** This theme was mentioned by 12 of the 14 participants (85.7%) in the study, 81 times (15.3%). The participants felt their rural community did not provide adequate career opportunities or felt a general lack of support to attend college from their community.

- **Lack of Family Support.** This theme was mentioned by 13 of the 14 participants (92.8%) in the study, 50 times (9.4%). Some participants felt they could have had additional encouragement and support from family members to attend college.

Three additional major findings included patterns identified by demographic sub-groups in which the majority described mostly positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education.

- **Distance to the College from Locale.** Four of the five participants (80.0%) who reported that their rural community was 45 minutes or less from the college, indicated mostly positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education compared to students whose rural locale were further from the college.
- **Grade Level (junior).** Four of the seven participants (57.1%) at the junior-grade level reported mostly positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education compared to senior-level students who described fewer supports.
- **Gender (female).** Six of the 10 female participants (60.0%) reported mostly positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education, while males reported fewer positive supports.

Two major findings included two demographic sub-groups that reported very few positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education.

- **Gender (male).** Zero of the four male participants (0%) reported mostly positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education.

Male participants accounted for 29.2% of the total mentions for barriers or difficulties in their pursuit of higher education while accounting for 25.6% of the total mentions for positive influences in their pursuit of higher education when compared to female participants.

- **Distance to the College from Locale (High School Resources).** All six participants (100%) who came from a rural locale more than 60 minutes away mentioned more barriers or difficulties to access and success in college related to high school resources. For the current study, the participants indicated that their rural high schools did not provide enough resources or experiences to prepare them for college or post-secondary education.

### **Findings Related to the Literature**

Individuals from rural America often find themselves at a disadvantage when pursuing a higher education or post-secondary training. According to the United States Department of Agriculture in 2019, 21.0% of all individuals, 25 and older, who lived in rural areas had a bachelor's degree or higher. This figure was lower than the 34.7% of individuals who lived in urban and suburban areas of the United States and had earned college degrees. Ardoin (2018); Byun, Meece, & Irvin (2012); Goldman (2019); and Holland (2019) identified several unique factors can lead to the challenges rural students face when applying to, entering, and completing their higher education. One factor was socioeconomic status. While none of the participants explicitly mentioned that they were in a lower socioeconomic class, the current study found that financial challenges associated with attending college was a barrier or challenge for the students. Twelve of the 14 participants (85.7%) in the study mentioned having had or experienced some

measure of financial difficulty for themselves or their family when attending college. The participants found that financing college was expensive, and they and their families had concerns about taking out student loans. The participants wanted to pay for college either through scholarships, grants, or cash and not saddle themselves with student loan debt after they graduate.

Ardoin (2018) mentioned that the distance to the college can influence a rural students access and ability to attend college. A major finding among the demographic sub-groups indicated that four of the five (80.0%) participants who lived within 45 minutes of the college had mostly positive mentions of influences of support for access and success in higher education. This seemed to indicate that students who are closer to the social capital sources from their rural communities, feel better supported (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). The students from the current study mentioned the support of their family, support by mentors, and support from their rural communities as important factors in their college success. All 14 participants in the study mentioned the support provided by their family as an important factor in their pursuit of higher education access and success. In fact, support by the family was the most mentioned positive influence on their pursuit of a higher education (21.7%) followed by support of mentors (18.9%). Community support (9.3%) was the sixth most mentioned positive influence on participants' pursuits of higher education access and success. Family, mentors, and community influences help rural students gain the social capital needed to access and become successful in college (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Ontiveros, 2020).

Another major finding related to positive themes for support of access and success in higher education in the current study was the motivation and attitude of the participants. This theme was mentioned by all the participants in 14.0% of the positive influences for access and success in higher education. The distance from college and access to their social capital sources could have had an influence on the participants' internal motivation and attitudes towards attending college. Ardoin (2018) and Holland (2019) found that access to information and resources have a positive effect on rural student success.

Byun, Meece, & Irvin, (2012) and Goldman (2019) found that college preparation had a central role in rural student college access and success. A major finding of barriers and difficulties that rural students described was a lack of resources and experiences at the rural high school. The lack of resources and experiences at the rural high school was the most mentioned theme, positive or negative, in the current study (23.4%). Rural students reportedly felt they started out college at a disadvantage due to a lack of dual credit opportunities, advanced placement courses, cultural field trips, fine arts coursework, or science courses with labs. The lack of these types of resources and experiences seemingly lead to rural students feeling more apprehensive about college and less confident in their own abilities to be successful.

