

## **ABSTRACT**

DITILLO, NICOLE MARIE. Rural College Student Persistence and Institutional Support. (Under the direction of Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach).

Students from rural areas (“rural college students”) are underrepresented on America’s college campuses. In North Carolina, rural communities represent over one-third of the state population (U.S. Census, 2010b), but only 18.1% of the state’s four-year college graduates (USDA ERS, 2017b). Geographic poverty and limited access to college preparatory resources make it difficult for rural populations in the American South to gain access to higher education (Byun et al., 2012c; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008). Despite their lower college attainment rates, rural scholars possess unique strengths, such as strong social capital within their communities and a deep commitment to service (Ardoin, 2018; Flora et al., 2016; Tieken, 2014). Additional research is needed to understand how students’ rural backgrounds shape their college experiences and the role of the institution in their persistence.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the college experiences of students from rural communities in North Carolina and understand how those experiences shape their college persistence. The case study explored the experiences of 15 late-stage rural college students enrolled in one land-grant institution in the South through interviews and document analysis. The study also used interviews with faculty and staff to explore the awareness and perceptions of institutional actors on rural college student populations. Findings from this study revealed that students’ rural backgrounds influenced the values, motivational orientations, and goals rural students used to guide them through their college experiences. Rural students, especially those attending rural public schools, had limited access to college preparatory coursework in their secondary education, but their academic engagement at

college bolstered their postsecondary success. Furthermore, rural students engaged in social activities and communities on campus to fulfill their goals of building community and engaging in service. Finally, rural students also maintained connections to their home communities throughout their college careers. The findings from this study suggest that rural college students utilize a multitude of strategies to persist in college. The study also found that institutional actors were limited in their understanding of rural college students. By understanding the unique challenges rural college students face in their transition to college and the strategies they use to persist, institutions can improve their support of rural scholars in ways that increase rural college student persistence at four-year institutions.

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Rural College Student Persistence and Institutional Support

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

To my students, who have taught, humbled, and inspired me throughout this journey.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Nicole Ditillo was raised in Harford County, Maryland where she developed a love of the outdoors and eating crab cakes. She earned her undergraduate degree in psychology and English from Gettysburg College. After graduation, Nicole took a two-year service position with the Pennsylvania College Advising Corps, a nonprofit college access organization that provides college access resources for low-income and underserved communities. Nicole served as a college adviser in two rural schools in Huntingdon County, PA. Her experiences serving in the schools inspired her to go back to graduate school at SSU University to learn how to be a better advocate for rural populations. Nicole earned a master's degree in higher education administration from North Carolina State University in 2015. Nicole's journey with college access came full circle in 2018 when she took a position as the Program Director with the SSU College Advising Corps. Though her new role, Nicole leads college advisers in serving students from low-income and under-resourced communities in rural North Carolina as they navigate the path to college. After completing the Ph.D. in Educational Research and Policy Analysis, Nicole will continue to pursue roles that allow her to be a resource and advocate for underrepresented populations in higher education.

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Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach has served as my faculty adviser for the last six years at NC State, as well as my dissertation chair for the last four years. Her thoughtful insight and calming process have challenged me become a better researcher and steadied me through the rough patches. I am boundlessly grateful to her for sharing her wisdom and kindness with me.

Dr. Joy Gayles was one of my first professors at NC State, in both my master's and doctoral studies. She has taught me some of the most foundational knowledge in my graduate education that I find myself referring back to on a regular basis. She has challenged me to consider perspectives and methods that I would not have otherwise, and my research is greatly improved by her insight.

Dr. Lesley Wirt and Dr. Carrie Zelna are two incredible scholar-practitioners who push me to consider not only *what* I am researching but also *how* my research can be implemented to improve the lives of students. Dr. Lesley Wirt has provided a careful eye for detail and an unwavering positivity that I sorely needed throughout this process. Dr. Carrie Zelna has been my champion through my academic and professional careers, and always challenges me to dream big but implement thoughtfully. Both of these women have modeled how to be a humble and brave servant-leaders in education, and I aspire to one day be an educational leader of their caliber.

The College Advising Corps taught me that one of the greatest gifts an educator can bestow on a student is four words: “I believe in you.” For me, those educators are Dr. Audrey Jaeger (“AJ”) and Bob Freund. AJ encouraged me to believe in my abilities as a scholar and to persist in achieving this dream, even during those times when the internal and external voices of doubt sought to convince me that I did not belong in a doctoral program. Her humor, candor, and grace sustained me through the most difficult periods in my academic career, as I know she has done for the countless other doctoral students who have traversed those challenges before me. I am forever grateful that she believed in me.

Robert (“Bob”) Freund introduced me to the world of higher education. Based on one international Skype interview, Bob took a chance on hiring me as a college adviser with the Pennsylvania College Advising Corps (PCAC), a position which entirely transformed my educational and career trajectory. Bob’s conviction in the power of education to transform lives and his unwavering encouragement propelled me into the world of college access. Even long after I left PCAC, Bob continually encouraged me pursue pathways that I would never have let myself dream of pursuing otherwise. He continues to mentor me through my new role with CAC, and I hope to one day be as great a mentor to my advisers as he is to me.

I would not have completed this journey without the support of my supervisors during my time in graduate school: Dr. Allison Medlin, Jason Perry, Dr. Laura Demarse, and Marsha Pharr. Thank you for supporting me in balancing my professional and academic responsibilities, and always pushing me to keep going.

Few people understand the challenges and triumphs graduate school quite like one’s peers. Thankfully, I have been blessed to be part of an amazing community of graduate students in the College of Education for the past six years. I especially want to thank the

brilliant, kind, and witty members of our doctoral cohort for their enthusiastic support, encouragement, and (sometimes) commiseration along the way. I am also grateful for the guidance of Dr. Alicia Keating Polson for always sharing her knowledge of the doctoral process with me to help me navigate the questions unanswered in any graduate handbook. I would not have made it through this program without the support of my peers, and I am honored to have shared this journey with you.

During this study I had the privilege of meeting 15 rural college students who shared their stories with me. I also had the honor of interviewing six faculty and staff members who took time out of their busy schedules to talk to me their experiences. It was a joy to learn from them. I am grateful for the time and thank them for trusting me with their voices.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Rural students are an underrepresented and largely invisible presence on college campuses (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012c; Ganss, 2016; Howley, Johnson, Passa, & Uekawa, 2014; National Student Clearinghouse, 2016). According to the 2016 progress report from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), only 59% of recent high school graduates from rural schools enrolled immediately into college as compared to 67% of students from suburban schools and 62% of those from urban schools. Rural identity is bound by place and culture, and both distinct from and tied to other forms of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, and religion (Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; Ritchey, 2008; C. C. Stone, 2014). As C. C. Stone (2014) notes, many facets of identity, like sexual orientation, military status, and disability, are not always overtly obvious or visible. Rural identity is similar in this way, which makes it easily overlooked by faculty and staff on college campuses (Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; C. C. Stone, 2014).

Yet rural identity has a powerful influence on students' college aspirations, experiences, and persistence (Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; C. C. Stone, 2014). Populations in the rural South have intersecting identities that mold students' postsecondary success (Ardoin, 2017; Tieken, 2014). When they do enroll in college, rural students often struggle with academic, financial, and social challenges in their transition to college (Dunstan, 2013; Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; Nadworny, 2018; Pappano, 2017; C. C. Stone, 2014). In addition to the content knowledge of their college courses, students from rural communities may struggle with the non-cognitive aspects of the college classroom, such as study skills or interacting with faculty, as well adjusting to new experiences, cultures, and perspectives (Dunstan, 2013; Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; C. C. Stone, 2014). This study explored the

college experiences of rural students from North Carolina with the purpose of understanding how students' rural identity shapes their college experiences, the strategies they use to persist in college and the role of the institution in their persistence.

### **What is “Rural”?**

One of the primary challenges in studying rural populations is that there is no singular definition of “rural” (Ardoin, 2017; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Flora, Flora & Gasteyer, 2016; Ganss, 2016; Isserman, 2005; Reynnells, 2016; A. A. Stone, 2017; Tieken, 2014). The federal government is estimated to use over 15 different ways of defining rural areas (A. Stone, 2017; Tieken, 2014). However, the three most common definitions of rurality come from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) (Reynnells, 2016; Tieken, 2014). Federal agencies use municipality, population density, and economic factors in determining an area’s urbanicity (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Reynnells, 2016). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural areas based on population density, land use, and distance within a census block, regardless of municipal boundaries (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder & Fields, 2016; Ritchey, 2008). Rural areas, as defined by the Census Bureau, have populations under 2,500 that are not otherwise included in urbanized regions (Ratcliffe et al., 2016; Reynnells, 2016). Alternatively, the OMB uses data on labor and trade markets to define counties as either metropolitan, micropolitan, or rural based on a population nucleus (Isserman, 2005). The USDA ERS uses economic data of counties to define areas as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan. Nonmetro counties are defined as not being part of the larger labor market area, as well as having low population density and/or land use that is noncommercial

(Reynnells, 2016). Most of these metrics define rural areas for what they are *not*, which is urban or metropolitan areas (Tieken, 2014).

The estimate of the rural population varies widely depending on which definition of rural one uses. The U.S. Census estimated that the rural populations consisted of 60 million people in 2010, or about 19.3% of the population (Ratcliffe et al., 2016; U.S. Census, 2010a). Alternatively, the USDA and OMB estimate the rural population, as of 2015, to consist of approximately 46.2 million people, or approximately 14% of the total population (Health Resources & Service Administration, 2017; U. S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2016). The significant differences in how rural areas and rural populations are defined highlight the challenge in studying rural populations as a cohesive population and begin to explain why few postsecondary institutions identify students by their rurality. The research suggests that rurality, like other components of identity, impacts students' ability to persist and graduate from college (Byun et al., 2012c; Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; C. C. Stone, 2014).

### **The Issue of Persistence and Degree Attainment**

Concerns about national college persistence rates and degree completion have risen to the forefront of the national consciousness in the last several years (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). College persistence is broadly defined as a student being continuously enrolled towards an educational goal, such as degree completion (McFarland et al., 2017; Reason, 2009). In the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report, *Condition of Education 2017*, McFarland et al. (2017) notes that persistence rates are an important indicator to track as continuous enrollment is necessary for degree attainment (p.22). As of spring 2014, the three-year national persistence rates of first-time postsecondary

enrollees were 80% at 4-year institutions and 57% at two-year institutions (McFarland et al., 2017), with variation among race classifications. Yet there is a wide gap between persistence rates and degree attainment among young adults: as of 2016, only 36% of young adults 25 to 29 years old had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, far lower than the 80% persistence rate (McFarland et al., 2017).

**Benefits of higher education.** Degree attainment has important ramifications for individual economic advancement, as well as the economic strength and stability of the national economy (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013; Ma et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). The private benefits of higher education include higher earnings and employment rates (Ma et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2017). For instance, young adults aged 25-34 years old who have completed high school earn an average of \$30,500 in 2016, while those who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher earn about \$50,000 annually, a salary that is nearly 64% than high school completers (McFarland et al., 2017). Young adults with a bachelor's degree or higher are also significantly more likely to be employed (88%) than those who have only attained a high school degree (69%) (McFarland et al., 2017). The unemployment rates for those with a four-year degree are about half (2.6%) of what they are for those individuals who have earned a high school diploma (5%) (Ma et al., 2016).

Higher degree attainment also has significant economic benefits for society. First, lower unemployment rates among a more educated population mean more individuals are contributing to the national, state, and local economies (Ma et al., 2016; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). Individuals who earn more annually will pay more in taxes. In their publication *Education Pays 2016*, Ma et al. (2016) found that adults who have earned at least

a bachelor's degree pay nearly twice as much in taxes as those who have only earned a high school diploma. Childhood poverty rates are strongly and inversely related to the educational attainment rates of parents in the households (McFarland et al., 2017). In 2015, 14.7 million children, representing 20% of the population, were living in poverty (McFarland et al., 2017). Among those households where parent had not completed high school, the poverty rate for children under age 18 was 52%, while the poverty rate for children whose parents had attained a bachelor's degree of high was only 4% (McFarland et al., 2017). Higher earnings, lower unemployment rates, and lower poverty rates among those with higher postsecondary attainment reduce the government spending on programs that serve as social safety nets, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), school lunch programs, and Medicaid (Ma et al., 2016). Economic research finds that as educational attainment increases individual rates of criminal activity and teen pregnancy decrease (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

Beyond the impact on our national economy, college persistence and degree attainment have important ramifications on individual health and civic engagement. Individuals with higher educational attainment were more likely to have access to employer-provided health insurance than those with lower education attainment rates (Ma et al., 2016). Bachelor's degree recipients are significantly less likely to smoke (7% vs. 26%) and to be obese (38% vs. 29%) than their peers who have earned only a high school diploma, and they are significantly more likely to exercise in their spare time (62% vs. 40%) (Ma et al., 2016). Those with higher education are also more civically engaged in their communities, including being more likely to vote and volunteer (Ma et al., 2016). Research conclusively

demonstrates not only the private benefits of higher education, but the vast public benefits as well (Ma et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

**Falling short: Educational attainment in the U.S.** Despite the evidential benefits of higher education, educational attainment rates have failed to keep pace with the educational attainment levels needed for economic demands in the upcoming decade (Carnevale et al., 2013; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). As of 2015, only about one in three adults (33%) had attained a bachelor's degree, and about 12% reported having earned an advanced degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Based on the projected job growth in 2020, 65% of all jobs will require at least some level of postsecondary education or training beyond high school, and 35% will require at least a bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2013). The highest job growth is in STEM fields, healthcare professions, and community services, many of which will require postsecondary education and training (Carnevale, et al., 2013). If Americans do not possess the skills and education needed to fulfill these new positions, companies may take their business to more-educated countries, thus weakening the economic strength of the U.S. Within the U.S., geographic regions with fewer educated workers are less attractive to potential employers when selecting operational locations (Carnevale, et al., 2013).

**Stratifications in educational attainment.** The overall educational attainment rates mask the stark stratifications in degree attainment across socioeconomic status (SES), race, and geography. Among students in the highest income quintile, 82% enroll in college compared to 62% of students in the middle-income quintile, and 58% of those in the lowest income quintile (Ma et al., 2016). The stratification extends into college persistence. Among high-achieving high school graduates, 74% of students from low-income backgrounds graduated from four-year institutions compared to 83% of those from high-income

backgrounds. In other words, the brightest poor students are earning college degrees at significantly lower rates than similarly skilled wealthy students.

National postsecondary degree attainment also varies by race and ethnicity. Asians reported the highest proportion of four-year degree completion or higher (69%) in 2016, followed by non-Hispanic Whites (43%), Blacks (23%), Hispanics (19%), American Indian (10%) and two or more races (28%) (McFarland et al., 2017). The disparities in degree attainment across race are important considering the rise in the number of people of color across the United States in the last decade. The population of Hispanic students enrolled in public K-12 education rose from 9.3 million (19%) in fall 2004 to 12.8 million (25%) in fall 2014 (McFarland et al., 2017). The percentage of students of color enrolled in public education increased over the same period, including Asian/Pacific Islander and students of two or more races, while the White student population decreased by nearly 9% (McFarland et al., 2017). The increasing number of students of color makes the issue of low degree attainment more prevalent as it begins to affect greater populations. Furthermore, stratifications in educational attainment by income and race have powerful implications when we begin looking at populations in the rural South, which are more likely to be both low-income background and people of color.

Educational attainment rates also vary by geographic location. Many states with the lowest education attainment rates are in the American South (U.S. Census, 2010b) nine of out the ten states with the lowest four-year education attainment rates are in the South, including West Virginia (17.5%), Arkansas (19.5%), Mississippi (19.5%), and Kentucky (20.5%) (U.S. Census, 2010b). The postsecondary enrollment rate in North Carolina (49%) is

slightly below the national average (50%), as is the four-year educational attainment rate (26.5% vs. 27.9%) (Ma et al., 2016; U.S. Census, 2010b).

**Educational attainment among rural populations.** Rurality, in addition to geographic location, influences educational attainment rates. Rural students represent a sizeable proportion of the primary and secondary students in the US. Rural public K-12 school districts enrolled nearly 20% of all public school students, accounting for nearly 8.9 million students in total (Showalter, Klein, Johnson & Hartman, 2017). Although rural students graduate high school at similar rates to urban and suburban students, they have lower college enrollment and attainment rates (Byun et al., 2012c; Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015). Only about 19% of the national rural population has attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33% of the national population (USDA ERS, 2017a). In North Carolina, only 18.1% of the rural population has earned a four-year degree as compared to the state average 29.0% (USDA ERS, 2017b). Educational attainment within rural populations mirrors the stratifications across income and racial lines reflected in the national population. For instance, 20% of the rural White population has a four-year degree as of 2015, compared to 10% of the rural Black population and 9% of the rural Hispanic population (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Rural students, especially those from the South, are more likely to identify as low-income and/or as people of color, heightening the concerns around college persistence and degree completion among youth from the rural South (Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

**American South: The intersection of income, race, and rurality.** Populations in the South are more likely to be low-income, people of color, and rural (Flora et al., 2016; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; NCES, 2013; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). The rural South has

a higher Black population than the national average, and a growing Hispanic population (Flora et al., 2016; NCES, 2013; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). In addition, some of the highest levels of poverty are concentrated in the American South, with county poverty rates of 20% or higher (Flora et al., 2016; USDA ERS, 2017c). The American South also has some of the highest proportions of rural populations: West Virginia (51.3%), Mississippi (50.7%), Arkansas (43.8%), and Kentucky (41.6%) (U.S. Census, 2010c). The counties and states with the highest proportion of rural populations also have the lowest education attainment rates, especially in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the Texas-Mexico border, and Native American reservations (Flora et al., 2016; USDA ERS, 2017c). Therefore, rural populations in South contend barriers to educational attainment caused by the intersection of race, income, geography, and rurality.

**Gap in persistence research.** There has been little research conducted on the college experiences and persistence of students from rural areas, henceforth referred to as “rural college students.” Most research is quantitative in nature, and the findings regarding college enrollment and persistence patterns among rural students have been conflicting and inconclusive (Byun, Irvin & Meece, 2012b; Byun et al., 2012c; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Yan, 2002). These studies also fail to capture *how* rural students persist in the college environment. The limited qualitative studies on rural college students have focused primarily on the experiences of first-year students. Findings from these studies may not transfer to rural populations in the South given the heterogeneity of the rural population.

College student persistence is a function of student attitudes and behaviors as well as institutional structures and resources; yet, many studies only examine college persistence through student factors (e.g. academic achievement, demographic characteristics, etc.). The

current study takes a more holistic approach to examining rural college student persistence by focusing on rural students within a specific region and institution type and considering student persistence through the lens of student attitudes and behaviors, as well as those of institutional agents.

The following section outlines the unique characteristics of the rural Southern population, and how geographic background can influence students' educational opportunities. I review North Carolina-specific information relevant to the current study. The section briefly outlines how the institutional environment contributes to student persistence. The chapter concludes by outlining what is known about rural college student persistence from previous studies, and how the current study addresses the gaps in the literature.

### **Why Study Rural College Students?**

The current literature on rural students explores some of the background characteristics that make the rural population unique, and within that category, the population of the rural South is distinct. Research suggests that rural students have limited access to resources, which creates specific barriers to college enrollment and persistence, such as limited academic preparation and the prevalence of first-generation college student status (Byun, Irvin & Meece, 2015; Flora et al., 2016; Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a; Ganss, 2016; Guiffrida, 2008; Maltzan, 2006; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016; C. Stone, 2014). Yet they also have strengths tied to their powerful connections to community and involvement in extracurricular activities (Flora et al., 2016; Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson & Hutchins, 2010; Means, 2019; Means et al, 2016; A. Stone, 2018; Theobald & Siskar, 2008; Tieken, 2014). The college environment, particularly involvement with faculty and staff, can have an important impact on college student persistence

(Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Tinto, 1993).

### **The Unique Rural Identity**

The geographic definition of *rural* differs based on the agency and the metrics used. Rurality, though, is not strictly bound by physical or population distinctions, but by the social and cultural characteristics that make an area “rural” (Ardoin, 2017; Ritchey, 2006; 2008; A. Stone, 2017; Tieken, 2014). Ritchey (2006) argues that population density does not fully define whether an area is considered *rural*. Instead, scholars should consider, “...other equally important rural qualities, such as locally-based independent, intimacy with nature, and the importance of shared values and collective responsibilities” (Ritchey, 2006. p.3). Similarly, Tieken (2014) identifies rural as a sense of belonging tied to place:

Rural, in this conception, is not simply a matter of boundaries. It constitutes one’s identity; it shapes one’s perspectives and understandings; and it gives meaning to one’s daily experience. This identity, this shared and place-dependent sense of rural belonging, gives rural its significance. (p.5)

One’s rural identity, then, includes not only the physical characteristics of where one is from, but also the social, and cultural characteristics that compose a rural community.

**Heterogeneity of rural areas.** Rurality is a distinct characteristic of an area, but not all rural areas are the same. Nationally, the rural population is predominantly White, but different regions have higher rates of people of color, including Black and Latinx populations (Tieken, 2014; USDA ERS, 2016). The rural South has a significantly larger Black population relative to the national rural population. Fifty-seven percent of the Black population in the U.S. resides in the South (US Census Bureau, 2011). According to the 2010

Census, North Carolina has higher overall Black population (22.2%) than the national average (13.3%) (US Census Bureau, 2017b). The rural Midwest, West, and South also have a rapidly expanding Hispanic population in recent decades, with Hispanic population growth over 60% in rural counties during the 1990's (Tieken, 2014; USDA ERS, 2016; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). Communities of color are more likely to have lower income rates and educational attainment rates, and the same holds for rural populations: the highest rates of poverty and lowest rates of educational attainment are in the rural South (NCES, 2013; USDA ERS, 2017a). The regionally-specific characteristics of rural areas makes it important to explore unique rural populations rather than treating all rural populations as interchangeable.

**Rural North Carolina.** According to the U.S. Census Bureau's (2010b) estimate, North Carolina's rural population consists of approximately 3.2 million people (33.9% of the population) in 90.5% of the state's land mass (U.S. Census, 2010b). The state's rural population is proportionally much higher than the national rural population at 19.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). North Carolina has the second largest rural population in the U.S., second only to Texas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). Rural North Carolina has similar demographic, economic, and educational trends as the rural South. For instance, only 71.0% of the North Carolina's population is White compared to 76.9% of the national population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The state also has higher proportions of Black (22.2% vs. 13.3% and American Indian (1.6% vs. 1.3%) populations than the U.S., but a smaller of Hispanic or Latino population (9.2% vs. 17.8%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The Hispanic population has grown substantially in recent decades, increasing 394% from 1990 to 2000 (Kochhar, Suro & Tafoya, 2005). North Carolina has a rural poverty rate of 19.2%, higher

than the state average (15.4%) and average poverty rate in urban areas (14.3%) (USDA ERS, 2017b). Rural populations in North Carolina have significantly lower four-year degree attainment rates (18.1%) than the state average (29.0%) and urban populations (32.3%) (USDA ERS, 2017b).

### **Rurality Impacts Educational Opportunities**

Rural identity is closely tied to other characteristics that influence college access and persistence, including SES, race, first-generation college student status, academic preparation, and community resources.

**Socioeconomic status and first-generation.** There are sustained gaps in college attainment and completion rates by income level (Ma et al., 2016; Ryan & Bauman, 2016; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey & Crowley, 2006; Yan, 2002). SES can have a strong impact on college attainment and persistence. One study found that students from low-income backgrounds were underrepresented on four-year college campuses compared to their high-income peers at a rate of 10 to 1 (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Low-income students are also more likely to be the first in their family to attend college (“first-generation college students”), and the combination of low-income and first-generation status makes them less likely to persist (Terenzini et al., 2001; Thayer, 2000). Rural students in general, but especially those from the rural South, are more likely to be both low-income and first-generation college students (Gibbs, 1998; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Provasnik et al., 2007).

**Academic preparation.** Access to academically rigorous coursework, college entrance exam training, and extracurricular activities contribute to students’ academic preparation for college. Rural students are significantly less likely to take rigorous courses in

high school than both urban and suburban students, and more likely to have lower scores on college entrance exams (Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2012c). Limited academic preparation may also be due to constrained secondary school resources. Rural schools are significantly smaller than urban and suburban schools, which restricts the advanced coursework they can provide for students because there are fewer students to fill course sections and fewer teachers to teach multiple course sections (Byun et al., 2012c; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008).

Academic preparation can significantly affect students' ability to enroll and persist in college. Choy (2001) estimated that almost half of first-generation students were marginally or not qualified for admission at four-year institutions. Rural college students report struggling with the academic rigor of college coursework (Ganss, 2016; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Schultz, 2004), as well as the nonacademic aspects of the college classroom, such as class size (Ganss, 2016; Schultz, 2004). Academic preparation and connection with the college academic environment play an important role in students' persistence and completion in college (Choy, 2001; Milem & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

**Community resources.** Rural students have barriers to college attainment, but their strong extracurricular involvement in high school and their community connections may also aid their college persistence. The smaller size of rural schools allows students to be involved in many different extracurricular activities, and to hold leadership positions within those organizations (Irvin et al., 2010; Schonert, Elliott, & Billis, 1991). Students in these areas tend to be highly involved in community religious and service organizations, both of which boost their academic achievement, college enrollment, and college degree attainment (Byun et al., 2012c; Irvin et al., 2010; A. Stone, 2018). However, there is inconclusive evidence

regarding the extent to which rural students continue to maintain high levels of extracurricular involvement in the college community (Ganss, 2016; Schonert et al., 1991). This lack of preparation may be due, in part, to the need to work to pay for college expenses, which inhibits for a student's ability to get involved in the college environment (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992b; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004).

Family and community are important sources of motivation and support for rural students pursuing higher education (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006; Demi, McLaughlin & Snyder, 2009; Maltzan, 2006; Means, 2019; Means et al., 2016; C. C. Stone, 2014; A. Stone, 2017; Wright, Scherman, & Beesley, 2003). Rural college students are significantly more likely to report closer relationships with their parents than nonrural students and to view their parents as a source of support and facilitator of independence (Wright et al., 2003). Rural students who successfully persist in college report achieving a balance between connection to the college environment and connection with their home community (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006; Maltzan, 2006). In fact, many rural students demonstrate higher levels of institutional attachment, while also demonstrating high levels of attachment to their home communities (Ames et al., 2014; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006; Wright et al., 2003). These findings contradict Tinto's model (1993), which suggest that students need to break ties with their home environments to be fully integrated into the college environment.

### **Institutional Environments Matter**

Persistence is not only dependent on the background characteristics and behaviors of the student but also on the higher education institution, which include institutional characteristics and opportunities for students to connect with faculty and staff (Tinto, 1998). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2011) found that student engagement in the college

environment is positively related to student learning and persistence. Student engagement consists of two components: the amount of time and energy a student puts into their academic and social engagement with the university, and the structure and resources that the institution commits to student learning and connection (Kuh et al., 2011). In other words, students' connection with the college environment is a result of student *and* institutional effort and behaviors.

Students' involvement in educationally purposeful activities, such as time spent studying and involvement in extracurricular activities, has a positive impact on their persistence, especially during their first year (Kuh et al., 2008). Similarly, student involvement in academic and social experiences on campus is positively correlated with their sense of belonging on campus and their intent to persist in college (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hausmann et al. (2007) found that students' involvement in peer group interactions, interactions with faculty, peer support, and parental support during their first year in college had a positive impact on their sense of belonging. Sense of belonging was positively correlated with students' institutional commitment, or intent to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007). Furthermore, student time spent studying or engaged in extracurricular activities had a greater positive impact on first year grades and persistence among more vulnerable student populations, such as lower-ability students and students of color, as compared to White students (Kuh et al., 2008). Although no specific studies on the level and type of rural college student engagement exist, these findings suggest that rural students would similarly benefit from different forms of academic and social engagement.

Institutional resources and organizational behavior also contribute to student persistence (Berger, 2001; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Reason, 2009). Organizational

behavior includes the behavior of institutional agents (faculty, staff, and administrators) rather than attributing actions to the institution itself (Berger, 2001). Institutions that demonstrate more collegial characteristics, which promote fairness, communication, and participation in the college environment, are associated with higher levels of student satisfaction and persistence (Berger, 2001). Student persistence is also associated with symbolic organizational behavior, which may help students to understand the values, norms, and behaviors of the college environment (Berger, 2001). Institutional expenditures can serve as a proxy for what an institution values and can impact student persistence. Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006) found that institutional expenditures on academic support services, like academic advising, and instruction positively contributed to student retention and graduation rates, whereas spending on institutional support negatively impacted graduation rates. These studies support the idea that institutional behavior and characteristics, in addition to student behavior and characteristics, contribute to college persistence.

### **Limitations of Research on Rural College Students**

The overall lower college attainment rates of rural populations are not as straightforward as the statistics suggest (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Quantitative research on rural populations consistently finds that rural students are less likely to enroll in college than their nonrural peers (Byun et al., 2012c; Howley et al. 2014; Hu, 2003; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Provasnik et al., 2007). When they do enroll, rural students are more likely to attend less selective institutions, two-year colleges, and public institutions than nonrural students, and are significantly less likely to enroll in highly selective institutions (Burke, Davis & Stephan, 2015; Byun et al., 2015; Gibbs, 1998; Hu, 2003; Schonert et al., 1991). This phenomenon is called *undermatching*, the term used to describe when a student enrolls in a

postsecondary institution that is less selective than the student could successfully enroll in based on their academic record (GPA, college entrance exams) (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Smith, Howell, Pender, & Hurwitz, 2012). In their study, Burke et al. (2015) found that students from rural high schools were more likely to enroll in two-year vs. four-year institutions relative to their nonrural counterparts, even after controlling for academic achievement, poverty, and distance from college. In other words, rural students were more likely to undermatch as compared to their peers who attended suburban and urban schools. Institutional selectivity has a strong impact on persistence; national persistence and retention rates are higher among more selective, private institutions than less selective, public institutions (NCES, 2017). Four-year institutions with open admissions have an average six-year graduation rate of 32%, compared to those institutions with an acceptance rate between 50-74.9%, which have a graduation rate of 61% (NCES, 2018). The most selective institutions that accept less than 25% of applicants have a six-year graduation rate of 88% (NCES, 2018). A broad review of graduation rates by institutional selectivity suggests that students who attend more selective institutions are more likely to graduate.

Yet the research on college persistence among rural students is less conclusive. Some research indicates that rural students are less likely to persist and graduate from college than their urban and suburban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012c; Pierson and Hanson, 2015; Yan, 2002). For instance, Byun et al. (2012c) found that suburban and urban students were significantly more likely to attain their college degree than rural students (61% and 106%, respectively). However, SES accounted for 10% of the variance in the model (Byun et al., 2012c). After accounting for SES, the difference in college attainment rates between rural, urban, and suburban students was no longer significant (Byun et al., 2012c). Alternatively, a

body of research exists that finds rural college students graduate at similar or higher rates compared to their nonrural counterparts (Byun et al., 2012b; Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Schonert et al., 1991). Specifically, the research suggests that rural students encounter challenges in getting to college, but they successfully adjust once they arrive on campus (Ames et al., 2014; C. C. Stone, 2014; Wright et al., 2003). In fact, Wright et al. (2003) found that rural students had no demonstrated differences in college adjustment compared to their urban and suburban peers, even though rural students were more likely to be first generation college students.

The inconsistency of the quantitative research findings may be due to several factors. First, many of the quantitative studies on rural college student enrollment and persistence use older national datasets (Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2012c), which fail to capture the recent rise in rural student college enrollment (Legutko, 2008; Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Challenges also exist that are associated with using national datasets (Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2012c), which could mask the regionally-specific characteristics of different rural populations. Regional studies (Howley et al., 2014; Pierson and Hanson, 2015; Yan, 2002) are limited by the transferability of their findings to other regional rural populations with different demographic characteristics. The selectivity of institutions in which students enroll further complicates researchers' ability to gain a clear picture of college student persistence. The inconsistent findings regarding college persistence among rural students warrants further research, especially regarding the specific factors that influence persistence.

While several quantitative studies on rural college students exist, there are far fewer qualitative researcher have studied this topic. These qualitative studies are primarily dissertations that explore first-year rural students, or rural students from a specific region.

For instance, Ganss (2016) delved into the experiences of rural students from Oregon in their first year of college. Other recent qualitative dissertations, including Schultz (2004), Maltzan (2006), and C. C. Stone (2014), have primarily focused on the first-year experiences of rural college students, which are important for understanding the first to second year persistence, but does not fully describe the long-term persistence of rural college students. Exploring college persistence among rural students who have successfully persisted in college can provide insight into the long-term strategies these students use to persist, and how organizational behavior channels those strategies. Furthermore, many of these studies explore rural populations in the Midwest and West. The characteristics of the rural South may uncover specific factors tied to race and income that influence the college persistence of Southern rural students, factors which may be less prevalent in research on rural populations in other areas of the country.

Several studies have exclusively delved into the college experiences of students from southern Appalachia, a subset of the southern rural population. Darling (1999) captured the stories of the college experiences of first-generation college students from southern Appalachia. She specifically explored students' narratives of their college experiences and what the experiences meant to students as they relate to their home culture. Bryan and Simmons (2009) explored the role of family involvement on college success among first-generation Appalachian students. Dunstan (2013) examined the influence of speaking Southern Appalachian dialect on students' academic performance, sense of belonging in campus, and their interaction with faculty and peers. While findings from these studies are highly useful in informing the present study, this research deviates in focus by exploring the

experience of rural southern populations beyond Appalachia and by including the role of organizational behavior in student persistence.

Few, if any, studies have explicitly examined the role of faculty and staff in shaping rural college student persistence. The studies by Bryan and Simmons (2009), Ganss (2016), Maltzan (2006), and Stone (2014) focused primarily on college persistence from the perspective of the student. Student attitudes and behaviors are crucial in understanding student persistence. Yet insight into organizational behavior can also illuminate strategies institutional agents use (or fail to use) to promote persistence. Previous research found that students who are engaged in extracurricular activities and informal academic connections with faculty and peers outside the classroom are more likely to report feeling a sense of belonging on campus that is positively associated with improved persistence (Kuh et al., 2008; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). College involvement and sense of belonging is especially important for students from students of color, including Latinx and Black students (Fischer, 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For instance, Black students who reported higher peer support were more likely to report increased sense of belonging as they progressed through their college career (Hausmann et al., 2007). Similarly, when students experience higher sense of belonging, they are more likely to be engaged on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Latinx students who had a strong sense of belonging on campus were more likely to engage in academic discussions with other students and faculty. Student engagement on campus is positively associated with academic achievement and student persistence from first to second year, especially for at-risk and students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 197; Kuh et al., 2008). Few if any studies have examined sense of belonging among rural students and its impact on

student success. Exploring the role of the institution, including the behaviors of faculty and staff, on student involvement can show how the institution can recognize and promote rural student engagement on campus in a way that bolsters their institutional persistence.

## **Current Study**

### **Problem Statement**

Rural students earn college degrees at significantly lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012c; Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015). Populations in the rural South have additional characteristics that are associated with lower college enrollment and attainment rates, such as higher rates of low-income and people of color (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). College persistence is not only influenced by student characteristics and behavior, but also by the behaviors of institutional actors (Berger, 2001; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Reason, 2009). Further research is needed to understand how regionality and organizational behavior shape the college experiences of rural students in the South, and how the strategies used by both students and the institution influence their persistence.

### **Focus of Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the college experiences of rural students from North Carolina attending a land-grant institution. The study seeks to understand how rural students describe their experiences in college in relation to their rural background and the strategies they use to persist. Furthermore, the study will explore how faculty and student affairs professionals (“staff”) at the postsecondary institutions identify and understand rural college student populations. Characteristics and behaviors of both the student and institution

contribute to a student's persistence in college; delving into both perspectives will provide a more holistic understanding of rural college student persistence.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide the study:

1. How do college students from rural North Carolina perceive their rural background and how it shapes their college persistence?
2. What are the college experiences and strategies of rural students in the American South that affect their overall persistence?
3. How do institutional actors, such as faculty and student affairs professionals, identify and support the persistence of rural college students?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure has been one of the most widely studied models of student persistence and has been extensively empirically tested, critiqued, and modified based on emerging research in the field of student retention. Tinto's model examines how student characteristics interact with institutional characteristics to influence student persistence. Students who persist are more likely to be academically and socially integrated into the college environment. Tinto's (1993) model is one of the most well-known and widely implemented models of student persistence among educational practitioners.

However, Tinto's model is limited in its ability to explain student persistence among diverse populations. This model assumes that students must separate themselves from the culture of their home communities to integrate successfully into the college culture. This assumption can have detrimental effects on students of color, especially for those attending predominantly white institutions (PWI), because the gap between the home and college

culture can be wider than it is for White students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). Critics of the model also identify that it fails to incorporate external commitments, such as finances or a student's home community. These external factors may disproportionately affect low-income, students of color, and nontraditional students who have responsibilities outside the college environment that affect their persistence (Bean, 1980, 1982).

Guiffrida (2006) developed a modified model of student persistence based on Tinto's (1993) model that incorporates a cultural lens (Kuh & Love, 2000). In adopting a cultural lens, the model modifies Tinto's concept of *integration* to *connection* and allows for the inclusion of the home social system (friends and family) into the model to recognize that students do not need to abandon their home community to be successfully connected to the latter community. This modification is particularly important for rural populations because it allows for students to maintain their strong connection to their home environment. The modified model also includes components of two human motivation theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and Job Involvement Theory (JIT) (Kanungo, 1982). Both motivation theories outline different components of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, how culture and human needs shape these types of motivation, and how motivation type affects learning and job performance. Guiffrida's (2006) modified model is salient for this study because it uses Tinto's model as a baseline for understanding college student persistence but also includes cultural and motivation elements that may be particularly important for understanding underrepresented populations.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research allows researchers to study individuals in their natural setting, and understand “how people interpret their experience, how they construct their worlds, and the meanings they attribute to their experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). The current study will use a qualitative case study approach to understand the phenomenon of college persistence among rural students from the South. Yin (2013) recommends using case study when one wants to gain an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon embedded within a specific context. The experience of rural college students at a public four-year institution may be different from students at other postsecondary institutions because of the mission and organizational behavior associated with that institution. Furthermore, rural students in the South may face additional barriers to college persistence based on the intersection of race and SES with rurality.

I examined the case using interviews with rural college students, as well as interviews with faculty and staff at a one public land-grant institution located in the South. I conducted interviews with 15 rural college students enrolled full-time at the institution who had successfully persisted into their seventh semester, or senior year, of college. I also interviewed six faculty and student affairs professionals identified by the rural students interviewed for the study to understand how institutional actors identified and supported rural students.

## **Delimitations**

The boundaries of the study determine the delimitations of the study, including the population, location, and the type of institution of the current study. I elected to study rural college students in their fourth year for several reasons. From a theoretical perspective, rural

students in their fourth year of college could provide insight into the strategies they used to persist throughout their college career, whereas other studies have primarily examined rural college student behavior in the first semester or year of college. Studying upperclassmen students also had practical necessities; the current study drew some of its participants from a larger qualitative study conducted the previous year which studied rural students in their junior or senior year at college. The current study recruited some participants who were in their junior year of college in the initial study, and who had progressed into their senior year. Additional participants were recruited directly by the researcher the following fall using the same recruiting techniques from the larger study.

Furthermore, I chose to limit the study to a public land-grant institution in North Carolina. As previously discussed, rural populations in the South have different qualities than rural populations in other areas of the country (Gibbs, 1998; NCES, 2013; USDA ERS, 2017a). The experiences of rural students who are academically eligible and who choose to attend land-grant institutions will also demarcate their experiences from the experiences of other rural college students. In order to establish boundaries on the case, this study only examines rural college students at one land-grant institution in North Carolina.

### **Limitations**

The current study is limited by the sampling strategies, scope the study, the time frame, and the lens of the researcher. First, the sampling strategies used to solicit participants limits this study. Using criteria set to identify rural students, the initial study drew a random sample of current rural college students in their junior and senior year at the institution and contacted these students to participate in the study. The current study recruited some students from that initial pool for follow-up interviews, as well as recruited additional rural students

the following fall. Students who chose to participate in the first study may be different from those who did not in ways that cannot be measured. Likewise, the opportunity to reflect on their college experiences in the initial study could potentially influence the reflections of participants during the second round of interviews in the present study.

I recruited faculty and staff participants using snowball sampling techniques, which limits the scope of experiences reflected in the study. In addition, the study is naturally limited to the experiences of the participants who are interviewed and their experiences during the points of time in which they are interviewed. Finally, the analysis of the data is limited by my lens as a researcher. To address this limitation, I will frequently draw on the literature and qualitative methods to improve credibility of the study, including triangulation of the data and use of member checks.

### **Significance of Study**

#### **Research**

The rural college student experiences uncovered in the current study broadens the knowledge base on rural college students by revealing experience of rural students from the South. A few studies have explored the experiences of rural college students from Appalachia (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Darling, 1999; Dunstan, 2013; Hand & Payne, 2008; Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015; Hlinka, 2017), but no recent studies have used case study methodology to gain a holistic understanding of rural college student persistence outside of Appalachia. This study illuminates the unique experiences of southern rural students that distinguish them from the national rural population. First, the study contributes to the existing literature by reinforcing the findings regarding rural students' experiences in college while also challenging components of other studies by revealing how the college experience

of rural students from the South is unique compared to those from other areas of the country. For instance, some literature finds that rural students are academically underprepared for college; findings from this study demonstrate that rural students' academic preparation is largely dependent upon the type of secondary institution they attend and that rural students had academic strengths that helped them thrive in college. The study also explored the specific strategies students use to influence their persistence, including connecting with faculty and staff and extracurricular involvement, in the context of a large, land-grant institution in North Carolina. Finally, findings from the study reinforced how institutional agents identified, or failed to identify, and support rural students. The attitudes and perceptions of institutional actors represents a facet of rural college student persistence that has not been previously studied.

## **Theory**

Tinto's (1993) student departure theory has been extensively tested in the last four decades. Researchers have made numerous modifications to the model, including the model proposed by Guiffrida (2006). By comparison, Guiffrida's (2006) model has only been applied to a few studies, although the components of the model—Tinto's (1993) model, SDT, and JIT—have been thoroughly researched. The current study added to the sparse number of studies using Guiffrida's (2006) cultural adaptation of Tinto's (1993) model and expanded the model through its application to rural student populations. The current study also explored institutional actors' awareness and perception of rural student populations, which represents an extension of Guiffrida's (2006) adapted model.

**Practice**

The study informs how secondary institutions advise rural students in the college application process and the ways in which higher education institutions identify and support rural college students. While secondary schools cannot change the background characteristics of rural students that create challenges in their pursuit of higher education, findings from this study help inform how rural secondary schools can better prepare students for college within their limited resources. For instance, findings from this study support greater resource allocation to rural secondary schools to promote the expansion of college preparatory courses through distance education or partnerships with local community colleges. In addition, the study highlights areas of strength that rural schools can capitalize on in preparing their students for postsecondary education, such as strong social capital of rural students and high involvement in extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, findings from this study advise higher education institutions on ways to improve their policies and practices to better identify, recruit, and support rural college students. A challenge of identifying rural students is that no singular definition of rurality exists (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Reynnells, 2016; Ritchey, 2008; A. Stone, 2017; USDA ERS, 2016). The current study's use of Isserman's (2005) definition of rurality can serve as a model for other institutions seeking to identify the scope of the rural population in their student body. The study not only identifies the barriers that rural students experience in college persistence, but also the strengths they contribute to the institution. Based on these findings, the current study should encourage more institutions, especially larger land-grant institutions that often do not have the capacity to recruit in rural areas, to engage in more targeted recruiting practices that encourage rural students to apply and attend their institution.

Rural students bring a unique perspective to the university; expanding the number of rural college students at the institution could unlock new facets of institutional diversity not previously identified.

Finally, the study illuminates the extent to which institutional agents, including faculty and staff, identify and support rural students. Findings from this study suggest best practices for supporting rural students, including simple recommendations like asking a student about their home community. Previously, Tinto's (1975) model encouraged students to integrate by fully immersing themselves into college life, especially within the first six weeks. Colleges facilitate this immersion through extensive first-year programming and extracurricular recruitment in the first few weeks of college. However, the literature on both rural students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Hlinka, Mobelini, Giltner, 2015; Johnson, Elder & Stern, 2005; Legutko, 2008; Maltzan, 2006; C. C. Stone, 2014; Wright, et al., 2003) and students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1996; Kuh & Love, 2000; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999) finds that students' connection to their home and cultural communities is important to their sense of belonging at college. Findings from this study challenge conventional college practices by reinforcing the importance of the home social system on rural college student support and showing how rural college students establish a balance between connecting with the college community while also maintaining a connection to home.

### **Policy**

This study has multiple policy implications for college completion efforts that can target resources at the secondary and postsecondary level. An understanding of the background characteristics that affect rural college students' academic preparation revealed

the resource limitations of rural secondary schools in preparing students for college. Policies that allocate more equitable funding mechanisms that support rural public K-12 schools could remedy these disparities. Small grants that cover transportation costs for rural schools seeking to take college visits could help these schools build a college-going culture among their students. Nonprofit interventions such as TRIO services, College Advising Corps, and AVID also provide opportunities for rural youth to gain access to college knowledge and prepare for college admissions. Overall, findings from this study raise the visibility of rural college students as a distinct subset of students in the eyes of higher education institutions and policymakers.

### **Chapter Summary**

Rural populations in America have lower college attainment rates than urban and suburban populations (Byun et al., 2012c; Howley et al., 2014; NSC, 2016). This trend is especially true in states in the American South, including North Carolina (USDA ERS, 2017a). Rural populations in the South are more likely to also low-income and/or communities of color, meaning that students from these communities have overlapping identities that are also traditionally underserved in higher education (Ardoin, 2017; Tieken, 2014; USDA ERS 2016; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). A challenge in raising awareness around rural populations is the varied definitions of rurality which make it difficult to accurately capture the scope of the rural population (Ardoin, 2017; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Flora et al., 2016; Ganss, 2016; Isserman, 2005; Reynnells, 2016; A. Stone, 2017; Tieken, 2014). Numerous studies have explored college access among rural populations, but far fewer studies have explored college persistence among rural scholars, and most of those studies are quantitative (Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2012c;

Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Yan, 2002). The current study explores the college experiences among rural students attending a land-grant PWI in the American South, and how their rural backgrounds shape their college experiences.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural college students are a relatively unnoticed and understudied population. The limited research on college access and persistence among this population indicates that rural students' college enrollment and completion patterns are unique from the general student population. Further still, regional rural populations have unique characteristics, including race and SES, which further influence educational attainment among those populations. Persistence research often considers student characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors when examining college persistence patterns, but far fewer explore the role of institutional agents on student persistence. The current study sought to understand how student characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as the behaviors of institutional agents, influences the college experiences among rural college students. The following chapter reviews the current and salient research on rural students, college persistence, and institutional characteristics and behavior. The model proposed by Guiffrida (2006) guides this study. This model is an adaptation of Tinto's (1993) institutional departure model that includes a cultural lens and motivation theory.

The chapter begins with a review of the research to date on rural populations and more specifically on rural students in the college pipeline. The bulk of the research on rural education focuses on primary and secondary student experiences, but I have highlighted the key findings that focus on pre-college characteristics and college access. Drawing from some larger bodies of literature, I reviewed the research on how student attitudes and behaviors and institutional characteristics interact to shape student persistence, including the role of faculty and student affairs professionals in aiding student connection to the university. Following a review of the literature is an overview of the foundational theories on persistence and

retention. Next, I summarized Tinto's (1993) model, including empirical research of the model and the limitations of the model. The chapter concludes with an outline of Guiffrida's (2006) adaption to Tinto's model. The modified model provides a cultural lens to Tinto's model that can be used to better understand rural college student persistence.

### **Rural College Students: A Review of the Literature**

Research indicates that rural students, broadly speaking, have several barriers to college access and attainment as a result of their rural background. Rural students are more likely to be from low SES backgrounds (Bauch, 2001; NCES, 2013; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001) and be first-generation college students (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Provasnik et al., 2007). Rural students often have lower college aspirations (Bajema, Miller & Williams, 2002; Hu, 2003; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991) and experience limited academic preparation in high school (Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008). On the other hand, rural students also tend to have stronger community resources (Bauch, 2001; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991, A. Stone, 2017; A. Stone, 2018) and higher levels of extracurricular involvement (Bajema et al., 2002; Sipple & Brent, 2008) than their nonrural peers that bolster their college access and attainment. How rural students perceive the barriers and strengths of their rural background, and the strategies they use in college can shape their college experiences and college persistence.

### **Setting the Stage: Characteristics of Rural America**

Rural America is diverse and expansive. As of July 2015, rural America consisted of 46.2 million people in 72% of the nation's land mass (USDA ERS, 2016). Rural communities in America differ in their demographics, topography, resources, and culture

(Flora et al., 2016; Tieken, 2014; USDA ERS, 2016; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). As Tieken (2014) describes:

Rural America covers Native American reservation communities in the West, small mostly 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).

While there are similarities across rural populations, rural America is far from homogenous (Flora et al., 2016; Kochhar et al., 2005; Tieken, 2014; USDA ERS, 2016; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003; A. Stone, 2017).

The last two decades have seen large population and demographic shifts in rural regions, as well as changing economic trends (Flora et al., 2016; Tieken, 2014; USDA ERS, 2016). In the 1990s, there was large growth in the rural populations in the West and South, primarily due to high birth rates and in-migration (Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). The Hispanic population has increased substantially in rural areas (Kochhar et al., 2005; Lichter, 2012). North Carolina's Hispanic population increased by 394% between 1990 to 2000, the majority of whom were foreign-born and male (Kochhar et al., 2005). The number of people of color in rural communities has more than doubled from 1990 to 2010 (Lichter, 2012).

In more recent decades there has been a sharp decline in the rural population. The Great Recession in 2007-2008 triggered a dramatic drop in rural birth rates and large outmigration from rural areas due to the decline in economic opportunities (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Flora et al., 2016; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003; USDA, 2016). The rural population is also aging; in addition to the outmigration of rural youth, rural areas have seen an influx of retirees (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). There was a

steady annual decrease in the rural population of 0.3% from 2010–2014, but that population decline was higher (approximately 4%) in areas with predominantly agriculture-based economies (USDA ERS, 2016). On the contrary, the population in urban areas increased by nearly 8% since the Recession, in part due to rural youth moving to cities for better job opportunities (Flora et al., 2016; USDA ERS, 2016).

The rural population is predominantly White compared to the national population, especially in the Midwest and West, yet recent population changes have shifted the demographics of the rural population (Kochhar et al., 2005; Lichter, 2012; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). The rural South has a significantly larger Black population than other rural areas (Flora et al., 2016; NCES, 2013; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). Since the 1990's there has been a large increase in the Hispanic population in rural areas, higher than any other racial or ethnic group (Flora et al., 2016; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Kochhar et al., 2005; Lichter, 2012; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). Waves of immigrant populations from war-torn areas of Southeast Asia, northern Africa, and the Middle East have also settled in rural areas in the past several decades (Flora et al., 2016). Currently, fourteen of the thirty most diverse counties are rural, contradicting the notion that rural America is White (Flora et al., 2016, p.13). In the 2015–2016 academic year, an estimated one in four students enrolled in rural public schools were students of color (Showalter et al., 2017).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's (2010c) estimate, North Carolina's rural population consists of approximately 3.2 million people--33.9% of the population-- in 90.5% of the state's land mass. Alternatively, the USDA ERS (2017b) estimates North Carolina's 2010 rural population to be 2.2 million people, or approximately 23% of the state population. North Carolina has the second largest rural population in the U.S., second only to Texas

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). Consistent with demographic trends of the rural South, North Carolina is more racially diverse than the national population. In North Carolina, approximately 22.2% of the population is Black compared to 13.3% of the national population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The Latinx population in North Carolina consists of 9.2% of the state's population (US Census Bureau, 2017). Native American tribes also have a presence in North Carolina, representing 1.6% of the state population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Approximately 29% of the population in North Carolina identified as non-White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), but the non-White population comprised of 50.5% of the public school population (DPI, 2016).

**Changes in economic opportunities.** The 2008 Recession affected rural areas through a rise in unemployment, declines in median earnings, and changes in industry. Rural unemployment nearly doubled during the Recession (from 5.2% in 2007 to 9.9% in 2010) but has since returned to nearly pre-Recession levels (USDA ERS, 2016). However, this decrease in unemployment rates may also reflect fewer people seeking work (USDA ERS, 2016). The economic opportunities available in rural areas have changed since the Recession. Manufacturing, primary goods production (farming, forestry, fishing, mining), and agriculture still account for large portions of the rural economy, but a significant growth in the service sector has occurred in rural areas (USDA ERS, 2016; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). However, positions in the service industry are primarily low-wage and low-benefit (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Furthermore, manufacturing in rural and urban areas fell by nearly 30% from 2001 to 2010 because of trade competition, rising labor productivity, and the Recession. Although manufacturing has recovered somewhat since the Recession, it is

still well below pre-Recession levels (USDA ERS, 2016). Thirty-nine percent of jobs in rural areas are managerial or professional compared to 52% in urban areas (USDA ERS, 2016).

**Cultural and social capital.** In addition to economic capital, cultural and social capital shape the resources of rural communities. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized cultural capital as one's mannerisms, cultural goods, and cultural knowledge. Similarly, Flora et al. (2016) define cultural capital as "how we see the world and what we value" (p.40). Cultural capital is transmitted through families and defines one's social class (Ardoin 2018; Bourdieu, 1986; Flora et al., 2016; Perna, 2006). An individual's taste in music, food, fashion and entertainment are all reflections of their cultural capital (Flora et al., 2016). Cultural capital is also manifest through one's use of language (Dunstan, 2013; Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015; Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016; Flora et al., 2016). Internalized societal values and beliefs form an individual's habitus, which shapes the way one sees the world and themselves (Ardoin, 2018; Bourdieu, 1986; Flora et al., 2016; Perna, 2006). Habitus can include an individual's aspirations, thoughts, feelings, expectations, beliefs, and actions (Ardoin, 2018, p.28). An individual's habitus can also shape their expectations and aspirations for education (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006).

Cultural capital is institutionalized through educational systems, such as schools and universities (Ardoin 2018; Bourdieu, 1986; Flora et al., 2016). School systems reinforce the values and norms of the dominant social group among students through the process of hegemony (Flora et al., 2016). Hegemony reinforces dominant values as normative (Flora et al., 2016). Rural communities are more likely to be underrepresented communities (low-income, communities of color); therefore, the dominant societal values are often at odds with the values of rural communities (Ardoin, 2018; Flora et al., 2016).

Social capital, on the other hand, consists of the social connections that help individuals gain access to other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Flora et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Perna, 2006). This form of capital is developed through membership in a group, which provides access for members to collectively-owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Flora et al., 2016). On an individual level, strong social capital through advantageous connections promotes economic opportunity and mobility (Flora et al., 2016; Means, 2019). Strong social capital in a community facilitates cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual trust, and can be used to improve a community's investment in physical and human capital (Flora et al., 2016; p.76). Rural communities often have strong social capital within their communities due to their small size and collectivist values, but the benefit of these social connections may not extend to social mobility beyond the community (Flora et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Tieken; 2014). In other words, students from rural communities have strong social and cultural capital within their communities, but these types of knowledge have traditionally not been valued on college campuses. Bourdieu (1986) argues that economic capital is at the root of other forms of capital; therefore, rural communities, which are often low in economic resources, are more likely to have low levels cultural and social capital in the larger culture.

**Forms of capital and education.** Educational attainment rates are strongly correlated to a community's economic cultural, and social capitals. Median earnings in communities often increase as the level of educational attainment of the area rises (Ma et al., 2016). At the same time, educational attainment increases are correlated with a decrease in levels of poverty, child poverty, unemployment, and population loss decrease (Ma et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; USDA ERS, 2017a). This trend is evident in the rural South. Counties with high poverty rates, defined as a poverty rate of 20%

or higher, are concentrated in the American South, including Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the Texas-Mexico border, and Native American reservations (Flora et al., 2016; USDA ERS, 2017a). In fact, nearly all the states in the American South had child poverty rates above the national average of 20%, including North Carolina, which has a child poverty rate of 24% (McFarland et al., 2017). These high-poverty counties also have some of the lowest education rates in the country (Flora et al., 2016; USDA ERS, 2017a). The US Department of Agriculture (2017a) argued that low educational attainment is inextricably linked to poverty rates in the South: “Lower educational attainment also contributes to poverty, so higher poverty in the South is both a cause and consequence of lower educational attainment” (p. 5). Understanding the characteristics of rural areas provides context for understanding the factors that influence rural students’ access and persistence in college.

While there have been increases in educational attainment levels among rural populations, rural areas still trail urban areas in educational attainment. In 2015, 19% of the rural population had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 33% of the urban population (USDA, 2017a). Furthermore, these increases in educational attainment are not distributed equally across the population. Within the rural population, White rural populations had higher levels of educational attainment than rural Black, Hispanic, and American Indian populations (USDA, 2017a). The educational stratifications by race within rural populations is particularly salient for rural populations in the South, which have higher populations of people of color than other rural regions (Flora et al., 2016; NCES, 2013; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003).

Flora et al. (2016) argue that the level of educational attainment may not accurately reflect the education aspiration and achievement level of rural populations but instead the

lack of economic opportunities in rural areas: “The rural-urban gap in college completion has widened since 1990, not necessarily because rural students do not attend college, but because many do not return to rural areas after attending college” (p.58). Lower educational attainment rates stymie in-migration to rural areas due to lack of high-paying economic opportunities and accelerates outmigration for those who do attain postsecondary credentials (Flora et al., 2016). Limited educational attainment among rural populations limits access to economic, cultural, and social capitals, thus reinforcing the limited social mobility of rural populations.

**Rural values.** While rural communities have faced economic challenges in recent decades, these communities are often characterized by values that make them resilient in the face of these challenges. Rural communities have traditionally been characterized by the concept of *Gemeinschaft*, or a society based on personal relationships and face-to-face interactions (Flora et al., 2016, p.17). Social relationships are highly valued under *Gemeinschaft* (Flora et al., 2016). *Gesellschaft*, or a society that is based on impersonal and contractual relationships, are more closely associated with urban cultures (Flora et al., 2016, p.17). Rural communities, in general, demonstrate a strong commitment to the people in their community and their physical space (Flora et al, 2016; A. Stone, 2018). These communities may reinforce personal relationships due to their small size of rural communities and strong familial relationships between community members (Ardoin, 2018; Flora et al., 2016). Communities in the rural South are more likely to be culturally collectivist (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). A collectivist culture is one in which an individual defines themselves in the context of their membership in a community, while people in an individualistic culture are more likely to define themselves independently from a specific group (Vandello & Cohen,

1999). The collectivist mindset of the rural South stems from the region's agricultural roots (which rely on individuals working together to be economically viable), persistent poverty, and strong religious culture that characterize the South (Vandellos & Cohen, 1999).

Rural communities have historically been perceived as more hardworking, democratic, independent, neighborly, traditional, religious, and patriotic than their urban counterparts (Flora et al., 2016). However, Flora et al. (2016) caution against reducing rural and urban communities to these dichotomous set of values due to the heterogeneity of rural communities and technological changes that have restructured rural communities. For instance, Talhelm et al. (2014) found that the type of crop a community grew, and the level of community cooperation needed to successfully harvest it, was more influential in shaping the strength of a community's collectivist values than simply being an agricultural-based community. Furthermore, improved infrastructure has improved the accessibility of rural communities. Individuals who live in rural areas are increasingly more likely to commute to suburban or urban areas for work, improving the flow of information, ideas and values between geographic locations (Flora et al., 2016). Mobile coverage and high-speed internet access, while still limited in many rural areas, has improved access for rural populations that were previously bound by geographic isolation (Flora et al., 2016). While some rural populations retain some of the stereotypical values associated with rural communities, the values of cooperation, altruism, independence and conservatism exist more on a continuum than a dichotomy (Flora et al., 2016).

### **First-generation College Students**

Research on first-generation college students is closely intertwined with research on rural college students because of the similarities and overlaps between the two populations.

Like the concept of “rural”, there is no singular definition of what it means to be a “first-generation college student” (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2015). The label of “first-gen” can be used to indicate that one or both parents have attended no college, some college but did not receive a degree, or completed less than a four-year degree (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). How one defines first-gen broadly changes the estimate of the number of first-gen students, and different postsecondary outcomes are associated with vary levels of first-gen (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). Toutkoushian et al. (2015) estimated that using the most lenient definition of first-gen, that both parents have not earned at least a bachelor’s degree, estimated that 77% of all students enrolled in postsecondary education would be considered first-gen, while the strictest definition, that both parents have not enrolled in any form of postsecondary education, estimated the national first-gen population to be 22%. Despite findings differences in the rates in college-going behaviors depending on the definition of first-gen, Toutkoushian et al. (2015) concluded that those students identified as first-gen, by any definition, were less likely than non-first-gen students to participate in college-going behaviors that contribute to college enrollment.

First-gen student status is closely tied to income, as first-gen students are more likely to be from low-income families (Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Redford, Ralph & Mulvaney, 2017; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora; 1996). Redford et al. (2017) found that first-gen students were more likely to come from households than earned less than \$20,000 a year (27%) compared to students whose parents had earned a bachelor’s degree (6%). Rural students are more likely to be first-gen students because fewer parents in rural areas have earned a college degree relative to urban and suburban parents (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Provasnik et al., 2007). In 43 of the 80 rural counties in North Carolina,

less than 50% of the adult population has obtained any postsecondary education beyond high school, meaning that many rural North Carolinians are first-generation college students (Woodie, 2018). While not all rural students are first-gen students, one can draw from the broader pool of research on first-generation college students to understand better the characteristics of rural college students that affect their college attainment.

**Academic preparation of first-gens.** First-gen and low-income students often have limited academic preparation which negatively affects their college access and persistence (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Cataldi, Bennett & Chen, 2018; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Redford et al., 2017; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-gen students are more likely to have GPAs below 2.0 than are non-first-gen students (Redford et al., 2017), and to be marginally or not qualified for admission at a four-year postsecondary institution (Choy, 2001). First-gen students are significantly less likely to be enrolled high level math courses compared to their non-first-gen counterparts (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001), and enrollment in such courses is highly correlated with four-year college enrollment (Choy, 2001). First-gen students who enroll in college are more likely to require remedial coursework, which can delay their time to degree (Engle, 2007). Often first-gen students take fewer academically rigorous courses than do non-first-gen students because their schools simply do not offer them (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007). Lower levels of parental involvement in students' academic and college decisions among first-generation students, often due to parents working long hours or multiple jobs that limit their time, also influenced the lower levels of academic preparation (Horn & Nunez, 2000 as cited by Choy, 2001; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell & Perna, 2008).

**Cultural capital.** First-gen and rural students are limited not only in their financial resources, but also in the sociocultural resources. A college capital theory of college access theorizes that greater cultural capital will promote social mobility, which, in turn, helps one to acquire more financial capital (Toutkoushian et al., 2015). A student's cultural capital is shaped by their socioeconomic status, race, and gender, among other factors (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006). It also includes the value that parents and community place on a postsecondary education (Ardoin, 2018; Perna, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Parents who have attended college themselves are more likely to encourage their children to attend college than parents who have not attended college (Terenzini et al., 1996). Similarly, peer support is a strong predictor of college success behavior, especially among students of color (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005).

College cultural capital, sometimes referred to as “college knowledge”, includes an understanding of how to navigate the college admissions, financial aid, and enrollment processes (Perna, 2006). Parents who have attended college themselves are better equipped to transmit their knowledge of college admissions and college experiences, thus better preparing their children to gain access to and persist in college (Ardoin, 2018; Choy, 2001; Perna, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Terenzini et al., 1996). School counselors and teachers can also transmit college knowledge by walking students through admissions requirements and assisting with financial aid paperwork. College educated parents are more likely to expose their children to other forms of cultural capital, such as museums, musical performances, and travel experiences (Ardoin, 2018; Perna, 2006). These cultural experiences may help students transition into the college environment, where exposure to these cultural experiences are valued (Ardoin, 2018; A. Stone, 2017).

On the other hand, parents who have not attended college cannot draw from their own experiences to guide their children through the college process (Ardoin, 2018; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Perna, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Terenzini et al., 1996). Limited financial resources and time can limit parents' ability to help their children develop cultural capital through other experiences (Ardoin, 2018; Engle, 2007; McDonough, Gildersleeve & Jarsky, 2010; Perna, 2006). Students can build cultural capital through other sources, such as their community or school, but they too are limited by the resources available (Ardoin, 2018, McDonough, 2005). For example, low-income schools are more likely to have higher student-to-counselor ratios, limiting the amount of time a school counselor can devote to students who are navigating the college process (Ardoin, 2018; Engle, 2007; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016b; Horn & Nunez, 2000; McDonough, 2005). Gagnon and Mattingly (2016b) found that low-income schools had an average counselor to student ratio of 435:1, far above the 250:1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. Therefore, the student populations that have the highest need for assistance in the college process—low-income, students of color, and first-gen students—often have the least access (Ardoin, 2018; Dennis et al., 2005; Engle, 2007; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016b; McDonough, 2005). Cultural capital becomes a self-perpetuating cycle: high cultural capital helps students gain access to college, and once admitted to college, one has more experiences to further expand their cultural and social capital.

**Social capital.** Social capital can also include students' access to information regarding the college application process through social networks (Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005). The parents of first-gen students do not have the first-hand knowledge of attending a four-year institution, and instead may rely on a larger social network to gain

access to information regarding college (Engle, 2007; Perna, 2006). Parental involvement in their children's education can strongly influence students' college going-behavior (Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005). Parental involvement reflects the relationships between parent and child, as well as the relationships between parents and school officials (Perna & Titus, 2005). Perna and Titus (2005) found that the more parents discussed education-related topics with their child, the more likely their child was to enroll in 2- or 4-year college. Likewise, parents increased contact with school officials about volunteering or academics was associated with students' increased college-going (Perna & Titus, 2005). Increased contact between the parents and school officials about academic-related topics allowed students to gain access to college knowledge through school and community networks, such as teachers, schools counselors, and other parents (Perna & Titus, 2005). Yet Perna and Titus (2005) also found that Black and Hispanic families had access to lower levels of social capital that promoted college enrollment because their children were more likely to be concentrated in schools with other families that had lower levels of family income, parental education, and course rigor. The findings of the study suggest that the lower levels of social capital in communities of color may contribute, in part, to the lower college-going behavior of students of color (Perna & Titus, 2005). Social capital may also influence student success once they enroll in college, by providing students access to opportunities like internships and jobs.

**First-gen students' enrollment patterns.** Income level and first-generation status significantly shape one's ability to gain access to and graduate from college. Low-income and first-gen students are significantly underrepresented on college campuses (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Pascarella et al, 2004; Redford et al., 2017; Terenzini et al., 2001). For instance, about 87% of students whose parents have earned a college degree

choose to enroll in postsecondary education immediately after high school compared to 47% of first-gen students (Engle, 2007). Disparities become more pronounced when researchers examined differences between students whose parents had attained some college but not attained bachelor's degrees, and students whose parents had a high school diploma or less (Cataldi et al., 2018; Choy, 2001). Among students whose parents did not complete high school, 72% enrolled in postsecondary education, compared to 84% of students whose parents had completed some college, and 93% of students whose parents held a bachelor's degree or higher (Cataldi et al., 2018).

Students who are the first in their family to attend college also differ in the type of postsecondary institutions where they enroll and their enrollment level. First-gen students are more likely to enroll in public postsecondary institutions (76%) compared to their non-first-gen counterparts (72%) or private for-profit institutions (16% vs. 5%) (Redford et al., 2017). They are also less likely to attend highly selective institutions (Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Redford et al., 2017). Because first-gen students often lack financial support to pay for college, they are more likely to be enrolled part-time in college while working full-time (Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). Furthermore, first-gen students are more likely to be older, female, Black or Hispanic, and have dependent children—all factors that are independently associated with low college attainment and persistence rates (Engle, 2007; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Redford et al., 2017; Terenzini et al., 1996). Pascarella et al. (2004) found that extracurricular involvement had a higher positive impact on first-gen students' academic success and academic self-efficacy than did non-first-gen students. These findings suggest that although

first-gen students have barriers in college access and degree attainment, certain college behaviors and opportunities may bolster their persistence.

### **Background Characteristics of Rural Students**

Like first-generation college student, students from rural populations have unique demographic characteristics (e.g. race, SES), and family backgrounds (e.g. parental education levels) that mediate their education educational aspirations, access, and persistence in college. The characteristics of rural areas and the populations within them increase the likelihood that students from these regions are first-gen. The same breadth of research does not exist on rural students as on first-gen students but because of the parallels between the populations, one can draw on the literature on first-gen students to help frame the research on rural students' college access and persistence.

**Rural income.** The research on rural poverty rates is conflicting, with some studies finding that poverty levels and median income in rural areas are similar to those in the rest of the country (NCES, 2013; Showalter et al., 2017; USDA, 2017c), and others showing higher poverty rates in rural areas compared to the national average (Bauch, 2001; Byun et al., 2012c; Byun et al., 2015; Paasch & Swaim, 1998; Roscigno et al., 2006; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). The inconsistency in poverty rates may be due to several factors, including different definitions for determining rurality, and changes in the rural population over time. Despite these discrepancies, most research on rural populations reveals persistent and significantly higher levels of poverty in the American South (NCES, 2013; Showalter et. al, 2017; USDA, 2017c). NCES (2013) found that, nationally, rural children have lower poverty rates (19%) than those in cities (25%) or towns (21%), but that the largest proportion of rural children living in poverty were in the South.

Poverty, defined as an annual household income of \$24,600 or less for a family of four, disproportionately affects rural North Carolinians (USDA ERS, 2017b; NC Rural Center, 2016; Kennedy, 2017). An estimated 15.4% of North Carolinians live in poverty, or one in every seven residents (Kennedy, 2017). Poverty disproportionately affects communities of color, including Latinx (27.3%), American Indian (25.5%), and African American (23.5%) communities, and children (21.7%). This is important given that North Carolina has become younger and more racially diverse in the last 30 years--the population of young people of color has increased from 30.7% in 1980 to 45.8% in 2014 (Kennedy, 2017, p.2). Poverty is more prevalent among rural populations in the state. Kennedy (2017) reports: "Out of the state's 100 counties in 2014, the 20 highest county-level poverty rates were all in rural counties" (p.3). Approximately 19.2% of rural North Carolinians were living in poverty as compared to 15.2% of those in urban counties (Kennedy, 2017). Similarly, the N.C. Rural Center (2016) found that nearly one-third of rural North Carolinians lived in poverty or just above it. Therefore, low-income students in North Carolina were more likely to be rural and/or students of color compared to state and national averages.

As is the case with first-gen students, parental income and education levels are predictive of rural students' college enrollment (Byun et al, 2012b; Howley et al, 2014). In their examination of rural students in Pennsylvania, Howley et al. (2014) found that rural schools with higher proportions of low SES students and students of color had lower college enrollment and persistence rates than average rural schools. Parental educational attainment is also a strong predictor of rural students' college enrollment (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004; Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010). A similar pattern emerges in rural North Carolina, which has higher poverty rates (19.2% compared to state average of 15.4%) and lower four-

year degree attainment rates (18.1% compared to state average of 29.0%) than the state (Kennedy, 2017; USDA ERS, 2017b). Based on this pattern, one can expect that rural North Carolina students will likely face additional challenges in postsecondary enrollment and persistence compared to their nonrural counterparts.

**Rural college enrollment patterns.** Rural student, like first-gen students, are more likely to delay enrollment after high school graduation and less likely to remain continuously enrolled compared to urban students (Byun et al., 2015). Rural students are also significantly less likely to attend highly selective and selective colleges than their urban and suburban counterparts (Byun et al., 2015; Prins & Kassab, 2017). Instead, rural students more often enroll in public and less selective institutions than do their urban and suburban peers (Burke et al., 2015; Gibbs, 1998; Hu, 2003; Prins & Kassab, 2017). The similar enrollment patterns between first-gen and rural students are not surprising given that a large percentage of rural students are also first-gen. Yet when researchers controlled for SES and curriculum intensity, many of the differences in college enrollment patterns and degree attainment disappeared (Byun et al., 2012c; Byun et al., 2015). These findings suggest that rural students have similar resources in college attainment as nonrural students, such as academic achievement and motivation, but that differences in SES negatively affect their college access and attainment. Overall, research suggests that rural students are more likely than nonrural students to undermatch or enroll in institutions that are less selective than are those they are academically eligible to attend (Burke et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2015).

**Cultural and social capital of rural students.** Rural students' social and culture capital shapes their level of college knowledge, and their ability to navigate the culture of the college campus. It is important to note that rural students have high levels of social capital

within their rural communities, but these social connections are often not as highly valued when students transition to college (Ardoin, 2018; Means et al., 2016). Rural students often lack the college knowledge that aids them in applying to college and successfully navigating a college campus (Ardoin, 2018; Chenowith & Galliher, 2004). In her study on college aspirations among rural, first-generation college students, Ardoin (2018) found that rural students were less able to recognize and define college jargon terms. Terms included general college jargon (e.g. faculty, PWI, community college), academic jargon (e.g. ACT/SAT, AP, full-time/part-time), financial jargon (e.g. FAFSA, tuition, grants), and degree jargon (e.g. B.A., B.S., doctoral). Rural students are often first-gen, which means that their parents do not have the first-hand experience to decode college jargon (Ardoin, 2018; Means et al., 2016). These students are more likely to rely on school staff, such as school counselors, for college counseling guidance (Ardoin, 2018; Means et al., 2016). However, rural schools have fewer school counselors to assist students in the college application process, and these counselors are often only familiar with the colleges in the immediate area (Ardoin, 2018; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016b; McDonough, 2005; McDonough et al., 2010). As a result, rural students are often ill-informed about their postsecondary options and the process for pursuing college (Ardoin, 2018; Chenowith & Galliher, 2004; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; McDonough et al., 2010; Means et al., 2016).

Lower levels of college-related cultural and social capital can impact rural students' ability to persist once they arrive on a college campus (Ganss, 2015; C. C. Stone, 2014). The "culture shock" of college experienced by many rural, first-gen students in their first year reflects how the cultural knowledge and social connections rural students obtain in their rural communities are not always transferrable to the culture valued on their college campus

(Ganss, 2016; Schultz, 2004; C. C. Stone, 2014). College is often the first-time rural students experienced different forms of ethnic, religious, and political diversity (Dees, 2006; Ganss, 2016). Rural students reported enjoying the exposure to diversity, but that it could also be overwhelming in addition to the academic and social demands of the college environment (Ganss, 2016). Rural college students report struggling with the academic and professional expectations of college and have difficulty navigating college culture (Ganss, 2016; Schultz, 2004; C. C. Stone, 2014).

### **Academic Background of Rural Students**

In the 2015–2016 academic year, approximately one in four public schools were in rural areas (Showalter et al., 2017). Rural school districts enrolled about 18.7% of all students enrolled in public school, or approximately 8.9 million students (Showalter et al., 2017). Rural students are different from nonrural students in the academic resources and preparation available to them prior to enrolling in college. These resources also reflect the prevalence of first-generation college student status in rural populations.

**School resources.** Rural schools tend to be smaller and have low teacher-student ratios (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Provasnik et al., 2007). They are also less likely to have school counselors, although those that do have a school counselor are usually at the recommended ratio of 250:1 (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Although rural schools have lower teacher-student ratios, they also have lower per pupil expenditures (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Roscigno et al., 2006; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). For instance, Roscigno et al. (2006) found that rural and inner-city students were equally likely to attend low-income schools, but that rural schools allocated approximately \$600 less per pupil annually than inner city schools. Lower property taxes and population density can create lower tax bases to

support rural public school districts (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). As public schools receive nearly 45% of their revenue from local sources, the economic resources of the local community have a significant impact on school resources (McFarland et al., 2017). Higher operation costs of rural schools due to factors such as increased cost of busing and more challenging teacher recruitment can also negatively impact the financial resources of rural schools (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2017; Sipple & Brent, 2008). In the 2015–2016 academic year, states allocated an average of 17% of their education funds to rural school districts (Showalter et al., 2017).

Areas of rural America still have limited access to broadband internet compared to urban and suburban areas (ECS, 2017; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). The U.S. Department of Commerce (2016) found that 75% of urban residents reported using the internet versus only 69% of rural residents. This gap widened as education level and income level decreased; for instance, 66% of rural residents in the lowest income quintile reported using internet versus 70% of urban residents in the same income bracket (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). In North Carolina, all K-12 schools and community colleges have access to high-speed internet but are limited in their wireless access and students' access to broadband internet at home (N.C. Rural Center, 2016). Limited access to broadband internet creates barriers to academic achievement among rural students, such as limiting their ability to complete homework assignments that require internet access outside of school hours (Woodie, 2018). The lack of internet access in rural areas can also create transitional barriers for rural students who enroll in colleges that heavily utilize educational technology platforms (ECS, 2017).

On the other hand, rural schools have strong bonds with the community they serve (Bauch, 2001; Flora et al., 2016; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Sipple & Brent, 2008; Tieken, 2014). Rural schools often serve as social and cultural hub of the community, and are responsible for transmitting the cultural norms, values, and history of a community onto the next generation (Flora et al., 2016; Lyson, 2002; Tieken, 2014). Small class sizes in rural schools allow students to develop strong relationships with their teachers (Bauch, 2001; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). Rural teachers tend to have more teaching experience than do urban teachers (Provasnik et al., 2007). Teachers in rural schools report being more satisfied with their teaching conditions than urban teachers despite lower pay and benefits (Provasnik et al., 2007). Compared to urban schools, rural schools also report fewer incidents of behavioral issues among students, which may be due to the close, personal relationships rural students develop with their teachers (Flora et al., 2016; Provasnik et al., 2007). In fact, teachers in rural schools may play an important role in supporting college-bound students. Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012a) examined rural schools across the US and found that teachers' educational expectations for students were positively related to students' educational aspirations, even after holding background characteristics constant.

**Academic preparation.** Like their first-generation counterparts, rural students are less academically prepared than their nonrural peers (Ardoin, 2018; Byun et al., 2012b; Byun, 2012c; ECS, 2017; C. C. Stone, 2014). Academic preparation is not only a reflection of individual student characteristics but also of community resources. Fewer financial resources and students can suppress the breadth and depth of coursework that rural schools can provide, including AP and IB courses (Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008). Rural students are, on average,

significantly less likely than suburban and urban students to have access to academically rigorous coursework in high school (Byun et al., 2012c). The gap in access to AP coursework between rural and urban schools has narrowed in the past 15 years, but rural students still have substantially lower access to AP coursework (73%) than their urban (92%) and suburban (95%) counterparts (ECS, 2017). Gagno and Mattingly (2016a) found that rural schools districts were significantly less likely to offer any AP courses compared to school districts in towns, suburban and urban areas. Researchers attributed this to small class sizes, and lack of teacher preparation for AP coursework (Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a)

Some research also suggests that rural students have lower standardized test scores on college entrance exams (as opposed to K-12 state tests) and AP exams than their suburban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012c; ECS, 2017). For instance, Gagno and Mattingly (2016a) found that even when rural school districts did offer AP coursework, the enrollment and success rates of rural students in those schools was still significantly behind those of students from towns, suburban, and urban areas, and that this pattern held even after controlling for SES. Current research finds that rural students perform equally well on standardized state tests as nonrural students (Showalter et al., 2017) and graduate from high school at similar rates to nonrural students (NCES, 2013), suggesting an improvement in educational outcomes for rural students compared to older studies that show higher dropout rates for rural students (Paasch & Swaim, 1998). The discrepancies in test performance between state standardized tests and college prep/AP exams for rural students may be less of an indication of rural students' academic abilities and instead, a reflection of how school size and resources impact students' test performance. Rural secondary schools may allocate their limited resources to prepare all students for taking the mandatory state tests, but not have the

resources to individually prepare the significantly smaller pool of students preparing for college entrance and AP exams.

Despite maintaining strong grades in their high school, rural students often encounter academic challenges in college (Ganss, 2016; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Schultz, 2004). Students reported being challenged by some of the noncognitive aspects of the college classroom, such as the large class sizes and lack of a personal relationship with one's professor (Ganss, 2016; Schultz, 2004; C. C. Stone, 2014). Dunstan (2013) found that the stigmatized dialects of Appalachian students created an additional barrier to their academic performance; students reported being less likely to speak up in class because they feared that their dialects would somehow mark them as less intelligent in the eyes of their faculty and peers. Factors beyond simply mastering the college curriculum influence rural college students' academic success.

**Extracurricular involvement and community resources.** The collectivist nature of southern rural culture explains, in part, the high degree of extracurricular and community involvement of rural students in their home communities (Bajema et al., 2002; Bauch, 2001; Irvin et al., 2010; Sipple & Brent, 2008). Due to their small size, rural schools often require students to be involved in multiple extracurricular activities and assume leadership roles within those organizations (Schonert et al., 1991). Schools in rural areas also operate as the center of the community (Irvin et al., 2010).

In their study of rural and nonrural students' postsecondary attainment, Byun et al. (2012c) concluded that rural students had more community resources than urban and suburban students did, and that these resources were predictive of bachelor's degree attainment, even after controlling for background characteristics like SES. Rural students

were more likely to be involved in religious services, considered to be a form of extracurricular activity, than their nonrural peers (Bauch, 2001; Byun et al., 2012c; Irvin et al., 2010; A. Stone, 2018), and this involvement was found to be a significant predictor of college enrollment among rural youth (Byun et al., 2012c). Among low-income Black students in the Deep South, church involvement was positively correlated with academic achievement (Irvin et al., 2010). Researchers theorized that involvement in religious activities served as an additional source of emotional support for youth that have a buffering effect against the negative impacts of poverty (Irvin et al., 2010). Other research indicates that teachers and administrators in rural schools utilize their strong ties in the community to engage students and parents in postsecondary preparation (Alleman & Holly, 2014). Rural parents are more likely to communicate with and know the parents of their child's friends than urban and suburban parents (Byun et al., 2012a). These findings support that rural students may have access to different resources, specifically community resources, than their nonrural counterparts, and that these resources benefit them in their pursuit of postsecondary education.

### **Goal Orientation**

Students' educational aspirations and motivations play an important role in their ability to persist and graduate from college (Ganss, 2016; Ishitani, 2006; Tinto 1975, 1993). Motivation, goals, and attitudes are crucial components in several theories of student retention, including Student Integration Theory (Tinto, 1993) and the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980, 1982). In Tinto's model, a student's ability and motivation interact with institutional academic and social characteristics to shape the student's intent to persist in college. Alternatively, Bean's model theorizes that students' attitudes impact their behaviors,

and that these attitudes are influenced by external factors, such as family support and financial attitudes (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). Similarly, Guiffrida (2006) integrates components of self-determination theory into student persistence, including the extent to which a student is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to attend college. Research suggests that students' aspirations and motivations to attend college affect their enrollment in postsecondary education, the type of institution they attend, and whether they persist in college.

The research regarding the educational aspirations of rural youth is mixed. On one hand, there is research that suggests rural students are less likely to aspire to postsecondary education (Hu, 2003; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). Hu (2003) found that rural students were more likely to aspire to only receive a high school education (16.0% rural compared to 11% of urban students and 10.6% of suburban students) and less likely to aspire to four-year college (28.2% of rural youth compared to 30.8% of urban students and 32.9% of suburban students) or graduate school (22% rural students compared to 31.1% of urban students and 27.3% of suburban students). Other studies have found that parents of rural students espouse lower educational aspirations for their children (Byun et al., 2012c; Ishitani, 2006). Byun et al. (2012c) found that only 70% of rural parents expected their students to obtain a bachelor's degree as opposed to 80% of suburban parents and 84% of urban parents. Educational aspirations can have a powerful impact on college persistence, as students who expect not to graduate are more likely to drop out in their first year (Ishitani, 2006).

Students' educational aspirations are shaped by the attitudes of their families and communities. Rural communities can send conflicting messages to their youth about the values they place on postsecondary education, caught between the desire to provide more

opportunities for their youth through education while also recognizing that the pursuit of higher education can create physical and psychological barriers that between young people and their communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Flora et al., 2016; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Students and community members recognize that when rural students leave the community to attend college they often do not return, contributing to outmigration known as “brain drain” (Ardoin, 2018; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Domina, 2006; Flora et al., 2016). Flora et al. (2016) argues that “...in Appalachia, on Native American reservations, and in the Mississippi Delta as well as in many inner-city neighborhood, educational aspirations separate young people from their community and their parents” (p. 43). On the other hand, many rural communities value education and instill this value in their youth (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Schonert et al, 1991; A. Stone, 2018). Rural communities in the Midwest have historically placed a high value on education attainment and strongly encourage students to pursue postsecondary education, even though they realize this may mean they do not return to the community (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Schonert et al., 1991). Other studies have found that rural students pursuing higher education cite their families as a source of encouragement in pursuing higher education (Means et al., 2015; Means, 2019; A. Stone, 2018). Rural students often recognize the sacrifices their parents made to help them attend college are motivated to attend college as a way of bringing pride to their families and rural communities (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Means et al., 2015; Means, 2019; A. Stone, 2018)

The differences in rural-nonrural aspirations may be attributed to student characteristics and environmental factors. Molefe, Burke, Collins, Sparks, and Hoyer (2017) and Haller and Virkler (1993) attributed the bulk of variation in educational attainment aspirations between rural and nonrural students to SES. Moreover, Haller and Virkler (1993)

argued that rural students have exposure to a narrower range of occupations in their areas and limited exposure to professional and technical jobs compared to urban students, which may limit the types of occupations they aspire to as children. Research suggests that rural students are more likely to pursue careers in agriculture, education, management, and health science, while urban students are more likely to pursue degrees in the arts, science, social sciences, and business (Bajema et al., 2002; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). Findings of lower educational aspirations among rural youth may be because traditionally high school graduates could support themselves financially through jobs in farming, mining, or lumber (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017).

Other studies have found little to no difference in the educational aspirations of students from rural areas. In their national study on rural students, Molefe et al. (2017) found that 90% of both rural and nonrural high school sophomores expected to attend college. There is also evidence that the educational aspirations of rural youth are increasing in recent decades: Legutko (2008) found that from 1995 to 2005 the number of rural youths in Pennsylvania who planned to attend college increased by 11%. These findings suggest that rural students are still aspiring to attend postsecondary education, although the level and selectivity of postsecondary education they aspire to is unclear.

The ambiguity surrounding the college aspirations of rural youth may also be attributed to the conflicting values rural students experience as they form their education and career aspirations. Research on rural college students consistently describes the “push-pull” of forces on rural students in their pursuit of and progression through college. Rural students are motivated by internal and external forces to attend college away from home to pursue their education and career aspirations (Ganss, 2016; Hlinka, et al., 2015; Maltzan, 2006;

Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019). Rural students describe how parents and school personnel in high school encouraged them to attend college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Ganss, 2016; Means et al., 2016; Means 2019; A. Stone, 2018). In some cases, rural students cite that they are pursuing higher education to fulfill the dreams of their families and communities (Means, 2019; A. Stone, 2018). Means (2019) explains, "...students across two focus groups described how actualizing their aspirations would honor the significant work and sacrifices of their family members, which helped motivate them to achieve their goals" (p. 8). Other studies described how they experienced an internal drive to attend college to achieve their career and personal development goals (Ganss, 2016; Means et al., 2016). The opportunity to improve their economic opportunities motivated students to attend college because the job opportunities in their home communities were limited (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Demi et al., 2009; Ganss, 2016; Hlinka et al., 2015; Maltzan, 2006; Means et al., 2016). Some rural youth expressed motivation to attend college so that they could return home and improve their home communities (Hlinka et al, 2015; Wright, 2012).

Rural students often express strong connections to their rural communities (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Hlinka et al, 2015; Flora et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019; A. Stone, 2017; A. Stone, 2018). Rural students may worry about the need to move away from their home community and support network to attend college (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Other students described fear of losing their identity or becoming a different person when they attended college (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). When students do come back to the community, they may be perceived as behaving superior to their former communities, preventing them from being able to fully reintegrate into the community (Ardoin, 2018; Carr & Keflas, 2009; Flora et al., 2016;

Hlinka et al., 2015; O'Quinn, 1999). Others chose not to attend college because of family obligations, such as marriage or children (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Rural community college students expressed experiencing a similar pull of family responsibilities, such as caring for sick relatives (Hlinka et al., 2015). Findings underscore the importance of home community to rural students and the tension rural students experience between home and college environments when pursuing postsecondary education.

### **External Commitments: Finances**

A criticism of Tinto's (1975) original model is that it failed to consider how external factors like financial concerns can influence a student's commitment to college (Cabrera et al., 1992b; Cabrera et al., 1993; Guiffrida, 2006; Tierney, 1999). Later models by Tinto (1993) include external factors in the persistence model. Research on first-gen, students of color, and rural students has highlighted the prevalence of these factors in students' college persistence.

The rising cost of college and the decreasing purchasing power of the Pell Grant have made it increasingly more challenging for students from low-income backgrounds to pay for college. Financial aid is one mechanism by which low-income students gain access to and persist in higher education, but not all forms of financial aid promote persistence equally (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016). Grants are one form of financial aid that seem to promote persistence among low-income students (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Mayhew et al., 2016). In her longitudinal study on financial aid, Goldrick-Rab (2016) found that students who earned need-based scholarships outperformed peers who did not receive the scholarship in earning higher grades, completing more credits, and having higher retention rates. Similarly, Nora (1990) found that grants and work-study

had a significantly positive impact on credits earned, GPA, and degree completion among Hispanic community college students. Cabrera et al. (1992b) examined the impact of financial aid in the context of Tinto's model and found that financial aid had a significant total effect on persistence. Rural students who persisted in college were more likely to have received one or more types of financial aid than rural students who dropped out of college (Yan, 2002).

Students who do not obtain enough financial aid to cover the cost of college must find alternative ways of paying for college, one of which is increasing the number of hours worked at on-campus or off-campus jobs. First-gen students worked significantly more hours per week and were enrolled in significantly fewer credit hours than their peers who were not first-gen students (Pascarella et al., 2004). Researchers concluded that work commitments detracted from students' ability to be engaged in campus activities (Cabrera et al. 1992b; Pascarella et al., 2004). Ultimately, working off-campus appears to have a negative impact on student success and persistence among first-generation students (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella et al., 2004). Rural students are more likely to have higher costs associated with transportation due to relocation to college, costs associated with returning home for family obligations, and commuting (Prins & Kassab, 2017). Although much research does not exist regarding financial aid among rural students, the prevalence of first-gen and low-income status among rural students suggests that these findings could apply to them as well.

### **Academic, Social, and Home Connections**

The model of student departure proposed by Tinto (1993) theorizes that a student departure is the result of the interaction between student characteristics and goals, and the

college environment. The extent to which students become academically and socially integrated into the academic and social realms of college influences their intent to persist in college. Formal and informal means of becoming integrated with the academic and social systems. Students are academically integrated by college performance (formal) and their interaction with faculty and staff outside the classroom (informal) exist. Students formally integrate socially through their involvement in extracurricular activities and informally through interaction with peer groups (Tinto, 1993). Similarly, other researchers have argued that students' engagement with the college environment is the result of the amount of time and energy the student commits to their academic and social systems (Astin, 1985; Kuh et al., 2011) and the institution's commitment of resources to providing structures that allow students to learn and engage (Kuh et al., 2011). Thus, student engagement is dependent upon both student and institutional efforts. Guiffrida (2006) modified Tinto's concept of *integration* to *connection* to recognize that students do not necessarily need to disassociate from their home communities to become connected with the college community. Few studies have examined the experiences and behaviors of rural college students in the college environment. Therefore, I draw on the broader scope of literature to understand factors that may contribute to rural college students' level of connection with the college environment.

**College academic system.** Tinto's model of student departure theorizes that students connect with the academic systems in college in formal and informal ways. Formally, students' academic achievement (GPA) signals the degree to which they are academically integrated into the community. Students bolster GPA through their involvement in educationally purposeful activities, like studying (Kuh et al., 2008). Academic achievement in college, as measured by college GPA, is one of the strongest predictors of degree

attainment (Mayhew et al., 2016). While rural students come to college with limited academic preparation compared to their nonrural peers, they are more likely to earn higher first-year GPAs than their suburban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012b).

According to Tinto's (1993) model, student interaction with faculty, staff, and peers outside the classroom constitute their informal academic connection to college. Unlike the strong evidence on the predicative power of GPA with college student persistence, the research on the relationship of faculty and staff connection to student persistence is less conclusive (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton & Lien, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Milem & Berger, 1997). Some research supports that student connection with faculty and staff is positively correlated with psychological constructs of connection with the college environment, such as students' perceptions of institutional support and sense of belonging. Milem and Berger (1997) incorporated Astin's behavioral constructs of student involvement into Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure to test whether involvement behavior would influence students' academic and social integration on a college campus. Milem and Berger (1997) found that involvement with faculty was significantly and positively related to students' perception of institutional support. Furthermore, informal involvement with faculty and peers in the fall semester of students' first year was predictive of involvement in the spring semester (Milem & Berger, 1997). These findings suggest that early student involvement in the college environment is predictive of the perception of institutional support and future engagement. The study also emphasized the importance of faculty involvement for student connection to the college environment.

Connection with faculty and staff impacts students' sense of belonging on campus, especially among students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hausmann et al., 2007; Milem & Berger, 1997). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students who frequently engaged in informal academic integration behaviors, such as discussing course content outside the classroom with their peers, tutoring other students, and talking with faculty outside the classroom were significantly more likely to report a sense of belonging on campus. Similarly, Hausmann et al. (2007) found that students with higher levels of academic integration and peer support were more likely to have a sense of belonging at college. However, low-income and students of color have a lower sense of belonging on college campuses and perceive campus climate as less welcoming (Soria & Bultman, 2014).

Fewer studies have examined the direct impact of students' contact time with student affairs professionals on student persistence, but findings suggest that support services in general can have a positive impact on persistence. In a national evaluation of TRIO's Student Support Services (SSS), Chaney (2010) found that the services provided, including academic advising, workshops, and tutoring demonstrated a modest increase in college retention and degree completion among the first-generation and low-income students that SSS serves. The greatest effects on those served were seen in the first year. Swecker, Fifolt, and Serby (2013) studied the effects of academic advising on first-gen students and found that a significant positive relationship exists between the number of meetings students had with their academic advisor and their persistence. In fact, for every meeting that students had with their advisors, their odds of being retained increased by 13% (Swecker et al., 2013). Even studies on institutional expenditures support the idea that better resources for instructional and academic support services improve student persistence (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006). More

research is needed to explore whether contact with nonacademic student affairs professionals, not just involvement in activities outside the classroom, impacts student persistence, particularly among rural student populations.

**College social system.** Students' involvement in extracurricular activities on campus is an important predictor of their connection to the college environment and intent to persist (Astin, 1985; Kuh et al., 2008). As previously stated, Kuh et al. (2008) found that higher levels of student engagement, including involvement in extracurricular activities, bolstered first-year grades. The impact of student engagement may be even more powerful for students of color as well as for academically underprepared students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Fischer, 2007; Kuh et al., 2008). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students who were members of religious organizations or Greek life were significantly more likely to report a sense of belonging on campus than nonmembers. Similarly, Fischer (2007) found that students of color that had higher levels of involvement in formal social activities like extracurricular activities were more satisfied with their college experience and significantly less likely to leave compared to White students.

In high school, rural students often engage heavily in extracurricular activities and demonstrate strong involvement in their home communities (Bajema et al., 2002; Irvin et al., 2012; Sipple & Brent, 2008). Some research suggests that this level of involvement may continue into rural students' college careers (Schonert et al., 1991; C. C. Stone, 2014). In their study of rural Iowa college students, Schonert et al. (1991) found that overall, rural students were significantly more likely to participate in a great number and breadth of extracurricular activities at college than nonrural students. Rural college students in C. C. Stone's (2014) study reported that they had little difficulty integrating socially into the

college environment. Despite their transition from their hometowns, where they knew everyone, to college, where they knew few people, rural students could make strong social connections with others at college (C. C. Stone, 2014).

Other studies have found that rural students reported having difficulty integrating socially into college life. Rural students say they feel like outsiders in the college environment because of their rural and first-gen student identity, and they struggled to make new friends (Ganss, 2016; Schultz, 2004). Although these students were highly involved in extracurricular activities in high school, they were overwhelmed by the sheer number of options for extracurricular activities at college, which ultimately discouraged them from getting involved (Ganss, 2016). External factors, like finances, may also detract from rural students' ability to become academically and socially engaged in campus life. First-gen and low-income students are more likely to work longer hours during the week, to live off campus, and to take fewer credit hours, all of which contribute to their lower levels of extracurricular involvement (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Engle, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Sora & Bultman, 2014). However, extracurricular involvement has a stronger positive impact on the critical thinking skills, degree plans, and academic efficacy of first-gens than on their peers who are not first-gens (Pascarella et al., 2004). These findings suggest that involvement in the social systems of college are important for rural students, especially those from first-gen backgrounds, but that rural students may experience financial and psychological barriers to involvement.

**Home social system.** Research on students of color and rural youth have demonstrated the importance of family connection in improving college persistence. Rural students demonstrate a strong connection to their families and communities (Bryan &

Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006; A. Stone, 2018). For instance, rural students in Bryan and Simmons (2009) study reported maintaining daily communication with their families and returning home regularly to visit, especially in the early years of college. Family did not only mean immediate family members, but also included extended family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins (Means, 2019; A. Stone, 2018). Dees (2006) and Maltzan (2006) found that rural students who successfully persisted in college did not disassociate from their home communities, but instead found a balance between maintaining connection to their hometown and being involved in campus life. Community ties were especially important among rural students of color. In his study on Black and Latinx youth, Means (2019) found that family and school communities were instrumental sources of encouragement for youth to pursue higher education. Similarly, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Latinx students who were involved with religious organizations and social-community groups outside the college community had a stronger sense of belonging on campus than those who were not involved. More research is needed to understand how rural students, especially rural students of color, utilize their home social systems to successfully persist in college.

### **College Persistence and Degree Attainment**

The degree to which students academically and socially connect with the college environment shapes their commitment to the institution and ultimately impacts their intent to persist and graduate from college. Some research indicates that rural students persist and graduate from college at similar rates to their nonrural counterparts (Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Yoder, 2007). For instance, Yoder (2007) found that while rural students were admitted to a large land-grant institution at lower levels, they graduated at similar rates to urban and suburban students. Likewise, Howley et al. (2014) found that rural students from

Pennsylvania had lower college enrollment rates than their nonrural peers, but that their persistence rates were like those of students from suburban and town regions and higher than urban student rates. These findings suggest that despite encountering challenges to get to college, many rural students find ways to succeed once they are enrolled.

Alternatively, Pierson and Hanson (2015) found that rural students in Oregon were less likely to matriculate (78%) to their second year than nonrural students (83%), and that this pattern held regardless of institution type. In fact, rural community college students who passed entry-level math and English courses were not more likely to persist than those who did not, implying that factors beyond academic performance affected their persistence (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). Financial aid was positively correlated with rural student persistence (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). This research aligns with the findings of Byun et al. (2012c), who found that the lower rates of college enrollment and degree attainment among rural youth were primarily due to lower SES. Rural college students from Iowa who failed to persist in college also cited financial constraints and career indecision as their reason for withdrawal rather than academic difficulties (Schonert et al., 1991). These findings align with the literature on student attrition, which finds that academic failure only accounts for 15–25% of student dropouts (Tinto, 1993). Together, these findings suggest that external factors beyond academic preparation affect persistence of rural college students.

The discrepancies in findings regarding rural college student persistence speaks to the complicated interaction of factors that affect persistence. Individually, factors like students' background characteristics (race, SES, gender), institutional type, or institutional support from faculty and staff all contribute differently to student persistence. Collectively, these factors converge to affect persistence in ways that are difficult to fully understand.

Differences in rural students' college outcomes across studies are likely due to slight differences across student populations and institutions that affect persistence. The current study seeks to explore the experiences of rural college students that influence their persistence within the context of one four-year land-grant institution in the American South.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Some of the seminal retention models used in higher education research today, including Tinto's (1993) student departure theory, originated in the 1960s and 70s. Researchers at that time postulated that student retention was not merely the result of student characteristics but also of students' interactions with the college environment and the outside world. As the student population and institutions in higher education have become more diverse and researchers have learned more about the factors that influence student retention, they have adjusted older models to better explain retention in today's student population. Guiffrida's (2006) modified model of Tinto's (1993) student departure theory uses a cultural lens to better explain college persistence among a broader student population. The current study will use Guiffrida's (2006) model to explore rural students' college experiences.

### **Persistence Research**

Researchers have examined persistence in higher education since the early twentieth century, but most empirically tested theories were developed later in the century beginning in the 1960s (Berger, Ramírez & Lyons, 2012). The concepts of *retention* and *persistence* are mistakenly used by both educational researchers and practitioners as analogous concepts, but *retention* is generally understood as an organizational phenomenon whereas *persistence* considers students' progress towards an educational goal as a student-centric phenomenon (Reason, 2009). Models of student attrition are sometimes framed *retention* models, whereas

they can also be viewed as persistence models. Considering the focus of my study, I will describe these models in terms of student persistence.

### **Historical Perspective on Student Retention**

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, higher education institutions were not overly concerned with student persistence (Berger et al., 2012). During the nineteenth century, higher education was only available to select groups of individuals (primarily White, land-owning males), and degree completion, while admirable, was not required in many professions (Berger et al., 2012). As the nineteenth century progressed, a steady expansion and democratization of higher education occurred mainly through policy changes such as the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which established the development of land-grant institutions. Greater enrollment led to a larger emphasis on student life in addition to academic experiences and an increased focus on degree completion. John McNeely completed one of the first studies of “student mortality” in the 1930s, examining attrition rates, time to degree, impact of institutional and student factors on attrition, and reasons for departure among students across 60 different institutions (Berger et al., 2012; Morrison & Silverman, 2012). Enrollment in higher education continued to expand under the GI Bill, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, resulting in a shift in focus from enrollment to retention and degree completion (Berger et al., 2012). These early theories used a psychological lens to examine how individual characteristics and behavior influenced persistence (Berger et al., 2012).

Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an increased understanding occurred regarding how the interaction between student characteristics and the campus environment, rather than student characteristics alone, shaped student persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Berger

et al., 2012). William Spady's (1971) theory was one of the first models to use this interactionist perspective, incorporate sociological concepts, and draw from empirical research to develop a conceptual framework for student persistence. Alexander Astin (1977, 1985), David Kamens (1971), Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993), and John Bean (1980, 1982) similarly draw from sociological perspectives and synthesized empirical research to create their persistence models (Aljohani, 2016; Berger et al., 2012; Metz, 2004; Morrison & Silverman, 2012).