Ardoin (2018) and Holland (2019) discussed the access to information and resources as an important factor in rural student college access success. Three major findings related to the current study concerned information and resources at the college level. The rural students in the current study indicated that resources provided by the college were a major source of support for access and success in higher education. Of the

positive mentions for support of access and success in higher education, the college resources theme was the third most mentioned (18.3%). The rural student participants felt that their colleges did a good job providing financial aid assistance, campus tours, and academic advising. However, two of the six emerging themes for barriers or difficulties mentioned the college environment and college resources. The rural student participants felt the college could have done more to make the college environment more inclusive for rural students, could have provided more information about degree programs, and could have visited their high schools more often for recruitment purposes. In a way, the rural students seemed to feel as if they were secondary to other students at the college.

Agger et al. (2018) found that gender can influence a rural student's perception of the value and benefits of attending college. Two major findings of the current study included two gender sub-groups. For the current study, six of the 10 (60.0%) female participants had mostly positive mentions of influences for access and success in higher education, while none of the four (0.0%) male participants had mostly positive mentions of influences for access and success in higher education. The female participants in the current study had better outlooks on their college preparation, increased motivation, and better attitudes towards attending college. The male participants in the current study seemed to exhibit more hesitation about the value of a college education and seemed to have less social capital that influenced their decisions.

Perna and Thomas' (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success was used to better understand the perspectives of students from rural communities and how those perspectives on attending college are shaped by the social, school, family, and internal

influences in their lives. The current study found that the School Context of Perna and Thomas's model provided the most positive supports or greatest influence, while the Social, Economic, and Policy Context provided the most barriers or difficulties. One consistent theme that aligned with three of the four layers within Perna and Thomas's model was the support provided by mentors. The value of mentors was a consistent theme brought up throughout the course of interviews with the participants. Mentors seemed to provide the most support throughout the Conceptual Model of Student Success.

### **Conclusions**

Through qualitative narrative interviews and results of the data analysis, six major themes of positive influences promoting access and success in higher education for rural students were identified for this study: support and encouragement by the family, support and guidance provided by a mentor(s), support from the college for access and success, support from the high school for college enrollment, the participant's internal motivation and attitude towards attending college, and support provided by the rural community. Additionally, six major themes of barriers or difficulties in rural students' pursuit of higher education were identified: lack of resources and experiences at the rural high school, navigating environmental differences at the college, resources related to attending college, financial challenges attending college, lack of community support, and lack of family support.

Themes for the current study were aligned with Perna and Thomas' (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success. For the current study, the School Context had the most positive influence on rural student success. College Resources, High School

Support, and Support by Mentors were all positive influencers through the School Context of Perna and Thomas' (2006) Conceptual Model of Student Success. The Social, Economic, and Policy Context had the most barriers or difficulties for the participants of the current study. Financial Challenges, Lack of Community Support, and the College Environment, all proved to be barriers or difficulties for the rural student participants.

Patterns among the themes by demographic sub-groups showed that participants who had less than 45 minutes travel time to the college from their rural community locale, female participants, and junior-grade level participants described more positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education. Male participants in the current study reported fewer positive influences that promoted access and success in higher education. Additionally, participants who attended a college more than 60 minutes from their rural locale reported fewer positive influences in high school resources that promoted access and success in higher education.

**Implications for action.** Rural students face many challenges when attempting to access higher education. Developing consistent programs state-wide that could help break access and success barriers for rural student will be critical. Programs such as the Missouri College Advising Corps, JAG-Missouri, and rootEd Missouri, are examples of state-wide programs that embed advisors in rural school districts. The advisors provide resources, make connections with families, break down college costs, provide mentoring, and college and career exploration experiences that students in rural communities need. Placement of college and career advisors/mentors in rural school districts could enhance opportunities for students to get 1:1 personalized attention to explore and prepare for the college or career pathway that best meets their interests.