### **Tinto's Model of Student Departure**

Tinto's (1975; 1993) model of student departure is one of the most well-known and frequently studied theories of student persistence in higher education. While Tinto's (1975) model has changed over time, it has retained many of its core dimensions (see Figure 1). Tinto's (1975) original model incorporates the following components: a) pre-college characteristics; b) students' aspirations and institutional goals; c) institutional experiences; d) academic and social integration; e) goals and commitments (intentions and external commitments); and f) outcomes (Metz, 2004; Tinto, 1975). The model theorized that student dropout behavior is dependent upon the interaction between students' individual characteristics and the college's characteristics. Students enroll in college with different individual background characteristics (e.g. gender, race), pre-college experiences (e.g. academic achievement), and educational goals (e.g. educational aspirations, motivations). These background characteristics and goals influence a student's integration into the academic and social systems of an institution, which, in turn, affects student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tierney, 1975, 1993).

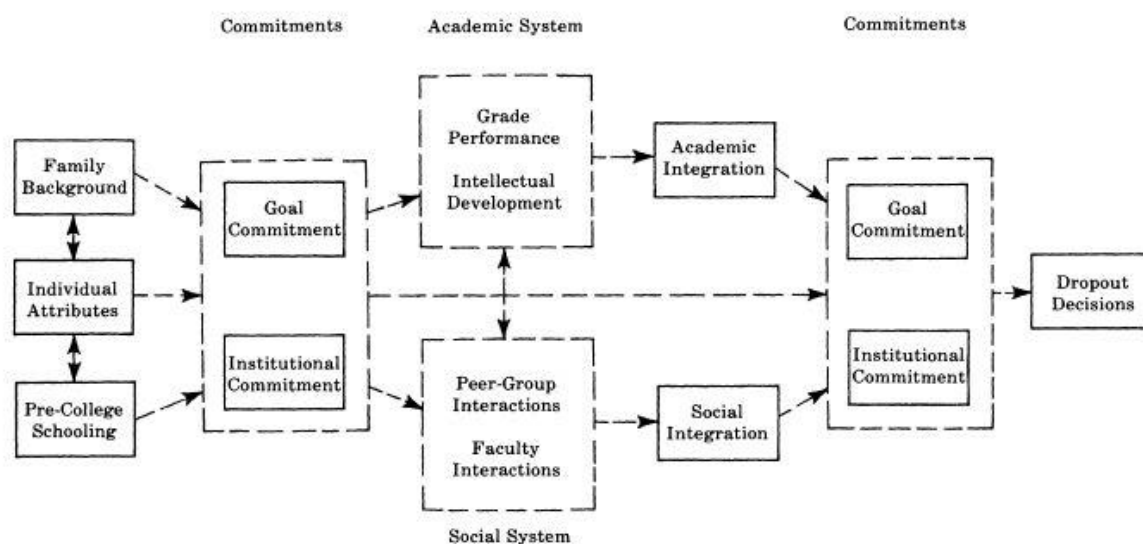


Figure 1. Tinto's (1975) Model of Student Departure. Adapted from "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," by V. Tinto, 1975, *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), p. 95. Copyright 1975 by American Educational Research Association.

Tinto drew from Durkheim's (1953) suicide theory to develop his concept of integration. In Durkheim's theory, one reason that an individual chooses to commit suicide is because he or she fails to become integrated into the community, particularly a new environment (Metz, 2004). Similarly, Tinto theorized that students voluntarily withdraw from higher education when they fail to become integrated into the academic and social systems of an institution. In other words, students persist in college to the extent that they perceive they have integrated academically and socially. Tinto (1998) theorized that student dropout is more prevalent within the first year of college.

Tinto also used Van Gennepe's (1960) social anthropology writings about rites of passage in tribal societies to develop his concept of integration (Aljohani, 2016; Berger et al., 2012; Metz, 2004). Van Gennepe outlined three stages—separation, transition, and incorporation—to describe the cultural passage of groups (Tinto, 1988). Tinto used Van Gennepe's concept to describe the process through which new college students transition and become (or fail to become) integrated into the college environment (Aljohani, 2016). According to Tinto (1988), students must go through all three stages of separation, transition, and incorporation to successfully integrate into the college environment.

In the process of separation, students begin to disassociate themselves from the norms and behaviors of their home communities to a certain degree (Tinto, 1988; 1993). This process can be particularly stressful for students because they may need to reject the values of their families and home communities (Tinto, 1993). In the transition stage, students have separated themselves from the values of their home communities but have not yet fully adopted the norms and values of the college community (Tinto, 1988; 1993). Persistence in this stage often depends on individual coping skills and educational goals and commitments to education (Tinto, 1993). Transition can become more challenging depending upon the degree of difference between the values and norms of the home community compared to those of the college community (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1988, 1993) theorized that low-income students, students of color, and rural students may be more powerfully shaped by the wide gulf in cultures between home and college communities. Finally, incorporation involves the student adopting the norms and behaviors of the college setting (Tinto, 1988, 1993). Incorporation takes place primarily through social interaction with faculty, staff, and peers (Tinto, 1993). Through the process of separation, transition, and incorporation, students

become integrated academically and socially into the college community, although integration does not guarantee persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Students integrate into the academic and social systems of the college environment in a variety of ways (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration occurs formally through student academic performance, such as college grades, and informally through faculty and staff interactions (Morrison & Silverman, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Students can also integrate formally and informally into the social systems of an institution. Formal social integration includes student involvement in extracurricular activities, whereas informal social integration occurs through interaction with peer groups (Kuh et al., 2008; Milem & Berger, 1999; Morrison & Silverman, 2012; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's concepts of academic and social integration have been widely interpreted by educational researchers as they have empirically tested the model. The concepts of academic and social integration were originally conceptualized as psychological components but have been tested largely through behavioral measures; this distinction may contribute to the inconsistency in empirical support for Tinto's model (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000).

### **Critiques of Tinto's Model**

Despite the near-paradigmatic status of Tinto's theory of student departure, strong criticisms of the theory exist for the validity of its specific constructs and its applicability across different student populations. Museus (2014) addresses several of the major critiques of Tinto's model, including the cultural limitations of the model, the lack of empirical support for some of the constructs, and the overemphasis on the student's role in the

integration process. Furthermore, Museus (2014) argued the model underemphasized the importance of external and organizational factors on student persistence.

**Cultural limitations.** The cultural foundations critique addressed the process of integration in the model. Cultural criticisms of Tinto's (1975, 1993) model focus on how Tinto applied Van Gennep's anthropological concept of rites of passage to explain the process by which students transition from the culture of their home community and assimilate into college culture (Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999). In Van Gennep's theory, individuals integrate into a new culture through the processes of separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993). The separation phase in Tinto's model involves students detaching or distancing themselves from the culture of their home communities as they begin the process of assimilating into the norms and values of the college culture (Tinto, 1993). For students of color who attend PWIs, the process of separation and incorporation is more challenging because the cultural divide between the home culture and college culture is often larger than for White students (Museus, 2014; Tierney, 1999). Similarly, low-income and rural students report experiencing a large cultural divide between the culture in their home communities and the college community (Tinto, 1988). Navigating these cultural gulfs can make the already stressful experience of transitioning to college even more daunting.

In his modified model, Tinto (1993) argues that college is comprised of multiple subcultures rather than one dominant culture. Rather than integrating into a singular culture, students seek membership in subcultures that align with their values and norms. Yet even this concept of membership assumes that students have some level of separation from their home culture (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón et al., 2000). Critics of Tinto's theory have

recommended incorporating a cultural perspective to understand student departure (Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Kuh and Love (2000) argue that a cultural lens means viewing student attrition as a sociological phenomenon, not a psychological phenomenon solely based on the individual. This perspective also shifts the burden of responsibility to the institution, rather than solely placing departure decisions on the individual students (Kuh & Love, 2000).

Research indicates that racial and ethnic identity and a campus's racial climate are important factors in the intent to persist among students of color attending PWIs (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Museus, 2014; Rendón, et al., 2000). These findings, along with the modest support for the validity of Tinto's model for students of color and non-traditional students, have prompted researchers to suggest alternative mechanisms through which students from other cultures assimilate into college culture. Valentine's (1971) theory of biculturalism theorizes that students of color practice the values and norms of their native culture and those of the mainstream culture simultaneously (Rendón et al., 2000). Other researchers recommend replacing Tinto's concept of integration with "connection," because connection recognizes relatedness but does not necessitate abandoning connection with the home community (Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000). Students who are *connected* to the college environment could demonstrate engagement in that environment, such as through extracurricular involvement or peer group interaction, while still maintaining an emotional connection to their friends, family, and community at home.

Hurtado and Carter (1999) posited that one reason Tinto's model has shown inconsistent validity for the construct of social integration among students of color is that these students do not necessarily demonstrate high levels of involvement in mainstream

extracurricular opportunities at college. Instead of using behavioral indicators of involvement (as most researchers tend to do), Hurtado and Carter (1999) used the psychological construct of sense of belonging, defined as students' perceived attachment to a group. They found that involvement in specific activities—religious organizations and social-community organizations—contributed to sense of belonging among Latinx students. These activities also have an external component that allowed students to be involved in both the college culture and their home culture simultaneously. Hurtado and Carter's (1999) findings challenge Tinto's assumptions that all types of involvement are equally beneficial to integration, and that students' involvement necessitates their separation from the home community.

**Overemphasis on student role.** Another critique is that Tinto's model overemphasized the role of students in creating their success and does not place enough responsibility on the institution for creating an environment that contributes to success (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2014; Rendón et al., 2000). Tinto's (1987) assumption is that individuals, rather than the institution, are ultimately responsible for students' departure (Rendón et al., 2000). This assertion suggests that low-income students and students of color, who are less likely to persist, are at fault for less advantageous college outcomes (Museus, 2014). Academic and social integration is closely tied to Astin's (1985) concept of involvement, which is the mechanism through which students get involved in different aspects of college. Yet Tinto's original model frames involvement as the responsibility of the student rather than the institution. In his revised model, Tinto (1993) emphasizes the role of the institution in helping students become integrated, but the institution's role was not the emphasis of earlier models.

**Lack of external and organizational constructs.** Research on Tinto's model indicates the need to include environmental and organizational constructs. One such model is Bean's (1980, 1982) Student Attrition Theory. The Student Attrition Theory applies Price's (1977) organizational model of employee turnover to explain the process by which students depart higher education. Like Tinto's model, Bean's theory describes student attrition as a process that results from the interaction of students with the academic and social components of an institution (Morrison & Silverman, 2012). However, the Student Attrition Theory places greater emphasis on environmental and organizational factors that influence student persistence, including institutional quality, the practical value of an education, and financial attitudes (Bean 1980, 1982). A subsequent model of nontraditional student retention by Bean and Metzner (1985) includes psychological variables, such as satisfaction, family acceptance, and stress, and their impact on persistence (Metz, 2004).

Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992a) examined convergent and discriminant validity between Tinto's student departure theory and Bean's Student Attrition Model and determined the extent to which these theories could be combined. Researchers found that, overall, Tinto's model of student departure demonstrated more predictive validity than Bean's Student Attrition Model (70% of construct validated vs. 40%, respectively) (Cabrera et al., 1992a). Yet the Student Attrition Model accounted for more variance in intent to persist (60% vs. 36%) and persistence (44% vs. 38%) than Tinto's model. Cabrera et al. (1992a) attributed this difference to the incorporation of more constructs related to external factors that were included in the Student Attrition Model, including parental encouragement, support from friends, and the role of finances. Cabrera et al. (1992b) and Nora (1990) support the importance of external factors like financial aid for college student retention, especially

among low-income populations. Cabrera et al. (1992a) concluded that the two models were complementary and that by combining them, researchers could gain a more comprehensive view of student retention. Similarly, Berger and Braxton (1998) also tested the validity of Tinto's model and modified the theory by removing constructs that were not supported and adding organizational structures. Researchers found that the three measures of organizations—institutional communication, fairness in enforcing policies, and participation in decision making—were strong predictors of social integration for students (Berger & Braxton, 1998). These findings support adding external and organizational constructs to Tinto's model.

**Inconsistent empirical evidence.** Higher education researchers have empirically tested and subsequently adjusted Tinto's student departure theory. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) were among the first to operationalize and test the constructs in Tinto's model. This early analysis supported the predictive validity of the major components of Tinto's model, most notably the correlation between informal faculty interaction and student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Likewise, Nora, Attinasi, and Matonak (1990) found overall support for many of the constructs in Tinto's model, including the direct positive impact of academic integration on retention.

Other studies have found only modest support for the academic integration components of Tinto's model (Berger & Braxton, 1997; Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Braxton & Lien, 2000). In their meta-analysis of studies examining academic integration, Braxton and Lien (2000) found strong support for the impact of academic integration on subsequent institutional commitment and student departure decisions in multi-institutional studies, but only modest support when examining single-institutional studies. Researchers

concluded that the inconsistent support for the concept of academic integration requires either abandoning that construct from Tinto's theory or reworking it. Similarly, the social integration component may not be applicable for all student populations (e.g., part-time students) or institution types (e.g., community colleges). For instance, Nora et al. (1990) found negative effects of social integration on retention among community college students, which was inconsistent with the model. External and organizational factors also play a larger role in retention for non-traditional students than social integration (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The problem may not lie entirely with Tinto's theory or the constructs themselves but in how these constructs are operationalized in the research (Baird, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As previously discussed, the concepts of academic and social integration were originally conceived as psychological constructs (the extent to which students *perceive* they are integrated into the academic and social communities) but have been operationalized through behavioral measures (e.g. student grades, extracurricular involvement). Validity of the research can become compromised when using entirely behavioral outcomes to measure psychological constructs (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, 2014).

### **Revised Model of Student Retention**

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure offers a foundational theory for understanding student retention. Despite its limitations, Tinto's (1993) model of student departure aligns well with the focus of the current study on retention among rural college students. Tinto's model takes a holistic view of student departure by examining students' background characteristics, their goals and motivation, and their interaction with various components of the college environment to explain retention. In the modified model, Tinto (1993) includes additional components that account for students' cultural background and

external forces and modifies the mechanism through which students connect to the college environment by changing the concept of integration to membership. Tinto's modified model also shifts more responsibility to the institution in influencing student departure behavior. This shift is important for the current study, which uses case study to examine how student behavior *and* institutional actors shape rural students' college experiences. Yet as research on student retention expands to include more diverse student populations, modifications and inclusion of additional constructs should be added to the model to better explain the process of student retention.

Guiffrida's (2006) modifications to Tinto's (1993) newest model expand the model in two important ways: by adding a cultural lens that allows the model to be expanded to more diverse student populations and by including human motivation theory into the model (see Figure 2). Guiffrida (2008) proposes the following modifications to the model: First, he advocates for including a role for a student's family and friends into the model (the "home social system") as well as including individualistic and collectivist values into their pre-entry attributes. Guiffrida (2008) posits that students' values and home social systems are important to take into account when considering students' motivation to persist in college, especially in studying students from more collectivist cultures. Second, Guiffrida (2008) suggests changing Tinto's (1993) concept of *integration* to *connection* to acknowledge that students of color maintain connections to their home communities while also building relationships with the college community. Lastly, Guiffrida (2008) integrates Self-Determination Theory and Job Involvement Theory into Tinto's (1993) model to improve the ability of the model to capture motivation orientation of students from collectivist cultures. I expand more on each of these proposed changes in the following sections.

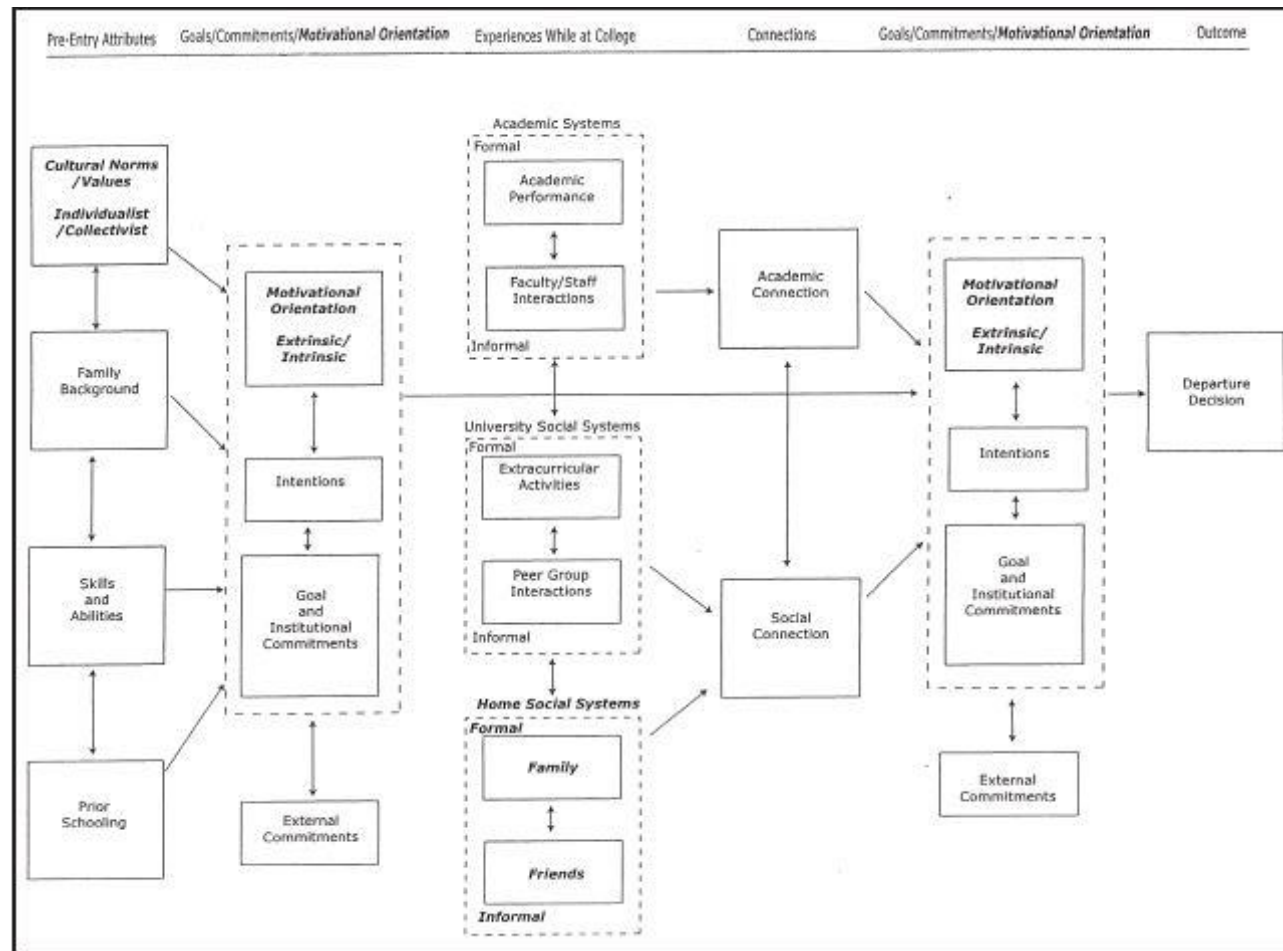


Figure 2. Guiffrida's (2006) modifications to Tinto (1993) model of student persistence that includes motivation theory and a cultural lens. Adapted from "Toward a Cultural Advancement of Tinto's Theory," by D. A. Guiffrida, 2006, *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(4), p. 461. Copyright 2006 by the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

**Cultural lens.** Guiffrida (2006) argues that Tinto's (1975, 1993) model may not fully explain student persistence behavior among students from collectivist cultures, including students of color. Utilizing a cultural perspective in student departure is critical in exploring retention among rural college students, especially in the South. Southern rural populations not only have higher populations of people of color, but they are also more likely to have collectivist cultural tendencies (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Therefore, a theoretical model that is adaptive to collectivist cultures is appropriate for studying student persistence among rural populations.

Guiffrida (2006) expands the cultural lens of Tinto's model in two important ways. First, he includes students' values, specifically their collectivist or individualistic values of their home community, as part of students' pre-entry attributes. Previous research suggests that students of color are more likely to have home communities with higher collectivist values as compared to White cultures (Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Phinney, 1996), but that college students of color also draw from individualistic values to successfully adjust to PWI campuses (Dennis et al., 2005). While research has primarily explored how students of color demonstrate collectivist values, research on rural communities suggest that they too exhibit higher levels of collectivist values (Flora et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Tieken; 2014; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Populations in the rural South are more likely to be African American, Latinx, and American Indian (Flora et al., 2016; NCES 2013; Tieken, 2014; USDA ERS, 2016). Students from the rural South may draw collectivist values from their rural culture *and* the culture of their racial/ethnic community (Flora et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Tieken; 2014). Therefore, Guiffrida's (2006) inclusion of collectivist and individualistic values into the pre-entry attributes of Tinto's (1993) model are also useful for

understanding the factors influencing persistence among rural populations in the American South.

The second cultural modification Guiffrida (2006) includes in his model is the inclusion of Valentine's (1971) concept of biculturalism through dual social support systems. The model presents a dual process through which students experience social integration, which Guiffrida calls *social connection*. This model supports student in developing social connection through the university social systems, including extracurricular activities and peer group interactions, as well as through the home social systems of family and friends.

Guiffrida (2008) states:

This subtle yet important change allows the theory to recognize that students can be comfortable in the college environment without abandoning supportive relationships at home or rejecting the values and norms of their home community (p.457).

Through this modification, the model acknowledges the need of culturally collectivist students to remain connected to supportive members of their home community (Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999).

**Motivation theory.** Guiffrida (2006) also advances Tinto's theory by including two motivational theories that account for the socio-cultural conditions that shape an individual's motivation: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Job Involvement Theory (JIT). These motivational theories help to explain how students' motivational orientations affect their level of commitment.

The first theory, SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1991), posits that individuals are motivated by three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. *Competence* is defined as an ability to achieve one's goal. Individuals demonstrate a need for competence

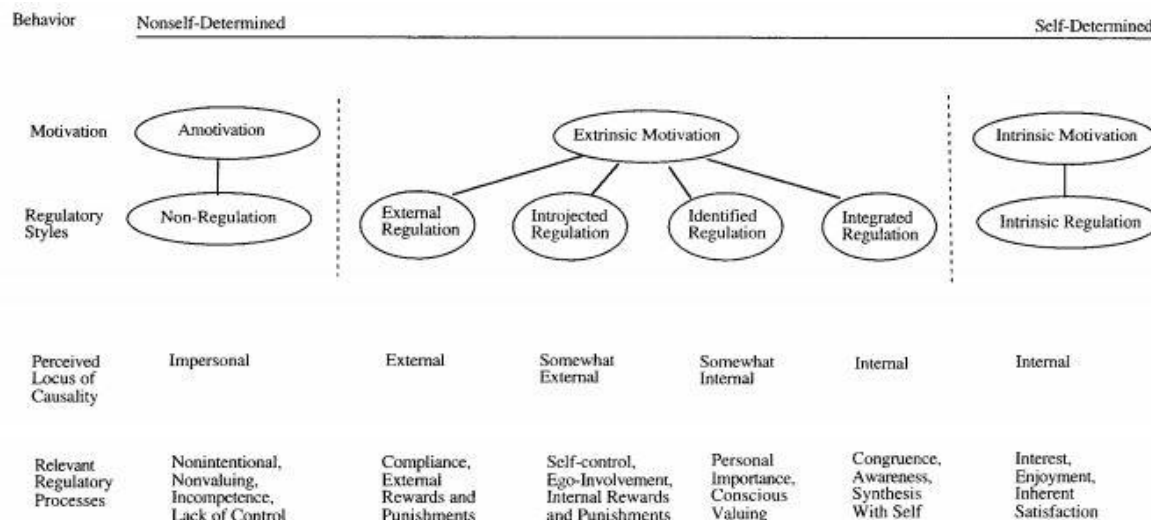
when they seek challenges that are in line with their capacities (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

*Autonomy* is one's ability to have volition in their behavior. Deci and Vansteenkiste (2004) explain, "To be autonomous does not mean to be independent of others, but rather it means to feel a sense of willingness and choice when acting..." (p.25). Finally, *relatedness* is defined as the need to form positive connections to and care for others. Relatedness is also associated for sense of belonging, both with individuals and one's community (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p.7). Deci and Vansteenkiste (2004) argue that the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are "universal necessities":

In other words, they constitute the nutriments that are required for proactivity, optimal development, and psychological health of all people. Thus, these needs are not learned but are an inherent aspect of human nature and thus operate across gender, across culture, and across time... (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004, p.25)

These psychological needs affect the type of motivation one experiences. SDT posits that individuals lie on a spectrum of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Figure 3 shows the SDT model as posited by Ryan and Deci (2000).



*Figure 3.* The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation with Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes from “Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being,” by R.M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, 2000, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), p.72. Copyright 2000 by American Psychological Association, Inc.

Intrinsically motivated behavior occurs by the inherent satisfaction derived from the behavior rather than by external rewards or punishment. On the other hand, an outcome external to oneself fuels extrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Extrinsic motivation includes four different types of motivation, ranging from controlled to autonomous: *external regulation*, *introjected regulation*, *identified regulation*, and *integrated regulation*. Individuals motivated by external reward or punishment are said to be *externally regulated*, while individuals motivated to satisfy self-esteem-related emotions are categorized as experiencing *introjected regulation*. Individuals experiencing *identified regulation* self-regulate their behavior because they have internalized the espoused cultural values as important to their personal values and goals. Finally, *integrated regulation* occurs when the

values or behaviors are fully integrated into one's personal values, but it is still considered extrinsic motivation because the behavior is not inherently motivating in and of itself.

The second motivational theory proposed by Guiffrida is Job Involvement Theory (JIT) (Kanuango, 1982). Like SDT, JIT theorizes that individuals are motivated to behave by intrinsic and extrinsic forces. Furthermore, JIT argues that society shapes the degree to which people are motivated by more Western, individualist norms or Eastern, collectivist norms, and that intrinsic and extrinsic forces are different depending on the values in which individuals are socialized under. Individuals are motivated to perform, in this case in an academic environment, based on the extent to which the environment rewards that fulfill an individual's culturally-influenced needs. In other words, college students who are more motivated by individualist norms may perform better in a college environment that rewards students for individualist behavior, such performing well on independent tasks like tests and papers. Rural students may be more likely to have collectivist values than their urban or suburban peers, but also retain the individualist values of Western society (Flora et al., 2016; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Students' stated motivations to persist reflected the combination of individualistic and collectivist values of their communities.

Students of color may differ from their White counterparts in their motivational orientation for attending and persisting in college (Guiffrida, 2006; Stage, 1989). For instance, Stage (1989) found that different types of motivation were more related to goal commitment for students of color than for their White counterparts. Similarly, Dennis et al. (2005) examined how motivations to attend college and the availability of social support from home shapes college outcomes among first-generation students of color. Dennis et al. (2005) found that personal motivation for career success was predictive of college

adjustment, whereas motivation based on family expectation was not. These findings underscore the importance of studying how motivation, specifically different types of motivation, can impact students' intent to persist in college.

**Empirical analysis of Guiffrida's (2006) model.** Although the components that comprise of Guiffrida's (2006) model (Tinto's model and motivation theories) have been tested extensively, only a few studies have empirically tested Guiffrida's (2006) modified model. The lack of empirical application of Guiffrida's (2006) model may be due it being a newer model, as well as being one of many modifications of Tinto's (1993) model. However, the limited studies on the model support both the cultural modifications, and the inclusion of motivational orientation into the persistence model. The present study adds to the growing body of literature applying Guiffrida's (2006) model to college student persistence among underrepresented student populations.

Several studies have specifically examined the cultural lens of Guiffrida's (2006) model. Barker and Avery (2012) found support for the cultural adaption of Guiffrida's model in their study on leadership initiatives among Black male undergraduate students. The researchers found that Black male leadership initiatives enhanced students' engagement in campus life and fostered relationships with faculty and staff without forcing students to give up their cultural heritage (Barker & Avery, 2012). These findings support Guiffrida's (2006) concept of social connections rather than social integration into the college environment and underscore the importance of a student's culture, especially racial culture, in their persistence. Merriweather Hunn (2008) similarly explored the application of Guiffrida's (2006) model in understanding persistence and degree completion among Black graduate students. Merriweather Hunn (2008) found that Black graduate students relied on social

support systems both within the university setting (faculty, peers) as well as their outside community (family, home community) for persisting through graduate school. The findings support Guiffrida's (2006) model for dual social support that includes the university social system and the home social system contributing to persistence.

Research also supports the SDT components of Guiffrida's (2006) model as it relates to college student performance. Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall and Abel (2013) examined whether motivational orientations, as defined by SDT, were correlated to improved student academic outcomes and persistence. They found that students who were motivated to attend college by the needs of autonomy and competence were more likely to have higher GPAs and persist than those students who were not motivated by those needs (Guiffrida et al., 2013). Guiffrida et al. (2013) also found that the need for relatedness was correlated with GPA and persistence, but the type of relatedness motivation made a difference. Specifically, students who were motivated to attend college because they wanted to connect with faculty and staff were more likely to have higher GPAs, while those motivated to connect with peers had lower GPAs (Guiffrida et al., 2013). These findings suggest that motivational orientation of Guiffrida's (2006) model can be used to better understand factors influencing college student persistence.

### **Chapter Summary**

Tinto's (1975, 1993) model of student departure provides a comprehensive framework for understanding student persistence, but the model is limited in its ability to explain persistence among diverse populations (Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Museus, 2014; Tierney, 1999). Critics of Tinto's theory cite his concept of *integration* into the college environment, which requires separation from the student's

home culture, as being problematic for students of color and other underrepresented student populations (Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2014; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999). To address this issue, Guiffrida (2006) modified Tinto's (1993) model to include a cultural lens and motivation theory to create a more culturally sensitive model of student persistence. I used this model in my study to understand rural college students' experiences in college and how these experiences shape their college persistence.

A cultural lens is important for understanding rural college student experiences in the South because rural students are unique from their urban and suburban counterparts. Rural populations are more likely to be low-income and have lower educational attainment rates (Whitener & McGranahan, 2003; USDA ERS, 2016). Rural populations in the South are especially more likely to be low-income and have higher proportions of unrepresented minorities as compared to the national rural population (Bauch, 2001; NCES, 2013; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003; USDA, 2016). Rural students are more likely to be first-generation college students, limiting their social and cultural capital in the college application process (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Provasnik et al., 2007). The limited resources of rural schools restrict the academic preparation of rural students for postsecondary education (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Roscigno et al., 2006; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001) but enhances their ability to get involved in extracurricular activities and develop close social ties to their community (Bajema et al., 2002; Bauch, 2001; Irvin et al., 2010; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Sipple & Brent, 2008).

Limited family income, parental education levels, and school resources can explain some of the findings of lower college attainment rates of rural students as compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012c; Howley et al., 2014). Rural students are

more likely enroll in less selective and public institutions (Burke et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2015; Gibbs, 1998; Hu, 2003; Prins & Kassab, 2017). The few studies that have examined college persistence patterns among rural youth find that they face unique barriers in persisting relative to their urban and suburban counterparts, including financial barriers, poor academic preparation, or difficulty connecting socially with the college environment (Byun et al., 2012c; Ganss, 2016; Pierson & Hanson, 2015). Institutional agents such as faculty and staff play critical role in promoting involvement and sense of belonging for college students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hausmann et al., 2007; Milem & Berger, 1997).

Yet research on college persistence among rural scholars is inconclusive (Byun et al., 2012c; Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Schonert et al., 1991; Yoder, 2007). These discrepancies may be due differences in background characteristics among the populations studied, including race and SES difference (Byun et al., 2012c). They may also speak to difference in institutional behaviors that alter student persistence patterns. In other words, some institutions may be better at retaining students than others due to their institutional mission, resource allocation, or services (Berger, 2001; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2008; Reason, 2009). Finally, differences may be due, in part, to the complicated interaction of these factors that shape student persistence. Further research is needed to understand how student characteristics and institutional characteristics interact to shape college persistence among rural students.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

The current study used qualitative case study design to explore the college experiences students from rural North Carolina attending one large, land-grant university. In addition to examining rural college students' experiences from the student perspective, this study explored how institutional actors, including faculty and student affairs professionals ("staff"), identified and perceived rural students at their institution. The following chapter offers an overview of the philosophical perspective that guided the study, outlines why I elected to use case study methodology, and describes the case study design. The chapter concludes with measures for trustworthiness and the ethical considerations of the study.

### **Qualitative Research**

Educational research draws from both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to examine and explore phenomena. Qualitative research is a broad method of inquiry characterized by unique goals, characteristics, philosophical perspectives, and research designs. While quantitative research seeks to determine cause and effect, the goal of qualitative research is to understand how people give meaning to their experiences and construct their worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research has several unique characteristics. First, it focuses primarily on understanding the subjective experience of others (Merriam & Tisdell; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013). Researchers differ in the extent to which they believe one's reality is subjective based on their philosophical perspectives, which is discussed further in the next section. However, qualitative research draws primarily from a constructivist viewpoint in that it perceives reality to be assembled rather than discovered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2013). The researcher as the primary data collection instrument allows the researcher to adapt the research design due to changing conditions and interpret nonverbal communication; yet it also means the data is open to biases as it is interpreted by the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers identify these biases for the reader and interpret how they can shape the understanding of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.25). In addition, qualitative research explores phenomena in its naturalistic setting (Miles et al., 2013). The goal of qualitative research process is to build concepts and theories, as opposed to quantitative research, which seeks to deductively test hypotheses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, the product of qualitative research often includes in words rather than statistics, and is richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2013).

### **Philosophical Perspective**

A researcher's philosophical assumptions act as a lens that shapes the way they interpret the world, and therefore, their data. Qualitative researchers have slightly different ways of describing these "lenses", but they are primarily described as philosophical perspectives, assumptions, or frameworks (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Philosophical perspectives shape one's ontology, or how one views reality, as well as epistemology, or how one views the nature of knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My philosophical perspective is primarily social constructivism (Creswell, 2013) or interpretive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), meaning that I perceive that there is not one singular and observable reality, but that reality is socially constructed by individuals' perceptions of their world. The research design reflected social constructivism through interviews with both students, faculty, and staff to gain a multi-faceted understanding of how

rural college student persistence is understood and shaped by multiple parties and institutional environment.

### **Case Study Design**

Qualitative researchers have conceptualized case study as both a form of research and the object of a study. Some researchers, including Stake (2005), Merriam (2009), and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that a case study is the choice of what is studied rather than a separate methodology: “The unit of analysis, *not* the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 41). Alternatively, Yin (2013) and Creswell (2013) perceive case study as a distinct form of methodology defined by either the object of study or the product of research. Case study is the chosen method when a researcher wants to gain an in-depth understanding of a real-life case in which the context is important to the understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013). It is a particularly good design for practical, everyday problems, and applied fields such as education (Merriam, 2009).

The current study used Yin’s (2013) definition of a case study to guide the research design. Yin (2013) conceptualizes case study as an in-depth examination of a contemporary, bounded phenomenon (the case) within its real-world context. A case can be an individual, a program, an organization, an event, a program or policy, an institution, or a community. Studies can either focus on a single case, or examine multiple cases, sometimes even across multiple sites (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The current case study was an instrumental case study, or a case that can provide insight into a broader issue and may be generalized beyond the specific case (Stake, 2005). The findings from this study may help inform researchers and practitioners about the experiences that contribute to persistence among rural college students in the South.

One distinct characteristic of case study is a purposefully selected “bounded system,” meaning that the case can be clearly distinguished from the context of the case study (Merriam, 2002). Miles et al. (2013) conceptualize case study as a phenomenon that exists within a bounded context, depicted as a heart (the phenomenon) enclosed within a circle (the case). The explored phenomenon in the case study was college persistence among rural students. A case is bound within a specific person or group, within geography, or within time. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) provide guidance for determining the appropriateness of using case study:

One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be; that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 39)

The case was bound by current college students from rural areas, faculty, and staff at a specific land-grant institution in the North Carolina during the 2016–2017, 2017–2018, and 2018-2019 academic years.

Case studies also have flexibility in their philosophical assumptions, generalizability, and data collection methods. Yin (2013) argues that case studies draw from either the realistic perspective, which assumes the existence of a single, objective reality, or a relativist perspective, which assumes multiple realities based on the participant. This study acknowledged the multitude of experiences across individuals through use of the relativist perspective. Additionally, case studies generally draw on theory to allow the researchers to

generalize their findings beyond the case being studied (Yin, 2013). My study used the modified model of student persistence proposed by Guiffrida (2006). Findings from the study may shed light on the college experience of other rural populations in the South. Case studies utilize multiple sources of evidence, including documents, interviews, observations, and physical artifacts, or multiple sources of evidence. The current study used interviews from different sources and document analysis to create a deeper understanding of the case.

### **Focus of Study**

The purpose of the current study was to explore the college experiences of students from rural areas of North Carolina at one land-grant institution and understand how those experiences shape their college persistence. The study used qualitative case study methodology to explore how students' background characteristics, motivations, and engagement on campus at the institution influence their college experiences, as well as how the institution identified and understood the experiences of college students from rural areas. Guiffrida's (2006) revised model of Tinto's (1993) student departure theory directs the research design and questions. The following research questions guide the study:

1. How do college students from rural North Carolina perceive their rural background and how it shapes their college persistence?
2. What are the college experiences and strategies of rural students in the American South that affect their overall persistence?
3. How do institutional actors, such as faculty and student affairs professionals, identify and support the persistence of rural college students?

### **Justification for Qualitative Case Study Methodology**

I chose to use case study methodology to explore rural college student persistence for several reasons. First, the study explored a phenomenon (rural college student persistence) within a bound system (one four-year land-grant institution in North Carolina). Other qualitative methodologies such as narrative inquiry or phenomenology examine the phenomenon primarily through the eyes of the individual experiencing that phenomenon. The study was unique because it focused not only on the experiences of rural college students as it related to their persistence, but also the role of institutional actors (faculty and staff members) in shaping rural students' college experiences. Use of multiple perspectives and data sources grounded the phenomenon within the context of the case boundaries. Through the interviews of students, staff, and faculty, as well as the use of document analysis, I gained a multi-faceted perspective on how the background of rural college students and the environment of a land-grant institution in the North Carolina shaped the college experience, and overall persistence, of rural students. From the philosophical perspective of social constructivism, exploring multiple perspectives on rural college student persistence revealed how this phenomenon was perceived differently across different individuals, or groups of individuals.

Case study is a powerful methodology for getting an in-depth understanding of a practical, everyday issue. Student persistence is one of the most pressing issues facing higher education today. Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, which are more likely to identify as first-gen, are increasingly enrolling in higher education (Engle, 2007; Ma et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Terenzini et al., 1996). Research indicates that first-gen students are less likely to persist and graduate than those who are not first-gen

students (Engle, 2007). Rural students are more likely to be first-gen college students and are more likely to enroll in public institutions (Burke et al., 2015; Gibbs, 1998; Hu, 2003; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Prins & Kassab, 2017; Provasnik et al., 2007). This likelihood is especially true in the South, where students are more likely to be from rural areas and enroll in public institutions (Gibbs, 1998). Yet public higher education institutions have lower student retention and graduation rates than private institutions (NCES, 2017). Therefore, persistence among rural students, especially at public institutions in the South, is a prevailing issue with which higher education leaders should address.

### **Research Design**

This study consisted of interviews with rural college students, most of whom were primarily in their senior year, as well as faculty and staff at a land-grant institution in North Carolina. The study recruited some students and data from a previous study conducted at the same institution that examines rural college student success, as well as interviewed additional rural college students. While both studies examined rural students' experiences at the institution, my study explored also how institutional actors shape the college experiences of rural students and contribute to student persistence.

### **Research Site**

This case is bound by a single institution, a large public land-grant university in the South, specifically in North Carolina. The university will henceforth be referred to by the pseudonym "Southeastern State University (SSU)." SSU is a research-intensive institution located in a large city. In Fall 2016, SSU had an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 22,000 degree-seeking students, and a graduate student population of nearly 10,000 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). SSU retains approximately 93% of the freshman class

and has a six-year graduation rate of 76% (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The university has strong engineering, textiles, and agricultural programs, as well as a selective veterinary school and extension offices in most of the counties across the state.

**Justification for land-grant institution.** The case study explored the college experiences of rural college students attending SSU, a large, land-grant institution in the South. Land-grant institutions were first established under the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 to increase postsecondary access for ordinary citizens and provide practical courses of study in fields such as agriculture, engineering, and military sciences (National Research Council, 1996). Land-grant institutions have a greater presence in rural and agricultural communities through the presence of agricultural extension offices that connect the research of the universities with farmers throughout the state (Kellogg Commission, 1996). Due to the mission of land-grant colleges and universities, many rural communities expect increased accessibility to these institutions (Yoder, 2007). SSU has a large agriculture college as well as a two-year agriculture institute that attracts a broader range of students to the institution.

The mission of land-grant institutions with respect to agricultural development may also reduce the cultural distance between rural students' backgrounds and the college culture, especially in departments with agriculture-related majors (Dunstan, 2013). Rural students are also more likely to attend public institutions than their urban and suburban peers (Burke et al., 2015; Gibbs, 1998; Hu, 2003; Prins & Kassab, 2017). Given the proclivity of rural students to attend public institutions and the size of the study body at land-grant institutions, one can assume that a sizeable number of rural students enroll in these types of institutions.

**Population.** The incoming freshman class for Fall 2017 at SSU was approximately 4,800 students. The university is relatively selective, with an average weighted high school

GPA of 4.54 among enrolled students from the incoming Fall 2017 cohort and average combined SAT scores of 1308. As of Fall 2017, 84% of the first-time degree-seeking undergraduates were in-state residents. The Office of Undergraduate Admissions at SSU estimated that approximately 22% of students from the 2017 first year class came from rural in-state counties.

### **Participant Selection**

The case research study drew on some initial data from a larger qualitative study on rural college student success conducted at the university. That study was a qualitative study led by a team of educational researchers at the institution, including myself. The purpose of the study was to understand the factors that influence student success among college students from rural areas attending SSU. The interview protocol for the original study is in Appendix A. Researchers in this study asked participants about their rural backgrounds, the college choice process, and their academic and social involvement at the institution. I conducted some of the initial interviews and participated in initial coding.

**Participant selection for original study.** Researchers in the original study interviewed approximately 40 rural students in their junior and senior years at SSU during the Fall 2017 semester. Researchers identified participants from the original study as rural based on the county of residency listed on their admission application. Researchers only invited students who lived in a rural county for at least four years to participate in the study.

I discussed the challenges associated with defining rurality in Chapter 1. For the purpose of this study, rural was defined using a metric determined by Isserman (2005). Isserman (2005) combines the rural-urban typology used by the U.S. Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to categorize counties by urbanicity/rurality.

Counties rarely fall into a clear rural-urban dichotomy but instead are a blend of both (Isserman, 2005). Isserman's (2005) typology categorizes counties as either rural, urban, mixed rural, or mixed urban based on the county's population nucleus definition from OMB, and the population density standard of 500 people per square mile from the Census Bureau. Counties are designated as rural if they meet the following criteria: a) population densities of less than 500 people per square mile, and b) and 90% of the county population in a rural area or the county does not have a urban area with a population of 10,000 people or more (p.475) The typology proposed by Isserman (2005) has the advantage of capturing a more nuanced portrait of a county based on demographic and economic factors than using only one approach. The original institutional study upon which the current study was based used Isserman's (2005) typology to identify students who resided in counties defined as rural or mixed.

**Participant selection for current study.** Participants for the current study were selected in two rounds. In the first round of participant recruitment, I used criterion sampling to identify a subsample of the initial pool of participants, approximately 10 students, from the original study who are still enrolled in the university as of the spring 2018 semester. Based on the timing of the data collection, all students interviewed in the first pool were in their senior year at SSU. I contacted these students for a second round of interviews. As in the original study, upper-class students were asked to reflect on their tenure at SSU and discuss their experiences at the university, including their interactions with faculty and staff. The first round of participant sampling included seven students.

A second round of participant recruitment was conducted in Fall 2018. I worked with the institutional research office at SSU to obtain a random sample of students of full-time,

currently enrolled seniors from rural North Carolina counties. I emailed students to explain the purpose of the study and solicit their participation in an in-person, recorded interview. The process used mirrored the recruitment process used in the larger rural study from which the first-round participants were recruited. I interviewed willing participants until I reached my quota, striving to maintain balance across gender, race, and academic major. Eight student participants were recruited in the second round of recruitment. Seven of the participants were seniors. One student was a junior by the number of years at SSU but had brought in enough credits that he could graduate early. Participants were interviewed during the Fall 2018 semester. All students were compensated for their time with a gift card.

**Faculty and staff participants.** I interviewed 6 faculty and staff members at SSU (3 faculty, 3 staff) identified as having worked with rural students over the spring, summer and fall semesters of 2018. Rural student participants identified faculty and staff in their interviews as staff members who played a role in their transition to college. The roles and professional backgrounds of faculty and student affairs professionals differ; therefore, I purposefully selected an even balance of faculty and staff to gain a broad perspective on the experiences of institutional partners who work with rural college students.

### **Data Collection**

Although case study does not have specific forms of data collection, it often utilizes multiple data sources to gain an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2013). The current study used individual interviews of rural students, faculty, and staff to explore the case. These data collection methods allowed me to gather the holistic experiences of rural college students at one institution from the perspectives of both students and institutional faculty and staff. Qualitative research is

characterized by emergent design, which allows the researcher to adjust the research design after the study has begun based on what is found during initial data collection (Creswell, 2014). After interviewing and conducting an initial round of code with the first group of participants, I decided to recruit a second round of participants to have a more robust applicant pool and ensure I was reflecting the experiences of rural college students at the institution.

### **Document Analysis**

Yin (2013) argues that document analysis is important to case study methodology because it can be used to corroborate or support other sources of data (p.107). Documentation can include personal documents, meeting minutes, administrative documents, or public documents like newspaper articles. Review of documentation can either support the information provided through other data sources or can reveal inconsistencies in the data that need to be explored further (Yin, 2013). Document analysis may provide further details about a topic that generate new lines of inquiry (Yin, 2013). The current study used document analysis to gain insight into participants' background characteristics that may contribute to their college persistence.

**Town profiles.** I examined town profiles of students' home towns using American Fact Finder (<https://factfinder.census.gov>), which pulls data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the American Community Survey to provide information on the demographic, economic, and education characteristics of residents within a specific town or city. Characteristics of students' home communities such as size, demographics, educational attainment, average income, economic opportunities in the region, and poverty levels can shape the educational attitudes and opportunities for students in the community (see Chapter 2). In addition,

understanding students' home community characteristics can provide insight into how students' home communities compare to the college community, and how this may have influenced their adjustment to college. I compared towns' community demographics, educational attainment levels, and poverty levels to the state averages to determine how students' hometowns compared to the state. I also compared the demographics of students' home communities to those of the incoming class at SSU.

**Academic information.** In addition to town profiles, I worked with the SSU Admissions Office to gather information about the average standardized test scores and number of transfer credits accepted by SSU from incoming in-state students. To protect the confidentiality of my participants, SSU Admissions provided county-level data collected over a five-year period from all in-state students who enrolled at SSU, including the average number of AP credits and college credits students transferred in. I compared the average number of AP and college credits of students from the rural counties where my participants were from against the overall average number of AP and college credits of in-state enrolled students. This comparison allowed me to determine the level of access to college preparatory coursework available to SSU students from rural counties (specific to the counties my participants were from) relative to the average in-state student enrolled at SSU.

The office also provided composite average college entrance exam scores (ACT and SAT) by county for all in-state applicants to the university over a five-year period. I compared the ACT and SAT scores of applicants from participants' home counties against the average scores of in-state SSU applicants. Comparing the average college entrance exam scores between applicants from the select rural counties and those from across the state

provided an indicator of the level of college preparatory resources available in participants' home counties relative to the average in-state applicant.

### **Interviews**

The purpose of interviews is to understand another's perspective beyond what one can observe (Forsey, 2012; Patton, 1980). They are one of the most common forms of data collection in qualitative research (Forsey, 2012). Interviews are an appropriate technique for gathering data on how individuals make meaning of a phenomenon or experience (Forsey, 2012). The purpose of the interviews with rural students in the current study was to understand how their rurality shaped their experience at SSU and what strategies they used to persist in college.

**Students.** The standardized open-ended interview, as described by Patton (1980), asks each participant the same questions to minimize variation across interviews and improve generalizability. I used a standardized open-ended interview protocol but also probed further based on the interviewee's responses. I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 15 rural college students at SSU. I identified selected students from the previous study on rural students and invited those students to participate in the study through university email. Seven students from the initial study interviewed with me. In addition, I recruited a second round of students during Fall 2018 for a more robust participant sample. All students interviewed were in their senior year or had enough college credits to qualify for senior status at SSU and all were from rural counties in North Carolina.

Interviews last approximately 30-60 minutes and were audio recorded with the permission of participants. The recorded interviews were then transcribed by a third-party transcription service and coded by the researcher. The interview protocol for students in the

current study can be found in Appendix B. The interview protocol draws on Guiffrida's (2006) model by asking students to describe their cultural background and students' relationships with their home support system. It also focuses on students' motivation for persisting in college, their relationships with faculty and staff during their college tenure, and any external commitments they have sustained throughout college.

**Faculty and student affairs professionals.** I conducted face-to-face interviews with six faculty and student affairs professionals (three faculty, three staff) at SSU to understand how the institution identifies and supports rural college students. Student affairs professionals are roles such as academic advisers, staff for academic and student support programs, and staff for campus activity programs. Student participants identified faculty and staff in their second interview as individuals who helped them during their time at college. A representative sample of faculty and student affairs professionals who were identified by students were invited to participate in the study through university email. I purposefully selected faculty and staff until quota was reached. Interviews last approximately 30-60 minutes and were audio recorded with the permission of participants. Interviews were transcribed by a third-party transcription service and coded by the researcher.

The interview protocol for faculty and staff interviews can be found in Appendices C and D. Questions start by asking faculty and staff about the degree to which they work with rural students, the context of their work, and the extent to which they perceive students' rural backgrounds as being influential in their college experience. One of the challenges with rural students is that their rurality is not always easily recognizable to outsiders. Faculty and student affairs professionals may not know that a student identifies as rural from an academic relationship with the student. Similar to the questions asked of rural students, I asked faculty

and staff about the academic and social systems on campus that rural students are involved with as well as the degree to which faculty and staff perceive students' connections with their home communities. The protocol concludes with questions on how faculty and staff specifically support rural students, and what other ways the institution could improve its support of this population.

### **Data Analysis**

Miles et al. (2013) recommend interweaving the data collection and data analysis processes so that the researcher analyzes data as other data is being collected. I conducted concurrent data collection and analysis to identify reoccurring codes early and streamline the coding process. Creswell (2013) outlines three major strategies for data analysis: organizing the data, reducing the data into codes, and developing the final representation of the data. I stored data on a password-protected laptop and protected participants' identities using pseudonyms after the transcription of audio data. I organized the data electronically according to the type of data (interview, document or memo), participant, and date collected.

The next step of the data analysis process is coding the data. Due to the volume of data collected in the study, I used Atlas.ti, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), to maintain organization in the coding process. Creswell (2013) recommends reading through all the transcripts in their entirety and memoing, or jotting down notes in the margins, before beginning the formal coding process. Miles et al. (2013) also recommend that researchers use analytic memoing throughout the data collection and analysis process to capture my reflections about the data. I maintained analytic memos as separate documents rather than embedded into the data, per the recommendation of Miles et al. (2013).

## Coding

The coding process occurs in several rounds. Coding is a way of describing “chunks” of data in a word or short phrase (Miles et al., 2013). Miles et al. (2013) describe coding as “a data condensation task that enables you to retrieve the most meaningful material, to assemble chunks of data that go together, and to further condense the bulk into readily analyzable units” (p. 73). I coded in two cycles (First Cycle and Second Cycle), per the recommendation of Saldaña (2016). I used dramaturgical coding for First Cycle coding. Dramaturgical coding frames individuals and their actions as a performance, particularly within the context of culture (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) recommends using dramaturgical coding when one wants to explore “intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions in case studies” (p.146). Dramaturgical coding allows the researcher to identify participants’ attitudes, objectives, conflicts, tactics, and values in the context of culture. In addition, dramaturgical coding aligns well with the theoretical framework of the study, which perceives student persistence as a result of the interaction between student characteristics, including attitudes, objectives, and values, with the college environment and in the context of their home culture. I reviewed and consolidated codes throughout the coding process.

Following the first cycle of coding, I organized my codes using a basic matrix that displayed overall findings and important quotes for each participant by code. Miles et al. (2013) recommend using matrices to identify patterns across the data and observe initial frequencies across codes. Organizing my data in the matrix helped me to identify frequently used codes that could be organized into themes and eliminate codes that did not have enough evidence to support them. It also helped me to pinpoint negative cases that contradicted

previous findings or added nuance to by findings. After organizing my First Cycle codes in the matrix, I was able to reflect on the data and reorganize my codes into the Second Cycle codes.

In the Second Cycle of coding, I organized codes into a smaller number of thematic groupings (Miles et al., 2013). The Second Cycle codes ground the emergent themes in the theoretical framework, to the extent that they align. For the second round of coding, I used a priori codes drawn from Guiffrida's (2006) model to loosely organize the initial codes. However, I maintained codes that do not fit within the theoretical framework so as not to be constrained by theory.

The final product of a case study is a rich, thick description of the case (Parker & Tritter, 2006). I highlighted themes within the case, which were loosely organized per the theoretical model framing the study (Creswell, 2013). In Chapters 4 and 5, I discussed the themes in relation to research questions. Yin (2013) recommends several structures for the final product of case study findings. The current study will use the linear-analytic approach, which discusses the problem, the methods used to examine the case, the findings of the case study, and the conclusions drawn from the case (Yin, 2013).

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study consists of the extent to which the findings are credible, reliable, and transferrable. To improve the trustworthiness of my study, I used multiple methods, including, but not limited to, triangulation, member checks, and creating a thick description of my findings.

## Credibility

Validity of qualitative research is determined by whether the findings of the study are accurate (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research views reality as being fluid and subjective, as opposed to the perception of a fixed, objective reality in quantitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Whereas quantitative research uses the term, *internal validity* to assess whether findings of a study are “true”, qualitative research uses the term *credibility* to describe the extent to which a researcher’s findings accurately capture what participants portray as their experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative research can improve credibility through multiple strategies, including triangulation, member checks, and engagement with the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Triangulation.** Triangulating of data across multiple qualitative data sources or participants is one way to improve validity (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002; Miles et al., 2013; Patton, 1980). Triangulation across sources helps the researcher to justify emergent themes from the data (Creswell, 2014). I employed triangulation of interviews across multiple participant interviews (students, faculty, and staff) to gain diverse perspectives about a singular phenomenon (Patton, 1980). I also triangulated data across multiple data sources, including interviews and document analysis. This method is particularly important for case studies that examine a group of individuals within an institution rather than one individual.

However, triangulation does not mean that all data will be the same. Patton (1980) states:

As with triangulation of methods, triangulation of data sources within qualitative methods will seldom lead to a single, totally consistent picture. It is best not to expect

everything to turn out the same. The point is to study and understand when and why there are differences. (Patton, 2980, p. 331)

Student participants expressed different experiences and perspectives, but all perspectives contributed to the overall understanding of rural college students' experiences at SSU and the role of the institution in their persistence.

**Member checks.** Another way to improve credibility of qualitative research is through member checks. Member checks consist of asking one's participants for feedback on the preliminary or emergent themes from the data, and whether those findings "ring true" with their experiences (Bowen, 2005; Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used member checks after the initial write up of the study. After completing data collection and the first round of coding, I created a composite summary of the findings for each group of participants (students and faculty/student affairs professionals). The composite was sent to the participants to verify the accuracy of the findings and ask if the summary resonates with their experiences. Participants had the opportunity to provide feedback to improve the thematic findings. I incorporated this feedback into the final write up. Member checks are also beneficial in that they provide an opportunity for participants to provide additional information as needed.

### **Reliability**

In quantitative research, reliability is understood as the extent to which research findings can be replicated over time (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reliability assumes a singular, static reality, which directly contradicts the assumptions of qualitative research that reality is relative to the individuals experiencing it. Rather than focus on replicability, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue: "The more important question for qualitative

research is *whether the results are consistent with the data collected*” (p. 251). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend qualitative researchers use the strategies of triangulation and investigator positionality to improve reliability of their findings. Use of triangulation as previously discussed will improve the reliability of my study. Finally, I make my biases known through my positionality statement.

**Researcher positionality statement.** The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research (Miles et al., 2013; Mertens, 2015). As such, the opinions and experiences of the researcher can potentially shape the interpretation of data. The purpose of the researcher subjectivity statement is to reveal the potential sources of biases to the reader and to bring them to the consciousness of the researcher so that the researcher can take measures to minimize the impact of these biases on the findings. I have been a graduate student and employee at SSU for the last six years, which makes me closer to my study in some ways than an outside researcher would be. Therefore, it is critically important that I am upfront with my biases, both to the reader and to myself, so that I may bracket my experiences to the extent possible.

Formerly, I served as a college adviser in two rural high schools in the Mid-Atlantic, where I developed my interest in college access and persistence among rural students. Some of the barriers to college access among my students included a lack of academic preparation, financial constraints, distance from postsecondary institutions, and difficulty in navigating the cultural gap between their home community and college culture. On the other hand, I saw instances where my students thrived in college and their community served as a source of support for them throughout their postsecondary experience.

Due to my experiences as a college adviser, I chose to pursue a graduate degree in higher education at SSU with the purpose of expanding the knowledge base on rural college student persistence and improving student support practices for this population. The land-grant mission of SSU resonated with my research interest because of the institution's commitment to supporting rural communities through education and extension and the high population of rural students attending the university. My research interest shifted from college access to persistence of rural students. As a graduate assistant, I worked with undergraduate students through university housing and a need-based scholarship program. Many of the students I worked with throughout my time at SSU were from rural communities throughout the state and experienced similar barriers and strengths as the rural high school students I had once worked with as a college adviser. I eventually took a position with the same college access organization that had initially ignited my passion for college access. I currently serve as the director of the program, which provides college access resources for students in rural North Carolina communities. My current work directly overlaps with the population included in this study, which can influence the way that I interpret the data from the study.

My background interest and research on this topic, as well as my own experiences with rural college students at SSU, may create some preconceived notions about the experiences of rural college students at this institution. To minimize this subjectivity, I memoed throughout the study. Memos allowed me to reflect on my observations and feelings during the data collection and analysis process and to identify any potential personal biases. Furthermore, I relied on the triangulation of my data to reinforce major findings in the data rather than relying fully on my own interpretation of the data. I provided opportunities for all

participants to provide feedback on my interpretation of the data through member checks. Finally, I sought out negative cases of my data that countered or added nuance to my original findings. Through these methods I sought to challenge any preconceived notions I had regarding my student population and ensure my findings were supported by the data.

### **Transferability**

The transferability, or generalizability, of the study is extent to which findings of a study can be generalized beyond the context of the study. Transferability is not a primary concern of qualitative research due to the assumptions around the subjectivity of reality. Qualitative researchers commonly rely on reader generalizability, which places the onus on the reader of the study to determine the extent to which the findings of the study apply to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative research can enhance the ability of the reader to generalize the study's findings by providing a rich, thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2015). Rich descriptions consist of detailed descriptions of the setting and participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2015). They also use quotes from participants and specific examples to support the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I created a rich, thick description of my findings so that the findings may be generalized to other populations of rural college students in the South.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Some of the ethical considerations of the study include confidentiality of participants, power dynamics between researcher and participants, and data analysis. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at SSU vetted this study to identify and address any ethical issues from the study. I encouraged student, faculty, and staff participants to thoroughly review the overview of the study and ask questions before consenting to participate.

Confidentiality of participants is a major ethical consideration of the study. In the data collection process, I initially identified the participants by their first name and last initial only. I substituted these names with a pseudonym once transcription of audio files was complete. I kept the master list linking participants to their pseudonym on a password-protected laptop only accessible by me. Another ethical consideration to address is the potential relationship between researcher and participants in the study. I have worked with undergraduate students at SSU over the last six years that I have been enrolled as a graduate student and worked as a staff member at SSU. To protect participants, I did not interview those over whom I have a position of power, or perceived position of power. This exclusion includes students I know through my work at the university. I also avoided exploiting participants, especially student participants, by providing a small compensation for their role in the study in the form of a gift card.

In my role at the institution, I have a vested interest in the results of the study (Creswell, 2013). To maintain objectivity, I engaged in memoing throughout the duration of the study. Finally, potential ethical considerations arising from data selection and analysis exist. An ethical consideration of case study is that the researcher can select which aspects of the case to highlight and which elements to ignore (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Use of multiple pieces of data across multiple different types of participants decreases my implicit bias in only attending to certain aspects of the case.

### **Chapter Summary**

The current study explores how rural students' backgrounds shape their college experiences at a large land-grant institution in the South using qualitative case study design. The study seeks to understand how student characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as

the attitudes and behaviors of institutional agents, can frame rural students' experiences and persistence in college. The study draws from Yin (2013), who views case study as a distinct methodology used to examine a bounded phenomenon within its real-world context. I used some data from a larger qualitative study on rural college students being conducted at the same institution to identify and solicit participants for further study, as well as recruited rural students using the same criteria used to recruit the first round of participants. Interviews from students, faculty, and staff were used to identify some of the specific forces that shape rural college student persistence at the selected institution from both the student and faculty/staff perspectives. Document analysis on student academic information (transfer credits, AP credits, SAT and ACT scores) and hometown demographic information served as secondary data sources in this study to further triangulate the findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The study explores the college experiences of rural students, and how their rural backgrounds shape those experiences. It also seeks to understand how faculty and staff identify and support college students from rural areas attending SSU. The following research questions guide the study:

1. How do college students from rural North Carolina perceive their rural background and how it shapes their college persistence?
2. What are the college experiences and strategies of rural students in the American South that affect their overall persistence?
3. How do institutional actors, such as faculty and student affairs professionals, identify and support the persistence of rural college students?

The following chapter begins by presenting a summary of the student, faculty, and staff participants in this study. The remainder of the chapter describes the major themes that emerged from analysis of the interviews conducted with students, faculty, and staff, in addition to the document analysis. Five major themes that emerged from the study: (a) *Rural foundations: The meaning of home*, (b) *Pride for self, family, and community: Student motivation*, (c) *Catching up: Academic preparation, challenges, strategies, and engagement* (d) *Lost in the institutional blind spot: Interactions with faculty and staff*, and (e) *Spanning two worlds: Navigating the social spaces between home and college*.

### Participants

#### Student participants

The student participants in this study included 15 late-stage undergraduate students (14 seniors and 1 junior) currently enrolled at SSU. All students were North Carolina

residents. I classified students' counties of residence as a "rural county" using Isserman's (2005) definition of rurality. Under Isserman's (2005) definition, rural counties fit the following criteria: a) population densities of less than 500 people per square mile, and b) and 90% of the county population in a rural area or the county does not have an urban area with a population of 10,000 people or more (p.475). I selected seven students from a previous study conducted at the university on rural college student success. These students were initially interviewed for the previous study in Spring 2017 and interviewed by me for this study in the Spring 2018 semester. I solicited an additional eight participants from a random sample of rural college students at the university and interviewed during the Fall 2018 semester.

The student participant sample was representative of the demographic characteristics of undergraduates at the university. Student participants were evenly split by gender, with seven female and eight male participants. The sample was representative of the racial/ethnic identities of the undergraduate student population at SSU University: 11 White (73.3%), two Black (13.3%), one Hispanic (6.67%), and one race/ethnicity not provided (6.67%). Two students transferred into the university from community colleges, one student transferred from another four-year institution, and one student reverse transferred to a community college before returning to SSU in his final two years. Most of the students (9, 69%) were STEM majors. Table 1 provides a list of student participants, demographic characteristics, and the broad major classification.

Table 1

*Student Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics*

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Race	Transfer	Major
Adam Jones	M	White	No	Engineering
Alex Hilton	M	White	Yes	Engineering
Cecil Reddin	M	White	Yes	Engineering
Daevin Smith	M	Black	No	Applied Sciences
Enrique Bute	M	Black	No	Basic Sciences
Erika Hutchison	F	White	No	Education
Grace Miller	F	White	No	Humanities
Josh Bailey	M	Unknown	No	Business
Kaitlyn Woodring	F	White	No	Basic Sciences
Liz James	F	White	No	Business
Matt Brown	M	White	No	Engineering
Meredith Grau	F	White	No	Applied Sciences
Phoebe Judge	F	White	Yes	Applied Sciences
Rebecca Martinez	F	Hispanic	Yes	Humanities
Thomas Day	M	White	No	Humanities

The majority of student participants were from communities within a two-hour radius of the university: six students were from communities within one hour of the university and another six were between one and two hours away from the university. The remaining three students were from rural communities more than four hours away from the university.

Students' hometowns ranged in size. Seven students were from communities with populations of under 1,000 people. In fact, several students' hometowns were technically classified as unincorporated areas that had no official census data; therefore, population estimates came from the next closest town. An additional four students were from

communities with populations under 2,500 people, one metric of the U.S. Census definition for an urban cluster (defined as an area with at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000 people [Ratcliffe et al, 2016]). Four students were from communities with populations of more than 2,500 people, the largest being a town of a little more than 5,000 people.

The background characteristics and lived experiences of each participant shaped their journeys to and through college. The following is a short description of each participant:

**Adam Jones** was an extroverted White male from the western part of the state majoring in engineering. He had a thirst for gaining new experiences and meeting people from all around the world. When he first arrived at college, he threw himself into the social scene, getting involved on campus and going out of his way to meet new people. In his senior year his involvement and friend group became more focused. He loved his hometown and wanted to return there one day to raise his family.

**Alex Hilton** was a White male from the central region of the state. He transferred into SSU after completing his associate degree at a local community college. He was majoring in engineering at SSU but at the time of the interview, he expressed doubts about his career choice. Having spent his first two years actively involved at the community college, Alex seemed a little disconnected from life at SSU and stated that he struggled to make friends at first. He enjoyed life near SSU and intended to stay in the area after graduation.

**Cecil Reddin** was a White male from the western part of the state. Of all the participants in this study, Cecil struggled most with persisting in college. Cecil expressed how he joined Greek life early in his college career to make friends, but the party scene adversely affected

his grades. He returned home for two years to complete his associate degree at the local community college and advocated to return to SSU. My impression was that he never fully left his home community, nor did he ever fully connect to the college community.

**Daevin Smith** was a Black male majoring in an applied science field. Daevin did not seem very connected to his home community beyond his immediate family. Daevin attended an early college high school. He was quiet and succinct throughout the interview. Daevin focused on finding full-time employment after graduation that would allow him to stay in the area.

**Enrique Bute** was a Black male from the eastern part of the state and majoring in a basic science major. Enrique attending the state-run STEM boarding school for his last two years of high school. He was highly engaged on campus at SSU and part of a prestigious scholarship program. Enrique planned to attend graduate school after college to pursue his doctorate in a science field.

**Erika Hutchison** was a White female majoring in education. She was still very connected to her home community and returned home often to visit friends and family. Erika was highly involved in volunteer and work opportunities on- and off-campus. She was pursuing a career path related to either education or healthcare that would allow her to return home for work.

**Grace Miller** was a White female majoring in humanities. Grace was not as connected to her home community, especially after having family leave the area during her time in college.

Grace expressed a deep love of learning and excitement to learn about different cultures.

Grace planned on moving out of state after graduation and had no intention of returning to her home community.

**Josh Bailey** was a male of unspecified race majoring in humanities. He was the only junior in the study but had additional credit hours due to attending an early college. Josh moved to his hometown later in his childhood but still considered his hometown as his true “home”. Josh was highly engaged in a student leadership position on campus.

**Kaitlyn Woodring** was a White female majoring in sciences from the western part of the state. She was part of a prestigious scholarship program on campus. Of the participants, she was one of the few who mentioned experiencing serious homesickness when she first got to college, but she quickly adjusted became highly engaged in service-based organizations on campus. Although she did not want to return to her home community, she was interested in finding a way to give back to rural communities. After graduation, she planned to do a service year in Appalachia before attending graduate school.

**Liz James** was a White female majoring in business. She returned home often to visit friends and family and felt very connected to her home community. Liz was involved in Greek life and other service-based organizations on campus. She also expressed a deep love of the institution. After graduation, Liz planned to stay in the area for a few years to pursue her career.

**Matt Brown** was a White male majoring in business and engineering from the central area of the state. He was primarily focused on his own personal growth as he neared graduation and discussed how he started to read for fun in his final two years at SSU. Matt was somewhat connected to his home community but opted against returning home because of poor job prospects.

**Meredith Grau** was a White female majoring in applied sciences. Her family was originally from the Raleigh area, which was one reason why she was not as connected to her home community. Meredith became more focused on career development and networking in her final two years of college to obtain a position away from home.

**Phoebe Judge** was a White female majoring in applied sciences. She moved to her hometown later in her childhood and never felt very close to her home community, yet she returned home nearly every weekend to visit friends. Her first year of college she attended a local community college and commuted to SSU from home her second year. At the end of her senior year, she felt uncertain about what she wanted to pursue for a career.

**Rebecca Martinez** was humanities major and the only Latina participating in the study. She transferred into SSU in her second year after one year at a private institution. Family was a primary value for her. She had a deep well of gratitude towards her family and expressed the importance of graduating to make good on the sacrifices her family made to get her to college. She was remorseful about not being able to return home after graduation but knew her job and graduate school opportunities would be stronger elsewhere.

**Thomas Day** was a talkative humanities major from a larger town near the university.

Thomas felt strongly connected to his home community, a place where his family had been for generations. He was determined to return home after finishing law school to become a political leader in town and help usher his town through its recent growth.

### **Faculty and staff participants**

Six faculty and staff participated in this study: three faculty members and three student affairs professionals. Student participants identified the faculty and staff as university employees who supported them during their college careers. Table 2 summarizes faculty and staff participants, demographic characteristics, and role at the university.

Table 2

#### *Faculty and Staff Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics*

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Race	Role
Dr. Edwards	M	White	Faculty member
Dr. Holloway	F	Black	Student affairs professional
Dr. Khan	M	Asian	Faculty member
Dr. Rockie	F	White	Faculty member
Ms. Ferris	F	White	Student affairs professional
Ms. James	F	White	Student affairs professional

Faculty members in this study interacted with students through their primary roles of teaching, research, and service. Dr. Khan and Dr. Smith had faculty responsibilities that were split between teaching, research, and service. They estimated that they spent between 30-40% of their time interacting with undergraduate students, primarily through teaching, undergraduate research, and advising. Both Dr. Khan and Dr. Smith said that their small

departments took mentorship of undergraduate students “very seriously.” Dr. Rockie was a teaching professor whose primary responsibilities included teaching and advising undergraduate students. All faculty members primarily taught juniors and seniors.

Student affairs professionals served in a variety of student support service roles across the university. Dr. Holloway led an academic support program for students from underrepresented backgrounds. While her primary role was academic support, she took a holistic approach in supporting students, often working with them to resolve some of the personal challenges they face that interfered with their academic success. Ms. Ferris served in a student support role within a scholarship program where she mentored students, developed and facilitated student programming, and taught student seminars. Ms. James’ primary roles were to advise the student leaders in her organization and to coordinate the mass communication of the department. The staff members interviewed for this study were more likely to have higher student contact time and interacted with a wider variety of students than their faculty member counterparts.

### **Description of Setting**

Southeastern State University is in a medium-sized city in North Carolina. The local population is just over 400,000 residents (American Fact Finder, 2018). The city is racially and culturally diverse, with 28.9% Black, 4.6% Asian, 11.0% Hispanic, and 2.6% multiracial residents. The city population is also relatively well-educated: 49.9% of adults 25 years or older have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to the state average of 29.8% (American Fact Finder, 2018).

SSU is a large Research I land-grant institution with an undergraduate enrollment of just under 25,000 students in Fall 2017 (IPEDS, 2018). It is a predominately White

institution (PWI), with 70% of the incoming first-year class identifying as White, 5.4% Black, 7.5% Asian, 5.8% Hispanic, 3.9% multiracial and 3.5% international students. The main campus of the university (“Old Campus”) sits a few miles from the heart of the city, with a second, newer campus (“Modern Campus”) located less than a mile away from the original campus. Most undergraduate students live and take courses on Old Campus, making it the central hub for undergraduate studies.

Walking across SSU’s Old Campus in the fall, one sees the blend of old historic brick buildings brushed by towering oak trees and large green lawns. The campus is both pragmatic and beautiful. Despite being an urban campus, the din of traffic barely reaches the heart of campus.

Then, as if released by some silent bell, students begin to stream out of classrooms and residence halls into the walkways for the class change. The uniform of undergraduate students is casual--jean shorts, T-shirts, tennis shoes, and backpacks are the most popular attire, with about a quarter of the students sporting SSU blue and green attire. One is as likely to see students in camouflage and cowboy boots as they are in button-up shirts and slacks, but it is the exception rather than the rule. Students stride steadily and purposefully, some walking alone with earbuds in, others chatting pleasantly in pairs or triads on their way to class or the library. You may overhear a small group of students excitedly discussing something they learned in class that day, followed by another group debating the football team’s chance of victory that Saturday or the lunch menu at the dining hall. Students on bikes, skateboards, and electronic scooters weave too quickly in and out of pedestrian traffic along the walkways. In the outdoor forums, tables of student organizations or local businesses displaying information greet passing students, soliciting donations and recruiting

new members. Occasionally one might see a frazzled graduate student or professor hurry by, or a group of prospective students plod by mid-tour, but the bulk of crowds are undergraduate students routinely following their daily schedule. The progression is deliberate yet relaxed, and in 10 minutes the walkways have once again cleared to a trickle. As a public land-grant institution, SSU markets itself as an academically competitive institution that is accessible to state residents, making it an ideal setting to explore the college experiences of one subset of rural North Carolina college students.

### **Thematic Findings**

Interviews with student, faculty, and staff participants served as the primary data source in this study. I analyzed the interview data using Saldaña's (2016) First and Second Cycle Coding and coded using Atlas.ti. Chapter 3 details my coding methods. Town profiles and academic data were secondary sources used to triangulate the findings. Through this data analysis process, five major themes emerged.

The first theme, *Rural foundations: The meaning of home*, captures how rural students perceived their rural communities, their initial orientations towards home at the start of their college careers, and the values they developed from their rural backgrounds. *Pride for self, family, and community: Student motivation* discusses the individualistic and collectivist goals students pursued in college using the SDT and JIT framework. The third theme, *Catching up: Academic preparation, engagement, strategies and engagement*, describes how rural students' academic preparation in secondary school frames their academic connections in college. *Lost in the institutional blind spot: Interactions with faculty and staff* is the fourth theme that centers on the awareness and attitudes of institutional actors on rural scholars, as well as the interactions between rural students and institutional actors

that shape student persistence. The final theme *Spanning two worlds: Navigating the social spaces between home and college* describes the ways in which rural scholars connect with both of their social structures at college and at home throughout their college career. I aimed to use participants' words (captured in quotations) in thematic titles wherever possible; in other cases, theme or subtheme titles are reflected in a title that captures the essence of findings. Table 3 shows the headings and subheadings of the thematic findings.

Table 3

*Thematic Findings Headings and Subheadings*

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Heading or Subheading

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**Rural foundations: The meaning of home**

A portrait of home

*Mapdot communities: Small-town America*

*"Everybody knows everybody": Close-knit communities*

*Trapped in time: cultural homogeneity*

*"College or Dominos": Rural poverty*

Gratitude or ambivalence: Student attitudes towards home

*"My family is my community": Positive orientations to home*

*Never there: Ambiguous and disconnected orientation to home*

Rural values

*Education*

*Hard work*

*Community*

*Service*

*Values significance*

**Pride in self, family, and community: Student motivation**

Individualistic

*Academic achievement*

*Love of learning*

*Beyond the comfort zone*

Collectivist

*Family pride*

*Reach higher*

*Challenging the rural stereotype -*

*Giving back*

**Table 3** (continued).

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Blended
<i>Building community</i>
<i>Graduation</i>
<b>Catching up: Academic preparation, challenges, strategies, and engagement</b>
Starting behind: Academic preparation
<i>View from 10,000 feet</i>
<i>College preparatory schools</i>
<i>Public schools</i>
Overcoming transitional challenges
<i>“I don’t even know 500 people”</i> : Adjusting to class size
<i>“Everyone had always just mentored me”</i> : Advocating for yourself
You get what you put in: Academic engagement
<i>Broad and deep: Attitudes towards coursework</i>
<i>Academic extracurricular involvement</i>
<b>Lost in the institutional blind spot: Interactions with faculty and staff</b>
An invisible community: Institutional awareness of rural scholars
<i>“It’s just not a demographic I pay attention to”</i> : Lack of awareness
<i>“Resilience”</i> : Awareness of and respect for rural scholars
<i>Faculty and staff support</i>
Working with rural scholars: Student interactions with faculty and staff
<i>They’re the only thing that matters: Feeling connected</i>
<i>Too busy to help: Ambivalent relationships with faculty</i>
<b>Spanning two worlds: Navigating social spaces between home and college</b>
Feels like home: Sense of belonging
Get involved: Social engagement on campus
<i>Community</i>
<i>Service</i>
Delving into diversity
Lifelines from home
Turning home: Relationships with home, revisited
<i>Consistently strong connections</i>
<i>Consistently neutral, ambivalent, or disconnected</i>
<i>Positively evolving: Conflicting and changing attitudes towards home</i>

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The following section summarizes the five themes and subsequent subthemes that illustrate how the relationship between rural students, their home communities, and the institution shape the college experiences of students from rural communities in North Carolina.

## **Rural Foundations: The Meaning of Home**

The first theme that emerged from the findings, *Rural foundations: The meaning of home* describes how rural students perceive their home communities and how it shapes the foundation of their college experiences. *A portrait of home* describes the primary characteristics students used to describe their home communities. The second subtheme *Gratitude or ambivalence: Student attitudes towards home* captures students' initial orientations towards their home communities upon first entering college. The final subtheme, *Rural values*, outlines some of the major values rural students expressed that they learned from their rural upbringing that they brought with them to the college environment.

**A portrait of home.** Students' rural backgrounds and their relationships with their home communities laid the foundation for their college experiences. Students' hometowns reflected the heterogeneity of rural North Carolina. They included agricultural communities, coastal hamlets, small mountain towns and unincorporated areas nestled in the woods.

The theme *A portrait of home* consisted of four smaller subthemes. The first subtheme was *Map dot communities: Small-town America*, which captures rural students' initial descriptions of their small home communities. The second subtheme, "*Everybody knows everybody*": *Close-knit communities* illustrates the close-knit and familial nature of small towns. The third and fourth subthemes discuss some of the more negative attributes of rural communities as described by the participants. *Trapped in time: cultural homogeneity* describes how small rural towns can also be psychologically closed to outside ideas and people. Finally, "*College or Dominos*": *Rural poverty* captures how the deep and persistent poverty of rural regions can affect the educational opportunities available to youth in rural communities.

*Map dot communities: Small-town America.* In the country music hit “Where the Green Grass Grows”, Tim McGraw sings, “Well I’m from a map dot/A stop sign on a blacktop.” Regardless of where students came from, McGraw’s words seemed to capture perfectly students’ descriptions of their hometowns as small, relatively isolated communities. Most students lived in communities smaller than 2,500 people. These communities were technically defined as “rural” according to the U.S. Census definition based on the total census population (Ratcliffe, 2016). Several students, like Matt, were literally from a one-stoplight town: “[It’s] a really small town, just probably, I think the population's like 800 and something. So, we've got like one stoplight, one Subway, a little burger place, that's about it.” Other students were from areas that were more accurately categorized as unincorporated communities because the area fell outside of a municipality:

We don't really have one town or one meeting place, at least for my high school. I feel like a lot of places, or maybe it's stereotypical, have that kind of thing. We were spread out, as far as our high school ... our high school and then a 15-mile radius probably between ... and there's probably five or six unincorporated communities or little small towns. (Alex)

In these communities, the closest neighbor may be several miles away, separated by farms or woodland:

In terms of, I guess like, distance, everything's very far away from each other because it's tons and tons of farmland. So, people have hundreds and hundreds of acres. And so, your neighbor may not be necessarily down the street, they may be a five or ten-minute drive away. And so that spreads everybody out for the most part. (Josh)

Physical distance kept many of these communities relatively isolated. Towns may be some distance away from even modest shopping areas, as Erika explained:

We're definitely probably the smallest town in the area. We have a couple of what I would call bigger cities...this sounds crazy but, where you have a Walmart and stuff like that. So, it takes us a good 30 to 40 minutes to get to a Chick-Fil-A or to a Walmart.

The small size of the town promoted strong relationships between community members.

***“Everybody knows everybody”*: Close-knit communities.** Nearly every student characterized their hometowns as being close-knit, and the kind of place where “everybody knows everybody”. They described how they continually ran into people they knew no matter where they were town. Kaitlyn recounted the phenomenon of knowing everyone in her town since birth:

I graduated with 160 people. Everybody in my town went to the same two churches, First Baptist or First Methodist, and they were across the street from each other. So, we all just kind of grew up together and I really didn't have to make friends. Everyone that I knew, I grew up with since I was born.

Alex described how when he returns home, he “can't go anywhere without seeing somebody that I know or talk to.” Communities were close not only because of the small size of the town, but also because families had lived in the town for generations. Family was a central part of students' home communities, and the concept of family extended beyond the nuclear family to include aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents: “So I talk to my family at least once a weekend. That includes my parents, my sister and my aunts and my uncle that live back home” (Enrique). Rebecca described a similar experience in her hometown:

Rebecca: So, we're not like a neighborhood or anything. But we know each other fairly well, all of us do. A lot of older folks that we all take care of. So, we all ... and a lot of us around the area are family, around like my area anyway.

Researcher: So, a lot of extended family?

Rebecca: Yeah, a lot of extended family. Then their extended family and their extended.

Community members may have multiple roles in students' lives, as family members, neighbors, faith leaders, teachers, or employers. Kaitlyn explains:

Well, all my teachers and all of my ... I mean, everyone that I went to school with, we all knew each other outside of school and so asking for help, or the, "I need an extension on this assignment", or all of that just kind of happened.

Kaitlyn went on to explain how one of her high school teachers was also a member of her church and granted her an extension on an assignment because she knew that Kaitlyn was also busy preparing for the school play. Kaitlyn's example illustrates how community members were part of one another's lives even beyond school grounds, and how the support of school staff also extended beyond the school.

***Trapped in time: Cultural homogeneity.*** The physical isolation of rural towns also contributed to the cultural isolation. I asked participants about how the culture of SSU compared to the culture of their hometowns. Several described how nearly all the people from home had very similar values and perspectives on the world. As Kaitlyn describes, "We all look the same in my hometown. We all act the same. We all think the same." Erika similarly stated, "[At college] you meet many more cultures and meet people that have different ideas here where back at home everyone is pretty straight forward, the same ideas."

The cultural homogeneity of towns made some towns less receptive to different ideas and people. In a minor sense, Cecil's town exhibited this quality regarding pop culture and fashion trends. Cecil explained how the small town culture and physical isolation of this home town insulated them from current trends and fads:

I think the biggest thing is people don't buy-in into trends, or maybe the trends don't change in a small town like they do. People don't keep up with what's going out outside of community. It's just like people how they live, do what they do. Kids from cities, a lot of college kids, for example, if there's a dance that goes with a song or something like that, everybody from bigger areas they're into that. They're into more like social media movements and stuff like that. Whereas back home, nothing is really trendy.

Cecil explained that it was not necessary that people in his town were unaware of trends, but that they did not value keeping up with the trends, recognizing that one trend would soon be replaced by the next in a never-ending cycle.

Several students also recounted more nefarious ways in which the cultural homogeneity of their towns could lead to prejudice and racism. Alex described how, in comparison to his home town, SSU was more receptive to cultural diversity:

Alex: You get a more wealth of ideas, diversity, that type of thing. A lot less prejudice here than compared to my town, not that it's running rampant or anything.

Josh described how his hometown was racially segregated, which motivated him to find more opportunities to learn about inclusion in college:

Inclusion was definitely one of them, just because my hometown was originally ... I mentioned earlier, it was very, very segmented in terms of diversity and race

demographics and things like that. And so that was something I really wanted to do was feel included but also bring other people into that conversation to make them feel included as well.

Grace stated that the structure of her hometown reinforced the close-minded culture: “There's no room for close-minded people here [at college]. I guess that's just the rural cities, towns, are okay with it. They kind of enforce it.”

Alex, Cecil, Enrique, Kaitlyn, and Matt all described how many of their peers from home either stayed after high school graduation or returned home after college, which partially contributed to the insular nature of the community. Alex said that his peers who returned home did so to take over family businesses or work on farms, whereas Matt described that many of his peers never left. In some ways, his hometown seems like a place trapped in time: “I think just the people that are born there a lot of times never get out, so it's almost ... it's like the culture there seems to have stayed the same for such a long time, it's almost outdated.” Grace was blunter in her appraisal; when asked how the culture of her hometown compared to that of SSU, she answered, “Well, there is a culture at SSU.” Growing up in towns that were less open to new ideas created some challenges to rural students when they transitioned to SSU, which I will discuss further in the last theme.

**“College or Dominos”: Rural poverty.** While students primarily had positive things to say about their hometowns, a few noted the economic disparity they observed in the communities. Document analysis of town profiles revealed that more than half of the students were from towns with poverty rates equal to higher than the state average of 15.2% (Kennedy, 2017). Poverty affected opportunities for postsecondary education. Enrique described how the cost of college was a prohibitive factor for some of his classmates:

My region of the state, we are impoverished African American community, where pretty much, after high school, people can't afford to go to college even if they want to go to college. We have a community college, but it's too expensive for even some people. I had classmates that could not afford the uniforms at all that our school system imposed on us. Their parents worked multiple jobs. When they hit middle school, they were in charge of taking care of their younger siblings. Their parents couldn't afford to keep the lights on some months, couldn't afford to get the food some months...

In some cases, the barriers to college access caused communities to curb the educational aspirations set for students. Rebecca, who was also from an impoverished county, portrayed how her high school focused on getting students to graduate rather than preparing them for postsecondary education because the financial burdens many students faced made college improbable. On the other side of the state, Kaitlyn's community had few opportunities for individuals from different educational pathways: "We have a joke in my hometown that you either go to college or go to Dominos." Kaitlyn's statement also shows the limited economic opportunities there are for students who do not have any training beyond high school. Like other areas of the state, the opioid epidemic hit Kaitlyn's hometown hard. Many students were unable to attend college, mired either by addiction themselves or caring for others affected by the disease. Kaitlyn's depiction of her home community represents rural students internalizing the idea that in order to be successful one needs to leave home. Apart from a few students, financial constraints did not appear to have a direct effect on many of the students interviewed in this study. However, several students

were keenly aware of how poverty affected their communities, which in turn affected their post-graduation plans.

**Gratitude or ambivalence: Student attitudes towards home.** In their interviews, students reflected on their initial relationship with their home communities. Students' initial relationships and orientation to home shaped the extent to which they internalized rural values and set the foundation for the social systems they would rely on during college. Most of the rural students in this study had an initially positive orientation towards home, as reflected in the first subtheme "*My family is my community*": *positive orientations to home*. A smaller subset of the students I interviewed demonstrated more ambiguous or disconnected relationships with home, as outlined in the second subtheme *Never there: Ambiguous and disconnected relationships with home*. In this section I will focus on students' initial relationships with home. In the final theme I will revisit how students' relations with home changed as they progressed through college, and its influence on their post-graduation plans.

**"My family is my community": Positive orientations to home.** Most of the students in this study (11) described their initial orientation to their home community as positive. While students varied in the degree to which they felt connected to their home communities, most students stated that they enjoyed returning home, whether that was during breaks or on the weekends. Some students described close family ties that kept them connected to their home communities. Liz described how she came from a large, close-knit family that she stayed in touch with throughout her time in college:

With my family, I have a very close family. I'm the youngest of four siblings, so I've always been very close with them. Like right now, fair season, we usually go to the

fair together as a big family once a year, but in the past two years, I will admit that that has ramped up a lot.

Like Liz, Thomas had a close relationship with his family, most of whom lived in his home community. He explained, “My family is my community, so I guess that's one in the same...” Thomas’s family had been in the community for generations and lived near one another. He explained how his entire extended family lived on two streets that bore their family surname: “We're all compound. All of us live there. There's only one group of us in the whole United States, and we're all right there.” Thomas’s sentiment expresses how closely intertwined family and community could be in small rural towns. Rebecca’s extended family also lived in her home community and frequently asked about college on her trips home:

And definitely my grandpa too. Every time I go home, he's like so how are your classes going? And then he'll just talk to me a little bit about that. And just say, well I can't wait to see you graduate. And then that keeps me going first of all.

The presence of family in their home communities contributed to students’ close relationship with the family itself. In Rebecca’s case, extended family also played a role in her college persistence by their interest and involvement in her college career.

Other students described the support they received from community members early in college. For instance, Matt got care packages from community members for encouragement:

A lot, especially freshman year. I mean, I used to get mail from people that it seemed like I barely knew that were just sending encouragement. So that's one thing about a small town is everybody really supports you. And you have a lot of people behind you, just because you kinda know everybody. So basically, from that.

Kaitlyn also described how, “People send me cards and care packages and they're always asking about me and texting me to find out how I'm doing.” Liz described how people in her home community would frequently check in with her and send cupcakes or other treats during exams: “Just little things to keep your spirits up, I guess.” Josh summarized his relationship with home as one of gratitude:

I'm grateful for it because it is ... I have that, not work/life separation, but school/life separation. I always have a place I can go back to that's away from the hustle and bustle of [the city] if I get overwhelmed and things like that.

Students' positive relationships with home reinforce the importance of including the home social system, as Guiffrida (2006) does, in a model of student persistence. Most of the rural students in this study relied on family and peer networks at home for emotional support early in their college career. Yet the larger home community also played a role, including extended family, neighbors, church communities and previous teachers would check in with these students and offer their support during the student's college career. In some ways, these connections to home reinforced students' commitment to their home communities and led them to return home after graduation. I will discuss this idea more in the final theme.

*Never there: Ambiguous and disconnected orientation to home.* Not all students felt connection to their home communities. Four students in the study (Daevin, Grace, Phoebe, Meredith) expressed being either neutrally oriented to home, or somewhat disconnected from their home communities. Several of these students either moved to their home communities later in childhood, had family who was from outside the area, or their families had moved away once they were in college. Meredith, for example, expressed an ambivalent relationship to her hometown. Later in the interview, she explained that her parents were raised elsewhere

in the state, and that her extended family still lived in that area: “And all my family, my grandparents and aunts and uncles live in [the city] so growing up as a kid, we would always like be here.” Similarly, Daevin expressed no strong connection to his hometown. Daevin described feeling somewhat disconnected to this home community. When asked if that was a change that occurred in college, Daevin replied, “I guess it's always been there.”:

Phoebe and Grace also expressed feeling disconnected from their home communities but their relationship with home was more complicated. Phoebe was from a military family and had lived in several cities within and outside the U.S. before her family settled in rural North Carolina late in her childhood. When asked where she considered her hometown, she vacillated between her most recent home in North Carolina, or her previous home in Virginia. Phoebe did have extended family in the town, but she struggled with feeling as if she belonged:

My first year of high school and one I didn't really know who I wanted to be friends with, kind of learning that about myself that I don't have to mix in with other people if I don't want to, if I don't really like who they are. I still do that and so I think I learned that and kind of learning more about myself and who I want to be friends with and who I want to surround myself with and being able to stand up to potential bullies [inaudible]. I made some a few really good friends, but most of the town I didn't really get to know.

Phoebe expressed never fully feeling part of her home community because she came in as an outsider later in her childhood. Yet later in the interview, she also discussed returning home on a regular basis, despite still feeling disconnected from home. Phoebe also expressed that she had grown closer with her family during college: “I've definitely grown closer to my

family over the years after high school and into college. I think that value has grown.”

Phoebe’s attitude towards home was complicated and often conflicting.

Grace was from the same town as Phoebe. Unlike Phoebe, Grace was born and raised in her home community but vacillated between expressing her comfort at home with her detachment for the community there. On one hand, she disliked the close-minded nature of her home community. She also did not seem to feel strongly connected to home support network. When asked about her greatest support systems from home, Grace responded, “For a long time, I just felt like it was just me. I really forced myself to do everything that I need to do. Then, if disaster struck, then it would be my mom or maybe my dad.” She closed the interview on an inconclusive note regarding her attitude towards home: “Yeah, don’t regret where you come from. That’s what made you who you are and so if you do know that you need to improve, at least you know it.” As opposed to the students in the study who were more positively orientated towards home, students in this category relied less on their home social system as an initial support in college. Beyond immediate family, these students primarily used their college support network to provide social support. These findings demonstrate that the home community is not an important source of support for all rural students.

**Rural values.** Students’ espoused values reflected, to a certain extent, the cultural values of their home communities. The primary values that emerged were education, hard work, authenticity to rural self, community, and service. The value of *education* explored how students their families, and their communities support perceived the worth of higher education and the extent to which it was encouraged in the community. *Hard work* captured the significance students placed on contributing labor towards achieving a goal, usually

associated with academic and/or career success. *Community* signified the importance rural students placed on relationships with others, including maintaining relationships with home and building new support systems at college. Finally, the value of *service* signifies rural students' desire to give back to their own communities, rural communities in general, or to the world through their involvement on campus or future careers.

Students' values were also associated with the basic psychological need of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as posited by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008). For each value, I briefly explain which psychological need it maps most closely to and how it may be associated with individualistic or collectivist cultures. The following theme of student motivation illustrates how students' values are ultimately associated with their motivations.

***Education.*** The value of education is closely associated with the need for competence because education gives one the opportunity to develop and refine their knowledge. A college education also generally affords individuals the autonomy to choose their academic concentration. Rural communities in this study differed in the value that those communities placed on education. On one side, several students stated that education was a priority within their immediate families. Thomas described how education was a shared community value, "Education has always been a big part of my family and the other families in the area." Education was also particularly important for his family. Thomas discussed how his parents invested what limited funds they had to send their children to the local private school rather than the public school, knowing that they would receive a better education at the private school: "Everybody in my family that's directly my last name, we all went to private schools. Took all the money we had. We were showing up with duct-taped shoes, but we were showing up to school." Likewise, Phoebe described education as a family value, "Growing

up, education was always important to me and my family and so doing well in classes was expected but on a deeper level for myself actually learning was important to me.” Phoebe offers an interesting caveat, that education was not the goal in and of itself, but that the learning experience that a college education offered was where true value lie.

Some students’ families instilled the value of education because they wanted their children to have the educational opportunities they were not afforded. This motivation was certainly the case for Rebecca’s father, who emphasized the importance of earning a college degree because he did not have the opportunity to attend college: “Definitely my dad is always in my mind so him not even graduating high school, and always telling me you're going to college, you're going to do better, you're going to do this.” Cecil’s mom had not gone to college and so she was not able to give him specific academic advice when he struggled academically in the first few years of college. However, she offered him emotional support and encouraged him to persist: “She didn't go to college so there's really not much advice I'm getting from her. She keeps me staying positive, if I'm having a rough time or something. ‘Well, just figure it out. You came this far.’” These experiences challenge the idea that rural students’ families send conflicting messages about college to their students. Rather, these students had the experience of having families who prioritized education and encouraged their children to obtain their degrees.

However, not all rural communities communicated the value of education to their students, even in schools. Phoebe observed that only a small portion of her high school teachers truly prepared students for the rigor of college coursework: “...a lot of my teachers were there, and they taught us, but they didn't spend a lot of extra time with us. The quarter of the teachers that did, they always push our class to do better and think harder and want to

go to college.” Rebecca discussed how the lack of resources in her county made college inaccessible to many of her peers. As a result, school personnel focused primarily on getting students to graduation but did not prepare students for much beyond that. When asked how being from a rural area impacted her academic experience at college, Rebecca responded:

I think it impacted it a lot. So, from what I can tell, and from talking to other people who are from rural areas like myself, they're high schools were also not that good. Also, where I'm from, the county is extremely poor, so that also has to do with the way that schools are run, and how important schools are to these people. Because of course farming is definitely a big part of our economy back home, so a lot of people will go to school and leave, or they'll go to school and then just quit after high school, and not even care about how to get through. A lot of the teachers would help them get through, just because they want that diploma, but other than that ... I can tell it's definitely impacted a lot. You can definitely tell a difference from someone who went to school in a city, versus someone who went to school like where I'm from.

In the case of Rebecca's home community, this lack of encouragement from the school system may be perceived as a pragmatic approach in the face of persistent poverty and limited resources rather than undervaluing education, yet the message to students was that college was not a priority. If students were not receiving encouragement and guidance on how to pursue higher education through the local school system, they needed to rely on the knowledge and encouragement of their families or be self-motivated enough to navigate the college application process to successfully enroll in higher education.

University faculty and staff speculate that rural students sometimes receive conflicting messages from home about the importance of education, especially those who are

the first in their families to attend college. Families may encourage students to attend college, but also encourage them to return home when the student experiences challenges. Dr.

Holloway observed:

Some of the households are their first generation, and they don't have that resource at home to go be able to say, hey, I'm struggling in school, can you help me? The people in their home life don't understand what their experience is at school. So that's a conflict, and that's a problem sometimes. For example, I had a student who was struggling, and just kind of interacting with the faculty mentor, just kind of acclimating to campus, a freshman student. And she ended up leaving and going back home because the messages that I was giving her of persistence wasn't the message that she was getting from her home environment. So, she ended up going back, it was just too much. And this student came in at a 4.2 GPA.

The type of experience Dr. Holloway described did not fully reflect the experiences students in this study shared. First, most students who participated in this study were not first-generation college students and thus their parents could offer some specific advice on how to navigate college. Students also offered little evidence that families encouraged them to return home when they encountered obstacles. In fact, several explained that college graduation was an expectation their family held. Thomas explains:

Family always taught us, and I'm sure taught [inaudible] in the same way, especially Memaw, she beat it into us, was education. You can never be too educated. If I wasn't going to go here, I'd be going to a similar university. But there was never doubt in my mind that I wasn't going to go to college, and I wasn't gone finish it.

When Kaitlyn struggled with homesickness in the first few weeks of college, her mom told her that she would need to stick it out:

She [her mom] told me that if I drove home before Fall break, she was going to take my car. Because I was fully planning on just going home. I was so mad for a long time about it but then was so thankful that she did that because if I had gone home, I wouldn't have come back.

Compared to Dr. Holloway's experiences, the rural students in this study were strongly encouraged by their families to finish their education at college, even during times when it was challenging.

The value of education motivated students to learn (intrinsic motivation), but it also encouraged them to achieve high grades in college, pursue academic experiences, and graduate (extrinsic motivation). Education was perceived as valuable in and of itself (intrinsic) but also to obtaining a stable career (extrinsic).

***Hard work.*** When asked about the values were most important to them when they first started college, nine out of the fifteen students interviewed expressed some variation of the theme of working hard, generally with the vision of achieving a specific academic or career goals. Alex captured both elements of this sentiment: "I guess just work hard. Work hard, try to achieve a goal." Working hard to achieve a goal allowed students to develop competence in a knowledge base or skill set. The goal for many of the students in this study was to do well academically and/or in their career success, a theme which I will discuss further in the following theme. One of Matt's goals in college was to do well academically, which he planned to achieve through working hard in school. Matt attributed this hard work to his rural upbringing:

Being from a rural area, I think I did a lot of work outside. I've worked on farms before. And I think in a sense that taught me hard work. My dad always had something for me to do. I've done a lot just outside, hands on stuff that taught me hard work.

Rebecca, similarly, attributed her value of hard work to the values that her family instilled in her:

Hard work is also important. My mom's a teacher, and my dad actually dropped out of high school, I think it was either that or like right out of middle school, because I think you could drop out earlier in Mexico. They've definitely installed hard work in me, like you're going to make it through college and you're going to be better. That was something that I definitely kept in mind.

Rebecca certainly exhibited hard work: throughout college she worked 2-3 jobs totaling 30-40+ hours a week, in addition to taking a full course load each semester and participating in undergraduate research. Students' value in hard work was specifically targeted towards their academic success in college and beyond, as Adam explains:

I've seen the benefits of pursuing higher education and sticking through it and doing a lot of things and I try ... I've always tried very hard in my life to listen to people who are giving me good advice and to do what they're saying instead of just hearing it. And those things have just really motivated me to stick through with it because the reward is worth it and working hard usually pays off.

Adam's words demonstrate how he internalized the value of hard work to achieve a specific goal: college graduation. Students' value in hard work motivated them to achieve

academically through grades and other academic accolades, discussed further in the following theme.

**Community.** Students consistently expressed that sense of community was valued in their hometowns, as evidenced by the extent to which they described their hometowns as “close-knit”. The value of community was closely tied to students need for relatedness, or their connection to individuals and communities. Many of the students in the study said they initially struggled with transitioning from a small community where “everybody knew everybody” to the anonymity of a large campus:

I would say just finding those people initially. Because I didn't know anybody when I came here. Finding those close-knit communities, or building my support system again, from the ground up, because 34 people, we're all spread out all over the country, our graduating class. Again, that was probably the hardest part. And something I'm still working on. It's just building a support system from the ground up and finding little niches where I can succeed. (Josh)

Enrique asserted that finding a community was especially important for rural students:

It's a big mental thing and I think that, for rural students, like just having a support network of some type, whether it be like you getting involved with a club or like an organization or just like hanging out with your friends in your suite or something, just making sure that you have a support network. It can be any type, it doesn't have to be specific, just to make campus feel smaller than what it really is. I think like being involved on campus or just doing things, in general, will make that, I think that would make somebody, like that, would make rural students feel more at home.

Students carried the value of community with them to college. About half of the students (7) stated that they valued community, both maintaining connection to their home community and developing a community at college. For instance, Rebecca discussed the importance of staying connected to her community, specifically her family:

My family, we're very family oriented. My dad's Mexican, obviously, and my mom's white, but on that side, my dad's side of the family that culture is just very family oriented. I've never been without my parents for more than a weekend or a week. Being six hours away from home was extremely difficult, and even sometimes like being an hour and a half away from home is sometimes ... I'm just like I just want to go. I just want to go home and see my parents. So family, keeping up with family is definitely important.

Thomas expressed how he not only wanted to stay connected to his community back home, but that he wanted to replicate that sense of community in his college environment:

Another value was keeping up with people from back home. I think that community aspect, I still hold that pretty dear to myself. I still try to text everybody now and then, try to see where they are and do they need anything.