In addition to the placement of college and career advisors in rural school districts, it is equally important for rural students to have opportunities to visit colleges or career technical schools of interest to them. It is vital for rural students to experience a college environment to decrease any preconceived fears they may have. College campus environments can be daunting and scary for rural students due to the sheer size of many larger institutions. Providing rural students with the opportunity to visit with current students at the institution from rural communities, program faculty, and college staff could enhance that students understanding of the college and help to ease their fears.

Enhancing the understanding of rural communities regarding the needs for post-secondary education and training will also be vital to the future of rural students access to and success in higher education. It is important for educators and businesses to showcase how higher education and postsecondary training could bring value back to the student, their families, and the rural community.

**Recommendations for future research.** Further research should be conducted to identify beneficial courses of action that could improve rural high school student post-secondary access and success. Community building, mentorship programs, and collaboration between rural school districts and institutions of higher education are required to improve student outcomes. Students from rural high schools often do not have the social capital, knowledge, or means to leave their rural communities which leaves them without opportunities for training in career or technical fields, and other pathways. Additionally, future research should be conducted to explore the types of resources that would be most beneficial for rural school districts. Several participants indicated they believed their rural high school experience left them feeling behind

academically when they started college. Many of the participants expressed lacking the experiences and access to resources compared to students at larger urban and suburban school districts. The participants mentioned a lack of dual credit courses, extracurricular activities such as band, art, music, career exploration, and advanced placement type courses, as examples. Providing equitable resources to all public-school districts, regardless of size, could benefit not only rural school districts, but could also be beneficial for rural students, their future career outcomes, and the rural communities. Additionally, career exploration, job shadowing, and mentoring programs could be beneficial resources for students from rural communities.

Additional research should be conducted surrounding the college decision-making process of males from rural communities. The males who participated in the current study exhibited more doubt about attending college and expressed less motivation to attend. All males who participated in the study mentioned a need to stay on the farm to assist in the family business. Upskilling or providing training that could benefit male students who choose to stay in their rural communities and assist with the family farm or business could improve their livelihoods and the communities.

Finally, education deserts have been discussed at length by such authors as Nathan Grawe (2018) and Adam Harris (2019). It will be critical for educational institutions to find ways to bridge the distance between communities that lie in fringe and remote rural areas. Although online access to college level resources and training may seem like an easy fix, many rural communities do not have broadband internet infrastructure to support those resources and many learners are still hesitant to learn online or receive training in a virtual manner.

**Concluding remarks.** Rural students are an underrepresented student population at colleges and universities across the United States and in Missouri. As the competition for college and university students increases due to the nationwide decrease in college-aged students (Grawe, 2018), it will be important for colleges and universities to provide equitable access and opportunities for rural students. By 2028, approximately 65 percent of all Missouri's jobs will require some level of training or education beyond high school (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021; Nietzel, 2022). To ensure that the United States is competitive in the global market, it will be vital to reach students in distant, rural, places and provide them with the tools and training needed to change their lives and provide hope for their rural communities to thrive for future generations.

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## Appendices

**Appendix A. Interview Protocol**

1. From what public rural high school did you graduate?
2. What year did you graduate from high school?
3. Did you grow up on a farm/ranch or within a town/city/village?
4. How far (distance-wise) is your hometown from the university?
5. As what gender do you identify?
6. What is your race/ethnicity?
7. Tell me about yourself, the community, and people you grew up with?
8. How did your rural experience manifest towards your college decision?
9. Tell me about your rural identity and how it has affected you in college?
10. Tell me about your attitude and motivations to attend college?
11. As a rural student what strengths do you possess that have helped you get to and persevere in college?
12. How did you end up at the college you are at now?
13. Tell me about your family involvement both within and outside the home to manage your experiences both in high school and in college?
14. How did the support from your family make you feel about attending college?
15. Tell me about the experiences you had in high school and college, your academic success, the people who have supported you, and the resources that have assisted you along the way?
16. Tell me about the social, economic, and policies at your high school and the college that have supported your student success?