I lived at the dorms my freshman year. I know that's required now, but it used not to be. But I lived there, and I tried my best to get my suite mates to hang out with one another 'cause I thought if you're living on the same hall, you should know who they are. Y'all should at least have a relationship to have a conversation.

Other students placed higher value on building community at college. Students like Kaitlyn also prioritized establishing friendships with people they could trust:

When I first got here, I wanted some sort of community and I wanted to stay close to my faith. Those were two things that I carried into college, I think. I wanted a group of friends that I could trust because I was in an area that I didn't necessarily know that I could.... just finding a core group of people that ... And I found that and we're still all very close friends. We're actually all going to dinner tonight, which is nice.

For Adam, it was important to him that he not only build community, but that he do so with people who were different from him:

I would say like connecting with people. I've ... growing up a small town it wasn't very diverse or anything. You know there was some different types of races and you know traditions and religions and whatnot. But coming here I really wanted to make an effort to connect with people from different cultures and I think that was one of my major drives was kind of learning what was out there and getting exposed to a new environment. So, connecting with other people from diverse backgrounds was very important to me and I found that very easy to do at SSU and then [the city] as a whole.

Enrique, on the other hand, sought to find community with individuals who shared his racial background:

I will say, for me, the ability to do well academically, but also socially. I will say, I guess kind of backing it up, I did very well academically freshman year, but I don't think I did well socially in terms of finding people who I thought related to me and my identities.

He was able to achieve his goal of finding community when he became a teaching assistant for one of his professors who was teaching a diversity course:

I saw a lot of value in that class, a lot of the community-building but also about what it means to be a person of color in STEM and how do you build community and how do you deal with diverse issues and stuff. So that's kind of where, I think that's really where I saw my social life explode, I will say. I found people that were like me.

*Community* meant different things for different students, but for all of them it boiled down to finding or maintaining a human connection among individuals with shared values, whether that was people from home, people at college, or both.

*Service.* The majority (10) of the students in this study expressed or exhibited a value in service and giving back. Like *community*, the value of *service* was connected to students' need for relatedness, both with college and home communities. Students exhibited this value through their involvement on campus. Nine students participated in extracurricular activities or leadership positions that engaged in service activities. For instance, Phoebe was involved in tutoring, while Daevin participated in computer science camps for kids. Erika was highly involved in volunteer work, in part because she was getting hours to prepare for occupational therapy school, but also enjoyed serving students with disabilities: "Then of course the kids that came to the camp, kids with special needs and disabilities have my heart." Rural students initially began their service-related activities in high school. What started as extracurricular involvement in high school progressed into a lifelong value for service and giving back. Kaitlyn explained that, "Community service has stayed a huge part of my life." Kaitlyn was actively involved in Special Olympics in high school, and in college her passion for helping others deepened into lifelong values:

I would say that the things that I now love, specifically Special Olympics, I think are going to extend into my career. I think that wherever I end up, that's going to be a

passion of mine. Or at least my ability to interact with individuals with intellectual disability has changed my mentality or stopped the stigma that I once carried even. I think that in high school maybe, they like kick started my involvement in college, where at the college involvement and my passions that I've figured out here, are going to continue for the rest of my life.

Josh was compelled to give back through his leadership role on campus, especially in a way that would be beneficial to other rural students:

I just had two big reasons. One of them was, because I had great orientation experience, I felt so welcomed and valued, to give back and show gratitude to the community who had done so much for me already. That rural piece as well. Even though I'm from a rural town, I went to an early college, and so I can speak to those experiences and relate closely to those students and make sure even though this is a big place, you're going to be fine. You'll find your people and things like that.

Values of service influenced students to pursue career paths that would positively impact the world. When asked about his personal interests, Adam discussed his love for the outdoors and hiking, which he attributed to his upbringing in the mountains. This personal interest, paired with his academic interest in chemistry and engineering, led him to pursue a career in environmental-focused engineering. Through this major, Adam felt he could pursue a career of interest that had job security and would have a positive environmental impact using renewable resources.

I would say to have opportunity to do the things that you want to do, and to feel satisfied with what you do every single day. And obviously some days are harder than others but to think about at the end of the day that what you did that day helps

society, it helps you, and it helped your family. I think that's very important and to know you make an impact on the world as whole for the better, not for the worst obviously, is also a good thing. And then to have something that encompasses all those values is very unique and remarkable and I think to find something that does all those things for each individual is very important.

Similarly, Phoebe deeply valued the serene beauty of the wooded community where she was raised. She was pursuing a career in environmental science to protect these types of ecosystems and have a positive impact on the world, however small:

When I first started college, I wanted to change the world. I think a lot of people do and I didn't know how and so I've let go in some ways of changing the whole world and just figuring out of how to change it just a little bit in a way that I can manage and so studying environmental science hopefully will let me do that.

Both Adam and Phoebe attribute this value for environmental conservation to the physical characteristics of their home communities.

Other students were committed to pursuing careers that were not only beneficial to society, but to rural communities, usually their own. Five students in this study expressed an interest in returning home to affect positive change and give back. Students attribute this goal to their underlying value of service. Students' goals related to *giving back*, specifically to rural communities, is discussed in the following theme on student motivation.

***Values significance.*** The findings surrounding rural student values reinforces some of the primary tenets of Guiffrida's (2006) cultural adaptation of Tinto's (1993) model. First, the values underscore the importance of including cultural norms and values as part of students' pre-entry attributes. Furthermore, the values students expressed were tied closely to

the SDT needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. For instance, values such as hard work and education speak to students' desire to develop competence in their intellectual growth. The value students place on hard work as a means of achieving a goal also speaks to their desire to have autonomous will to set and achieve goals in their education.

Alternatively, the desire for community and service more closely relate to values associated with *relatedness* because both values were associated with bolstering individual connection with their communities. Finally, the inclusion of home social systems in the model demonstrates the values of community and service, both of which are connected to students' home communities.

***Rural foundations summary.*** The first theme, *Rural foundations: The meaning of home*, focuses on rural students' foundational relationships with their home communities. Students describe their home communities as small and close-knit, but also as culturally isolated and impoverished. Most students in this study positively orient themselves towards their home communities and have positive interactions with community members, but a small minority of rural students have more complicated or ambivalent relationships with home. Finally, rural students' backgrounds reinforce values in education, hard work, community and service. These values are closely related to the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and service described in SDT.

### **Pride in Self, Family, and Community: Student Motivation**

The second theme that emerged from the findings, *Pride in self, family, and community: Student motivation* explored rural students' motivation towards pursuing and persisting in college, as well as the type of experiences they pursued in college. I subdivided

the *Student motivation* theme into motivation orientation associated with *individualistic*, *collectivist*, and *blended* motivations.

As I introduced in Chapter 2, Guiffrida (2006) theorizes that college students' socio-cultural backgrounds influence their motivational orientation in ways that shape their college success. Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Job Involvement Theory (JIT) as a framework, Guiffrida (2006) argues that the psychological needs for autonomy and competence are more closely associated with individualistic values, whereas the need for relatedness is reflective of collectivist values. Students raised in cultures that prioritize collectivist values are more likely to exhibit greater intrinsic motivation to fulfill the need for relatedness, whereas students raised in individualist cultures are motivated by individual autonomy and competence (Guiffrida, 2006).

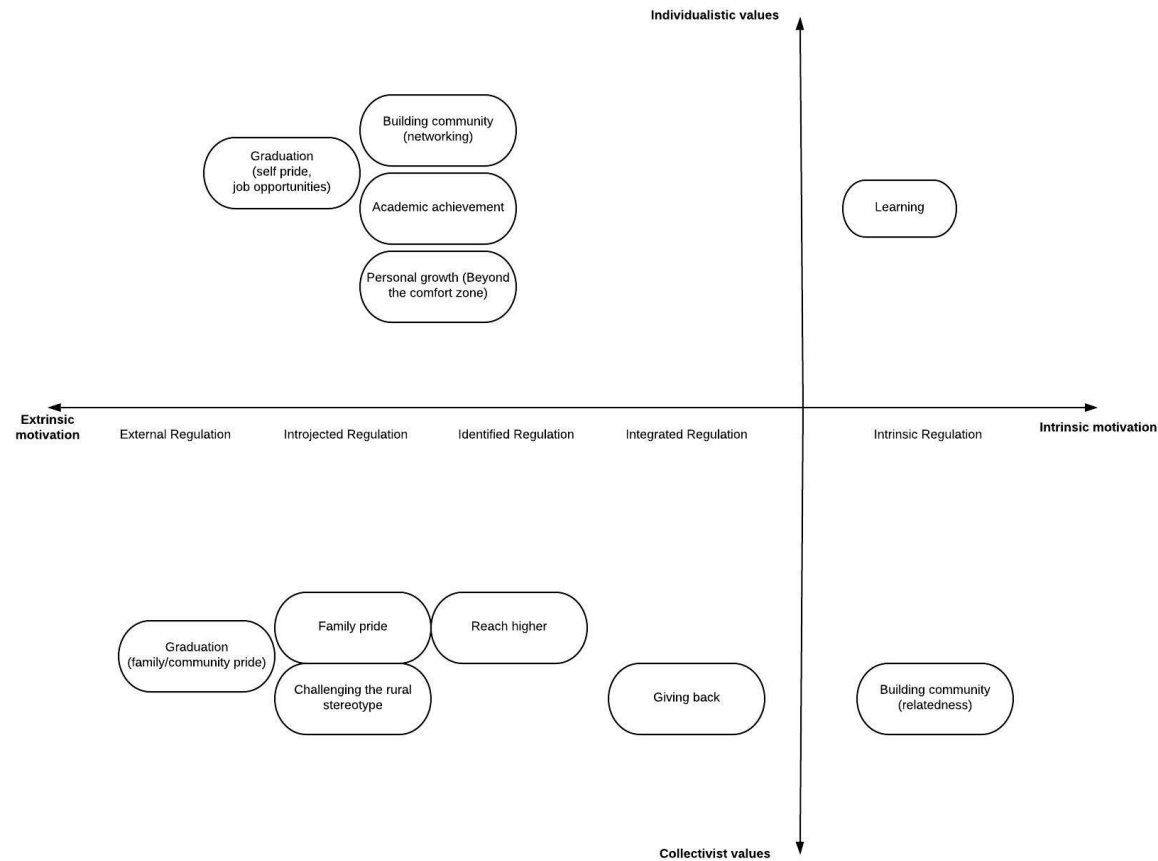
Individuals' behavior ranges along a spectrum of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation based on the extent to which they have internalized the reward value of the behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsically motivated behaviors are those that are rewarding in and of themselves (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004). Behaviors motivated by external forces fall along a spectrum of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic behaviors that are most highly motivated by external rewards are *externally regulated*. External rewards or punishments directly motivate externally regulated behaviors, such as a student working to achieve good grades in school purely to avoid punishment from parents. The next level of extrinsic motivation is *introjected regulation*, which describes how an individual internalizes some of the regulation but is not fully motivated by intrinsic values. Ryan and Deci (2000) categorize ego-related or self-esteem-related motivations in this type of extrinsic motivation, such as a sense of pride or avoiding guilt or anxiety. *Identified regulation* describes

motivation that is of personal importance or value. *Integrated* regulation is the most internalized form of extrinsic motivation. It describes when an extrinsic motivation is fully internalized into one's values. Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that, "Actions characterized by integrated motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, although they are still considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than for their inherent enjoyment" (p.73). See Figure 3 (p. 87) for model of the motivational continuum.

Students' espoused motivations reflect the values of the cultures in which they are raised and shape the types of experiences they pursue in college. The findings from this study show how rural students from the American South are motivated to persist in college based on a combination of individualistic and collectivist values, and the degree to which they internalize these values is reflected by the extent to which the student is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated.

During their interviews, I asked rural students to share some of their academic and personal goals during college, and the factors that helped them to persist. The major themes that emerged from their narratives were loosely plotted based on two orthogonal spectrums: an intrinsic-extrinsic motivation spectrum, and collectivist-individualistic value spectrum (Figure 4). Motivations were not plotted to scale, nor does the plot capture the subtle nuances of SDT and Guiffrida's (2008) model. Instead, I approximately placed the goals in the quadrant in which they best fit. Guiffrida (2008) argues that relatedness is more closely associated with collectivist values and autonomy and competence with individualistic values, however, these needs are not entirely associated with individualistic or collectivist values. Goals may also appear in multiple different quadrants depending on the student's reasoning

for pursuing that goal. I have organized and described student motivations based on the quadrant in which they are associated.



*Figure 4.* Rural Students' College Goals in Relation to their Individualistic and Collectivist Values, and Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations. Adapted from "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," by R.M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, 2000, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), p.72. Copyright 2000 by American Psychological Association, Inc.

**Individualistic.** Individualistic goals associated with autonomy and competence motivated rural students in this study throughout their college experiences. Rural students in this study were highly motivated by individualistic goals associated with autonomy and competence. Individualistic goals were subdivided based on whether students were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to achieve those goals. *Academic achievement* was an extrinsically motivated goal to earn high grades and academic accolades. *Love of learning* described students' intrinsic motivation to gain knowledge for its own sake. Finally, *Beyond the comfort zone* captured students' desire for personal growth through the pursuit of new experiences.

***Academic achievement: individualistic and extrinsic.*** Most of the participants (11 of 15) stated that one of their academic goals coming into college was to do well academically, as evidenced by a high GPA. Attaining high grades is an external reward, making this form of motivation *external regulation*. However, students who were motivated to attain high grades for a sense of pride (as opposed to the grade itself) would be motivated by *introjected regulation*. The prevalence of students motivated by academic achievement is not particularly surprising given that SSU is an academically competitive school and many of these students were academically high achieving in high school. Rural students aimed to continue to earn high grades in college:

I'm from a small school when I came here, I was towards the top of my class and then I did really well at [the community college] and I wanted to do well here. Probably a goal, as far as GPA goes, just to be above 3.5, not be valedictorian but have some sort of something next to my name. (Adam)

I was determined to make A's and B's. I've never made a C before in my life. (Erika)

Well, I was pretty much in high school like a straight A student. So that was my goal is just to keep those straight As. (Matt)

Students were at the top of their graduating classes in high school, and they anticipated continuing to perform at a high level in college. Other students, like Liz, stated that their goal was to make the dean's list or earn good grades to get into graduate school.

Faculty and staff similarly recognized rural students to be highly motivated to succeed. Dr. Rockie challenged the idea that rural students were less likely to be achievement-oriented than their nonrural peers:

I was going to make the claim that maybe the kids from the bigger cities are more competitive or something, but that's not true. Some of my most, and by competitive, I mean the kids who are really grade-oriented, I don't think I see a trend around where they're coming from. I can name four kids from rural areas who are all very concerned about their grades and want to achieve at a high level. I can't say that I see a difference there.

Dr. Khan and Ms. Ferris asserted that rural students were strongly motivated to earn high grades that would make them competitive for graduate school and the job market. For instance, Dr. Khan explicit says, "Rural kids, I would say they have a desire to succeed. They understand that they have this desire to say, 'How do I succeed?'" In addition, both Dr. Khan and Ms. Ferris described how rural students came to college with a certain level of resilience that distinguished them from their nonrural counterparts:

The second thing that I always think of rural kids is for our industry or for industry, they have pretty good common sense, where they grew up in their atmosphere or they had to survive on common sense. Do you see what I'm saying? While the city kid, they just are smart, or sometimes they haven't had to face the same kind of challenges as they were going through, I think. (Dr. Khan)

But they come in with a certain amount of resilience that sometimes students who have every opportunity available to them just don't have to deal with. (Ms. Ferris)

While they may have been motivated to succeed academically, rural students described how they tempered some of their academic goals when they better understood the rigor of the coursework. Their priorities changed from having perfect grades to maintaining good grades while also getting involved on campus and gaining other experiences. This transition is discussed further in *Academic strategies* section.

The personal value that some students placed on their academic achievement illustrates that they internalized some of the individualistic norms that are reinforced in the American education system and society. The degree to which students demonstrated that these extrinsic goals were internalized suggests that they were motivated by *identified regulation*, a form of highly internalized extrinsic motivation according to SDT. The university, in turn, rewards individual achievement through GPA, dean's list, honor societies, and graduation honors. Faculty further encouraged students who were planning to continue their education beyond the bachelor's degree to achieve high grades in their undergraduate education, as graduate school admissions rely heavily on undergraduate achievement.

*Love of learning: individualistic and intrinsic.* Beyond the grades, the love of learning and achieving mastery of a subject motivated rural students intrinsically in their academic studies. SDT characterizes students' love of learning as intrinsic because it was rewarding in and of itself. Several students, like Grace, demonstrated a deep desire for both autonomy (freedom to choose) and competence (mastery of a subject) in her learning:

The freedom to pick whatever I want to choose. I could double major. I could double minor. I could do whatever I want. There's so many classes here and there's so many people to meet in these classes that you would never have met otherwise. There's so much to learn from these classes and the other people and your professors. I'm just a big nerd, I guess. I really love learning.

The breadth and depth of the coursework similarly motivated Daevin: "Personally, I wanted to learn what I can, try to get experience in new areas. I wanted to try new things, and basically in many possible areas as I could." The breadth of academic majors and minors offered at SSU allowed students to take course offerings across multiple disciplines and do a deep dive into areas of strong academic interest.

The pursuit of a major, or concentration within a major, motivated other students in their academic studies. Meredith explained that one of her goals was, "Definitely figure out what I wanted to major in." Once she identified her major, she focused on exploring the concentrations of interest, "Kind of what I wanted out of my [applied science] degree, because I did come in undeclared [within the major]. So, then I was trying to figure out which major I wanted out of all of them." Meredith ultimately decided not to specialize within her major because she enjoyed the freedom to explore many different avenues of interest within her applied science major.

Adam's choice of major was closely associated with his personal interests as well as his abilities: "To do what I could and to learn the material. I always enjoyed chemistry a lot and was decent at it and so I wanted to further go down that avenue and just like graduate with a job." Note that Adam expresses both an intrinsic interest in learning ("I always enjoyed chemistry...") but that he also takes a pragmatic interest in following that interest to employment after graduation ("...graduate with a job"), a need that is extrinsically motivated.

*Beyond the comfort zone: individualistic and extrinsic.* In addition to their academic goals, students expressed a desire to gain new experiences that would allow them to grow and learn in other areas of their lives. Like their academic achievement, the opportunity to gain new experiences motivated rural students because they perceived that the new skills that they learned would better prepare them for life after college.

Grace, for instance, wanted to gain new experiences because she wanted to become more comfortable in adjusting to change:

I already considered myself open-minded, but I wanted to be even more open-minded and be comfortable with change, which adjusting to change is something hard for me maybe because of my hometown. Nothing ever changed. If something did change, even if it was not important at all, it was shocking.

Grace specifically attributed her difficulty in adjusting to change to her rural upbringing ("adjusting to change is something hard for me maybe because of my hometown"), so the transition to college represented an opportunity to develop this area in her personal growth. Grace expressed that getting used to change in college would help her cope with the larger transitions later in life:

Rural students expressed that adjusting to change could be challenging for them because at home things stayed relatively the same. Attending college, students were motivated to engage in activities that were foreign to them and would challenge them academically and personally. For Grace, this motivation manifested in the goal of wanting to be more comfortable with change in general: “The change, I’m going to be going through a huge change the next year. Graduating, studying abroad, moving. I’m just like, ‘Oh!’ Then, the real world. I don’t know. I think I’ve prepared enough that I won’t freak out.” By becoming more comfortable with change, Grace could develop greater autonomy to pursue other goals. The goal of becoming more comfortable with change is also because achieving this level of comfort could help Grace reduce her anxiety in pursuing some of her greater goals of graduating, studying abroad, and moving.

Other students, like Josh, expressed a general desire to be challenged in ways that would push them to develop their competence in new areas:

I really wanted to be challenged, whether it be through, say academics, like either a leadership experience or things like that too, because high school felt very, in terms of the opportunities felt very safe. It just felt very middle-of-the-road. So, I wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone. I wanted to be challenged to gain either transferrable skills or new insights or whatever that may be, to help set me up for success in the future. (Josh)

As with Grace, Josh frames the challenges he anticipates in college as a departure from his experience back home (“because high school felt...very safe”). The goal of being challenged would lead him to develop skills that help him achieve other goals (“transferrable skills”

“help set me up for success in the future”). Similarly, Phoebe specifically sought leadership opportunities in college that would push her to develop new skills:

I tutor which is not something I really thought I'd ever do and so getting to know other students and being able to help them in their classes wasn't something I saw myself doing. I'm a certified group fitness instructor which I also didn't see myself doing. As an introvert, getting up in front of people and telling them, "This is what to do. This is how you do it" and motivating them really pushed the person who I thought I was. Definitely growing up a lot since I started college.

Phoebe developed competence in specific skills (tutoring, leading others) that could be applied to future settings. Yet, Phoebe also expressed some level of internalization around her goal of personal growth (“Definitely growing up a lot”). Matt similarly expressed how pushing one outside their comfort zone, an extrinsic goal, could be internalized as a personal value:

I would say just back to the whole growth mindset that I was talking about before. I mean, obviously you're gonna have some low times, but that's just all part of growing and expanding your knowledge and ideas. So just keeping in mind that it's all a process, you know?

Matt’s description of pushing one outside one’s comfort zone as a “growth mindset” demonstrates how this goal, while extrinsic, can fall on the most intrinsic side of the continuum (*identified regulation* or *integrated regulation*).

**Collectivist.** Research on rural communities suggests that they retain collectivist values such as group harmony and building relationships with others. The first subtheme, *Family pride*, describes how rural students were motivated to persist to make their families

proud and honor their sacrifices. *Reach higher* was the second subtheme within the collectivist motivations. It captured how, through their academic success, rural students were able to reach new milestones for their families and their communities. *Challenging the rural stereotype* describes how students were motivated to dispute negative stereotypes associated with rural cultures through their academic excellence. Lastly, *Giving back* illustrated how students embodied their value of *service* to give back to rural communities after graduation, sometimes their own.

***Family pride: Collectivist and extrinsic.*** When asked about what factors motivated them to persist in college, about half of the students stated that they wanted to make their families and communities proud of them. Again, motivations related to self-esteem are considered *introjected regulation* (extrinsic motivation) according to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For instance, when asked what factors encouraged him to succeed, Adam stated (among other reasons), “To make my family proud. To make my dad happy.” Participants acknowledged the encouragement and, often, the financial support they received from their families. Phoebe discussed the financial investment her parents made in her education and said that she was motivated to show her parents how she had profited from their investment:

I actually got a little something out of what my parents paid for and being able to use that in the next class and the class after that and eventually next semester when I graduate being able to use those same skills in my career.

Similarly, earning high grades motivated Thomas not only for his own self-pride but to bring pride to his family: “Grades. ... especially 'cause I had to show it to my parents and explain that I'm not wasting my money or I'm not wasting theirs. That was rewarding, was being able to show them that I was doing well.” Phoebe and Thomas’s goals illuminate the intersection

of individualistic and collectivist goals that motivate rural students: on one hand, rural students desire the external validation of their academic success through grades or skills, yet they do so not only for their own egotism but to honor the investment made by their families in their education.

Other students, like Grace, framed this idea of family pride as something they did not want to lose should they not graduate:

Other things, I don't want to disappoint my family. One of my friends that I hang out from middle school recently dropped out of SSU. He's going to an online school for something completely different. But I could never do that because I would disappoint my parents. Even though they're not annoying where they'd be like, "I'm disappointed in you," there is still a chance that they could. I'm just going to prevent that completely.

The threat of disappointment, while not as commonly expressed, was still a sentiment that motivated students to persist in the face of challenges.

Rebecca also described her parents support as an investment that she felt duty-bound to repay through graduation:

Researcher: What role do you feel like your home community has played in supporting you, for the last four years?

Rebecca: Definitely a big role. They've kept me going basically. I feel like I kind of owe it to them, because they've supported me all my life, I kind of owe it to them to show them that they didn't just waste their time on me. I definitely have to graduate. I feel that pressure to graduate. And that's a good thing.

Notice how Rebecca describes her academic success as a type of repayment (“I owe it to them...”), but one that she is willing to make (“And that’s a good thing.”). However, it also adds this additional sense of pressure (“I definitely have to graduate. I feel that pressure to graduate”) that could further exacerbate the other pressures a college student experiences through their coursework and other responsibilities. In fact, Rebecca was already under increased pressures to pay for schooling. Rural students’ motivation to make their families proud, while honorable, could also create additional stressors that affect their persistence.

*Reach higher: Collectivist and extrinsic.* Beyond making their families proud, other rural students were motivated to graduate because it represented a step forward for their families and communities. For Rebecca, graduating from college was a milestone that many of her family members had not had the opportunity to pursue:

Definitely my dad is always in my mind so him not even graduating high school, and always telling me, “You're going to college, you're going to do better, you're going to do this.” All those lectures, those many, many nights. That's definitely something I feel like I owe to him and to my mom. I feel like I owe them at least this. At least graduating.

As in the previous section, we see where Rebecca frames college graduation as a debt owed to her family. Her words also illustrate how rural families value education as a source for generational change (“...always telling me, ‘You’re going to do better...’”), and how students like Rebecca internalize that value (“That’s definitely something I feel like I owe...”). What distinguishes this sentiment from the previous section is that Rebecca specifies how graduating would not just bring pride to her family, but that it represents a goal achieved for her family. In other words, a difference exists between her family feeling pride

for her accomplishment versus Rebecca's accomplishment of graduating representing an accomplishment that extends beyond herself to be an accomplishment for the entire family.

Grace was the first in her family to finish her college degree. College graduation was a milestone that had not been achieved by any of her older siblings:

I know they'll [her family] back me up with whatever I do, but none of their kids went to college. My dad has two kids and my mom has three and none of them went to college, so I'm just going to be like, "Yeah, I'm going to be the one to do it."

Grace expresses a mixture of both individualistic pride in being achieving this milestone for herself as well as collectivist pride of graduating for her parents.

For other students, graduating from college represented an accomplishment for the entire rural community. Enrique was a recipient of a full-ride scholarship program that allowed him to attend SSU. He perceived his scholarships as a privilege, a privilege that was not often granted to those from his community. Enrique described how that privilege also meant that he had a responsibility to take advantage of the opportunity and persist in the face of obstacles:

I think about that all the time. It's kind of like a first world problem I would say, like 'Oh, I kind of want to give up right now,' but there are so many other people that would rather be in my spot right now. I think about that like I'm doing that for them. I'm doing it for not only myself, not only my parents, my mentors. I'm doing it for them.

Enrique perceived his own college graduation as a way to inspire other students from his community that college was an option for them and as a signal to university stakeholders that it was worthwhile to invest in rural students. Like *Family pride*, students' desire to graduate

from college is associated with their self-pride (*introjected regulation*). But beyond that, college graduation was expressed as being of personal value to students because of what it would represent for their families and communities. Therefore, *Reach higher* associates more closely with *identified regulation*, distinguishing this motivation slightly from merely bringing pride to one's family.

***Challenging the rural stereotype: Collectivist and extrinsic.*** The negative stereotype of rural people as ignorant or stupid loomed large in the minds of some participants. As with the previous two forms of motivation, challenging the rural stereotype is related to one's self-esteem. Rather than developing a sense of pride, challenging negative stereotypes allowed students to avoid a sense of self-shame associated with their rural identities. Several students cited examples of peers who started college but did not finish. For example, Alex said:

Yeah, I guess the pressure is like seeing ... I've known kids from home that come here that went into engineering and they flunked out and started doing something else. Like I said, it's that kind of thing ... I feel like if I flunked out even though I don't have, I don't think I have any [inaudible 00:54:16] flunking out but if I did quit or decide to do something else that ... this almost makes me think that I care about what everybody thinks there. But I feel like you'd get back and people talk about it ... which I feel like is kind of a self-centered way to think about it, but I just realized that's how I think about it so that's weird.

For Alex, failure to graduate represented a threat to his individual sense of pride from his community ("this almost makes me think that I care about what everybody thinks there. But I feel like you'd get back and people talk about it..."). Yet he also suggests that dropping out of college, though stigmatized, is not uncommon in his community ("I've known kids from

home that come here that went into engineering and they flunked out and started doing something else...”), implying that, in some ways, not finishing college is even somewhat expected in his community.

Cecil also saw many of his peers from home drop out of college. Even when he struggled academically, one thing that kept him going was not wanting to be perceived a college dropout like so many others in his community:

Cecil: Well, another thing, I didn't want to be another one of those kids from a small town, that goes to a big college, and... I just couldn't do it. Like blames everything else, rather than himself.

Researcher: Was that something you felt happened a lot in your hometown?

Cecil: Yeah. The people that went to a university, most of them come back after freshman year.

Graduating from college meant not fulfilling the stereotype that rural students could not succeed in college.

Directly challenging the negative rural stereotype by succeeding in college (as opposed to not failing) was a motivating factor in persisting for these students. Enrique's motivation to challenge the rural stereotype was two-fold: he wanted to show that rural people are not stupid, but also that rural America isn't only white, agricultural societies:

I guess the media just kind of over-stereotypes or overgeneralizes what rural America is really like and not all of rural America is working-class white people that are farmers...I think that really weighed on me kind of hard junior year of college because it was not only the media overgeneralizing, but then when I told people “Oh, I'm from a rural area,” they think I'm dumb automatically, when I actually have a healthy 3.8

GPA, went to graduate school, I do research and I'm accomplished in, I would say, a lot of the things that I do. Just because I'm from a rural area I'm even stereotyped by my peers. "Oh, you must be backward-thinking, or you must be really dumb." That's not what rural America is all about.

For Enrique, achieving college success allowed him to not only challenge the negative stereotypes of rural people but to put his own county on the map:

And so, at least a lot of students, at least in my experience, growing up, there was always this very negative stigma about where I'm from, or just rural areas in general, that people there are dumb, people there don't work hard for what they really want in life and sometimes it's just a matter of they don't have the resources to do that and I've been able to show that yes, good things come out of [my county]. Yes, people from rural areas are competitive for graduate school. People from [my county] are competitive for these national fellowships that probably most students from urban areas with professor parents dream of when they're in the 7th grade...So I think being from a rural area, it just makes me work that much harder to make my community proud, but also to show that I'm breaking the stereotype of what somebody from rural northeast North Carolina can actually do. And so, I know that no matter what happens I've always made not only my parents proud and myself proud but also my community proud.

Dunstan (2013) heard a similar narrative in her study on the college experiences of rural Appalachian students. College was the first time that these students became consciously aware of the negative stereotypes associated with rural populations. Students' Appalachian dialects "marked" them as rural to their peers and professors and triggered the negative

stereotype of rural populations that is often associated with the rural dialect. Dunstan (2013) found that institutional actors and peers sometimes reinforced negative rural stereotypes through their behavior in the classroom, and this behavior negatively affected students' academic and social integration into the university. Ms. Ferris recollected a similar experience of how one of her students consciously masked her rural accent because she was afraid it would denote her as stupid in the eyes of her professors and peers. These findings suggest that rural students are conscious of the stereotypes associated with their culture and, in some cases, actively challenging these stereotypes through their own postsecondary achievement.

***Giving back to the community: Collectivist and extrinsic.*** Several participants discussed their motivation to use their education to make a positive impact on their communities. Both Thomas and Erika intended to return home after graduation to contribute to the growth of their home communities. Thomas was deeply involved in politics throughout college, and stated that he felt that, "...the best way I see to fix something is through politics." Thomas planned on returning home after graduation to help his town navigate its recent growth and become more economically viable:

I don't wanna pull a Jesse Helms and try to keep textiles in the mountains for no reason other than trick another generation into working in it and not going to college, but I do want to go back and try to open up some new businesses and try to diversify the local economy a little bit. Get some stability to that area. 'Cause it's not dying. If anything else, it's growing. What's nice is there's never been any money in that area, so we don't have a dying downtown. So everything's open for new buildings.

Thomas expressed that with his college education and his experience in state politics, he could assist his town in navigating this cultural transition. Similarly, Erika stated that she wanted to return to her home community to improve the education or health care system:

It makes me want to go home because I feel like they have given me so much in my life and supported me for so long. Especially when I graduate, I want to use whatever education I get here or elsewhere to take that home. My education degree is actually in a STEM concentration. We don't have any certified STEM educators back at home.

So, if I can go into a school system, start something like that, and bring something new that we don't have, I would love to do that. With OT too, I would love to just give that to my community that has pushed me in so many ways. I've never questioned whether I wanted to go home or stay up here.

Erika is even more explicit than Thomas in expressing that her primary purpose in returning home is to give back to a community that she feels has given so much to her. Erika specifically sought to major in an academic field that would fulfill a need for her home community (“So, if I can go into a school system, start something like that, and bring something new that we don't have, I would love to do that.”). Her words illustrate how her desire to give back to her home community shaped her academic major choice.

Kaitlyn and Enrique, on the other hand, expressed a desire to give back to their rural communities from afar. One of the major challenges Enrique saw in his home community was the effect of poverty on limiting students’ educational opportunities.

Enrique recognized that he was immensely privileged to have earned a full-ride scholarship to SSU, and he wanted to provide that opportunity for others. Enrique planned on one day setting up a scholarship for students from his home community to study science:

I see this as a lifelong goal, is to establish a scholarship for students that are interested in science from [my county]. No college restrictions, you don't have to go to SSU. As long as you're majoring in science of some sort, I want to introduce a scholarship fund for that, so.

Enrique's way of giving back to his community was to remove the financial barriers for other students so they could also enjoy the benefits of education.

Yeah, but it's just I think that, for me is that I want to reduce, at least from where I'm from, if a student should go to college, finances should not be the primary, like, just getting to college should not deter you from wanting to go. I want to try to make it as open as possible.

Kaitlyn recognized that a major challenge in her area was access to quality health care. She stated that people in her area had to travel long distances to get to a major hospital:

I think the closest is...an hour or two hours away to get help and that's just not feasible and people don't want to go that far away. We talked about that with college. So, people aren't getting help and I've had way too many friends pass away from drug addiction and overdosing and things like that. That's a problem that can be fixed with more resources available, closer by.

Kaitlyn identified that the lack of resources also stemmed from a lack of representation of rural people. This awareness prompted her to join the Appalachian Service Project (ASP), a service organization that rebuilds homes and provides basic resources to impoverished

communities in rural Appalachia. Due to her passion for serving rural communities, Kaitlyn planned on taking a service year between undergrad and graduate school for work full-time for ASP:

I was super passion about ASP in high school, was on staff for all the summers in college, and so I think that that has sort of stayed the same and my focus on making sure that rural voices are heard has been a cause that I've been passionate about [that] throughout college...

Like Thomas, Kaitlyn wanted to be sure that, “rural voices are heard”, even if it was not specifically those within her own community. She also identified how this commitment to service was long-standing from high school and would allow her to give back to other rural communities later in her career. The desire to give back is considered extrinsic because the reward, improvement of rural communities, is external to self. However, this is a motivation that rural students hold closely to their identities and is therefore is considered a highly internalized form of extrinsic motivation, such as *integrated regulation*.

Staff similarly noted this trend among rural students. For instance, Ms. Ferris perceived that her rural students were slightly more likely to consider how they can give back to their rural communities: “It's really fascinating, because I don't think our urban students often think in that frame of like, ‘What skills, what academic field should I be pursuing to help my hometown?’” In alignment with JIT, students with collectivist values are more likely to view their work as a way of giving back to society rather than a means for personal achievement. We see this sentiment demonstrated among some of the rural participants in this study. While most of the students interviewed did not express an interest in returning home or serving rural communities, those students who were interested had a clear

understanding of the challenges their communities faced and how they planned to address those challenges with the knowledge they gained from their college career. Even those students who chose not to return to their communities expressed an interest in service through their involvement on campus and their career choices in specific fields.

**Blended motivation.** Rendon et al. (2000) challenge Tinto's (1993) concept of integration. Rather, they suggest that students of color who successfully persist in dominant culture environments use dual socialization, or biculturation (Valentine, 1971), which allows individuals to practice the cultural norms and behaviors of both their home culture and the dominant culture. Rural students exhibit a degree of dual socialization through their expression of individualistic and collectivist values and goals. Students' goals to maintain a high GPA in college suggest that they internalized the individualistic norms, as suggested by JIT, and are therefore motivated to achieve good grades in college. On the other hand, students also cite that they are motivated to make their families proud and elevate the perception of their rural communities, suggesting that they also are motivated by needs associated with more collectivist cultures. Two areas where students demonstrated blended motivations were in their goals to build community and graduation.

**Building community.** One area in which students demonstrate a multifaceted set of motivations is in their pursuit of community on campus. Guiffrida (2006) theorized JIT, when applied to Tinto's model, would show that students socialized in a collectivist culture would be motivated to form social relationships with others to fulfill the need for relatedness, whereas a student socialized in individualist cultures would pursue social connections to fulfill the intrinsic needs of autonomy and competence. Rural students did demonstrate a value in community, both on campus and at home, as discussed in the previous section. One-

third of the rural students in this study (5) stated that, in addition to their academic goals, they wanted to find or build their social community at SSU. Six students also stated that they chose to attend SSU because they wanted to be exposed to new people or experiences. Upon closer examination, their motivations for seeking community illustrated a combination of individualistic and collectivist values that fall along intrinsic and extrinsic spectrum.

A portion of students sought out community for individual gain to build their professional network. For instance, Meredith initially joined extracurricular activities to make new friends:

I was part of the [living-learning community] so that was kind of a cool thing to come into. Having that little group to help build some friends and then expand my network and then after that it was pretty easy to expand and grow.

On one hand, Meredith expresses the desire to build a community for the sake of making new friends (collectivist, intrinsic), yet she also perceives building community as a way of building her professional network (individualistic, extrinsic). Meredith's motivation to develop community continues to shift towards a professional network and away from purely social interaction as she progressed through college:

Probably the social aspects. I think freshman and sophomore year I was, you know, always had to say yes to going to parties or everything, but now ... I think after sophomore year, I realized like I'm here for me and my major and my career.

By her sophomore and junior years, Meredith focused more on developing her work experience than her social network: "I think after sophomore year, I had more goals that were related to work and schoolwork rather than social and like clubs and organizations. And more of just building my resume and career focused." By her junior year, she held an internship,

which later led to a work position with the dean of her college. Meredith prioritized networking because she intended on finding a position outside of her hometown:

...it's pushed me harder to work a little harder, 'cause I know I didn't want to go back to living in [my town]. Just that I had a bigger goal of working in [the city] or somewhere else in the country. That probably pushed me to network more and find connections.

Other students were motivated by the collectivist value of relatedness. Building community was intrinsically motivating for these students because it fulfilled the psychological need to connect with others. Kaitlyn prioritized finding a core group of friends at college that she could trust at college:

When I first got here, I wanted some sort of community and I wanted to stay close to my faith. Those were two things that I carried into college, I think. I wanted a group of friends that I could trust because I was in an area that I didn't necessarily know that I could... And I found that and we're still all very close friends. We're actually all going to dinner tonight, which is nice.

As Kaitlyn describes it, finding a community of peers at college with similar values that she could trust was a primary goal, and one filled the void of close friendships she had left behind at home. Josh cited a similar sentiment:

And I wanted to, I guess find my community. That was a big one. I just wanted to find whether it be a group of people, community, whatever that looks like, because they take different forms. Where I felt safe, valued, acknowledged, heard, things like that.

Like Kaitlyn, Josh not only wanted a community, but one that shared his values and which he could trust to be himself. In these two cases, finding a community was a collectivist value that fulfilled students need for relatedness and was intrinsically motivated. By comparison, Meredith was somewhat interested in finding a group of peers for the social aspect (collectivist), but she placed far greater emphasis on community as a professional network (individualistic) for professional advancement (extrinsic)

Other students' social motivations were more complex. Adam demonstrated the combination of individualistic and collectivist motivation for social connection that fell along the intrinsic/extrinsic continuum:

I would say that it made me more eager to connect with professors and fellow classmates. I wasn't, I guess, predisposed to think that connecting with people was not worth it because that's kind of all you have in a rural community is people. You run out of things to do so you just hang out with people and I think that helped in the regard that I was not ... I didn't undervalue the bonds between people and so I think that comes in handy because some people don't figure out that connecting with your professor and knowing your professor's name and knowing them face-to-face is worth it until it gets to be too late.

On one hand, Adam demonstrates an intrinsic, collectivist motivation to connect with others (“I wasn’t, I guess, predisposed to think that connecting with people was not worth it”), and he attributes this motivation to his rural upbringing (“that's kind of all you have in a rural community is people”). Community is important because it gives one something to do (“You run out of things to do so you just hang out with people...”), which would be considered an extrinsic, collectivist motivation to bond with others. On the other hand, Adam

acknowledges the individualistic motivations of connecting with faculty, including the academic and professional benefits of building social connections with one's professors ("I think that comes in handy because some people don't figure out that connecting with your professor and knowing your professor's name and knowing them face-to-face is worth it until it gets to be too late"). Building connections with others leads to a secondary benefit of potential professional advancement, similar to what Meredith expressed, making it an extrinsically-motivated reason for social connections. This observation illustrates how rural students can be motivated by a combination of needs driven by their multifaceted cultural value system.

***Graduation and beyond.*** Graduation was another primary goal for most students. While this goal may seem like a trivial observation, it is important to recognize given the mixed findings on rural college student completion (Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson and Hanson, 2015; Schonert et al., 1991; Yoder, 2007). Several students discussed graduation as a way of proving to themselves that they could finish their degrees. Graduating was a personal achievement that instilled a sense of pride and maintained their self-image as an academically competent student. Cecil explains:

I didn't want to be [a] college dropout, really, you know? I had like three other friends that were trying to do engineering at [university] and they couldn't do it and I just didn't want people to view me that way. That was a big part of it, and then, I didn't want to let myself down. I've been telling myself I've been wanting to get an engineering degree for so long, I just had to do it.

According to SDT, motivations related to self-esteem are a form of extrinsic motivation known as *introjected regulation* (see Figure 3). As Cecil focused primarily on avoiding threat

to his self-esteem (“I just didn't want people to view me that way” and “I didn't want to let myself down”), his motivation would be classified as motivated by individualistic values.

Like Cecil, Grace was motivated to persist in college because of the potential negative impact on her self-esteem. I revisit a previous quote from Grace to illustrate:

Other things, I don't want to disappoint my family. One of my friends that I hang out from middle school recently dropped out of SSU. He's going to an online school for something completely different. But I could never do that because I would disappoint my parents.

To a certain degree, this motivation was individualistic in that she did not want to feel the disappointment from her parents. Yet Grace's sentiment could also hedge on collectivist if one understands her words to mean not only would her parents feel disappointment in her (individualistic) but also that her failure to persist would bring shame on her family (collectivist). In a later exchange, Grace describes how college graduation motivates her to persist because of both the individual pride it would bring her, and the pride it would bring her family to be the first to earn a college degree. Beyond graduation, students were motivated to major in a particular field or obtain specific experiences that would benefit their careers, such as internships and co-ops. As Daevin said, “It is an absolute priority for me to come out and have a good, reasonable position.” The motivation to obtain a career is both individualistic and extrinsic. Alex and Adam, both of whom majored in engineering, pursued that degree because of the stability of the job prospects it offered. Alex said, “Yeah having a four-year degree ... and that's one of the reasons I wanted to do civil because I feel like I could do a lot with it.” He explained further:

So, yeah probably about a year in I said, "Yeah, I wanna be an engineer at SSU." I kind of put myself into a box. I wanna be a civil engineer because you can get jobs here and then you get three or four years in and you're like, well it doesn't really matter where I can get a job. I can do anything anywhere. It's not really all about getting a 7 to 3, 9 to 5 job. Whereas, I feel like this is everywhere in the American culture, not just in rural places but you're raised from a little kid to say, "Hey why are we going to school?" So, you can get a job. Oh, okay.

Alex's sentiment speaks to the extrinsic value of education, which gives an individual the ability to obtain a stable career. It also illustrates how his home community framed the purpose of education as a means to getting a job rather than for internal fulfillment.

Similarly, Adam sought a major that would provide good job prospects:

And I think that's the really interesting and cool part is that all my education and everything I've been working toward is coming together to be utilized. Which also makes me proud because it shows me that I picked a useful major, and an applicable major, which is reassuring because I'm sure that a lot of people my age struggle with that if they don't choose a major that provides for that opportunity.

However, when asked factors motivated Adam to persist in college, Adam also expressed how he wanted to graduate for his own personal fulfillment and to bring pride to his family:

Adam: I would say ... yeah ... I would say to ... what's the word I'm looking for ... to satisfy myself, I guess. To prove myself that I can do it. To make my family proud. To make my dad happy.

These two ideas demonstrate how rural students' motivation to graduate is often more multi-faceted upon closer examination. On one side, Adam demonstrates individualist values

in that he is proud that he chose a major that is highly valued in the job market (“...a useful major, and an applicable major...”). He also is driven by the more intrinsic, individualistic value of self-pride (“to satisfy myself...”). In the same breath, Adam demonstrates collectivist values and extrinsic motivations of bringing pride to his family (“To make my family proud”). Adam’s narrative demonstrates how students are motivated by several different needs and motivating forces in their college persistence. Thomas makes a similar observation in a longer exchange:

I wanna do good. That sounds so juvenile. I want to make good on the sacrifices my parents made. They spent so much. And it's not just the money; it's the time, the opportunity cost of what they could've been doing with that money for themselves. My dad could've got a nice boat. They could've done anything. Bought a bigger house. They didn't; they invested in my education.

I owe it to them and to myself to do my best, to try to make the best of the situation I've been given, which has been a pretty dang good one. And to recognize that it's been a good one, and try to do better for my children, which will be the result of me doing good for myself.

You see? It all ties back. That's been the biggest motivator. It's not about doing it for my parents. I'm doing it because of my parents. And also 'cause I want to succeed, myself. For my children. I wanna be able to give my children a better bringing up than I got.

Like Adam, Thomas expresses a collectivist desire to do well academically and graduate to make his family proud (“I want to make good on the sacrifices my parents made”). However, he also recognizes that he is motivated by individualistic needs related to his own competence and to set himself and future family up for financial stability (“And also 'cause I want to succeed, myself”). These findings support the idea that rural students internalize both individualistic and collectivist values, and that these values translate into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to fulfill goals. Therefore, researchers of rural communities must conceptualize motivations on a cultural spectrum rather than as dichotomous.

***Pride in self, family, and community summary.*** A range of values and goals motivate rural college students to persist in college. On one side of the spectrum, individualistic goals motivated rural students, including academic achievement, learning, and pushing themselves outside their comfort zone. On the other side, rural students demonstrated ways in which they were motivated by goals associated with collectivist values, such as bringing pride to their families, achieving new levels of educational attainment within their families or communities, and challenging rural stereotypes. Rural students’ goals were also multifaceted, such as their goals associated with community and graduation. Within these goals, students were motivated along a spectrum of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation depending on the degree to which they internalized their goals. These findings illustrate how rural students are socialized through a blend of individualist and collectivist values in their home communities, and how these values influence their postsecondary goals.

### **Catching Up: Academic Preparation, Challenges, Strategies and Engagement**

The third theme that emerged from the analysis was *Catching up: Academic preparation, challenges, strategies, and engagement*. This theme captured how rural students' limited access to college preparatory resources left them feeling less prepared for their college coursework, especially those who attended traditional public high schools. Yet the rural students in this study also displayed strengths like resiliency and a desire to learn. These strengths helped rural students overcome some areas where they were not as prepared in college.

The first subtheme, *Starting behind: Academic preparation* describes rural students' academic background prior to college and its effect on their college preparation. In *Overcoming transitional challenges* rural students described some of the unique challenges that rural students experienced in the college classroom and the strategies they use to conquer those challenges. The final subtheme, *You get what you put in: Academic engagement*, illustrates the ways in which rural students value their academic coursework and the ways in which they get involved beyond the classroom.

**Starting behind: Academic preparation.** Students came from a range of academic backgrounds and levels of preparation. Two-thirds (10) of the students who were interviewed attended their local public high school. Of the remaining students, two attended early college in their counties, one attended the local private school, one attended a local charter school, and one attended the public STEM boarding school in the state for the final two years of high school. A strong connection exists between the type of school rural students attended and their perceived level of academic preparation, with students who

attended public school regarding themselves to be less academically prepared for college as compared to those rural students who attended college preparatory schools.

*View from 10,000 feet.* Document analysis revealed that rural students generally transitioned into college with fewer AP courses and lower test scores than their urban and suburban counterparts, regardless of the type of secondary school they attended (public, private, charter, etc.). The admissions office at SSU provided data on the number of AP courses offered by high schools and the average number of transfer credits of enrolled students to SSU over a five-year period. I compared the average number of AP credits offered by high schools in the participants' home counties to the average number of AP credits offered by all high schools of SSU enrolled students over the same time period. The comparison showed that high schools from participants' home rural counties offered nearly two fewer AP classes as compared to high schools from the average SSU in-state student (2.41 vs 4.34 AP classes).

I did the same comparison of transfer credits between enrolled students from participants' home counties and in-state county average. Students from participants' home counties did have a higher number of transfer credits than average (10.0 vs. 6.79 credits) but this difference may be due to greater access to community college courses in high schools than access to AP classes. For those rural students coming into the university with fewer college credits, they needed to start in entry-level classes, which lengthened the amount of time to degree attainment. Students either needed to take a heavy course load during the academic year or take classes over the summer in order to graduate in four years. Those students unable to finish in four years would need to take additional semesters of coursework, which costs students and their families additional money.

Next, I compared the average ACT and SAT scores of applicants from participants' home counties to average scores from all in-state SSU applicants over a five-year period. Applicants from students' home counties had lower ACT scores (24.5 vs. 26.1) and SAT scores (1134.9 vs. 1187.6) than the average SSU applicant. These findings reflect *all* high schools in the home counties, not just public schools. The findings are consistent with those from Byun et al. (2012c), who found that rural students score lower on college entrance exams than their nonrural counterparts. The document analysis illustrates that applicants and enrolled students from the participants' home counties appeared less academically prepared than the average SSU applicants, as evidenced by having access to fewer AP courses and lower college entrance exams. A surprising finding was the higher number of transfer credits from these counties. I speculate several reasons for this finding in the subtheme on public schools.

***College preparatory schools.*** The students who attended the college preparatory schools stated that they felt more academically prepared for the level of coursework in college because of the preparation their schools provided. Enrique, who attended the STEM boarding school the last two years of high school, described how the rigor of the coursework at his school prepared him for the rigor of coursework he could expect at SSU:

I will say the only similarity I think that I had was that I came from straight from [the STEM school]. There was that academic component that I knew that I would pretty much flourish here, or do well here, is because I had that experience at [the STEM school] where I was pushed, and I knew I would be pushed at SSU, and that was not even a challenge for me.

Enrique describes how his high school prepared him for the course content and general academic rigor of the coursework, so that when he did transition into college this higher level of expectation was not a surprise. Thomas described how his private high school taught him to write:

Like I said, I went to private school. College preparatory. They [his cousins] went to public schools, so there's a stark difference between what we were able ... It was a very big difference between what we were able to do our freshman year as far as reading, as far as writing skill. That was the biggest thing.

I really didn't have a problem. Of course, my school was very strict about writing, and they taught you to do research papers in the 10th grade. It was a college preparatory school, so when we got to SSU, I knew what I was doing, and I just rolled right through it with very little academic resistance...

Thomas went on to explain how, because he was able to easily tackle research papers in college it provided more time for him to engage in other academic experiences:

It provided free time for me to engage in internships and different kinds of activities that I felt that I was ahead of my peers, 'cause I was able to write like freshman. The majority of the freshman can't write ...

The two students who attended early college, Josh and Daevin, entered SSU with two years' worth of college credits they transferred into the institution. Daevin explains, "I went to an early college program, so I had credit hours that helped me out. And after I graduated from there, I came into SSU as, basically a Freshman with Junior credits." The credit Daevin

transferred from the early college allowed him to take a lighter course load of only 12 credit hours per semester.

Josh felt like his early college helped get him prepared for the college environment but because he brought in so many credits, he did not have the ability to explore different majors through general education credits:

Initially, academic-wise, I wanted to graduate early, because I went to an early-college high school. So, I came in with my AA [Associate of Arts]. But I didn't know what I wanted to do. Granted, it was great because it gave me exposure to the college experience, but also GEPs [general education credits] are out of the way, so that self-discovery phase is just completely gone. Initially, I wanted to just graduate and then just get out into the world.

Instead, Josh chose to take fewer credit hours per semester so he could take more time at college to explore his academic options: “It really allowed me to slow down and figure out where I fit in within the world too. And choose a path that I genuinely want to do and that I wasn't pressured into, if that makes sense.” The additional credit hours Daevin and Josh brought into college allowed both to have lighter course schedules and freed up time to pursue other opportunities, like explore different major options or getting involved in extracurricular opportunities.

Students who attended college preparatory schools often compared their experiences to their peers who attended the local public schools. By comparison, these students felt that they were better prepared for the rigor and expectations of the college classroom because of their high school experience. Meredith, who attended a charter school, discussed how her experience would have been different had she attended the public school:

Meredith: Sometimes I think about what if I had gone to the school in [the public school] and then what I have done after that. I think going from middle school to high school at the charter school, that was kind of a big step because going to that high school is definitely a lot more coursework, I feel like and a lot harder classes.

Researcher: The charter school?

Meredith: Yeah, and that got me probably more prepared for what I'm doing here.

Like Enrique, Meredith described how her school prepared her for the level of academic rigor she could expect in college. Enrique similarly felt that had he stayed in his home county, he would not have done as well academically at SSU because the public school offered fewer challenging courses:

... [the county public school] doesn't have like any AP course offerings. So, I wouldn't have been able to take like AP Chemistry or like an advanced physics class or as many like disciplinary specific biologies that I took. At [the STEM school] I took Anatomy and Physiology, Molecular and Cellular Biology, and Molecular Genetics. I didn't know what those things were when I was at [home]...So I think I would have probably had a very rude awakening when I would have come here.

The STEM school also provided greater depth of coursework than his public school. Rather than taking biology or chemistry, the STEM school offered more specific fields like physiology and molecular genetics, courses that more closely align with the higher level of sciences found on a college campus.

Thomas described how his experience learning to write in this private school compared to those of other freshmen after he enrolled at SSU:

I went to a college preparatory school, so they had a heavy course load for us. We wrote research papers in the sixth grade. That's when we started learning how to write them. Which I was so amazed. I came here, and freshman year, they said, "Write a five-page research paper." And I said, "I can do that tonight." And people were just like, stressing out, flipping desks. And I was like, "Calm down, y'all. It's five pages." I was surprised at how many people don't know how to write.

Public school-educated students in this study reinforced the notion that college was the first time they had to write a research paper.

However, private schools did not entirely prepare rural students for college. Meredith felt that attending the charter school for high school, rather than her local public school, helped prepare her for the type of work she could expect at SSU. Still, she did not have as many AP classes available to her and still needed to adjust to the non-academic component of college classes:

Coming into college I had taken three AP classes. Not all of those credits transferred but a few did. I had a little bit of previous studying and taking a big exam kind of thing. I guess I felt prepared, but definitely walking into the big classes. You have to go to the professor on your own and learn all that. It definitely took through my freshman and sophomore year to get the handle of how to really take a class and do well in it.

Thomas stated that one area where the high school did not prepare him for was technology, both instructional technology in the classroom and online platforms:

Technology. I had no idea how to use Moodle or any online courses. I did know how to use Excel, and PowerPoint, and Word, and the scientific calculators, but I had no idea how to use Moodle. I had never had to use that stuff.

Overall, the students who attended college preparatory schools felt academically prepared for the level of course rigor they encountered in classes at SSU and the type of work that was expected of them (e.g. writing papers, doing research).

***Public schools.*** Most of the students in this study (10) attended their local public schools. These students noted how, compared to their more urban and suburban counterparts, their rural schools offered fewer college prep classes. Grace said:

Everyone would always talk about the AP classes that they took. We only had four classes, four AP classes at my high school. I took all four of them and I thought I was pretty cool. Like, “I’m done taking all four.” These people are like, “Yeah, I transferred in with about 30 credits.” So, I felt behind because of my rural background.

Multiple consequences exist from having fewer college preparatory classes available. First, students with access to fewer college preparatory courses are often less academically prepared for the rigor of college courses, which makes their academic transition to college more difficult. Kaitlyn, Rebecca, and Liz all discussed having to learn how to study for the first time when they arrived at college. Rebecca explained:

I did not study a day in high school, and I had a GPA of a 4.5 when I left. I was top 10% of my class, I was actually number seven. It was very easy to get through high school but coming here you had to teach yourself how to study and really prepare yourself timewise.

Note that Rebecca discusses challenges associated with the noncognitive aspects of the college classroom, such as building study skills and time management.

Students who did have access to AP courses did not necessarily have college-level coursework. At Erika's school, the teachers who taught AP courses were not AP certified, which made the courses less academically rigorous than normal AP courses:

I had no AP credits, but I did take two AP courses. But we don't have any AP certified teachers at my high school, so nobody ever really passed the test. They offer the class, but we never passed. I mean, it was three total in the whole school. So, I came in with no credits, where some people come in with like a whole year done.

Document analysis of the school profiles of students' secondary schools further supported these accounts. Students enrolled at SSU attended schools that offered an average of 4.34 AP courses. Comparatively, students from participants' home rural counties attended schools with an average of 2.41 AP courses offered, supporting the idea that students from rural counties have fewer AP credits available to them.

However, rural students, on average, brought in a greater number of transfer credits relative to the average SSU applicant. Document analysis of aggregate academic data from students' counties revealed that the average number of transfer (college) credits that an enrolled SSU student brought into the university was 6.788 credits. Students from the selected counties brought in an average of 10.88 credits. The standard deviation of transfer credits was 4.98 credits, reflecting the large range of transfer credits. The average number of transfer credit accepted from these counties ranged from 4.72 to 21.3 credits.

A few reasons exist for these discrepancies. First, data from document analysis represent the average number of transfer credits for all schools in the county, not just the

public schools. In addition, transfer credits represent credits earned through AP coursework *and* dual enrollment courses through the local community college. North Carolina has a robust community college system with 58 community colleges across the state. North Carolina public schools have implemented the Career & College Promise (CCP) program, which is a dual enrollment program that allows students to enroll in community college classes through their high schools (Department of Public Instruction, n.d.a.). Even if students did not have access to AP coursework, they may have access to community college coursework through the CCP program. Students earning college credits through the CCP program than through AP courses may be easier because students simply need to pass the CCP courses to earn college credit, whereas many colleges require students to earn a certain score on the AP exam to earn college credits. Therefore, rural public schools may rely more heavily on CCP courses than AP coursework to provide advanced coursework to students.

Rural students also had lower scores on college entrance exams relative to the average applicant. The average ACT score of applicants from the selected counties was 24.5, compared to the ACT score of the average applicant, which was 26.1. The standard deviation was 1.99. Scores ranged from 21.3 to 26.9. Overall, applicants from the counties of participants had lower ACT scores than the average applicant to SSU. A similar trend emerged with SAT scores. The average SAT score of applicants from the selected counties was 1138.9, compared to the average SAT scores of applicants of 1187.6. The standard deviation of the scores was 64.4 points. SAT scores ranged from 142.6 in one county (145 points below the average) to 1221.2 (33.61 points above average). Overall, applicants from the selected counties had scores that were below that of the average applicant. These findings underscore the fact that students from rural counties, particularly those in participants' home

counties, may not have been as academically prepared as their urban and suburban counterparts, as evidenced by college entrance exams. Alternatively, rural students may be academically prepared but have access to fewer test prep resources to score highly on college entrance exams.

Other students discussed how their lower-performing schools tended to have high turnover rates among teachers and administrators. High turnover restricted students' access to experienced, quality teachers, which was especially problematic in core subject areas like math and English. Liz explained:

A lot of my math classes growing up were taught by first-time teachers, and everyone has to have a first time, but it's hard to have all your math classes with a first-time teacher. I think I had two that weren't with a first-time teacher in high school. There's a lot of Teach for America [teachers], so that was kind of difficult. So, the math has never come super easy for me, but learning how to do that, and understanding it, and why you need to understand it has been challenging, but I think I've finally figured it out.

Math preparation highly correlates with enrollment in four-year institutions, therefore, inadequate preparation in core subjects like math can have a significant impact on students' ability to enroll in students' ability to successfully persist in college (Choy, 2001).

On the other hand, a couple of public school students in this study felt that their high schools challenged them and fostered their academic growth. Adam attended a small, public school, but the school had multiple college preparatory classes and a strong college-going culture:

Our English for our senior class was like a college prep class, and in there we did a lot of things geared towards college, but we also did things like completing applications to schools and researching schools and going on websites in class because we had Google Chromebooks, and they had enough to where all the English classes that were in session could have enough for the classroom to have all a Google Chromebook, so you could all go on the internet individually at your desk and search things like that...And so I guess in that regard, they helped shed light on a lot of the opportunities for college and stuff.

Adam attributed part of his college preparation to the size of the school and the caliber of his teachers, including one teacher who drove an hour over the mountain to teach an AP course. Matt echoed a similar experience, citing the close relationships with his teachers from home as one of the reasons he felt academically prepared to come into SSU:

The school that I went to, I think there was only like 1000 people in the school or so, 900 and some. And you get a really personal experience with your professor ... or, well, your teachers at the time, I guess. And I think really all you need to be prepared for a college like this is you know how to work that, 'cause you're never gonna come out of high school I think completely academically prepared as far as the classes are just different. And you have to learn to work on your own.

In addition to the close relationships with his teachers, Matt suggests that his school fostered independent learning (“you have to learn to work on your own”), which was helpful to him in successfully bridge the gap of knowledge between his secondary education and college.

The findings on academic preparation indicate a few things. First, document analysis demonstrates that applicants from participants’ home counties had fewer AP courses

available to them through their high schools and lower college entrance exams (ACT and SAT scores) compared to the average SSU enrolled students or applicant (respectively).

These findings were for *all* schools in the select counties, suggesting that even those students who attended more college preparatory high schools had access to fewer academic resources than their fellow SSU applicants elsewhere in the state. When asked how they perceived their academic preparation, students from college preparatory high schools stated that they felt academically prepared for their transition to college, citing that their high schools offered academically rigorous coursework, depth of coursework (in the case of the STEM high school) and preparation for writing. In contrast, many of the students who attended the public schools stated that they did not feel their high school prepared them for the rigor of college academics. Students stated that they had access to fewer AP courses, high teacher turnover, and limited writing development.

**Overcoming transitional challenges.** In addition to some of the academic or cognitive challenges of adjusting to the college classroom, rural students identified aspects beyond the coursework itself that posed transitional issues, including adjusting to class sizes and learning to advocate for themselves. Yet with these challenges, rural students also established strategies to bolster their academic adjustment to college.

***“I don’t even know 500 people”:* Adjusting to class size.** Nearly all the participants mentioned that a major adjustment in their early transition to college was getting used to the difference in size—of classes, campus, and the surrounding area. While the size of SSU is an adjustment for all students compared to their high schools, some of the students in this study discussed how the university was bigger than the population of their entire counties. Alex made the comparison of his high school to the size of the college:

But, especially just coming in and already having my department, the [engineering] department, being twice as big as my high school. Like, my high school was only 400 kids whenever I was there, and I think that undergrad and graduate there are 800. Erika stated how adjusting to class sizes was one of the most challenging transitions for her in coming to college: “Class size because I had like a 400-person class and that's my high school in a total. That was a huge adjustment to sit in an auditorium like that.”

Most high school students do not attend classes of this magnitude in high school but for rural students who come from small schools, the difference in size is orders of magnitude different. Enrique had the largest high school graduating class (320 students) of the study participants, and he only experienced a class size that large after he enrolled in the STEM school. Thirteen of the students interviewed had graduating classes of 160 students or fewer, and nine of those graduated with fewer than 100 students. Students in this study felt like, even as compared to their peers, they struggle with the size of campus:

My high school is ... It's reasonably sized. To me, I thought it was a pretty big high school. We had two floors. That's strange from where I'm from. My graduating class was 100 people. I thought that was pretty good sized.

Then, when I came here, people were saying, "Yeah, I had two, 3,000 people in my high school. My graduating class was 500." I'm like, "I don't even know 500 people."

(Grace)

One reason for the adjustment in the size of the college classroom was that rural students were previously used to getting to know their teachers well due to small class sizes, but this relationship was not always possible in large lecture hall-style classrooms:

Enrique: I think the biggest issue for me was going from like classes of like 15 to 16 to classes of 200. I do better when I'm able to interface with the professor. I've always been like my class sizes in my home high school were no more than like 20, because our high school was very small. I guess just that size proportion, actually trying to get face time with professors was probably like the biggest [issue] ...

Josh described how the issue of size was not only in the classrooms, but in navigating the bureaucracy of the college: "Here, there's so many departments and layers and stuff like that too, so navigating that to get the support that I needed initially, was really difficult."

To counter this size adjustment, several students sought out smaller majors where they could depend on having more intimate class sizes and personal relationships with their professors that mirrored what they had in high school. Several students (Adam, Erika, Meredith) were in majors with less than 50 students per graduating class, which allowed them to get to know the other students in their cohort and their professors. Smaller majors helped students develop social networks, as Erika explained:

This place is really big, which I went into a major that was also really small, so that helped me out. I have about 50 girls in my major, so going to a big university, but yet having a small major is really nice.

Meredith specifically chose her major because of the small size:

So, I chose the [my major] partly because it's like that little community. It's like a small college within the larger college. My graduating class from high school was 50 students, so coming to [my major], it kind of still felt like that little community within the big university. That's one reason I chose [it].

Like Meredith, Adam described how his experience in his major echoed the experience he had in high school:

And so, it's kinda like ... 'cause I was in a lot of like honors or AP classes going through middle and high school and it was the same students in all those classes. And so, when I got to SSU that was kind of echoed throughout my [major] curriculum, which was pretty cool. Cause even students I don't know very well in my class, I just don't know their name and kind of what they have going on, which is a cool way to connect.

Adam said that because he got to know his professors well, he and a few other students would even go to professors' houses for dinner. Through smaller majors, students were able to enjoy closer relationships with peers and faculty, and these relationships seemed to foster their academic performance.

***“Everyone had always just mentored me”*: Advocating for yourself.** Rural students also stated that another major transition for them in coming to college was learning to advocate for themselves in the classroom. Cecil noted how he had to initially transition from having teachers proactively help him in high school to taking control of his own learning in college. When asked what the biggest transition was for him in college, he replied, “Large classrooms, communications with professors, staying on top of that. The independence for reaching out if you have problems, it's just up to you to learn. It's no longer the faculty's job to make you learn.” For Cecil, the issue of classroom size is tied to the issue of learning how to communicate with professors presumably because the larger class sizes made it more challenging for students to know their professors.

Rebecca transitioned to SSU her sophomore year after spending her first year at a small liberal arts college. Even after having spent a year in college, Rebecca still found it challenging to learn to advocate for herself at SSU:

At [my previous institution] it was a little easier, because the professors were more willing to like ... well I don't want to say more willing, but they were more available to work with you. So, it was a little easier there.

Similar to Cecil's experience, Rebecca found that the large class sizes at SSU were not a barrier in and of themselves, but that the size of the classes limited the availability of the faculty to help students.

Kaitlyn captured this challenge in discussing how coming from a rural area influenced her academic experience. I revisit a memorable quote from Kaitlyn:

Well, all my teachers and all of my ... I mean, everyone that I went to school with, we all knew each other outside of school and so asking for help, or the, "I need an extension on this assignment", or all of that just kind of happened. Like I remember I had a paper due for an English class, so a college level English class in high school, and my teacher went to my church and I remember I was telling her about I was in this play, and blah blah blah, and she just extended it without me asking. That doesn't happen in college because professors aren't caring about what you're doing outside ... I mean they care, some of them especially, but they're not going to take time to say, "Oh she has this going on so she must not be able to focus on this. Let me extend that", so just like having to, one, not ask for extensions when I'm doing things but also like reach out to professors, and they didn't know me already, and explain who I was. And I mean even if it was just for a recommendation.

Kaitlyn articulates how in rural communities, students' relationships with their teachers extend outside the classroom ("everyone that I went to school with, we all knew each other outside of school" "my teacher went to my church"). This connection allowed educators to see the other competing factors that influence students' ability to do their schoolwork, whereas in college, faculty may only see their students in the classroom. Therefore, the student must take responsibility to ask the professor for help and remind the faculty member who they are.

Kaitlyn went on to explain how the anonymity of a large school became an issue when she was tasked with finding a mentor for her scholarship program:

[My scholarship program] made us find a faculty mentor and I remember that was super hard for me because I just didn't know who to ask and didn't know what I needed in a mentor because everyone had always just mentored me. It was just always an unspoken thing that we did for each other.

Learning to self-advocate is a transition for nearly all freshmen coming into college. Yet Kaitlyn's account highlights how this transition may be more difficult for rural students because they come from a close-knit environment where built-in support systems exist. Kaitlyn describes mentorship in her home community, where it is a community responsibility to offer mentorship and guidance ("everyone had always just mentored me" "It was just always an unspoken thing we did for each other"). This experience of mentorship at home was different from her experience of mentorship in college, where she was responsible for seeking someone to serve as a mentor. Kaitlyn's experience in finding college mentors highlights an area of cultural divide between rural communities and college culture.

As with adjusting to the size of campus, learning to be one's own advocate is a common adjustment for most incoming college freshmen. However, the accounts from participants suggest that the learning curve for rural students was steep since they were used to small class sizes and personal relationships with their teachers in their home communities. A strategy that rural students employed was learning to ask for help. Half of the students I spoke with also stated the importance of asking for help when they were struggling. For instance, several students described having to get over the idea that they were bothering their professors when they were asking for help. Phoebe explains:

I've been to office hours. I've grown more confident in emailing them about questions I have and realizing that their office hours are there for a reason and their email is there for a reason and that I'm not bothering them, I'm not interrupting their tea time or their coffee break. I also approach them after class if I have a question.

Thomas similarly stated:

I think people go, "They ain't gonna wanna talk to me. They ain't got time." I say, "Yes, they do. Trust me." If they have office hours that don't work with you, I guarantee you they will make an appointment some other time. They're here to help you. There should be no qualms about asking anybody for anything on this campus if you're a student.

Both Phoebe and Thomas touch on the importance of utilizing the structures of the college classroom, such as office hours, to be proactive in asking for help and clarification from their professors. Thomas also recognized that helping students was part of the job of a professor, and that faculty are often willing to help when asked.

Asking for help was also important for students' social transition. Kaitlyn struggled in the early months of school, but she was too afraid to admit to anyone that she was having trouble. She found that as soon as she reached out to her family and people on campus to let them know she was having trouble, she was able to start working on strategies to improve:

And then, being able to say that, "I'm not okay" is also, learning that that's an okay thing, it's okay not to be okay, took a lot of pressure of me trying to force myself to be fine. The first day that I went into someone's office and said "I am struggling.", was the first day that I was like, "I can be in college because, if I can come in someone's office and tell them that I'm struggling and they actually care and want to help me figure it out, then, I can do really anything."

Kaitlyn describes this ability to ask for help as a developmental shift in some ways, and a true mark of being a college student. Like Thomas, Kaitlyn found that when she asked for assistance, faculty and staff were willing to help. Adam ventured that self-advocacy also could be helpful in a social setting:

And so, I would say on SSU's campus if you are proactive in making connections with the surrounding community you can mirror some of the same ... some of the same sentiments, which in a smaller town and a larger community as a whole. So, I would say for SSU's campus I feel like it has the potential to be more close knit and together as a community as long as you're willing to maybe put some effort into doing so.

As with asking for help from faculty in the classroom, Adam suggests that rural students need to take the initiative to build their social support system in a way that "mirrors" the close-knit community they valued at home.

Josh offered a counterpoint to his peers, stating that coming from a rural community made it easier for him to connect with his professors:

I think it got me used to going up to the instructor and having a conversation. Or not being afraid to ask questions, stuff like that too because I had to be able to do that in a small environment, have the relationship with the teachers or professors or things like that. And so that prepared me to have those conversations and not be afraid to approach a professor after class, and things like that.

Unlike his peers, Josh felt more comfortable developing a close relationship with his professors because it was what he was used to doing at home. Josh's experience was different from the experience of most of the rural students in this study, who stated that their close relationships with teachers at home were "built in" to the environment, whereas at college they had to exert effort to ensure their faculty members not only knew who they were but also that they needed additional help.

Faculty and staff speculated that rural students may be less likely to ask for help because they were intimidated by faculty members with advanced degrees, having come from communities where it was not common. Ms. Ferris explained:

I feel like sometimes our rural students are a little bit more caught off guard with ... Right, they've always been taught to use "Ma'am," or "Miz," or whatever. But transitioning to "Professor," or "Doctor," or, you know, I think it has been a little bit harder for some of our rural students who probably just haven't had as much contact with folks who have PhDs.

Dr. Smith similarly speculated that students from rural areas may live in communities where fewer people have professional careers. Analysis of students' home communities confirms

this assertion; on average, 7.78% of individuals from students' hometowns had graduate degrees as compared to the state average of 10.6% (American Fact Finder, 2018). Students' hometowns had a greater percentage of people with a high school diploma or less (42.8%) as compared to the state (39.2%) (American Fact Finder, 2018).

However, only one student, Enrique, discussed how the cultural distance between himself and his professors made it challenging to ask for help:

My parents grew up rural. I grew up rural. They don't know much about college. I'm in some way a first-generation college student, but not really. My mom like went to college, like I mentioned before, but both my parents didn't go to college. A lot of my people that are in my [scholarship] class, both of their parents went to college, so they knew how to prepare their students and what to look for when they talked to professors. I didn't have that knowledge. So, I had to figure all that stuff out myself when I got here. Because talking to teachers at [the STEM school] and talking to faculty is two different completely things. Even though they have the same education levels, they're two different ball fields, and you have to learn how to navigate the field.

Enrique touches on two interesting points. First, he highlights the gap in college knowledge about how to talk to faculty members, which he attributes to his parents' educational background and his rural upbringing. Second, he states that talking to faculty at college was more challenging than talking to faculty at the STEM school he attended, even though they had the same education levels. Although Enrique does not specifically articulate why it was more challenging, his account challenges the idea posited by the faculty and staff in the study that rural students are unwilling to ask for help from professors because they are intimidated

by their education level. Instead, Enrique implies another reason may exist why it was more challenging to ask professors for help other than intimidation with their education. The student narratives above suggest instead that rural students are not used to having to advocate for themselves in the classroom and may perceive their faculty as unwilling to help them. However, when they do ask for help, students find that generally faculty will assist them.

**You get out what you put in: Academic engagement.** Rural student participants in this study demonstrated that they were academically engaged and involved students at SSU. Students' commitment to their learning process was reflected in their attitudes towards their coursework, as captured in the subtheme *Broad and deep: Attitudes towards coursework*. Rural students particularly valued their pursuit of challenging coursework that offered both breadth and depth of subject matter. In the second subtheme, *Academic extracurricular involvement*, students described being as engaged beyond the walls of the classroom as they were within the classroom. Their academic extracurricular involvement activities included academic clubs and societies, internships, co-ops, and undergraduate research.

***Broad and deep: Attitudes towards coursework.*** Students' perception of the value, rigor, and quality of their coursework affects their learning. In *How College Affects Students*, Mayhew et al. (2016) state:

Based on the weight of the evidence, the most important climate dimension that shared positive associations with cognitive gains was students' perceptions of the climate as scholarly and intellectual—faculty holding students to higher standards. (Mayhew et al., 2016, p.148)

As illustrated in their narratives, rural students in this study valued their college academic coursework. First, rural students prioritized their education. Erika made her education her

number one priority in college: “I’ve done this a lot, but that was my big goal was education before anything else.” Thomas discussed how he prioritized his academics: “I treated my education as a job. I was gonna be working from 9:00 to 5:00. Either I was gonna be in class or I would be studying for class, but that’s what I did.” Students also established behaviors and strategies that would ensure they were focused during their studies. For instance, Liz kept herself accountable to stay engaged in classes by strategically placing herself at the front of the room:

I think making sure that I position myself so that I can do well in classes. I’m one of those people that tends to, if I can, sit towards the front in classes. I’m in business, I don’t know if you’ve ever been in [the business building] but was in your senior everything is in [the business building]. Last year, almost all of my classes were in the auditorium so I didn’t always make it to the front in that one, but just making sure that I position myself somewhere where I can hold myself accountable and not be on my phone and whatnot.

As with Thomas, Liz’s attitude towards her studies suggested that she valued her college education and felt a sense of responsibility to ensure she was putting forth substantial effort to her studies.

Other students expressed positive and growth-related attitudes towards their academic coursework. Grace sought out specific courses simply for the joy of learning new things:

Other goals I had, I wanted to learn more about the world...Through [my major] I have to learn history, which is right up my alley. I love history. I wanted to learn more stuff for myself, so I took some horticulture classes and they’re really fun... Then, I just want to ensure that I’m going to keep learning something new every day.

This is what I need to read, or this is what I have to study and then look for conferences or whatever.

Another aspect of the SSU curriculum that students valued was the breadth and depth of coursework offered at SSU. Within their majors, students had the ability to specialize within an area of interest. Rebecca explained:

Definitely learning about my major, and with [humanities] of course it's very broad, so you have to pick a concentration, basically. And they definitely help you with that here. They offer so many classes... They definitely help you or give you the option to take those to figure out what you want to do.

Rebecca articulates how she values not only the depth of coursework but also the assistance from the department (“The definitely help you with that here”) in finding a concentration area of interest. Understanding the niche areas within her major and connecting those areas with her personal interests helped Rebecca narrow her search for graduate school programs and ultimately select a career path. Kaitlyn also found that the basic science college offered her a range of electives to find a concentration, even though she ultimately decided to stick with the basic science:

And then also, SSU does a really good job of setting up a lot of different ... You can take it a lot of different directions with their elective courses, and their major electives, and all of that. And so, I was able to take classes in nutrition, and bio-chemistry classes, and micro-bio classes, and sort of find where I fit in. And I just love those core science classes. The stuff on the outside, the English and all of that, I realized that maybe that's not what I like the most but, I found out that I actually did like [the sciences].

Students also valued the ability to take courses outside of their major through general education credits or electives because it gave them a chance to discover new areas of interest they may not have otherwise explored. As Erika explains:

I've enjoyed having electives. With our [major], our electives are more controlled than other peoples. I've taken some really cool things like World Populations and Foods. Different things that I probably would not have taken if I would have been on like a strict pathway, or things that weren't offered at my school, when I was in high school.

Enrique articulated the value of the depth and breadth of what SSU had to offer in a longer exchange:

So, I will say, at least the breadth that I've undertaken, but also the depth. At least in my experience with my peers at SSU, they usually try to focus on one thing and, to me, that's not taking advantage of what SSU really has to offer. SSU has so many majors and there are just so many undiscovered things that people just don't know about. Like, for example, one of my favorite GEP classes that I've ever taken is Conservation of Natural Resources. As a [science major], I never would have expected that that class that was at 8.30 that I had to get up for twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes would be one of my favorite GEPs to this day. I recommend so many people take that class. But at least I came with an extra number of credit hours that I needed so I had opportunity to major and minor in different things. So, I'm minoring in Spanish right now and that's really, I guess, taught me how to think in a very different way, like every [scientist] should think very critically and analytically

whereas there are some [inaudible] in Spanish, but you just have to know your Spanish to be able to communicate it.

I'm going to also thank that depth that I was talking about earlier...I'm really getting that extreme, hands-on experience and I've been to the grad school interviews and they ask me "What have your genetics classes been like? What have your [science] classes been like?" And they are impressed with the amount of skills and knowledge that I have as an undergrad because they're like "You're probably better than some of the grad students I currently have in my lab." So, I think that's kind of my academic experience summed up. It's been very broad, but it's also been very deep. And I think that's the best way to tackle it at SSU. Not everybody can do that, but I think that's probably the best way to really take advantage of what SSU has to offer academically.

Enrique, like Erika, had the ability to take courses outside of his academic major through GEP credits, which he would not have otherwise taken if he chose to take only courses within his major. He was able to do this, in part, because he came in with additional credit hours because of his college preparatory schooling. The advantages, or perceived advantages, of college preparatory schooling for rural students are discussed in the previous section. Taking courses in other departments, such as Spanish, helped Enrique to think about his major coursework in a different way that may contribute to deeper learning. Finally, Enrique asserted that the depth of his coursework helped him apply and get into graduate school.

Students also enjoyed the challenge of the coursework. Josh discussed how he valued the environment of college that tested him but also provided the support system to help him

through those challenges: “I like the fact that I've been challenged. But there's still plenty of support systems, underneath that, that I can rely on throughout, as I'm being challenged and moving up and things like that.” Liz stated that she found the rigor of the coursework to be one of the most rewarding aspects in her academic career:

The challenge. SSU doesn't, the classes it's not like anything's an easy A. It cracks me up when people say, “What's an easy A class?’ Because there's not really one here. You have to put your best foot forward.

Phoebe valued that the challenge of the coursework made her a better student and a better writer:

It takes a lot of time and they're very high standards in most of my classes, which I appreciate and it's helping me learn to have proper grammar, to be able to write a report in the right APA way and not my own way. A lot of times the teachers and the TAs really do care and so seeing that they care and that they're really there to help us learn, it makes it bearable and doable.

Similar to Josh, Phoebe expresses how the college environment creates structured challenges, but that faculty and staff are also there to encourage and assist students when they encounter those trials. With greater challenges, students felt they were able to learn and accomplish more: “I definitely feel more accomplished getting through the class like after finals than I ever had. Looking back at high school, I worked a lot harder. I feel like I've achieved a lot more” (Erika). In some cases, students were able to see the fruits of their labor through physical products. The research reviewed by Mayhew et al. (2016) supports that students who are more challenged academically in college tend to make more cognitive gains (p.148).

*Academic extracurricular involvement.* Other students got involved academically outside their normal class responsibilities by becoming teaching assistants or joining academic societies. Daevin joined a service organization for engineering majors where they taught young students how to code. Likewise, Adam elected to be the service chair for the academic society in his engineering major. Internships, co-ops, and undergraduate research opportunities further enhanced students' academic engagement. Eleven of the students interviewed participated in at least one of these three high-impact academic experiences. For instance, Adam had the opportunity to do a co-op through his major as well as participate in labs that provided hands-on experiences:

I've gotten a great opportunity to work for a company through connections I've made through SSU. Done a lot of really cool labs. I myself have taken, through a class I've taken a log from [the research forest] and turned the log into paper, do everything to it. So, I've personally turned a tree into a piece of paper, which is pretty exciting.

Meredith had an internship with a local business in marketing, which cascaded into other job and internship opportunities around campus:

I did that and the communications internship. And then over the summer I worked at Dick's Sporting Goods. I know that's not really related to campus, but definitely having all this experience on campus and around campus helped me get that job over the summer. And then coming back that job helped me get probably my job at the Dean's Office now. All my stuff kind of relates.

Enrique, Kaitlyn, and Rebecca participated in undergraduate research with faculty. Kaitlyn discussed how her experience with undergraduate research made her more confident

in her ability to do that kind of work and opened her eyes to a different type of research than what she saw through her STEM field:

Yep, I'm doing undergrad research in [the humanities] ...they're working on research and teacher self-efficacy and obviously I'm not doing any crazy cool things, but I'm going through, listening to these, typing them out. The things that undergrads do in the research department. But, she's [faculty member] been really awesome and helpful. And that's just a cool experience to get. I was really afraid of research because I don't want to work in a lab and I don't like, but qualitative research is something that I didn't even know existed until [my faculty adviser], so, that was cool. It's awesome.

Rebecca also had a paid research opportunity in her field that she obtained through her faculty mentor. As a prospective graduate student, the research opportunity gave Rebecca valuable research experience for her resume.

Students in STEM-related majors were slightly more likely to participate in internships and research, but students in business and humanities fields also engaged in internships or research. In the case of internships and co-ops, students valued the ability to gain applied experience and to network with professionals in their field. Research supports that these experiences may also improve student learning, as well as their persistence and graduation:

The research on integrated academic interventions indicates that they seem to influence the cognitive development of undergraduate students, especially those that students found challenging and rigorous, like an honors program and opportunities to work with faculty on research. (Mayhew et al., 2016, p.128)

**“Catching up” summary.** The findings on rural students’ academic preparation suggest that, relative to their nonrural peers, rural students do not always have access to the same resources to prepare them initially for the content and rigor of college coursework. The number of AP courses schools offered, and students’ standardized test scores reflect this difference in resources. Perhaps more importantly was students’ own self-perception of their lower initial academic preparation transitioning into college. Other unique challenges exist that rural students face in their academic adjustment to college, such as the large class sizes and learning to advocate for themselves. Yet the rural students in this study also demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness in the academic studies. Students show a deep commitment to their learning and value the academic rigor and course selection available. Rural students address some of their transitional challenges by developing strategies that mimic the favorable conditions they were used to at home, such as developing relationships with faculty or finding smaller majors. Finally, rural students participate outside the classroom through work-integrated experiences, academic clubs, and undergraduate research.

Rural students’ commitment and engagement to their academic progress is important because research strongly suggests that the amount of effort students’ put into the academic progress is indicative of their academic gains. Mayhew et al. (2016) explains this idea in their review of the current literature:

...our review found conclusive, nearly incontrovertible evidence that students learn the most when they are actively engaged in the learning process. Whether learning in collaborative groups or through a simulation in the classroom, students who take part as active and engaged learners gain more from the educational experience than their peers’ more passive approach. Relatedly, the more time students put into the learning

enterprise, the more they realize in terms of enhanced verbal, quantitative, and subject matter competence. (Mayhew et al., 2016, p.99)

In short, the rural students in this study expressed that they cared about their academic college coursework, and their level of engagement may have mitigated the impact of entering college with fewer academic resources.

### **Lost in the Institutional Blind Spot: Interactions with Faculty and Staff**

The fourth theme that emerges from the findings centered on the role of institutional actors, such as faculty and staff, on rural college student experiences. Interaction with faculty is an important component of a student's academic integration in Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence and remains within Guiffrida's (2006) adaption of the model. Student interactions with faculty appear to have an impact on their retention and persistence, especially as it relates to students' perception of the quality of teaching (Mayhew et al., 2016). Yet no evidence exists that the frequency of interactions with faculty and faculty's perceived care or concern or students are predictive of student persistence (Mayhew et al., 2016). Exploration of the relationship between rural college students and institutional actors may illuminate the awareness (or lack thereof) among faculty and staff about rural college student populations at SSU. Furthermore, this theme outlines how the knowledge of institutional actors about rural students influences the way faculty and staff work with these scholars. In turn, it may also demonstrate how students perceive and interact with institutional actors in ways that shape their college experiences.

The first subtheme, *An invisible community: Institutional awareness of rural scholars*, explored the awareness and perceptions of faculty and staff on rural college students. Faculty and staff in this study were evenly divided in their level of awareness about

the number of rural students in their respective programs or departments. Faculty and staff who knew more about the presence of rural scholars in their department were more confident in their understanding of what made rural students unique from other subpopulations of students. Those faculty and staff who were less certain about the number of rural students in their programs were more speculative regarding rural college student characteristics.

The second subtheme, *Working with rural scholars: Student interactions with faculty and staff* illustrated the substance and quality of relationships between rural students and institutional actors. Further subdivisions organized student interactions according to how helpful rural students perceived faculty and staff to be. Many of the students in this study had positive interactions with institutional actors. Several had faculty mentors and interacted with faculty both within and outside the classroom. A minority of students did not indicate that they had substantial interaction with faculty. Some expressed that faculty were too busy with other work demands to interact with students, while other students simply preferred to problem solve on their own.

**An invisible community: Institutional awareness of rural scholars.** Faculty and staff participants displayed a broad range in awareness of the rural student population at SSU, both in terms of the number of rural students at SSU and their understanding of the characteristics of rural scholars. Of the six faculty and staff members interviewed for this study, three were not highly aware of their rural population while the other three appeared more cognizant of rurality when considering their student populations. Institutional actors' estimates of the proportion of rural students in their departments or programs ranged from 7% to 50% of the student population.

*“It’s just not a demographic I pay attention to”*: *Lack of awareness*. Three faculty and staff—Dr. Rockie, Dr. Smith, and Ms. James—were not as cognizant of the populations of rural students in their departments. Their estimations and characterizations of rural college students were, admittedly, speculative. For instance, when asked about a rough estimate of the number of rural scholars in her department, Dr. Rockie estimated the rural population through process of elimination:

I have come to see the kids, I mean, if I had to guess and I don't know, I hope you have the stats on this, but if I had to guess, I'd say, I'd probably say 40% of them come from some city... the population is fairly representative of the population as a whole, but we also get a lot of kids from smaller districts... My sense is 20 or 30% are from relatively rural area.

Likewise, Dr. Smith stated that an estimate of the number of rural students in his department would be purely guesswork:

First of all, obviously unlike race and gender, you don't wear that [rural identity] on your forehead. So, it's harder. And so, I guess we get impressionistic evidence. My guess is largely from the way people speak and what clothes they wear, students. But of course, that's not really faithful to their background either.

Dr. Smith’s observations raise two important points. One, the idea that rurality is not something that is as overtly obvious as other individual demographic characteristics can be: “First of all, obviously unlike race and gender, you don't wear that on your forehead. So it's harder.” While an individual’s race or gender are not universally apparent from the outside, the point remains that no external designations exist that mark an individual as “rural”.

Without knowing an individual's geographic background, faculty and staff may rely on stereotypes to identify students as rural: "My guess is largely from the way people speak and what clothes they wear, students." Dr. Smith agrees that method is flawed of defining rurality ("But of course, that's not really faithful to their background either."), but it is what he used in the absence of other information. In fact, all three individuals who stated they were unaware of their rural populations also stated that in describing rural student characteristics they relied on speculation:

This would just be purely conjecture, but I do think that the kids that come from the [the city] have their feet under them in a different way. This is their town. They live here. Some of them get their laundry done by their parents down the street or whatever. I do think there's a different orientation for those kids because they're home and they've got their little safety nets right there. (Dr. Rockie)

Faculty and staff were generally not comfortable speculating on rural college student characteristics (Dr. Smith: "My sense is ... but you know, I don't even know whether I want to talk about this because it's highly impressionistic and you are the professionals."), but I encouraged them to do so within the interview to understand their impressions of rural scholars.

Dr. Smith's argued that one of the challenges with being able to estimate the rural population was the nebulous nature of defining what is "rural". He used the example of examining counties in North Carolina, and how the population even within a county could make it challenging to define it as either "rural" or "urban". He specifically cited how even the outskirts of SSU's home county, considered an urban county, could be considered rural based on the culture and population of the area:

Now we think of [this county] presumably as an urban county in North Carolina. So, you would think of a student from [this county] as being urban by definition. But she wasn't. And I know people who live in [towns on the outskirts of the county] ...And you can think of those areas as pretty rural.

Dr. Smith's observation recalls the challenge of defining rurality and underscores the need for a definition that designates a degree of rurality rather than a binary designation.

In addition to the challenge of defining rurality, two important reasons exist why these faculty and staff members were not fully aware of the rural population in their department. The first has to do with their role within the department. Dr. Rockie was a teaching professor within the department who did not have a major role in student recruitment and selection. On the other hand, Dr. Smith used to serve as the department chair, during which time he felt he had a better understanding of the demographics of the department, whereas now that he had returned to the faculty he no longer did.

The second important reason was that many departments or programs did not track students based on their rural/urban background. Ms. James was responsible for selection of student leaders within her program, and she stated that, while they did try to select a cohort of students from a range of different background characteristics, rurality was not a characteristic they examined:

But, yeah, we've pulled demographics as we're going through the selection process right now to see are we getting gender diversity, racial diversity, out-of-state, in-state, first year transfer. Basically, anything that we could glean from admissions and R&R information. We try to select a team that are all qualified to do the job, that all show leadership potential but that we hope to represent, that new students coming can see

someone potentially that they can relate to and make them see themselves being successful...But we've never done it by rural, urban, where are they coming from. Similarly, Dr. Smith stated that his department placed greater emphasis on achieving racial and gender diversity and did not necessarily consider students' county of residence. The only way these faculty and staff members knew if a student was from a rural community was if a student self-disclosed. Dr. Smith explained, "I mean, I do get to know students, so I don't ask them this question. And they often don't tell me. It just sort of comes up in general conversation, particularly students I get to know well." Ms. James also relied on more anecdotal evidence in identifying rural students: "I don't know percentage, but I do know that it's a common experience people speak to." Dr. Rockie stated that rurality was not something she necessarily thought to ask much about: "No idea. I mean, it's just not a demographic I pay attention to unless they're my advisee." I am not implying that faculty and staff did not recognize or value students' rural identities, but it was just not a characteristic that they found important to ask about specifically.

***"Resilience": Awareness of and respect for rural scholars.*** By contrast, the other three faculty and staff interviewed (Ms. Ferris, Dr. Holloway and Dr. Khan) did have a better sense of the rural populations within their respective programs. Unlike the other faculty and staff interviewed, rural identity was a component of student identity that Dr. Khan and Ms. Ferris' programs tracked, or at least considered, during student recruitment and admissions processes. For instance, the scholarship program that Ms. Ferris worked for made a concerted effort to select their annual cohort of students in such a way as to mirror the demographics of both the state and institution. She described some of the processes the program used to select their cohort:

By colleges, but then also by race, by gender, by, I mean, and by rural versus urban. And so, if we're talking about just rural North Carolinians, I would say maybe 30-ish percent of that two thirds is rural. And then our out-of-state students aren't always from urban areas either.

Dr. Khan reported that his department also tracked where students were coming from within the state about their rurality and had seen a sizable decrease in the rural student population within the department as the admissions standards of the university rose in recent decades. The program Dr. Holloway worked with did not specifically track student rurality, but it was something that she personally considered when getting to know her students:

Researcher: Do you all identify, or do you look at geographic diversity? Do you look at rural, urban, suburban?

Dr. Holloway: That's a good question. Not directly, no, but I will tell you that if I could do a mental scan of the students that have been in my program, they've come from rural areas. And I know that [inaudible], of course I can see the transcripts and all of that. And I've had several students, I would say maybe it's 45%, almost 50% of my students come from a rural environment.

Dr. Holloway's observation demonstrates how individual faculty and staff, even outside of program specifications, take rurality into account when thinking about student diversity.

Institutional actors also differed in their perception of rural students' ability to successfully transition to college, with some viewing rural students as having unique challenges in their transition while others noticed no discernible difference. Dr. Smith asserted that many of the challenges rural students experience at SSU were not unique to

their rurality but rather were universal challenges that students experience in their transition to college:

For example, I have never had a student who missed an exam because he was up milking cows. I know that's ... I'm joking around there but that I wonder if that's the kind of thing you're thinking about...rather then, "I screwed up this semester because my parents are going through a divorce". Or, "I screwed up this semester because I just had to work too much. I can't afford to go to SSU." And my sense is that that's probably the ... I don't think that's anything that the rural students, as far as I can tell, have [it] worse than the urban students.

Similarly, Dr. Rockie stated that she had noticed situations with students related to finances or issues at home, but that these situations were not necessarily tied to a student's rurality:

It's such a tough time now for everybody. The fact that these kids, a lot of them, are going into debt...is just tragic. Finances do impact some of the kids. We try to keep the cost of the books down. We've gotten involved with families a couple of times, but generally these are college kids so other than my advisees and occasionally with my students and something's up, somebody's sick or dying, I don't talk about their families per se that much.

Faculty members and staff who were more aware of their rural student population were more likely to identify specific ways in which students' rural population impacted their college access and persistence at SSU. A major theme that emerged was the issue of resources. Dr. Smith argued that issues of resource allocation transcend the rural-urban divide:

My sense is that it again, this is speculating. But my sense is that if there are home situations that are problematic, those aren't necessarily urban or rural, right? Those have to do with matters of resources. They have to do with whether your parents are divorced are not. And these kinds of things are distributed across.

Yet Dr. Khan, Dr. Holloway, and Ms. Ferris asserted that rural students often came in with access to fewer college-preparatory resources than their nonrural counterparts. For instance, Dr. Khan argued that the rising admissions standards of SSU made it increasingly more difficult for rural students to get into SSU and obtain merit-based scholarships because they did not have access to the same resources that students from urban areas did to make them competitive:

In the old days we did a lot of rural kids that worked in mill towns. Their father worked for a paper mill or their uncle or whatever. But since they're [the scholarships] merit-based, we are starting to see a lot more city kids that are coming into our program because they have a better ... It's not that they're smarter. They just have a much better profile than ...

You know this better than me. So, then the rural kids, so for a rural kid, he's got to ... For him to get a 650 in the SAT is a huge achievement. Then you get a kid from [an urban county] that's got a 790 and a 800. So, it's kind of throwing our pattern off a little bit, but I don't know what we can do about it.

In addition to the rising admissions standards in the university, the Dr. Khan's department moved to a college that had higher admission standards than where they were previously housed, making it even more difficult for rural students to be admitted into the program. Dr.

Khan acknowledges that the difference in student profiles is not an issue of ability (“It's not that they're smarter. They just have a much better profile...”), but an issue of resources that was specific to rural students.

Dr. Holloway noticed that rural students had access to fewer academic resources than nonrural counterpart:

When you compare those students from a rural environment, a rural support area, and you compare them to let's say to [urban counties], that's when the difference kind of hits home with them. When they come and they're compared to these students, they didn't have resources like the IP or AP classes. So they have, it's an identity shock, if you will, because they don't feel as prepared as the students coming from a well-resourced county.

As with Dr. Khan's observation, Dr. Holloway argued that rural students' academic preparation is not an issue of ability but an issue of access to resources. When rural students transition into SSU with fewer academic resources, it can shake their confidence in their academic abilities:

Some of my students from rural communities, because they are now at this big university and competing with students that came from more resourced schools, they feel that they're not supposed to be there, they're not good enough, and that kind of thing.

The issue of “imposter syndrome” is one that students from other underrepresented groups, such as students of color or first-gen students, often face in their transition to college (Parkman, 2016). Dr. Holloway's observation underscores how the experience of rural

students can be similar to the experience of other students who identify with groups that have been traditionally marginalized in higher education.

While these faculty found that rural students often lacked the academic preparation of their nonrural peers, they also argued that rural students were unique in the resilience they displayed in overcoming these setbacks to be competitive in college. For instance, Dr. Holloway says:

One of the unique things I would say about my students that come from a rural community is their resilience. They were one of a few that were [inaudible] in their school. They are very high achieving students, and they're resilient. They fought through not having resources to getting to where they are. They had to seek it out, it wasn't readily available.

Because of their lack of resources, Dr. Holloway argued that these rural students had to work even harder to succeed and get into SSU than students who may have had more resources.

Ms. Ferris also observed where rural students had access to fewer resources to prepare them for the rigors of the college classroom, but they found creative ways to succeed despite these obstacles:

... watching them take advantage and the creative things that they do to live up to their potential with limited resources, you know, when they don't have all of the extracurricular opportunities, and they don't have 25 AP classes available to them, it's really fascinating and it's, to me, shows that we are making a good investment by selecting them and having them be part of our program.

Faculty and staff identified other strengths of rural scholars that aided their persistence in college. Ms. Ferris observed that rural students exhibited qualities of determination in their persistence:

I mean, I'm sure you hear of looking at rural students, lots of words like, "resilience" and "grit" and, you know, the buzzwords. But they come in with a certain amount of resilience that sometimes students who have every opportunity available to them just don't have to deal with.

Ms. Ferris observes that it is due to rather than despite their challenges that rural students develop skills of resilience. Dr. Khan expressed that rural students came in with a strong work ethic and desire to do well: "I think the perspective they bring: 'Yeah, I want to try to work hard. I want to do well.'" These observations echo some of the core values that rural students expressed in their interviews, specifically related to hard work in achieving their academic goals.

In addition to their grit and resilience, Ms. Ferris, Dr. Khan and Dr. Holloway expressed that rural students brought a diverse perspective to the university that was critical to the college learning environment. Dr. Rockie observed, "If I had to say a strength, I think there's strength in diversity and I don't mean diversity in this sort of euphemistic way, I mean just different kids, kids who have different experiences." Dr. Rockie did not necessarily attribute this strength to rural students specifically ("If I have to say a strength...") but instead says that any sort of diversity of thought was important to the university. By comparison, Ms. Ferris explained how the presence of rural students at the university was not just beneficial for those students, but to the intellectual growth of all students:

And we try and do our best to cover lots of different aspects of diversity, and so it's a lot about individual social identities, a lot about privilege, a lot about class, which unfortunately ties in a lot with rural versus urban. And so I think in those conversations and those activities, our rural students definitely are coming at it from a different perspective, and sharing that is really valuable, with the other students who, you know, some of them have never set foot on a farm before, or you know, they've had such a different experience and have been very insulated from rural communities. And so, having classmates and peers and people that they consider friends and go to the dining hall with, you know, having this extremely different opinion I think is really valuable for everyone.

As with Dr. Khan and Dr. Holloway, Ms. Ferris stated that rural students offered a unique perspective on issues of diversity and perspective that would be lacking if the student body only consisted of students from suburban and urban spaces because rural students had experiences that their nonrural counterparts did not. Dr. Khan asserted, "So that diversity they bring has to exist at a university like SSU."

*Faculty and staff support.* Regardless of their awareness of rural students, faculty and staff actively supported all students through their work. Faculty supported students through teaching and mentorship. For instance, Dr. Rockie used universal design in creating her curriculum to make the course accessible to all students. She said, "I don't do anything in particular for kids who are rural, but I do think that the changes I've made have been to help create, to help people feel safe and heard." Dr. Rockie also made a concerted effort to get to know the name of all her students by the first couple of weeks because she found that this practice greatly enhanced her rapport. Students in the study affirmed that when professors

knew their names, they felt professors valued them as individuals. The scholarship program that Ms. Ferris worked for closely monitored all their students and intervened with support when they noticed students who were struggling to the point of dropping out. Dr. Holloway stated that she regularly worked with students outside of her normal work hours when student crises arose that needed to be addressed. Faculty and staff expressed and enacted a commitment to the academic and personal success of their students, regardless of where they were from.