17. What additional resources would have been beneficial to your student success?
18. Tell me about the challenges or barriers of attending high school and attending college from your high school and community?
19. What do you think are common challenges students from rural community's experience in high school and college?
20. Tell me about the challenges and concerns you faced when deciding and attending college?
21. How did you overcome these challenges and navigate your way through to where you are now?
22. Tell me about the challenges and decisions your family have had to make about you attending college?
23. How did your family overcome these challenges?
24. Tell me about the barriers and challenges you have faced from your high school and your college?
25. How have you overcome these barriers and challenges?
26. Tell me about the social, economic, and policies at your high school and the college that had been challenging or posed a barrier to your student success?
27. How did you overcome these challenges? Who did you seek out for assistance? Are these items still a barrier or challenge to your success?
28. How can rural high schools and communities better support rural students?

29. How can colleges and universities better support students from rural communities?

**Appendix B. Email to Participate**

Hello XXXX,

I want to invite you to participate in a research study for my doctoral dissertation. My study is titled ***“Rural Students and College Success: A Narrative Approach to Rural Student Support Structures and Barriers Through the Conceptual Model of Student Success”***. Your invitation to participate consists of a one-on-one interview via Zoom, which should last no longer than one hour.

Below are a few details that may assist you in your decision to participate:

- This study is qualitative. The one-on-one interviews via Zoom should last no longer than one hour. It is recommended that you find a private place that does not have any distractions and has a reliable internet connection. Your schedule will determine the date and time of the interview.
- The format for the questions will begin with demographic questions that include the high school you attended, your high school year of graduation, if you lived on a farm/ranch or within a town/city/village, as what gender you identify, and as what race/ethnicity you identify.
- After the demographic questions, we will discuss what positive influences in your life promoted access and your pursuit of going to college. In addition, we will discuss any barriers or difficulties you may have experienced in your pursuit of going to college and being successful.
- Your participation is solicited but is entirely voluntary. Information obtained through the Zoom video conferencing will be completely confidential. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings. If you choose to participate, you may indicate a preference for not responding to any of the questions and may withdraw from participation at any time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at: [RowdyLPyle@stu.bakeru.edu](mailto:RowdyLPyle@stu.bakeru.edu) by March XXX. Once I receive your reply, I will schedule a time to meet via Zoom for the interview. In addition, if you have any questions about the study, please contact me, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

I appreciate you taking the time to discuss your experiences as a student from a rural community! Your participation will enhance future opportunities for students who come from communities much like yours!

Sincerely,

Rowdy L. Pyle  
Baker Doctoral Student  
(816) 248-4161  
1101 Aspen Drive  
Liberty, MO 64068

## **Appendix C. Informed Consent**



## **INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

Northwest Missouri State University supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided so you can decide whether you wish to participate in the current study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

### **TITLE OF STUDY:**

Rural Students and College Success: A Narrative Approach to Rural Student Support Structures and Barriers Through the Conceptual Model of Student Success

### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Rowdy L. Pyle  
Baker University, School of Professional and Graduate Studies  
7301 College Blvd.  
Overland Park, KS 66210  
(816) 248-4161  
[RowdyLPyle@stu.bakeru.edu](mailto:RowdyLPyle@stu.bakeru.edu)

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine the stories of college students from rural communities and the unique challenges they face compared to their urban and suburban peers when applying to, entering, and completing higher education.

### **DATA COLLECTED**

As part of the study the data collected will include:

- Demographic data including the name of the high school you attended, the year you graduated high school, and if you lived on a farm/ranch or within a city/town/village, and the distance your hometown is from a college or university will be collected.
- Demographic information as what gender you identify and as what race/ethnicity you identify with will be collected.
- Your story about the positive influences promoting your access and success in college.
- Your story about the barriers or difficulties in your pursuit to attend and be successful in college.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. The information obtained through Zoom interviews and audio recordings is completely confidential. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings. I appreciate your support with this research study.

Sincerely,

Rowdy L. Pyle  
Baker University Doctoral Student

---

Printed name of individual agreeing to participate in study

---

Signature of subject agreeing to participate in study

I agree to be video and audio recorded via Zoom video conferencing software:

---

Signature of participant

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D Baker University Institutional Review Board Approval.**



*Baker University Institutional Review Board*

February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Dear Rowdy Pyle and Tracy Cooper,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [npoell@bakeru.edu](mailto:npoell@bakeru.edu) or 785.594.4582.

Sincerely,

*Nathan Poell, MLS*  
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee  
Sara Crump, PhD  
Nick Harris, MS  
Christa Hughes, PhD  
Susan Rogers, PhD