Institutional actors also perceived that part of their role was to expose students to new experiences, and this exposure may be particularly beneficial for rural students. Dr. Holloway created opportunities for students to travel to academic conferences across the United States:

One of the things that's a great benefit of the program, I say that exposure is key. So, one of the great things about this grant is that we were afforded an opportunity to provide to students to travel to conferences outside of the state. And we go and are part of this symposium with 10 other schools from the mid-Atlantic. A part of this consortium that we created and the funding that we have for travel, the students are able to go to different cities, states to see the great research that's going on. To see the other faculty mentors, to see the other universities...So going and exposing those students to different colleges and universities, it at least gives them a small glance of what life could be outside of their community, and outside of SSU. So, I think that has helped with some of my students, because I've had two students from a rural community who were with me as graduate students, who now are faculty positions at

a more suburban campus. They would not have gone if they were not in this network and gotten exposed to these other schools and the faculty at these other schools. Due to their small department and consistent funding, Dr. Khan's department created several high-impact practices to support undergraduate students. The department hired nearly 100 undergraduate students to conduct undergraduate research over the summer, some as early as freshmen. They also created an international trip that the department would run every other year for students in the department. This trip gave students exposure to international industry practices as well as international cultures:

And some of these rural kids that go on these trips, they've never gone on an airplane. And last semester or last year, we took up to China. I had like three or four kids that had never been in an airplane. And here they were taking a 14-hour flight, going to China, and getting exposed to that food and so on.

Faculty and staff felt that exposing students to diverse experiences would help them grow as students and widen their perception of opportunities available after graduation.

While faculty and staff identified strengths of the university in supporting students, several voiced ways in which the university could improve their support of underrepresented students generally, and rural populations specifically. Dr. Khan argued that the university failed to adequately support those rural students coming into the university who may be less academically prepared for college because of fewer academic resources available through their secondary education: "Rural kids, I would say they have a desire to succeed. They understand that they have this desire to say, 'How do I succeed?' And the question is are we giving them the right tools to make them succeed? And I don't think we are." He proposed piloting a summer bridge program for rural students to provide a crash course in the

academic areas where the program sees the most attrition of rural students due to lack of academic preparation. Dr. Khan felt his department already did well in supporting students once they were successfully enrolled in the major, but they needed more resources in getting students academically prepared for enrollment.

Similarly, Dr. Holloway felt that “pockets” of support existed across the university for underrepresented students, but the university needed to make a more unified and intentional effort to help underrepresented students persist. The holistic support that her program provided to students was successful in helping students from all backgrounds, not just rural students:

What I'm doing at SSU is considered a high-impact practice. Research has found that high-impact practices don't just work for students of underrepresented groups, they work for everyone. So, if we can adopt that kind of mindset, and just do these types of things for this population, but realize that it benefits everyone, I think it will be a better place.

Dr. Holloway argued that support efforts need to include not only supporting students academically, but also addressing the personal, financial, and cultural challenges they face as they transition into the university environment, an environment that may be very different from the one in which they were raised. Like Dr. Rockie’s use of universal design, these proposed changes would be beneficial to many underrepresented populations, including rural students.

I only interviewed six faculty and staff members in this study, so I cannot extrapolate from their experiences to the attitudes and knowledge of all faculty and staff at SSU. Yet, I chose these faculty and staff members were chosen because they had been named as a helpful

faculty or staff member *by the students I interviewed*. This means that the faculty and staff members not only interacted with rural scholars but had built enough of a relationship with at least one student that they were personally named as an individual who had contributed to that students' persistence. Given the mixed awareness of rural scholars within this small sample, it raises the question of how aware faculty and staff across the institution are of the number of students from rural backgrounds and their experience.

**Working with rural scholars: Student interaction with faculty and staff.** Rural students in this study had varying levels of interaction and experiences with faculty and staff across the institution from strongly connected mentorships to having no substantial relationships with faculty and staff.

*“They’re the only thing that matters”*: *Feeling connected*. Students felt connected to their faculty members in a variety of ways. These connections ranged from getting to know their professors in the classroom to building mentoring relationships and even getting to know some of their faculty outside the classroom. Within the classroom, students particularly valued when faculty took the time to get to know their names. Both Matt and Grace described instances where professors spent several weeks getting to know the first names of all the students in their classes and how that practice positively shaped their interaction with that professor.

I had one business professor that really stood out to me. There was probably 200 and some people in the class, and she remember everybody's name. I remember I came in one time to take a test, and she handed me the test and said, "You're [Matt], right?"

And I said, "Yeah," and I was a little taken aback. But experiences like that stand out

to you. And professors that really take the time to get to know you make a big difference. (Matt)

For rural students, having faculty know them by name was reminiscent of the experience that they were used to in high school, where they had much closer relationships with their teachers.

Other students discussed how faculty, like their teachers at home, took an interest in their personal wellbeing. Rebecca said that this care was especially true for her humanities professors: “Personally, and I might just be biased because I'm in [humanities], but I feel like they're more supportive, and more ... they're genuinely interested in your wellbeing and how you're doing in classes.” Students in smaller majors were more likely to say that their professors developed personal relationships with them and provided additional support to their students regarding their career development, as Erika explains:

Within the [my college], you have the same teachers back to back. So, it's a very personal major, which I think has been like a blessing for me because back at home I had the same teachers most of the time anyway...That's kind of the situation I'm in now with [my major]. It's very one-on-one. They want to help you in any way they can.

Erika valued how, like her teachers back home, the faculty within her department were able to provide one-on-one support and guidance.

As students progressed through their majors, their relationships with some of their faculty deepened to the point where they got to know their professors on a more personal basis. Adam went on a study abroad experience with several of the faculty in his program, and afterward, he started going to their houses for dinner with other people in his major:

So I've been very fortunate enough to ... actually this year in particular grow very close with two of my professors, have actually been over to their houses for dinner, for movies, to just talk and drink and stuff and so I've grown closer with them and part of that is cause I went to China with them.

Erika also discussed how the relationships with faculty shifted over time to the point that she felt comfortable having lunch with them:

I never really got to know many of my professors when I first started school. I would always make an appointment, introduce myself on the first day because if I ever needed help, I wanted to make sure they knew my face. If I went up to talk to them or later, they would know who I was. We eat lunch with our professors now.

Getting to know faculty was beneficial to students as they prepared for future careers. Both Thomas and Erika had faculty member provide personal recommendations for them for graduate programs, seminars and other academic opportunities due to their personal relationships which allowed faculty members to get to know their students better.

Other students developed relationships with their professors through undergraduate research and mentorships. A little more than a third of the students in this study (six) found faculty mentors. Through these experiences, students were able to build close working relationships with faculty that benefited them both as students and in their career development. Enrique, for instance, conducted undergraduate research with a professor who helped him discover his interest in research:

The first time I ever went to her office I was so scared of her, but then she was like "I actually like you," and I was like "Thanks," but I still didn't know what the terms of that was but I'd come to realize like she means what she says, she says what she

means, but she really cares about everyone that she works with and she's helped me, I guess, blossom into a researcher, which is why I'm going to graduate school for developmental biology.

I will say my first year in the lab was not the easiest in that nearly all the experiments that I did failed, and she sat down and explained with me that this is how science actually works. You think that science is just all the things you see on TV, the TV tells you completely wrong and so the fact that she was willing to sit down, and this is normal. I experienced this during my PhD and even when I do experiments in the lab I fail. And she took the time and actually sat down and talked to me about that.

Enrique's experience with his professor was beneficial in multiple ways. First, she helped him become a better student by helping him with the technical skills associated with research. This assistance led to him eventually discover an interest in research, which led to his pursuit of graduate school. Furthermore, Enrique's faculty member encouraged him to persist as a student when he faced obstacles by explaining to him that the challenges he was facing with his research was simply part of the scientific process and not a reflection of his abilities.

Kaitlyn had a similar experience with her faculty mentors, who helped advise her when she was navigating the change in her career plans late in her undergraduate career:

...we talk about life and my plans and all of that shifted in the very beginning of this year. And that was really scary because I was supposed to know what I was going to do, I thought that I was supposed to know what I was going to do and I just decided

what I thought I wanted to do was in no way, shape, or form what I would be happy doing. So, they just sort of talked through that and we sort of, worked through that. As was the case with Enrique, Kaitlyn's faculty mentors helped by providing advice and personal support as she navigated her career path.

Mentorships seemed particularly important for two of the students of color in this study, although the process of finding a faculty mentor was not always an easy process. For instance, Enrique had three or four faculty mentors by the end of his college career, but when he first sought out a faculty mentor, he felt that faculty members dismissed him: "...I didn't know if it was because I was a freshman or if it was because I was from rural North Carolina or if it was because I was African American. It really hit me hard in the beginning...". Enrique did connect with several faculty mentors later in his academic career who took time to provide detailed guidance on his academic journey and who understood and, in some cases shared, his personal background. Enrique specifically sought out faculty mentors who would provide him with both academic and personal support:

I thought it was going to take me a little bit longer, especially being an African American student, those are needs within itself, especially like at a predominantly white institution like SSU. Also, being from a rural area because I've realized I only mesh well with certain types of people and so I'm looking for like specific personalities. I'm not just looking for someone to just mentor me, I'm looking for a specific personality that will understand like some of the issues that I go through and some of the things that may like come up.

Rebecca, another student of color, found a faculty mentor who shared her background as a person of color on a predominantly white campus. She sought out her mentor, rather than her

academic adviser, when she was planning for her career beyond college. By contrast, Daevin did not indicate that he had a specific faculty mentor. However, he did become involved in a residential learning community that focused on Black male development. He stated that this program allowed him to learn more about his shared racial and cultural identity: “I wanted to try and learn more about people who look like me 'cause I didn't really have that opportunity growing up.” Possibly, that involvement in this organization served some similar purposes in providing advice and mentorship as would a faculty mentor. Some students of color in this study found a mentor who was also a person of color, even if the mentor did not share the students’ racial identity.

Advisers played a large role in helping rural students navigate the academic landscape. Students described how advisers helped them create their class schedules, change majors, and advocate for them when they were struggling academically. Thomas recounted how his academic adviser helped him not only register for classes but also utilize the online registration tool. His adviser was also very knowledgeable about how courses fulfilled requirement, and showed him which courses he could take to fulfill multiple requirements and general education requirements, as well as which courses to take based on his skills:

We had the index cards with the class schedules, and we moved 'em around. That's what we did in high school. I had no idea how to work, to re-audit. I had no idea of what to work as far as that stuff goes. So, I went, and she sat down, and she showed me, “How do you see the description of this course? How does this course fit into your schedule?” The biggest thing was, “What can you double up on? What can count for two things?”

Thomas's adviser helped him take classes where he would be academically successful and navigate the university's course requirements. Grace, on the other hand, worked with her adviser to find a major that was a better fit for her personal interests:

My first advisor, she knew a lot about Mandarin stuff and Chinese stuff that happened in [the city]. So, she was a great fit. She was the one that led me, "Hey, you should probably change your major if you're not interested." That was important to me.

Thomas and Grace both perceived their advisers to be a source of institutional knowledge, especially regarding course selection and the administrative processes of changing majors.

For Cecil, his adviser served as an advocate for him when he transferred back to SSU after attending the community college in his hometown. His adviser told him which courses he would need to take and the grades he would need to get in order to transfer into his major of choice:

I felt really comfortable around her. She's the first person I talked to when I came back. The last semester I was at [SSU] I failed two classes, and I was only taking 12 credit hours, and I'm trying to get into one of the harder programs in Engineering. She was like, "What?" But she didn't tell me I shouldn't try to do it. Then, when I started, I had to take Calc 3 over the summer, and I made an A and an A+ in it, and she was really supportive from thereon out, and really helped me out a lot.

Cecil's adviser even stepped in and advocated on his behalf for the college to accept him.

Cecil was considering dropping out of SSU permanently if he was not accepted into his major, so the advocacy of his adviser had a significant impact on his persistence.

Overall, many of the students in this study said that faculty and staff were supportive of them as students. Josh explains that even those professors who were not within his academic field were helpful:

Even though I've had conversations with faculty that I had in the class, that wasn't really applicable to what I want to do in the future. But I know I can still go to them if I have a question or if I want to hear about them, or get advice, things like that. So, they've been very supportive overall.

Grace said that developing that relationship with professors was really the crux of what the college experience was about:

I love professors. I think they're one of the most important people that children and young adults should have a good role model for. Let's see ... For example, I've taken Mandarin here for seven semesters, so I know everyone in the department. We're all really good friends. It's important to maybe not have a friendship relationship with your professor. It's kind of weird but let them know they're respected and then they'll respect you back...Professors are so important to my well-being just 'cause they're the only thing that matters, how they present their material and their availability for questions.

In her observation, Grace reinforces that the relationship with professors is what fosters learning, and since the purpose of college is to learn, that relationship is crucial to students' experiences.

*Too busy to help: Ambivalent relationships with faculty.* Another portion of students who participated in this study had a more mixed perspective on their faculty, perceiving some of their faculty to be helpful, but within limits. Other students in the study did not

interact with faculty outside class time, either by personal choice or because they felt faculty were unwilling to help them.

A common observation among these students was that faculty often came across as too busy to help their undergraduate students. Students like Matt described how faculty members are willing to help, but that they are busy and so students may not receive help as quickly as they would like:

Definitely helpful. I mean, any time that I've come up to a faculty member or one of my professors and asked for help, I've never been turned away. I feel like at times they're slow, not all of them, I've had some that are really slow to email you back. I understand that though. I've never had an experience though where I've asked a professor for help and they haven't helped me, so definitely have been extremely helpful professors when I need it.

At a research-intensive university like SSU, professors' research can rival the time spent working with students. Thomas perceived that faculty members were not personally invested in their students, but he understood that this lack of attention was partly a function of their position:

Not out of the fact that they don't want to be; it's just that they just can't. They've got jobs, they have research, they have 13 other classes. They're slam-packed along with whatever else they're doing to stay relevant in the field.

Although Thomas would prefer a more personal relationship with his faculty, he seemed resigned that faculty had too many competing demands on their time (“Not out of the fact that they don't want to be; it's just that they just can't”) to get to know their students. While these students were frustrated that their professors' research limited their interaction time,

they also appreciated that faculty members' commitment to research made them leading experts in their fields. Students like Grace perceived faculty as being highly passionate about their work: "I always admire my professors 'cause hey, they may not want to do it but at least they're still here. They have passion for their subject which is something I too want to have." Grace describes how she perceived the lack of personal investment from her professors as a fair tradeoff for the opportunity to interact with a faculty member who is passionate and knowledgeable about their field.

Students like Enrique, Erika, and Cecil expressed more frustration with faculty member's limited availability. Students perceived STEM faculty members as being less accessible to students. Enrique, who was highly engaged in undergraduate research and had several faculty mentors, stated that he perceived STEM faculty to prioritize their research over developing relationships with their students:

I feel like faculty, to me as a student, they're, at least in the classes that I've had, it seems like they're just kind of there to serve their role and that's it. No faculty have ever really, to me, have, I will say, get to know me. There have been a few exceptions. At least, on the whole, it seems like my science [professors] have just been like "I'm here to convey this information to you," and not necessarily learn about you as an individual.

Rebecca stated that her humanities professors were, "genuinely interested in your wellbeing and how you're doing in classes," whereas the faculty from her STEM courses would just give students work and instruct them to reach out if they were confused.

Faculty seemed so busy with their research that some students were hesitant to ask for help. I revisit this quote from Phoebe, who described how she initially felt unsure about reaching out to faculty but had learned over time that faculty wanted to help students:

I've been to office hours. I've grown more confident in emailing them about questions I have and realizing that their office hours are there for a reason and their email is there for a reason and that I'm not bothering them, I'm not interrupting their tea time or their coffee break. I also approach them after class if I have a question.

Other students avoiding working with faculty because they perceived professors as not being receptive to questions outside of class. Cecil explains:

There are a few, but overall, I feel like they're busy with what they're doing. Even emailing and asking professors a question, they'd be really short with everything. I get that because they're doing research, and they're really busy, but it's something I don't really enjoy at all. Because I'm paying money to be there.

An unwillingness to reach out to faculty members was especially problematic for a student like Cecil, who already struggled academically throughout his college career. Faculty may be very willing to help students, but some students perceived faculty members' busy schedules and focus on research as an unwillingness to make time to help undergraduate students. For some students, this perception dissuaded them from working with faculty altogether.

About a third of the students in the study had limited interaction with faculty, only occasionally going to office hours or asking a question after class. The reasons for this limited interaction were mixed. Matt, Phoebe, and Liz all stated that they preferred working through their questions independently rather than asking their professors for help. These

students did not necessarily have negative perceptions of faculty but instead preferred to work independently. Liz explains:

I'm not much of a one-on-one student. I'll talk to them at the end of the class and whatnot, I do that kind of frequently, but I don't really go to office hours much. The big lecture halls, unless I needed to ask them a quick question after class, I never really spoke to them personally.

Daevin did not provide much reason for his lack of interaction with faculty except to say, "I've come in to my professor's office hours and asked questions from time to time, when I feel like I really need the help." Of all the students interviewed, only Cecil said that he chose not to go to his professors because he felt unwelcome. The lack of interaction with faculty did not appear to be problematic for these students may could be an issue of selection, as these students were those who had successfully persisted into their senior year of college.

***Lost in the institutional blind spot summary.*** Faculty and staff varied in the extent to which they were aware of rural college students within their departments and programs.

Institutional actors who had greater awareness of their rural college student populations were more likely to be in departments that tracked rural students as a demographic as compared to those faculty and staff who were less aware. The difference in awareness across institutional actors raises the question of greater institutional awareness of rural scholars at SSU. Students also ranged in their attitudes towards and interactions with faculty and staff. Most students had positive interactions with faculty and staff, interacting with them through class, faculty mentorships, or research. Yet some students also perceived faculty and staff as less willing to help, which in turn, made students less willing to ask for help.

## **Spanning Two Worlds: Navigating Social Spaces Between Home and College**

The fifth and final theme that emerged from the data explores how rural students' social relationships with the college and home environment shaped their college experiences and contributed to their persistence. Rural students engaged in two major social systems: the college social system, which included their extracurricular involvement and peer communities, and the home environment, including family, friends, and the home community itself.

The first several subthemes discuss how rural students engaged with the college social community through peer networks and their extracurricular involvement on campus. In the first sub-theme *Feels like home: Sense of belonging*, rural students describe how the characteristics of the institution and the student body shaped their sense of belonging on campus. The second subtheme, *Get involved: Social engagement on campus* explores how rural students' core values for community and service shaped the types of activities they chose to engage in on campus. The third subtheme, *Delving into diversity*, outlines the ways in which rural students conceptualized diversity on campus. For students from predominantly White communities, this perception of diversity focused on racial diversity. But students from communities with higher percentages of people of color noted that SSU was a place of cultural diversity, even if there were fewer people of color on campus. Most students in this study valued experiencing diversity on campus and sought ways to connect with peers from different backgrounds.

The final two subthemes incorporate students' relationships to their home communities. In *Lifelines from home*, I discuss how many rural students in this study had one or multiple connections to home on campus through family, significant others, or friends.

These connections to home on campus benefited rural students by bringing a piece of the familiar to an alien environment and easing their initial transition to college. The fifth subtheme, *Turning home: Relationships with home, revisited*, reintroduces students' initial orientations to home and explores how those relationships changed, or did not change, as students progressed through their college career. These relationships with home, combined with students' career aspirations, shaped students' ultimate plans to return to their hometown after graduation.

**Feels like home: Sense of belonging.** Education literature has found that students' sense of belonging on campus has a significant impact on their ability to persist and thrive on campus (Astin, 1985; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh et al., 2008). While a range of experiences existed among students, most (nine students) stated that they felt a sense of belonging on campus. When asked about what initially drew them to the campus, three students mentioned SSU's agricultural tradition and how this institution's history felt familiar. Matt said:

I remember when I toured, and I came by a big field with a bunch of cows in it, and I was like, "This is just like back home." So, I guess the ag industry here ... or school here is very similar to back home in that aspect.

Liz described how the agricultural components of the school attracted other rural students to the school as well:

In a cheesy way, a lot of the people around here that are [in] agricultural parts of this school and a lot of that does feel like home. Like seeing people walk around campus in cowboy boots is not something you'd see at every campus, but for me that's normal.

These findings reinforce the idea that rural students perceive land-grant institutions as more culturally accessible than other large state institutions (Yoder, 2007).

Other students mentioned how the friendliness among people at the university gave the large campus a small-town feel. Josh said:

It's still very close-knit, despite the population size. And so that allowed me to feel a little at home a little bit. Because even though there's so many people at this institution, depending on what major or program you're in, you'll start to see the same people over and over again, in your classes, and things like that. So that aspect of it was the familiarity, compared to home.

Students described how, just like at home, they encountered the same familiar faces on a regular basis.

A few trends regarding sense of belonging emerged across student characteristics. The three transfer students in the study reported that they felt a slightly lower sense of belonging on campus, perhaps due because of the shorter time spent on the college campus. Alex spent his first two years at the local community college before transferring into SSU and stated that he had some challenges settling in socially when he first arrived:

I guess the only thing that was difficult was I went to [the community college] for two years. I went to [the community college] for two years and then I transferred here as a junior. So, I feel like that's more of a problem of I wasn't here my freshman year and all the friends that I made from my ... because I played baseball at [the community college] so I made a pretty tight group of friends for my first two years and then everybody kinda went their separate ways and then I came here. And everybody that

has been going to school here since their freshman year had friends and bonds that they've had for the past two years and it's kinda hard to get into that.

Alex described how he made a few good friends in his major but for the most part, made friends with other transfer students who were also looking for a social network.

Phoebe also attended another local community college for one year before transferring into SSU. However, her hometown was close enough to SSU that she lived at home and commuted for her first year at SSU (second year of college). Phoebe described how she still felt a little lost at the university because of the transfer:

There seems to be this great expectation of having a plan all throughout college and after college. I think that's what I'm still struggling with and have the most trouble with is meeting some of those expectations of [the university motto], trying to find my niche and where I belong in such a large school, especially I never lived on campus and I went to community college for [one] year.

Phoebe's transitional challenges were academic ("this great expectation of having a plan all through college") and social ("finding my niche and where I belong in such a large school"). Later in the interview, Phoebe described how she went home nearly every weekend although she did hang out with one good friend from home who also attended SSU. Based on the information she provided, Phoebe seemed to have much social connection to the university.

The last transfer student, Rebecca, said that when she first transferred to SSU, she had a tough time adjusting:

It took me a lot longer to figure out the campus and figure out the way things are run here. It took me about a good month, maybe a month and a half to really settle in and know what I was doing. It was extremely overwhelming. I remember just trying to

take a deep breath just to get to class, but also my fiancé goes to school here so I'd call him and be like hey how do I get to this building. It was overwhelming, but once I got the hang of it, it was pretty easy to transition the rest of the way.

Having her fiancé also attending SSU seemed to serve as a safety net for Rebecca as she adjusted to life on a new campus, even for small things like finding her next class. Alex and Phoebe did not have this help when they arrived on campus, which may partially explain why they had more challenges transitioning to SSU. Rebecca described how, after she settled in, she did feel a sense of belonging on campus: “There's definitely a small town feel here, in a way. I know it's extremely large, but you definitely meet your group of people and you know what you want to do, and they help you out and so forth.”

Students who were closer to the university, like Phoebe, were more likely to go home on the weekends rather than stay on campus; four out of the six students who lived within an hour of campus stated that they regularly returned home on the weekends, especially early in college. Yet other students who returned home frequently, including Thomas and Erika, stated that they felt a sense of belonging on campus. Therefore, these students' frequent trips home did not necessarily affect their sense of belonging. Those students whose home communities were further from campus were much less likely to say that they returned home on the weekends, citing distance from home as one reason for that. Adam used to return home often as a freshman but as he progressed in college, those visits home became less frequent. Now driving home for the weekend felt too far:

Honestly, when I go home now, I drive for four hours, and I'm like, “How did I do this so much my freshman year? This is like, oh my God.” And I love going home, but it can be a bit of a drive...

The slightly longer drive of more than an hour for students may have been just enough of an inconvenience for some students that it encouraged them to find community on campus rather than return home. Sense of belonging is important to student persistence, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds, such as low-income, first-gen, and students of color (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh et al., 2008).

**Get involved: Social engagement on campus.** When asked what advice she would give to rural students from her home communities who were thinking about coming to SSU, Liz said:

Thinking about coming here, I think the biggest challenge would always be the size of it, so my number one advice would be join any organization. I don't care what kind it is. In doing so, they have a community within a community. That makes it a little smaller.

Liz recognizes that a big transitional challenge for rural students is adjusting to the size of SSU's campus relative to their home communities. As previously discussed, students adjusted to differences in class size by seeking out smaller majors or findings ways to connect with their faculty. Socially, Liz recommended finding a smaller community on campus by getting involved in an extracurricular activity, which helps students to connect to a small group of peers with a common interest. Rural students in this study carried the values of community and service, which translated into goals of building community and giving back. Extracurricular involvement helped students to achieve these goals, while also building skills that demonstrated the benefit of involvement on personal and intellectual growth of students.

*Community.* All the students in this study were involved in some extracurricular activities, with most students being moderate to highly involved outside the classroom. Activities included service organizations, academic societies, fraternities and sororities, living-learning communities, intramural sports, and cultural clubs. Getting involved in a club helped students build their initial communities among peers who had similar interests to them. Research on social interactions in college demonstrate that the quality of students' peer interactions is positively correlated with their college persistence (Mayhew et al., 2016). Adam got involved in rock climbing his junior year in college, which led to a part time position at the local rock-climbing facility. This job also served as a community hub for SSU students and community members with an interest in fitness:

There's a lot of SSU students who come there and a lot of my coworkers are SSU students. And there's a whole community in and of itself that go to [the rock-climbing club] on a regular basis which I think is really awesome. It's a community that's intent on being healthy and fit and all that good stuff and typically they're more environmentally cautious and they're very chill people.

Thomas got involved with an on campus political organization, which connected him with other politically active students across campus: "Which is another thing that really helped me was clubs. Got me hooked up with the CRs (College Republicans) on campus. And so that, a lot of people like-minded. Same kind of background."

Involvement in clubs and organizations also helped students build their social and cultural capital across campus. Josh, for instance, was heavily involved in orientation on campus as a student leader:

I was actually very fortunate, I was an orientation leader. And then so that helped significantly just because that gave me the exposure to the campus as well as different offices and the bureaucracy side of things, but also allowed me to gain friendships and trust and support systems, like a smaller group. I liked it so much I came back as a student coordinator, which is the upper-level position that serves as a pure mentor and supervisor to the orientation leaders. So, allowing that, helped me get my foot on campus. I know people in a bunch of different departments and programs and stuff like that too. So, in the event I have a question, I have somebody I can turn to, things like that. So that was probably really, really beneficial from the get-go.

Orientation helped Josh find a group of peers (“allowed me to gain friendships and trust and support systems”), as well as connect with professionals across campus in different departments. The organization also helped him build leadership skills and feel comfortable navigating the bureaucracy of the large college campus.

Liz also discussed how involvement in her sorority connected her with peers who were older:

When I lived in the house my sophomore year, I really grew close with a lot of girls.

I'm still roommates with the same girls. I joined other organizations because of it.

Meeting people from all different levels, like from seniors down to freshman, and as a freshman and sophomore, that was really beneficial to have older people kind of ask advice for, or from. So, I definitely got more involved with that.

Both Josh and Liz describe one of the benefits of getting involved on campus: it helps students develop social and cultural capital they can use in college and beyond. Involvement in their respective leadership roles helped Liz and Josh connect with older students and staff

across campus who could answer questions and provide advice. Much like students benefited from their academic advisers, informal peer and staff “advisers” imparted institutional knowledge that helped students navigate the social structure of campus. The connections they formed led students to additional leadership opportunities.

Cecil’s experience represented an interesting counterpoint to the idea of community. Upon his initial transition to college, Cecil struggled to fit in with his peers:

Yeah, I thought I would assimilate a lot faster than I did. I got friends pretty quickly and I was close with them. They would hit me up all the time to go eat but as far as social stuff, just a little different, like whenever they'd go hang out with girls, they were gonna go hang out with like city girls from Charlotte or something and I didn't necessarily get along with people like that. We just didn't get each other, that group. I had friends, but whenever they went out to go do stuff, I wouldn't really go with them. One because I didn't dress preppy enough and two, it was just difficult for me to hang out with people that I didn't know for a while.

Although he met friends, Cecil did not feel share the same values. Part of the challenge for Cecil was interacting with peers who had grown up in more urban environments who may not have shared his interests (“whenever they'd go hang out with girls, they were gonna go hang out with like city girls from Charlotte or something and I didn't necessarily get along with people like that”). Another challenge Cecil described was the challenge of getting used to the difference in fashion style:

Definitely style. How people ... like you fit in a clique. What you wear here, says more about anything. I remember the first time I came here I heard this girl talking about cargo shorts. She was talking about a guy, trying to talk to her at a bar, and she

was like, "He was wearing cargo shorts. Do you know how to dress yourself?" What do you mean? Cargo shorts, they have more pockets. It's the utility. That's when I realized cargo shorts weren't cool.

The issue for Cecil was not the clothing themselves, but that his attire distinguished him as an outsider. He perceived the way he dressed made it more difficult for him to make friends:

People just judge you if you were dressed a certain way. Took me a lot longer to get to know people that I eventually became good friends with. I think it had a lot to do with, I just didn't care what wore or anything. 'Cause I just had clothes that my grandpa gave me at garage sales or something, 'cause that's what I thought was cool.

Weird shirts from obscure places.

Cecil managed this by “conforming”, as he described it: he adjusted his clothing style and joined a fraternity to make friends:

My suite mate, I became friends with him, and he took me to [the fraternity] the next semester and I guess he really liked me and he's trying to recruit me and of course they were like, "You gotta dress a little nicer," and all that.

Cecil's ability to make friends on campus and join this organization was contingent on conforming to the dress code of the group, which he eventually did:

I ended up pledging a fraternity, and it's something I just didn't want to do, but it was so hard to make good friends. I was saying earlier, it took me a lot longer to become with friends, that I would eventually become good friends with.

However, the social aspects of Greek life negatively impacted his academic progress. His grades suffered, and he lost his financial aid. At the same time, Cecil's mom was struggling with addiction back home. The combination of all these challenges forced Cecil to return

home for several years. He eventually enrolled at the local community college, improved his grades, and returned to SSU to finish his bachelor's degree. Cecil professed that, despite the challenges, joining the fraternity was a positive decision for him:

Short term, my grades went down but I was able to come back after the two years and I had a lot of people that had houses that I could go live with. It was just really easy coming back, whereas if I wasn't in a fraternity, all my friends would've been gone at that point and it would've been really difficult coming back.

Yet when asked what advice he could give to someone else from his home community looking to attend SSU, he said:

Do you own thing, don't join a fraternity...It's just too much. They have a lot of money, maybe, but I feel like I would have had a more effective college experience if I didn't join a fraternity, as far as academics go. I would have been doing other things.

Cecil's experience illustrates how community in and of itself did not always have a positive impact on students, especially if the community did not share the same values as the rural student. Unlike a student like Thomas, who was able to build a community with individuals who had shared interests, Cecil joined a community that required him to change a component of his identity for membership. Cecil's dress was not a trivial change, but instead represented his sense of originality and family ("Cause I just had clothes that my grandpa gave me at garage sales or something, 'cause that's what I thought was cool"). This account reinforces the importance of how peer groups built on shared identities can foster student persistence, whereas those that do not can ultimately weaken student persistence.

For rural students of color, finding their community also meant exploring their racial identities. Enrique was the only participant who discussed the intersection of his rural

identity with his racial identity. He needed to find other people of color in the sciences and spent most of his first year doing so. But he found that many of those he identified with racially were from urban areas:

At least in my experiences at [SSU], they seemed very distinct, because at least most of the rural students that I met here, they're usually white, in my experiences. I've not met another African American in science at SSU who's also from a rural town. I just haven't. And usually most of my black friends, they're from cities that are pretty diverse or predominantly African Americans like Durham, like Charlotte, like Atlanta. They're from places where, I guess, black people were seen. At least in these urban spaces where black people are usually normalized, I would say.

Enrique became involved in academic clubs for multicultural scientists and other service-based organizations as a way of connecting with other students of color. Daevin, the other Black male student interviewed, also sought student organizations for students of color. In his case, Daevin got involved in a living-learning community that supported black male students. He sought the opportunity because he felt he had not had that kind of opportunity to explore his racial identity in his hometown. Likewise, Rebecca became involved in a multicultural student organization on campus as a way of learning more about her Hispanic heritage and connecting with other Latina students. She said the reason she joined the multicultural student association was, "...because back home you don't have many multicultural stuff because a majority of them are White." These findings suggest that building community for students of color serves a very different purpose than it does for White students. Involvement with multicultural organizations helped students of color learn about their own racial culture in a way that was empowering and did not get from their home

community. Given the number of rural students of color in North Carolina, one much understand how these students explore different aspects of their identities at college and the intersectionality of students' racial identity with their rural identity.

*Service.* About half (seven) rural students in this study reported being involved in regular service-based organizations or leadership roles during college, and five of those were heavily involved in service. Through their college service involvement, students built one the values of service they formed in their home communities and developed a deeper commitment to service during college, often by taking on additional service roles. Kaitlyn was a good example of this idea. During high school, Kaitlyn was involved in volunteering with the Special Olympics. When she arrived at SSU, she found that the university did not have a Special Olympics chapter, prompting her to form a committee to start one. In her final year at SSU, Kaitlyn was interning at the Special Olympics headquarters, in addition to several other prominent service roles on campus. She discussed how her leadership roles on campus changed over time:

In my freshman year, I was just sort of a quiet person in the back of a lot of club meetings. I would go to a lot of things that I didn't really care about but I would say through time I've sort of narrowed down the causes that I really care about, or at least the group of people that I enjoy spending time with to work towards a cause. College provided opportunities for Kaitlyn to explore and grow in her service leadership, but she ultimately came back to one of the initial organizations she held dear coming into college: Special Olympics.

Rural students in this study also gave back to other rural students and rural populations through their leadership positions and service organizations. For instance, both

Liz and Josh discussed how they used their leadership roles interacting with incoming first-year and prospective students to ease the fears of rural students worried about transitioning into a large campus environment. Liz explains:

The ambassador [program] takes no more than two hours a week at max, but it's been a lot of fun because you do get to meet so many people, and kind of be that face. I love to answer people's questions when they're worried about coming to a big school from such a small environment.

Josh similarly explained that one reason he decided to work in orientation was to give back to other rural students like himself:

One of them was, because I had great orientation experience, I felt so welcomed and valued, to give back and show gratitude to the community who had done so much for me already. That rural piece as well. Even though I'm from a rural town, I went to an early college, and so I can speak to those experiences and relate closely to those students and make sure even though this is a big place, you're going to be fine. You'll find your people and things like that.

In both responses, but especially in Josh's, a sense of duty exists ("I felt so welcomed and valued, to give back and show gratitude to the community who had done so much for me already") that indicates a value in service. Moreover, rural students want to relate to and give back to other rural students who were in their shoes not many years earlier.

Enrique chose to give back to rural students through a science outreach program within his major:

And they have this two to three-day program where they literally just immerse the kids in science. I mean, I've served as a counselor for that and the kids are always

asking questions like "What is it like to be a college student? What is it like to be a science student? What is it like to be black in science?" Things like that... These are kids that are traditionally from, at least the most schools that we interact with, have been from rural areas or usually majority-minority classrooms.

Enrique's service opportunity allowed him not only to give back to other rural populations, but specifically to communities of color in rural communities, much like his own. One of Enrique's long-term plans was to start a scholarship program for students from his community to study science in college but through his volunteer experiences, he was able to give back a little bit sooner.

Students' social involvement through extracurricular activities was beneficial to rural students in three important ways. First, it reinforces their institutional commitment to the university. Tinto's model and subsequent research on this area support involvement on campus promotes student persistence (Mayhew et al., 2016). In their review of the literature on social integration, Mayhew et al., (2016) found support for components of Tinto's (1993) model, stating that, "...social involvement is associated with social integration, which leads to institutional commitment, which then predicts retention/persistence" (p. 415). Second, rural students in this study espoused values related to community and service, which they attributed to their rural upbringing. These values served as the foundation for students' motivations towards building community and ultimately giving back the community through and after college graduation. In their social engagement, we see how rural students enact some of their rural values and motivations in the ways they choose to get involved with activities in and around a college campus. Finally, involvement also achieved individual

benefits of helping rural students develop social and cultural capital that opened the door to future leadership positions.

**Delving into diversity.** Nearly all the rural students in this study noted how the college campus was significantly more diverse than their hometowns. For instance, Matt discussed how, compared to his predominantly White hometown, SSU offered an opportunity to meet people from different racial and cultural backgrounds:

There's just a lot of different diversity here that you don't see back home. It's predominantly White where I'm from, and so it was definitely good to get out and experience some diversity.

Similarly, Adam stated that, “growing up in a small town it wasn't very diverse or anything.” Like Adam, Kaitlyn was from a predominantly White community where people had similar views: “Diversity was a huge thing in all aspects of the word. We all look the same in my hometown. We all act the same. We all think the same.” Kaitlyn explained how college was the first time she met someone of a different religion:

I'd never met someone who was a non-Christian till I got to college and my roommate was. And she not only was a non-Christian, she told me that she hated Christians. We're best friends now, it worked really well but it shocked me for a little while.

These experiences reinforce the stereotypical notion of rural America as predominantly White and Christian. A little over half of the students in this study (nine students, but two from the same hometown) were from towns where more than 75% of the population was White. By comparison, the most recently admitted freshmen class at SSU (Class of 2022) was comprised of approximately 70% White, 5.35% Black, 7.47% Asian, 5.87% Latinx, and 3.87% students of two or more races (SSU Office of Admissions, 2018).

The other half of the rural students in this study were from communities that were more racially diverse (30%+ people of color) than the undergraduate population at SSU. These communities were predominantly Black, Latinx, and White (American Fact Finder, 2018). Yet, these students, like their peers from predominately White communities, also stated that SSU was more diverse environment than their home communities. When I explained that SSU's population was proportionally less racially diverse than their home communities, students explained that they perceived their hometowns to be homogenous because people in the town shared common perspectives and ideas, even if they did not share the same racial or ethnic backgrounds. Erika explained that for her, diversity meant "different kinds of people." At college, she explained, "You meet many more cultures and meet people that have different ideas here where back at home everyone is pretty straight forward, the same ideas." Daevin's hometown was racially divided between White and Black populations, but he still considered SSU more diverse because, "...there's still thousands and thousands of different ethnicities, and that's just not the case from where I grew up."

Part of the perception that SSU was more diverse may be rooted in the culturally homogenous nature of students' home communities. Students described their hometowns as the kinds of places where change happened slowly, and community members were less receptive to new ideas. By comparison, SSU was in an urban center where the pace of life moved much faster. Students described how the university environment fostered exposure to diversity, as well as interaction between students of different backgrounds. Matt specifically cited his residence hall as a place where he first encountered peers who had different backgrounds and life experiences:

But when I would meet new friends with different backgrounds, different religious backgrounds or political backgrounds, there was a lot of ... because there's always exercises that they do in freshman year where you get to meet new people and discuss those types of things.

Likewise, Phoebe described how the structure of the university fostered diversity and interaction between people from different cultures:

It's so much more diverse culture here. You have people from so many different backgrounds that if someone with a different background comes in, it's not unexpected. There is already kind of this infrastructure of support and different groups that meet. It's just expected or not unexpected maybe.

These students observed that the university created intentional structures and programming to foster this type of interaction between different groups of individuals.

Other students observed how the culture of SSU welcomed diversity, especially as compared to their home communities. Alex stated:

Yeah, so I'm a lot more exposed to ... been living here for four years now so there's a definitely big difference. It's, obviously, faster here. You get a more wealth of ideas, diversity, that type of thing. A lot less prejudice here than compared to my town, not that it's running rampant or anything.

From Alex's perspective, SSU is not only more diverse, but also more tolerant of different ideas and cultures than in his home community. Grace had a similar observation:

... there's so many opportunities here. It's so overwhelming at first, but it's worth it. A change is so important. Also, just stay open-minded if you are and if you're not, you'd

better be. There's no room for close-minded people here. I guess that's just the rural cities, towns, are okay with it. They kind of enforce it.

Phoebe, Matt, Alex and Grace express several similar ideas in their observations. First, they touch on the perception that SSU and surrounding city have greater diversity of people and ideas than their home communities do (“It’s so much more diverse culture here” “You get more wealth of ideas, diversity, that type of thing.” “...there’s so many opportunities here.”). They also stated that SSU and urban environment are receptive to diversity (“There’s no room for close-minded people here”). Phoebe and Matt describes diversity as an intentional and integral part of the college culture (“There is already kind of this infrastructure of support” “There’s always exercises they do”). Finally, students directly compare the surrounding city to their home communities, where they perceive diversity of people and/or thought are not as welcome (“A lot less prejudice here...” “They kind of enforce it.”). These observations capture not only how rural students perceive diversity on their college campuses, but also how it compares to their home communities. Students’ exposure to diversity at college potentially shapes how they view their home communities in light of their college experiences.

Students valued the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Matt described how his first year he was exposed to many new ideas, and the experience was what made his first year at SSU so valuable:

I would say meeting new people with different ideas than what I had previously coming into school. When you come from somewhere where everybody thinks the same way as you, it's a little difficult to come in and explore new ideas, which I adjust

to that quick. I mean, that was awesome. I mean, that's what made freshman year so great was getting to explore new things, new ideas.

Rural students were not only receptive to engaging with diverse populations and experiences, but actively pursued them as a goal in college. For instance, Adam discussed how exposure to diversity was a primary goal in attending college because it was something he did not have at home:

I would say personal goals were to kind of I guess earlier, kinda branch out and meet as many people as I could. Kind of expose myself to different traditions and cultures and to kind of see the world beyond a more Bible-belt type community, which I found very easy to do.

Similarly, Daevin wanted to take advantage of the diversity of the university by participating in new experiences:

Personally, I wanted to learn what I can, try to get experience in new areas. I wanted to try new things, and basically in many possible areas as I could. I wanted to try to find new people to befriend, things like that.

Grace appreciated that college allowed her to connect with other peers who also valued diversity and new ideas like she did:

Just meeting like-minded people. That was important. I consider myself pretty open-minded, which is not what I would say about the people back home. That's why I wanted to leave. I've met so many different people and so many different perspectives that I never even thought about when I was back home.

These goals led students to seek new experiences and cultures. For example, Adam studied abroad in China with his degree program, Daevin joined a residential learning community, and Grace sought to become proficient in several foreign languages.

Not all students were as initially receptive towards new experiences in their first year. In fact, a few discussed how they came in with preconceived notions about the types of people they would meet at SSU. Cecil explained, “I had a really small mind about a lot of things like about religions and just people in general, rich kids. I had a negative outlook on all that and that's all changed since I've been here.” Cecil described how he transitioned from distrusting his urban and suburban peers to realizing, “There's good people everywhere. There's not just good people in small towns.” Matt underwent a similar change in perspective after the initial culture shock dissipated:

...just talking to new people and realizing that, hey, these guys aren't crazy just 'cause they think different things. And that kinda opened me up to new things. And I mean, it's a process. It's not like the next morning, I was like, hey ... a different thinker. And I still hold the values that I brought from [my home town], but it's kind of in a different manner. And I'm not against new ideas when I hear them. And that change... mean, I still feel like I'm evolving from, and this is my senior year. I think that's what's made college so fun for me.

Adam came into college expecting his classmates to all be “city people”. His “A-ha!” moment was when he realized that, like himself, his classmates had come to SSU from all over and were experiencing their own versions of culture shock just like he was. This realization helped Adam to see beyond the surface-level differences to see the similarities of interests between him and his classmates.

Exposure to diversity for rural students may be a little different than it is for other incoming freshmen. First, rural students were from communities that were very culturally homogenous, even if they were more racially diverse than the SSU campus. Many students described their communities as culturally insulated due to their small size, distance from cultural centers, and propensity for community members to remain within the community (See: *Rural foundations: The meaning of home*). College, by comparison, represented a community of peers from many different racial, cultural, socioeconomic, political, and religious backgrounds. The diversity of the student body compounded with the difference in other areas, including class size and academic expectations (See: *Catching up: Academic preparation, challenges, strategies, and engagement*). Whereas a student from a suburban community may need to adjust to the size and some diverse perspectives, rural students were adjusting to size, academic expectations, *and* diverse perspective and values of their peers and faculty. As Josh explains:

So, going from that to here, which is such a drastic change in terms of the learning curve was just significantly steeper than I thought it was going to be. And so particularly what came to mind was the higher gear of everything.

In other words, “diversity” for rural students came to capture not just a few differences in perspectives from their home communities, but the cumulative cultural divide between their home communities and college communities.

The other notable piece is that rural students were, for the most part, receptive to this diversity. I revisit a quote from Adam, who describes being specifically motivated to immerse himself in a culturally diverse community:

I would say personal goals were to kind of I guess earlier, kinda branch out and meet as many people as I could. Kind of expose myself to different traditions and cultures and to kind of see the world beyond a more Bible-belt type community...

Other students, like Cecil, were not as initially receptive to the differences of their peers but eventually came to value it as part of their college experience (“I had a negative outlook on all that and that's all changed since I've been here.”). Ultimately, rural students in this study expressed an overwhelmingly positive perception of the diversity they experienced in college.

***Peer connections with home.*** Many of the participants in this study (10) had someone from home who also attended SSU with whom they regularly interacted. Having a friend from home seemed to help ease the transition into college for many rural students and allowed them to maintain some connections to home while still growing as a college student. For instance, Erika’s best friend from high school also attended SSU, and they chose to live together freshmen year which made her new living arrangement feel more familiar: “I made a lot of friends when I first came here. Not only in my major, but other aspects. I came up here with my best friend from high school, so that was familiar living arrangements, we were together.” Erika’s peer network at college therefore represented a combination of both new college friends and old high school friends.

Alex also lived with friends from home. He described how several of his friends from high school and a cousin ended up also enrolling at SSU:

Going back to the familiarity thing about whenever I transferred here, I had a couple friends come here from high school and one of my cousins are actually here now in the Ag program. I feel like a lot of the people I went to high school with that come

here now did go ... whether or not it's [ Ag program] or it's poultry science or some four-year program.

Alex said that transferring from the community college into SSU with one of his best friends from high school made the transition easier.

Kaitlyn knew a student, Riley, who was a few years ahead of her at SSU from her hometown, because of that hometown connection, he made an effort to help her build connections at SSU: “He was able to come have lunch with me and say, ‘Oh you're interesting in this, well here's this person.’” Kaitlyn said that having a close friend from home who understood her experiences also helped some of the transitional challenges she experienced:

I knew Riley very, very well. His mom was my geometry teacher. And he was part of the same [scholarship program] and so having someone that I knew very well, who I could talk to was huge. And he went through the same thing that I did.

Rural students with friends from home seemed to be able to feel more comfortable easing into college while also still feeling connected to their hometowns.

**Turning home: Relationships with home, revisited.** In their interviews, I asked students to reflect on how their initial relationships with home and how those relationships changed over time. I also asked them whether they intended on eventually returning to their home communities. Students’ relationships with home shaped and were shaped by their college experiences, especially in how students built and maintained relationships at college and at home. From the analysis, an interesting tension emerged between students’ orientation to home and their intent to return.

*Consistently strong connection.* From the outset of this study Cecil, Erika, Liz, and Thomas consistently demonstrated strong relationships with home. Throughout her college career, Liz returned home often to spend time with her friends and family. Her return trips home increased in her final two years of college after her mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS): “I spend a lot of time going home between weddings, and my mom recently got diagnosed with MS, so she's been on treatment so that takes up a lot of the time.” Cecil remained closely connected with his home friend group, most of whom stayed or returned to his home community:

Two of my friends I would call, every day or every other day, on social media I'm always interacting with a lot of my friends. I'd a really close-knit group of friends back home. A lot of people say, once you're in college you won't even remember your friends from high school, but that's not been the case at all.

He attributed this closeness to the shared values and similarities them.

Three of these participants (Erika, Liz, and Thomas) were from towns that were within 60 miles of SSU's campus. Because they were close to home, they often returned home on the weekends. Erika, for instance, stated that she returned home nearly every weekend. One explanation for this was because she had a boyfriend who went to college in her hometown, and she often went home to see him. However, she started to spend more weekends in at SSU as she progressed through school: “As I've been up here longer, my freshman year I went home religiously every weekend. As I've gotten more acquainted with here, I've stayed up here more... [My boyfriend], he's felt more comfortable coming up here too.” She still went home regularly to watch her brother play sports on the weekend.

Thomas was socially and politically engaged in his community, and went home regularly to see family, attend church, and participate in civic events. Due to his interest and involvement in local politics, community members would update him when he returned home and ask for his input:

I'm driving down the road, people will wave me down and come out and speak to me, tell me about things. People assume that I'm going to do something political, so they feel like they should tell me all their problems. They rant to me, which I'm more than happy to listen to them, 'cause I'll rant right back to 'em.

My conversations extend more than the, "Oh, how are you? How's your family? Oh, good. Have a good one. How's the weather?" It's more like, "Have you heard about that tax tariff," or, "Have you heard about what they're doing with the tax rates here," or, "Did you hear about what they're gonna do about that road?" Half the time, I don't know what they're talking about. I can't read everything, so they inform me about what's going on locally. But I feel like I connect pretty well with my community.

Unlike the other three, Cecil's hometown was about a four-hour drive from SSU, which made it more difficult for him to return home on the weekends. Perhaps because he was so close with his friends from home or because of the large culture shift from home to college, Cecil struggled to fit in at first in the college environment. This transitional struggle ultimately let him to join a fraternity, which made his grades suffer and forced him to return home for a few years to attend community college. For Cecil, the pillars of home were his friends and mom, both of whom gave him the emotional and financial support to return to SSU:

I think the biggest thing is just being able to, as far as my friends go, call them and get little things off my chest. For example, after I heard that girl say something about cargo shorts, I know I probably called AJ and was like, "Dude, you can't wear cargo shorts here." With my mom, financially, she's been helping me out a lot, a lot more recently than when I first got here. And my friends too, financially. They have more than you would think. They've been helping me like \$20.00, \$30.00 if I need it. They have jobs.

Although he was not able to return as often in person once he returned to SSU, Cecil was still very close to his home community throughout his college career.

These four participants described how their relationships with their home communities strengthened as they progressed through SSU. Liz explains, "So over time, I would almost say it's stronger. Not even due to that, I guess when you're away from it, the bond to it becomes a lot stronger. I've always been a small-town person." Their strong relationships encouraged three out of four of these students to return to their home communities shortly after graduation. As previously discussed, Thomas intended to return home after law school to get involved in local politics and be an advocate for his community: "I wanna go back home when I finish everything, back to [my county] and try to fix it. What I've come across time and time again is the best way I see to fix something is through politics." Cecil was considering doing a short stint in Antarctica as an engineer to earn money to pay off his college loans but then was considering returning home to work for a local engineering company. Erika also intended to return home after graduation as either a school teacher or occupational therapist. She specifically pursued these academic pathways because they would give her the opportunity to return home. Only Liz intended to stay in the

city for a couple years but because home was close by, she knew she could make frequent trips home:

So, for post grad, I'm kind of hoping to stay in [the city] for at least two years. I just feel like it's a good way to get my feet off the ground and kind of maintain my, I don't know, my own ship, but it's close enough to home I can get home if I need it.

The students in this category illustrate how students develop connections to their home social systems (family and friends) and their college social systems (peers and activities) to persist in college. Except for Cecil, whose involvement in Greek life proved detrimental to academic success, these students found a balance between being highly involved on campus while also highly involved in their home communities. Cecil did find, however, that his connection to peers when he returned helped him settle back into life at SSU without re-joining the fraternity. As Guiffrida's (2006) model would suggest, rural students maintained connections with both communities without fully integrating into one or the other, and the connection with both contributed to their persistence.

*Consistently neutral, ambivalent, or disconnected.* Daevin, Grace, Phoebe and Meredith expressed being initially less connected to their home communities upon entering college. At the end of their college career, these students remained neutral or slightly disconnected from their home communities. Like Daevin, many of these students rarely returned home by the end of their college career:

Researcher: Thinking about that connection with your home community, how often do you connect with peers from back home or with your family?

Daevin: Not very much.

Researcher: Okay. Do you go home very often?

Daevin: I do not.

Both Meredith and Daevin were highly motivated to find a full-time job after graduation so that they would not need to return home. As Meredith explained:

I don't know if it necessarily has or if I've even thought about it, but maybe it's pushed me harder to work a little harder, 'cause I know I didn't want to go back to living in [my hometown]. Just that I had a bigger goal of working in [the city] or somewhere else in the country. That probably pushed me to network more and find connections.

These two participants did occasionally return home to their communities but expressed little emotional attachment to home. Instead, they created connections in their college communities. Both Meredith and Daevin worked on campus for at least one summer so that they could remain in the city over the summer. At the time I conducted these interviews, both Meredith and Daevin had full time job offers in different cities after graduation.

Grace and Phoebe also remained disconnected from home but were more likely to return home than Meredith and Daevin. Grace became steadily less connected to her home community as she progressed through her college career, in part, because of the absence of her home social system from the area. Early in her college career, Grace's stepfather passed away and her mother moved to another state, but her older brother still lived in town. She still returned home frequently on the weekends because she did not have strong connections to the college community:

Well, in my first year I went home every weekend. 'Cause, I still hadn't fully adjusted to college yet. Well, I did move out of my house in my home and I moved to my brother's house which is also in the same small town. So, I would hang out with my

brother more. We didn't really hang out often 'cause he's 15 years older than me.

Then, every weekend I would go hang out with my same three high school friends. She gradually transitioned to staying at college on the weekends and keeping in touch with her friends through social media: “This year, now it's like we're more digital than physical, I guess. So, we'll just message each other a few times through the week, send some memes or whatever.” As she was disconnecting from her home community, Grace built her community at college, getting involved in different language clubs, Chinese cultural clubs, and even ballroom dancing. Grace’s conflicting views towards home are captured in her following statement:

Every time I go back to [my hometown], it's just a good happy time. Even though I may not like the people or whatever, it's constant. There's not much change there. I wouldn't say the community really helps me, but it did help me to prepare and transfer here.

Although she did not necessarily feel connected to her home community, she appreciated the consistency and reliability of what she can expect when she visits (“There’s not much change there.”). After graduation, Grace intended to find a position teaching English overseas before moving out of state with her boyfriend.

Phoebe also maintained a distant emotional relationship from home throughout her college career. For the first two years of college, she lived at home and commuted, first to the community college and then to SSU. The initial commute made it difficult to get involved in activities on campus:

I didn't start group fitness until my second semester here. My first year here, I didn't really get involved that much. I was driving back and forth and so I don't want to drive back with rush hour, staying after class too, join a club or something.

When she moved on campus, Phoebe became much more involved in campus life. She began tutoring and working at the gym. By the end of her college career she was led fitness classes and worked with a PhD student to do research.

Despite not feeling very connected to her home community, Phoebe returned home nearly every weekend. She stated that she often returned home to visit her boyfriend, as well as a few other friends who went to work rather than college after high school graduation. Although she felt connected to specific individuals at home, Phoebe did not feel that her home community played a significant role in supporting her in college: "...I don't feel like necessary the town itself or that community has really played as much of a part in [supporting me]."

The four participants in this study who expressed ambiguous or disconnected feelings towards their home communities were less likely to draw on their home communities for support. Meredith, Daevin, and Grace all cited their immediate families as a source of emotional support but felt their communities themselves did not play a part in supporting them through college. Even Phoebe, who regularly returned home, did so only to visit immediate family and her boyfriend, but felt little sense of connection to her town. With the absence of connection to the home community, these students became more socially connected to the college community through involvement in campus activities and clubs. These students illustrate how the home community is not a priority for all rural students.

Within Guiffrida's (2006) model, these students would not strongly rely on their home communities, but instead would derive their social connection from the college community.

*Positively evolving: Conflicting and changing attitudes towards home.* The home orientations of the remaining seven participants (Alex, Adam, Enrique, Josh, Kaitlyn, Matt and Rebecca) can best be described as both generally *positive* and *evolving* because of how their positive relationships with home became more nuanced and conflicted as they progressed through college.

In many ways, students' evolving attitudes towards their home communities was a normal part of college student development. For instance, Alex was initially somewhat disconnected from his community when he started college and eager to leave home. As he progressed through college, he became closer to his family:

I talk to my mom and dad semi-regular, more than I used to. Whenever I was freshman, sophomore, beginning of junior year I had an independent streak like, "I don't wanna talk to them, I don't need them." Now I talk to my family a lot, my brothers and sisters, my grandparents.

While his contact with family increased, his interaction with his home community and peers decreased over time. He said he only kept in touch with "two people or maybe three" friends from home. One reason was that the community centered on the K-12 school, and specifically sports within the community. Alex was heavily involved in sports growing up but once he graduated and left home, he no longer had that connection to the community:

I just feel like the community in general really centers around the school. I think that's the big thing. Yeah, definitely the community centers around the school and what goes on in that and I guess once you're not in it, you're not around it all the time ... I

don't wanna say I go back and feel like an outsider because I don't really but I mean, it kinda has that vibe to it.

By the end of his college career, Alex reported that his family was his main source of support. While he was still positively oriented towards home, he felt less connected with the community itself.

Similarly, Adam was close to his home community but described how his trips home decreased over time: “So my freshman and sophomore year I went home relatively frequently. More my freshman year and then it kind of tapered off. Now I visit home very rarely, maybe two or three times, four times a year.” Part of this change was due to the increasing demands from schools and the distance from home, as Adam’s hometown was nearly four hours from SSU. However, Adam kept in touch with friends from home through social media and had two close friends from home attend SSU and enroll in the same major. When asked if he intended to return home after graduation, Adam stated that he intended to find work elsewhere for a few years, but he considered the option of returning home once he had a family of his own:

Yeah, and my parents, after they went to college, they went back there. I feel like there's a reason they did. A lot of the people, a lot of my friends' parents grew up there as well, and they stayed there, and all of my friends kind of feel the same way about my hometown that I do. If I ever have kids, I'd like to raise them there because I feel like raising them there would be better than raising them anywhere else. I don't know, that's just my biased opinion. So yeah, if I have kids, I'd like to raise them where I grew up.

Students like Kaitlyn and Enrique found that their values changed in college, and that this change made it difficult to transition back home. Enrique explained how he felt like a stranger when he returned home. His transition was made more challenging, in some respects, because he left his community early to attend the state STEM school for his last two years of high school:

When I go back home, I don't want to stay at home because I don't have friends back home because it's such a small town and I left early. There's like social, not necessarily social taboos, but there's some social things where I guess where I left early everybody forgot about me, it's kind of weird. So, just how a very rural town works; it's only something that I understand and none of them understand.

Enrique had difficulty connecting his experience as a college student to his fellow community members and peers because few shared this path. The demographics of his town support this idea: only 13% of individuals aged 25 years or older from Enrique's town had a bachelor's degree or higher, less than a third of the state average. Although he did not feel like he personally fit in at home, Enrique's hometown was still a place he cared about deeply. Enrique discussed how when he first left home in high school, he would come home and not leave the house:

...I don't know, there was just an internal thing where I felt like, not that I was necessarily better than where I was from, but that the opportunities at [my county], the things that they could have never afforded me, I didn't realize at the time the institutional issues, that they were their own just structural issues that were there. I just kind of saw it like as a "me versus the rest of my peers" type of thing.

Going to college opened his eyes to the structural issues that perpetuated the deep poverty of his community and kept many of his peers from attending college:

But then when I actually came to college and realizing "I'm super privileged to be here right now," and really getting to notice these institutional systems that are oppressing my classmates, people that went from elementary school to temporary [inaudible] and I was like "Wait, crap." And I think it's really strengthened me to actually want to go back to my community and do something good in the future.

Enrique's narrative illustrates the internal tensions he experienced. On one side, he does not quite feel like he fits in anymore at home because of his educational experience. On the other side, he expressed that because he was able to get the education that many of his peers were not afforded, he had an obligation to go home and create more opportunities for others.

Kaitlyn expressed similar conflicting internal tensions. Growing up, she was closely connected to her small community and involved in community life. When she transitioned to college, people in the town would send her notes and care gifts of encouragement. However, she found that her values slowly changed in college in ways that were different and sometimes conflicting to those from home. When asked how her relationships with home had changed, Kaitlyn replied:

I would say it's definitely more distant. I appreciate the relationships that I had and the people that were big parts of me growing up. But I would say that I'm very, very different than most people in my hometown now. As far as like the things that I believe in and the things that I care about. Even Special Olympics, people in my hometown don't care about it and obviously it's huge things for me. Just like, recognizing that the things that I value are very, very different than the things that my

parents' friends value and the things that their kids value and the people who stuck around at home, have continued to value. I can't blame them for that because it's just a product of where they are. I just kind of keep a little bit of a distance because I just disagree with people that I probably will never change their mind and that's okay. We need people that challenge our views, but it bothers me sometimes to listen to them. Mostly to see what they're writing on public platforms.

Kaitlyn's value shift, which she attributed to her education, drove a wedge between her and her community. Yet she also expressed a desire to want to give back to rural community and maybe even return home one day:

People send me cards and care packages and they're always asking about me and texting me to find out how I'm doing. I think that while maybe my relationships I feel like have fallen away, they still think about me, which has been really cool. It's sort of encouraged me to go back.

At the time I conducted this interview, Kaitlyn was planning to take a service year in Appalachia, not far from her hometown, to serve in impoverished communities. Like Enrique, she felt a calling to give back to rural communities even if she did not feel fully comfortable reintegrating into them.

Rebecca, too, expressed how her relationship with her home community had cooled a bit over time, although she remained closely connected to her family:

When I go home, I feel ... it's definitely different. It's not the same at all. Here, you're more rushed and we got to go, go, go. And then back home it's like we'll get there when we get there it takes this long, so make sure you're ready by this time. It's laid

back at home. So, when I get there, I have to calm myself down and get back to the way things were.

But unlike Kaitlyn and Enrique, Rebecca did want to return home after graduation but felt she could not because of the lack of job opportunities:

Yeah so, moving back home is not really an option with what I want to do. Because there's nowhere to do what I want to do, besides the hospital there. And that's not where I want to be. I guess, it's not really an option. And my mom, she's come to terms with that too, like with what I want to do. And what my fiancé wants to do too, there's not really a place for us back home. So, we'd have to live at least near a city... It's kind of sad.

Rebecca's relationship with home was complicated, not because she did not feel connected to home and want to return, but because she felt as if she could not pursue her career goals in her home community. Not returning to home also meant not returning to her family ("And my mom, she's come to terms with that too...").

Erica was similarly torn between wanting to return home to serve her community and the opportunities available to her in the city:

I'm kind of fighting between do I take this job up here because the school systems up here are way better than in [my county]? Or do I continue through [occupational therapy]? That experience that I am having right now is kind of making me question what I want to do.

Erica's dilemma captured the challenge that several other students in the study expressed, torn between wanting to return to their hometowns, but also recognizing that their career opportunities would be better in urban areas. Erica ultimately asserted that she planned on

returning home, but this underlying tension illustrated the competing forces that went into making her choice.

These students' relationships with their home communities may have changed over time, but they still expressed fond relationships with their homes. Adam explains:

And I say that [my attitude about home has] changed but I still get a really positive vibe when I'm there and interacting with my community as a whole is very, very positive and rejuvenating. I describe my hometown as rejuvenating as well cause it's ... just feels good to be there.

Likewise, Josh said:

I always have a solid foundation I could always go back to. In all honesty, this [college], the relationships, all this other stuff, can go south but in the end, I have that home community I could go back to and my family and things like that. That'll always be there.

Staff also notice how rural students typically were close with their home communities. Ms. Ferris noted that many of the rural students she worked with in the scholarship program demonstrated pride in their upbringing:

And I like to say, I'd like to say that our rural students do a good job of standing up for their experience and their rural communities. I think they do a good job of being proud of where they're from, and the value that that brings, and recognizing that maybe you're from this fancy city, but where do you think all your food comes from? So, I ... probably not every rural student, but I have on a number of occasions seen rural students stand up for their communities and where they're from and demand that

it be recognized as just as valid as being from Charlotte or northern Virginia or whatever.

Students may have changed in college, but their communities remained a constant, unwavering source of support and strength.

The students in this category demonstrated how rural students maintained relationships with their home communities throughout college, but these relationships changed during students' college careers. In the case of Kaitlyn and Enrique, the relationship changed because the students' values changed in ways that divided them from the values of their home communities. Yet these two students still wanted to find ways of giving back to their home communities even if they did not intend to return there personally. Other students like Rebecca and Erika wanted to return home, but not feeling as if strong job prospects existed in the area. Still other students like Alex, Adam, and Matt felt more disconnected from home because their involvement in home communities like the school or sports teams changed after they graduated. Despite rural students' changing attitudes towards home, their home communities still played a major role in supporting them in and through college.

***Spanning two worlds summary.*** Rural students in this study describe building and maintaining connections to the college community and their home communities. On campus, students feel a sense of belonging. Students got involved with organizations that shared their values of building community and giving back. College was also an experience in diversity. For some students, college was the first time they had interacted with individuals of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Although many rural students were from towns that were more racially diverse than SSU, they perceived campus as more diverse because of the diversity of thought and experiences reflected in faculty and students. Finally, students expressed how

their relationships with home evolved throughout their college careers. Some students maintained a steady relationship, either strongly connected or ambivalent, with their home communities. Most students described how their connections to their home community changed over time. These findings reinforce the need to include both the college social system and a home social system in models that explore persistence among students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, including rural populations.

### **Chapter Summary**

Five major themes emerged from the data generated by student, faculty, and staff interviews as well as document analysis. *Rural foundations: The meaning of home* illustrated how rural students perceived their upbringing as it relates to their core values and orientations to their home communities. Rural student values broadly reflected both individualistic and collectivist values. The second theme, *Pride for self, family, and community: Student motivation* captured the dual socialization of rural student populations by highlighting the ways in which rural students are motivated to persist in college by both individualistic and collectivist goals. *Catching up: Academic preparation, challenges, strategies, and engagement* described rural students' academic preparation and engagement in college. This theme illustrated the ways in which rural students' academic preparation and rural backgrounds influence their initial academic performance in college, as well as revealed the specific strategies rural students use to overcome background-specific challenges. *Lost in the institutional blind spot: Interactions with faculty and staff* revealed the awareness and perceptions of institutional actors about rural college student populations. Rural students also characterized their interactions with faculty and staff and described the ways in which these interactions shaped their college experiences. Finally, *Spanning two worlds: Navigating the*

*social spaces between home and college* illustrated how rural students connect to both college and home social systems to establish social engagement during college.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural college students perceive their rural backgrounds and how students' rural identities shape their college experiences at a large, land-grant institution in the South. The secondary focus of the study was to understand how institutional actors identify rural students and the characteristics that make them unique. College enrollment and persistence of rural students has recently come to the forefront of the national education discussion as college enrollments have declined (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; Pappano, 2017). Research on rural populations suggests that youth from rural communities are less likely to attend college than their nonrural peers and more likely to enroll in less selective postsecondary institutions (Burke et al., 2015; Gibbs, 1998; Hu, 2003, Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; Prins & Kassab, 2017). According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) (2016), students from suburban schools (67%) and urban schools (62%) are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education immediately after graduation compared to only 59% of rural graduates.

Findings are less conclusive about the college persistence of rural students relative to their nonrural counterparts (Byun et al., 2012c; Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; NSC, 2016; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Yoder, 2007). While NSC (2016) found that rural students are persisting and graduating from college at similar rates of their nonrural peers, they may still encounter unique challenges in their transition to college. Nadworny (2018) said that higher education institutions have only begun, "...to recognize that these students need at least as much help navigating the college experience as low-income, first-generation racial and ethnic minorities from inner cities." This case study seeks to understand the experiences

of late-stage undergraduate students from rural communities attending a land-grant institution in North Carolina and the strategies they use to persist.

The study is significant both in the way it explores the college experiences of students from rural areas and the theoretical framework used to better understand rural college student persistence. Little is known about how rural students perform in college and the strategies they use to persist (Byun et al., 2012c; Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Yoder, 2007). Even less information exists about how higher education institutions identify and support students from rural areas. The study uses a strengths-based approach to explore not only the barriers that students from rural areas face in college persistence but also the strategies rural college students use to persist at a large land-grant institution. It also seeks to understand how institutional actors identify and support rural student populations, an element of rural college student persistence that has not previously been explored. Guiffrida's (2008) model of student persistence is the theoretical framework used in this study. Researchers have used this model to understand the persistence of students of color in higher education, but this study is the first time it has been used to learn more about college persistence among rural student populations.

The chapter discusses the interpretation of the research findings in the context of the research questions and theoretical framework. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications for theory, policy, practice, and research.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding research questions of the study are as follows:

1. How do college students from rural North Carolina perceive their rural background and how it shapes their college persistence?

2. What are the college experiences and strategies of rural students in the American South that affect their overall persistence?
3. How do institutional actors, such as faculty and student affairs professionals, identify and support the persistence of rural college students?

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In this discussion, I will review the significance of the five major themes that emerged from the study in light of the current research on rural college students and college student persistence. To reiterate, the five major themes were: (a) *Rural foundations: The meaning of home*, (b) *Pride for self, family, and community: Student motivation*, (c) *Catching up: Academic preparation, challenges, strategies, and engagement* (d) *Lost in the institutional blind spot: Interactions with faculty and staff*, and (e) *Spanning two worlds: Navigating the social spaces between home and college*.

#### **Rural students exhibit a strong connection to their home community.**

Community plays an important role in the rural culture (Ardoin 2018; Flora et al., 2016; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Tieken, 2014). Rural students perceived their rurality as a central and distinct component of their identity (Maltzan, 2006; C. C. Stone, 2014). Most of the students interviewed for this study exhibited a strong connection to their home communities. The minority of students who did not feel as connected generally had more tenuous family ties to their home communities based on where their extended family lived or moved to during college.

Small communities and schools fostered close and multifaceted relationships between community members. Most of the students interviewed for the study (80%) lived in towns with populations fewer than 2,500 people. The U.S. Census Bureau uses 2,500 residents as

the population threshold to define rural areas (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). The remaining three students lived in rural towns with populations near or below 5,000 people and were adjacent to larger cities, but these towns were still considered “rural” by Isserman’s (2005) rural-urban typology and culturally rural by the students themselves. The small population size helped foster close relationships among rural residents. When asked to describe their hometowns in a few words, nearly every student interviewed described their communities as “close-knit” and the kind of place where “everybody knows everybody”. Stone (2014) found that students in her study used almost the same words to describe their home communities.

Students described many positive characteristics of their hometowns, but also explained that their towns were far from idyllic. More than half of the students were from towns with poverty rates equal to higher than the state average of 15.2% (Kennedy, 2017). This statistic is consistent with the literature, which finds that rural areas, especially those in the American South, have higher poverty rates than state and national averages (NCES, 2013; Showalter et. al, 2017; USDA ERS, 2017c). Poverty negatively affected school resources like teacher quality and administrative support in the schools. Kaitlyn, Enrique, and Rebecca shared that college was not an option for many of their peers who needed to work following high school graduation to financially support themselves and their families. Students’ descriptions reinforced that poverty was a persistent and severe issue in their rural communities, and it negatively affected the college aspirations and opportunities for rural youth (Kennedy, 2017).

Rural towns were also culturally homogenous, even if they were not racially homogenous. Some of the students in this study described how their rural towns were closed to new ideas and people, ranging from pop culture trends to racism. The homogenous nature

of students' hometowns made many students more eager to interact with peers from different cultures and gain new experiences. This finding counters findings from Giuffrida (2008), who speculated that rural students are challenged by their exposure to diversity communities at college in a way that may threaten their persistence. If anything, these findings suggest that students' awareness of their town's close-mindedness made them more open-minded students in college. These findings are more congruous with those of Ganss (2016) and Stone (2014), who found that rural students attending four-year institutions were receptive to interacting with people from different backgrounds. I expanded further about students' attitudes towards diversity, and their continued connections with their home communities later in this section.

**Students' rural backgrounds influenced their motivational orientation in college.**

Rural students' motivations to persist in college stemmed from both individualistic and collectivist values instilled through their rural upbringing. The extent to which students internalized these values determines whether they are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to achieve these goals. Findings from this study illustrate how rural students have internalized *both* individualistic and collectivist values from their rural backgrounds. From the individualistic orientation, academic achievement motivated, especially as it related to earning high grades. Rural families and communities instilled the value of education in rural students, and this value fostered rural students' love of learning, which in turn, led to greater involvement in their academic progress. These findings are important because they show how some of the traditional mechanisms that colleges use to reinforce academic achievement, like grades and academic accolades, are effective in motivating rural students to work hard in their academic studies. These findings are similar to findings that students of color who are motivated to attend college by values associated with autonomy and

competence are more likely to do well academically and persist than those not motivated by those needs (Guiffrida et al., 2013). Findings from this study suggest that rural students are also motivated by needs of autonomy and competence, and that these needs serve as motivational factors that enhance their academic achievement.

Research on motivational orientation finds that communities of color are likely to have collectivist values as compared to White communities, including research on the application of SDT among students of color (Guiffrida, 2006; Phinney, 1996; Stage, 1989). Guiffrida (2006) developed the modified model with the intention of using it to explore college persistence among students of color. Research also suggests that rural cultures, particularly those in the rural South, are more likely to have collectivist values (Flora et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Tieken; 2014; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Collectivist communities are more likely to value interdependence over independence, group harmony over competition, and personal attachment to one's in-group (such as family or community) over detachment (Guiffrida, 2006). The parallels between the motivational orientations between students of color and rural populations prompted the use of Guiffrida's (2006) for this study. Based on previous research and using Guiffrida's (2006) framework, I expected to see rural college students motivated to persist, at least in part, by collectivist values.

The findings from this study support that hypothesis. Rural students in this study had collectivist goals of bringing pride to both their immediate families and their communities. Some of the rural students who I interviewed stated that they were motivated to persist because gaining a four-year degree represented a step forward for their families and communities. These findings echo those of Bryan and Simmons (2009), who found that rural students felt a pressure to succeed both from and for their communities. Rural students also

expressed a desire to use the skills and knowledge gained from their education to give back to their communities and rural populations, either through returning to the community themselves to work or advocating for rural communities in their careers elsewhere.

Previous research has explored the motivations of rural youth in pursuing higher education (Bajema et al, 2002; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Hlinka et al., 2015; Freisen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019) but this study is the first to explore college persistence among rural students using SDT and JIT.

Furthermore, this study is the first one to demonstrate that rural students are strongly motivated by the need for relatedness, as demonstrated by their values of community and service.

The combination of individualist and collectivist values that motivate rural students to persist suggests that rural students experience a level of dual socialization at college that allows them to navigate between school and home cultures (Guiffrida 2006; Rendon et al., 2000; Valentine, 1971). While students internalized the individualistic values of autonomy and competence characteristic of Western culture, they expressed a commitment to the community that is more characteristic of collectivist cultures. Guiffrida (2006) theorized that students of color would be more motivated by collectivist values, but that hypothesis was not apparent in this study, perhaps due to the low number of students of color interviewed. Instead, findings from this study support an extension of Guiffrida's (2006) model to rural populations and justify the importance of considering college students' socio-cultural background in shaping their motivational orientation.

**Rural poverty influences the career aspirations and trajectories of rural students.**

The poverty of rural students' home communities influences their goals, particularly those associated with collectivist values. Students from areas with above average poverty levels were more likely to express motivation to bring pride to their families and communities. For instance, Rebecca was from an area of the state in which the poverty rate was more than double the state average. She noted how many people in her community were unable to attend college because of financial constraints, including her father. College graduation represented her ability to achieve what many in the community did not have the opportunity to do. Although she struggled each semester between academics and working multiple jobs, she stated that she was determined to graduate to make her family, especially her father, proud. Vandello and Cohen (1999) theorized that poverty may be one factor that contributes to the collectivist culture of the South because it forces individuals to pool resources to survive.

Previous research suggests that rural students may restrict their career aspirations to occupations to which they were exposed growing up, such as agriculture, education, and health science. By contrast, urban students are more likely to aspire to a wider range of occupations, including those in the arts, science, and business (Bajema et al., 2002; Haller & Virkler, 1993; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). In this study, those students with aspirations to return home chose occupational pathways that were available in their hometowns, including education and healthcare. However, students in this study did not allow the limited career opportunities at home to dissuade them from pursuing higher education. This finding contradicts previous studies that suggest that rural students may feel that they need to make a choice between staying in their home communities and pursuing higher education (Carr &

Kefalas, 2009; Flora et al., 2016; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Rather, the students in this study who prioritized returning home to their communities specifically sought career paths that they knew would allow them to find employment back home.

Yet the poverty of their home communities did influence rural students' career goals. For some students, the lack of economic opportunity in their home communities, or significantly better job prospects elsewhere, deterred students from returning home after graduation. Students like Rebecca expressed an interest in returning to their home communities but felt they could not do so because of the lack of employment opportunities in the area. Rural communities are trapped in a vicious cycle, where educated rural youth do not return home because of the lack of jobs, but the lack of an educated workforce dissuades businesses from establishing themselves in rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Flora et al., 2016). Rebecca's experience aligns with previous findings that a college education can separate students from their home communities (Ardoin, 2018; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Domina, 2006; Flora et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; C. C. Stone, 2014). While Rebecca did not let this inability to return home stop her from pursuing higher education, it is unclear as to whether the separation from return home would dissuade other students from going to college. Limited career opportunities in rural communities still play a role in students' ability to return home.

In contrast to previous research, this study also found that poverty and lack of economic opportunity could also be a motivating factor for some rural students to return home to make a change in their community. In other words, rural students desired to return home or return to rural areas *because* of the lack of economic opportunity in their home communities. Five students in the study sought academic pathways that would allow them

give back to their home communities. Some students identified high-need careers in their communities and academic majors that would lead to those careers. For instance, Erika pursued a pre-med pathway while majoring in elementary education, opening the opportunity for her to return home as either an occupational therapist or elementary school teacher:

It makes me want to go home because I feel like they have given me so much in my life and supported me for so long. Especially when I graduate, I want to use whatever education I get here or elsewhere to take that home. My education degree is actually in STEM concentration. We don't have any certified STEM educators back at home. So, if I can go into a school system, start something like that, and bring something new that we don't have, I would love to do that.

Kaitlyn similarly had aspirations of returning home to improve accessibility of healthcare in rural areas. Still other students wanted to return home or stay close to home simply because they enjoyed their rural upbringings. Two additional students expressed interest in eventually returning home to raise their families, and another five wanted to pursue careers in state in order to remain close to their home communities.

Rural students' motivation to return home speaks to the strength of their relationship with the home community and the value they place on community and service. These findings add nuance to the research on rural college students' career aspirations by demonstrating that lack of economic opportunity in home communities can motivate rural students differently regarding their career motivations. As previously discussed, the desire to return home may influence students to pursue a specific career path that is available and needed in their home communities. Furthermore, the findings suggest that, in some cases, high-achieving rural students can successfully balance their educational and career

aspirations with a desire to return to their home communities. Still others want to return home but are dissuaded from doing so due to lack of job opportunities. These findings highlight an opportunity for rural communities and higher education institutions to utilize rural students' values and desire to return home as an engine for economic growth in impoverished rural regions.

**Faculty and staff reflected the uneven institutional awareness of rural college students.**

Interviews with faculty and staff illustrated that institutional actors were somewhat unaware of the rural student population in their departments or program. Of the six faculty and staff interviewed for this study, three had some knowledge of the approximate number of rural students in their program and characteristics that may be unique to rural students. The other three faculty and staff members showed very little understanding of rural students in general. Even more striking is that the rural students interviewed for this study identified these specific faculty and staff members as individuals who were instrumental in their college persistence, meaning that the faculty and staff who participated in this study had at least *some* substantive contact with a student from a rural background. When asked to describe characteristics associated with rural students, these faculty and staff resorted to speculation based on preconceived notions of rural populations.

Institutional actors may be unaware of rural student populations for several reasons. First, unless the faculty or staff member was in the position to track the demographics of their department or program, they were unlikely to know the demographic breakdown off-hand during the time of the interview. Furthermore, students' rurality/urbanicity is not a metric that is normally tracked by university departments and programs, although it is occasionally reflected in admissions statistics. Universities do not perceive rural identity as a

form of student diversity, and thus do not regularly capture it in demographic metrics. Faculty and staff members' estimates of the rural student population in their respective programs ranged from 7% to 50%. Even accounting for variance between departments, the range in estimates is substantial.

Rurality may also not be a form of identity that faculty and staff are even aware of or find salient. Dr. Rockie explained that, "...it's just not a demographic I pay attention to unless they're my advisee." Dr. Smith went so far as to argue that focusing on differences between students was less productive than focusing on student similarities. Once again, this thinking refers to the importance that the university places on geographic locale as a component of student identity and how that institutional value (or lack therefore) is reflected in institutional actors. Furthermore, students' rural background is not as visibly apparent by external characteristics in the same way that other forms of identity, like race or gender, can be. Faculty and staff members become aware of students' backgrounds primarily through informal conversation. Dr. Smith, who estimated only a small number of students in his department were from rural areas said, "I mean, I have more of them obviously, but they don't reveal themselves to me." Faculty suggest it is the responsibility of the student to bring awareness to their rural identity, rather than the responsibility of faculty and staff to ask.

Institutional actors also differed in the extent to which they viewed students' rurality as being important to their persistence. Dr. Khan discussed how the admissions requirements to be accepted to SSU rose substantially in recent decades. This selectivity made it more challenging for students from rural communities to get into SSU because they did not have resources to make them academically competitive. Dr. Holloway noted that rural students have access to fewer AP and IB courses. Data on the average scores on college entrance

exams of rural students compared to the SSU average supports this notion, with students from rural counties scoring well below the average SSU applicant. Dr. Khan argues that by SSU raising its academic requirements, the institution is drifting from its land-grant mission of establishing accessible postsecondary educational opportunities to citizens across the state. By contrast, Dr. Smith said that the challenges faced by rural students were no different from those faced by any incoming freshmen.

To the knowledge of the researcher, this study is the first one to explore institutional actors' awareness of rural student populations on a college campus. College students from rural communities often state that their rurality is central to their self-identity (Maltzan, 2006; C. C. Stone, 2014; A. Stone, 2018), yet university faculty and staff demonstrate limited awareness of rural student populations. Furthermore, research suggests that other characteristics associated with rural student populations that influence their college persistence exists, including academic preparation (Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008) and levels of social and cultural capital (Ardoin, 2018; Chenowith & Galliher, 2004 Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Ticken, 2014). Given that the rural communities represent a little over one-third of the state population in North Carolina (U.S. Census, 2010b) and students' rurality is an important component of their identity, students' rurality is a significant institutional blind spot for SSU to have such limited understanding of this population.

**Rural students, especially those who attended rural public schools, have access to fewer college preparatory resources that leave them feeling academically underprepared for college.**

Findings from this study strongly suggest that many rural students from North Carolina, especially those educated at rural public schools, are underprepared academically for college. Public school-educated students reported having limited access to AP and other college-level coursework, which is consistent with the literature on rural schools (Byun et al., 2012c; Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008). Even those students who did have access to AP courses expressed that these courses were not as rigorous as they should be, as reflected by teacher's assertion that the course material would not adequately prepare students for the AP exam. These findings align with those of Gagno and Mattingly (2016a), who found that the success rate of rural students on AP coursework was lower than that of students from towns, suburbs, and urban areas. Researchers attributed this difference in resources, in part, to the lack of teacher preparation to deliver AP coursework effectively. Document analysis revealed that rural applicants to SSU had access to fewer AP courses and scored lower on college entrance exams than the average SSU applicant. These findings contribute to the greater body of research that shows rural students have limited academic preparation relative to their urban and suburban peers.

Students who attended rural public schools were even further disadvantaged in their academic preparation for college. Rural schools face financial constraints due to their smaller tax base and higher transportation costs (ECS, 2017; McFarland et al., 2017; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008). Higher poverty rates of the surrounding community

further challenge rural schools in the South (Kennedy, 2017; Tieken, 2014). These schools also struggle with teacher recruitment and retention (Sipple & Brent, 2008). Liz described how the high turnover rate of teachers and the prevalence of first-time teachers in her school made it difficult for her to master core subjects like math.

A unique finding of this study was rural students' perceived lack of preparation in writing. Previous studies demonstrated that rural students had access to fewer college preparatory courses, but public school-educated rural students in this study specifically pinpointed academic writing as an area where students' felt that their high school resources did not fully prepare them for the expectations of college. Thomas, who attended a private rural school, described how he felt very prepared to write research papers based on the preparation from his high school. Compare Thomas's experience to the experience of Kaitlyn, who attended public school:

I was also really wanted to learn as much as I could because my high school did not have so much to prepare you for college like other high schools did. I had no idea how to write a paper before I came here.

This finding pinpoints an additional area in which rural students may have access to fewer college preparatory resources than their nonrural counterparts. The evidence suggests that rural students, especially those who attended public schools, arrive at college less prepared for the demands of college coursework. Moreover, students *feel* as if they are unprepared for college coursework, which may decrease students' confidence in their abilities and contribute to imposter syndrome. Students who believe they are not "college material" are less likely to persist in college (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali & Pohlert, 2003).

Furthermore, rural students in this study stated experiencing non-cognitive transitional barriers in the college classroom that stemmed from their rural backgrounds, including adjusting to classroom sizes, expectations of their academic performance, and learning to advocate for themselves in the college classroom. Research on rural college students consistently finds that adjusting to campus size and class sizes in college is a common adjustment for rural students (Ganss, 2016; Schultz, 2004; C. C. Stone, 2014).

**Rural students' value in education, academic strategies, and academic engagement in college bolstered their academic performance in ways that contributed to their persistence.**

Student accounts and document analysis illustrate that most of the rural students who participated in this study had access to fewer academic preparatory resources prior to college, which contributed to lower standardized test scores and a lower confidence in their academic abilities during their initial college transition. Most research on rural students provides evidence that rural students have access to fewer academic resources that prepare them for the rigor of college coursework as compared to nonrural students (Ardoin, 2018; Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2012c; ECS, 2017; Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008; C. C. Stone, 2014). Yet rural students in this study demonstrated that they cared deeply about their academic growth and learning. The current study furthered the research by examining *how* rural college students overcome limited academic resources from their secondary education to persist in college.

Kuh et al. (2011) argue that the amount of time and energy students invest in the academic systems in college, whether it is formal systems like coursework or informal systems like faculty interaction and academic extracurricular activities, is a demonstration of

their academic engagement. The findings from this study demonstrate that rural students exhibit high levels of interest, effort, and engagement in their academics. Students expressed how they prioritized their education and were motivated to earn high grades throughout their college career. They took an interest in their courses, and specifically valued the breadth and depth of coursework that was available to them through SSU. Student engagement in the learning environment has a positive impact on student learning (Rocconi, 2011) and persistence (Kuh et al., 2008). Rural students also participated in academically high-impact practices like internships, co-ops, and undergraduate research opportunities. Nine of the 15 students in the study participated in one of these three high-impact experiences, and some students participated in multiple. Research on work-integrated learning (Blair, Millea & Hammer, 2004) and undergraduate research (Kim & Sax, 2009; Kuh, 2008; Zydney, Bennett, Shahid & Bauer, 2002) support that these academic engagement practices have a positive impact on student learning and academic achievement.

Engagement with faculty and staff was also an important indicator of rural student engagement, although not one experienced by all the students in the study. Many of the rural students in this study fostered relationships with faculty and staff across campus, ranging from informal discussions about course material to formal mentorships and engagement outside the classroom. Six of the students in this study had faculty mentors. As with other academic strategies, engagement with faculty is positively correlates with college student learning and persistence (Fischer, 2007; Kim & Sax, 2009; Kuh, 2008; Zydney et al., 2002). The students in this study who had faculty mentors found that they were beneficial in providing career advice, writing letters of recommendation, and offering personal support to them as they progressed through their academic career. For rural students of color, faculty

mentors were models of how people of color were leaders in academia. These mentors also provided a space for students of color to share the unique challenges they faced as students of color at a PWI.

On the other hand, not all rural students in this study perceived institutional actors, specifically faculty, to be willing to help students. Several students perceived faculty as more concerned with their own research than with teaching. This feeling was especially true for faculty in the STEM fields. Rural students' perceptions of faculty as unhelpful was a stark contrast from their experience with many of their educators from home who were proactive in helping their students. When students perceived faculty to be less receptive to students, the students were less willing to ask the faculty member for help. Other students chose not to interact with faculty outside the classroom because they preferred to work through problems on their own. Rural students who did not interact with faculty were still able to persist through much of their college career, but they may not have reaped the same benefits (e.g. advising, letters of recommendation) as those students who fostered positive relationships with their professors. The degree to which students engage with faculty can have important implications for their college persistence. Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Hausmann et al. (2007) both found an improved sense of belonging among students who engaged in more academic integration behaviors, including faculty interaction. Therefore, students who were not comfortable interacting with faculty may have experienced more challenges in becoming academically engaged on campus earlier in their college careers.

Moreover, the study found that rural students engaged in specific strategies to address the non-cognitive challenges of the college academic environment. Rural students sought smaller academic majors to combat large class sizes. The rural students in this study who

were used to having teachers and community members intercede on their behalf when they encountered challenges learned to advocate for themselves at college and ask for help from faculty and staff when they felt themselves struggling. Similar to the findings of Pascarella et al. (2004) in their study on first-generation college students, this study demonstrates that rural students are resilient in the face of academic challenges stemming from their rural backgrounds, and they utilize strategies to overcome these challenges.

Previous research on rural college students shows mixed evidence that rural students persist at similar rates to nonrural students (Byun et al., 2012c; Gibbs, 1998; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Schonert et al., 1991; Yoder, 2007). The findings on rural college students' academic integration are significant because they not only demonstrate that rural college students have ample capacity to persist in college, but they also illustrate *how* rural students persist in college, namely through their academic effort and engagement. In short, rural students who successfully persist in college immerse themselves in academic behaviors that promote their learning and engagement. In alignment with the findings of Kuh et al. (2008), findings from this study suggest that academic engagement behaviors can bolster student persistence despite lower academic preparation.

The study also illustrates some potential pitfalls for rural students in their academic careers, such as perception of faculty as unresponsive to student needs. Students in this study described how interacting with faculty required additional energy because it was so foreign from what they were used to experiencing at home due to the significantly larger class sizes and the lack of personal relationships with their professor. Some rural students who perceived faculty as less receptive to students took much longer to develop help-seeking behaviors or chose not to engage with faculty outside the classroom altogether. This

reluctance is problematic because engagement with faculty positively correlates with college student learning (Kim & Sax, 2009; Zydney et al., 2002), sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado and Carter; 1997), and persistence (Kuh et al., 2008). These findings suggest that rural students are persisting despite lack of support (or perceived support) from institutional actors. Although these students represent those who persisted despite these challenges, other rural students who experienced these same behaviors from faculty possibly did not persist.

**Rural students utilized both the university social system and their home social system in college.**

A significant critique of Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence is the model's limitations in describing college persistence among students from different backgrounds (e.g. students of color, adult learners). Guiffrida (2006) argues that students of color benefit from interacting with social systems outside the university. Guiffrida's (2006) modified model proposes including two social systems: a) the university social systems, which includes extracurricular activities and peer group interactions, and b) the home social systems, comprised of family and friends from one's home community. Findings from this study reinforce, like students of color, rural college students rely on engagement with both university and home communities to thrive in college.

**Building community on campus.** Previous studies on rural college students have demonstrated that rural students are socially engaged on college campus, both through peer interaction and involvement in extracurricular activities (Ganss, 2016; Schonert et al., 1991; Stone 2014). The focus of this study illustrates not only *what* students become involved with on campus but *why*. Findings from this study suggest that students' rural values of

community and service guided the types of social interaction and extracurricular involvement they chose to participate in at college.

Like many college students, the rural students in this study participated across campus in clubs, academic organizations, and work. Many of the students in the study said they initially struggled with transitioning from a small community where they knew everyone to the anonymity of a large campus. For instance, I revisit a quote from Josh, who stated:

I would say just finding those people initially. Because I didn't know anybody when I came here. Finding those close-knit communities, or building my support system again, from the ground up, because 34 people, we're all spread out all over the country, our graduating class. Again, that was probably the hardest part. And something I'm still working on. It's just building a support system from the ground up and finding little niches where I can succeed (Josh).

Due to their close-knit background, rural students' difficult social transition is a unique challenge for this population (Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; Schultz, 2004; C. C. Stone, 2014).

A strategy that nearly all students recommended to other students from rural communities was to get involved on campus to create a smaller community within the large university. Research on student social integration at college supports that students' positive peer interactions positively contributes to their persistence (Fischer, 2007; Wolniak, Mayhew & Engberg, 2012). Extracurricular involvement helped rural students build community among peers who had similar interests and values. From the perspective of SDT, building community allowed rural students to fulfill their need for relatedness on campus. This study is the first one to connect rural student involvement on campus with the psychological needs

for relatedness and collectivist values. Furthermore, involvement in extracurricular activities and connections with campus peers helped students build cultural and social capital that assisted them in navigating the social structures of college campus. As many rural students are first-gen college students, this finding suggests that social interaction on campus could help students develop valuable social and cultural capital among the college community.

The current study also provides evidence that building community for rural students of color is unique compared to that of White rural students. Previous studies have examined social engagement among rural secondary students of color (Irvin et al., 2012) but no known researchers have studied how social involvement at college influences the experiences of rural students of color. Findings from this study suggest that rural students of color seek opportunities to connect with other students of color and get involved in extracurricular activities that would allow them to explore their racial or cultural backgrounds. Within this finding, two interesting nuances emerged. The first was that rural students of color came from communities that had higher proportion of people of color than the college environment into which they transitioned. Yet all three stated that they did not have the opportunity to explore their racial or cultural heritage at home, which was a motivating factor for them to get involved in multicultural communities on campus. The second interesting finding came from Enrique, who stated that he had trouble finding another Black student of color who also shared his rural background. This observation is a surprising given that many rural communities in the South are also communities of color. Enrique's observation also provides some insight into how rural students of color conceptualize their intersecting identities at an urban PWI campus. Public institutions in the South that attract rural students should consider

how students understand and explore their racial and cultural identities in college and how these intersect with their rural identities.

Findings from this study also demonstrate how rural students enact their rural value of service to become involved in service-based organizations on campus. Half (seven) of the rural students who participated in the study were involved in service-based organizations and leadership roles during college. As with rural students' motivation to build community on campus, these findings illustrate how rural students' value of service translated into a specific type of involvement on college campuses. Rural students also found ways to connect with and give back to other rural students or prospective students. In her study on rural college students in Oregon, Ganss (2016) found that rural students sought friendships with other rural students on campus. Findings from this study extend that research to suggest that rural students make a cognizant effort to support other rural students across campus.

In his review of the literature on rural college students, Guiffrida (2008) argued that rural students attending large universities would be challenged in adjusting to the size of the university, different cultural environment, and the diversity of the student body. Guiffrida (2008) cited anecdotal evidence from his experience as a school counselor in a rural school that rural students tend to adjust poorly to large universities; they drop out and re-enroll in local four-year colleges. The experience of rural students in this study challenges those assumptions. Attending a large university in an urban setting created many *first* for rural students: first time driving on the interstate, first experience with public transportation, first large basketball game, and for some students, the first time they interacted with people from a different race, socioeconomic group, religion or political affiliation than themselves. While rural students did note that the cultural diversity on campus was an adjustment for them at

first, it was an adjustment they welcomed. Even Cecil, who was initially disinterested in meeting new people, found that he really enjoyed getting to know people from different backgrounds. Students valued that the institution fostered the interaction of people from different backgrounds. These findings are very consistent with the Stone (2014), who found that rural students experienced an adjustment to the diversity when they first transitioned into a large university, but they welcomed that experience.

Findings from this study suggest that rural students conceptualize diversity beyond racial or ethnic diversity to mean diversity of perspective. About half of the students in this study were from towns that were more racially diverse relative to SSU. Several students, like Erika, were from communities that had significantly higher Black and Latinx populations relative to SSU. When I asked her how the diversity of students at SSU compared to that of her hometown, she said, “You meet many more cultures and meet people that have different ideas here where back at home everyone is pretty straight forward, the same ideas.” Rural students placed greater significance on the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds of their peers than the racial diversity of the campus. Overall, rural students were receptive to interacting with people from different backgrounds and perceived that the institution created and fostered opportunities for interaction among diverse populations. Student satisfaction of their institution’s racial climate correlates with degree completion (Museus, Nichols & Lambert, 2008). Considering this research, the findings from the current study suggest that rural students’ receptiveness to campus diversity and perception of the positive racial climate on campus may have contributed to their college persistence.

**Maintaining connections to home.** One of Guiffrida’s major contributions to Tinto’s (1993) model is the integration of the home social system into the overall social support

system that students utilize to persist in college. Guiffrida (2006) asserts that students develop *connections* to the college community rather than fully integrate, as suggested by Tinto (1993). Few studies have examined rural college students' relationship to their home communities during their college career. Maltzan (2006) has conducted one of the few studies on this topic in her ethnography on students from a small rural community in Ohio and their pathways to college. In her study, Maltzan (2006) found that the students who successfully persisted in college managed to balance their relationships between the college environment and their home communities. These students may go home somewhat frequently by the standards of faculty and staff, but they also engaged in the social activities on campus (Maltzan, 2006). This study is the first time Guiffrida's (2006) model of dual college and home social systems has been applied to explore college persistence among rural students.

Findings from this study demonstrate that rural students, in fact, do utilize their home social systems to persist in college. Most of the rural students who participated in this study (11 students) cited a positive relationship with their home communities. Like Bryan and Simmons (2009), many of the students in this study kept in touch with their immediate families daily. Students' sense of family also included extended family members such as grandparents and cousins (Means, 2019; A. Stone, 2018). In Maltzan's (2006) ethnography on students from rural Ohio, she found that students described the town itself as "family"; rural students in this study expressed a similar sentiment. Members of the town sent students care packages in their first few years of college and asked about students' college progress when they returned home. Thomas explained:

My church, for instance, that what I'd probably call my community. Every time I come home, they wanna know what I'm doing, or Grandma has told them about what I'm doing and they wanna know more about it. They all are very encouraging to me. These students were still very involved in the student organizations and clubs on campus, but they returned home regularly to spend time with their communities. Findings from this study suggest that students' hometowns were another source of support within their home social systems. This finding suggests a potential modification of Guiffrida's (2006) model to include "community" as another player within the home social system.

Another unique finding from this study is the prevalence of students having connections from home within the university. Ten of the students interviewed for this study (two-thirds) had a peer from home who also attended SSU, including a close friend, relative, or significant other who grew up in their same hometown. In this way, students were able to bring a piece of home with them to college. Having a *built-in* friend from home at college helped rural students with the initial social transition to college. It also gave them someone to process with and help normalize some of the new things they were experiencing. For instance, Kaitlyn knew an older friend, Riley, from her hometown who attended SSU and was able to give her advice about courses, developing study skills, and navigating the size of campus. Many other rural students lived with friends or family members from home. This finding was interesting given that rural students in this study were from schools with relatively small graduating classes. Models of retention do account for students' interactions with college peers, but no known model accounts for the connections that students carry with them from their home communities. Findings suggest that these connections could be

important for understanding some of the social strategies rural students use to socially persist in college.

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical Implications**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Guiffrida's (2006) modified model of student persistence, based on Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. Guiffrida's (2006) goal for the adapted model was to more accurately capture the factors that contribute to college persistence among students of color:

This article is an attempt to integrate these social and cross-cultural psychological principles into Tinto's theory with the goal of strengthening it, enhancing its cultural sensitivity, and making it more descriptive of minority student academic achievement and persistence. (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 453)

Guiffrida (2006) suggested more broadly that this model could be used to, "...move the theory toward greater cultural sensitivity, thus allowing it to more accurately describe diverse students—especially the students who maintain more collectivist cultural norms" (p. 467).

Guiffrida's (2006) model addresses the cultural limitations of Tinto's model (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Guiffrida (2006) suggests four modifications: (a) add students' cultural norms and values as part of their pre-entry attributes, (b) include motivation theories that account for students' cultural values, (c) incorporate the role of family and friends (defined as the "home social systems") in supporting students at college, and (d) replace Tinto's concept of "integration" with "connection".

Few studies have applied Guiffrida's model to studies on student persistence, and those that have explored college persistence exclusively among students of color (Barker & Avery, 2012; Merriweather Hunn, 2008). Although Guiffrida (2008) originally developed model to understand persistence among students of color, researchers can apply the model more broadly to explore college persistence among populations with collectivist cultures. For instance, this model may be powerful in understanding college student persistence among rural students in the South given that rural populations exhibit greater collectivist values (Flora et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Ticken; 2014; A. Stone, 2018; Vandello & Cohen, 1999), and communities in the rural South are more likely to be communities of color (Flora et al., 2016; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Kochhar et al, 2005; Lichter, 2012; Whitener & McGranahan, 2003). The current study is a novel application of Guiffrida's (2006) model to explore college persistence among rural populations.

**Cultural norms and motivational orientation.** The study reinforces the need for incorporating cultural norms into a college persistence model used to study rural college students. Rural students in this study exhibited values and goals associated with both individualistic and collectivist cultures. Individualistic values included the value of education, as it relates to academic achievement, and hard work, as it relates to achieving individual academic and professional goals. Rural students also exhibited individualist goals, including a goal for academic achievement, learning, and personal growth.

Yet rural students in this study also espoused collectivistic values, including the values of community and service. These values set the foundation for collectivist goals in college, including bringing pride to their families and communities and giving back through service. A blend of individualistic and collectivist values motivated other goals for students,

including the goals of building community and graduating from college. These findings suggest that rural students who persist in higher education exhibit a degree of dual socialization, which allows them to utilize both the individualistic and collectivist values from their rural upbringing and align their values with those of the institution (Guiffrida, 2006; Rendon et al, 2000; Valentine, 1971). For instance, rural students are motivated to find and build community among their peers. Rural students aligned this value with the institution's value of student involvement outside the classroom. The alignment between student values (building community) and institutional values (extracurricular engagement) was mutually beneficial to both parties and positively reinforced rural students' college persistence. Moreover, the study illustrates the need to include cultural values as part of students' pre-college factors when studying college student persistence; the findings from this study clearly demonstrate how rural students derived specific values from their rural backgrounds and these values shaped their goals and engagement in college.

Furthermore, this study demonstrated how researchers can use motivational theories outside education to improve educational models. Guiffrida (2006) combined Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) with tenets of Job Involvement Theory (Kanungo, 1982) to create a motivational framework that accounts for students' cultural norms and values. Prior to Guiffrida's (2006) adaptation of the model, the SDT framework had been applied in educational settings, but JIT had not. This study provides further evidence for the application of JIT in a motivational framework. Motivational theories that are sensitive to the sociocultural forces that shape individual behavior will be increasingly important in college persistence research as the college-going population in America becomes more diverse as compared to previous cohorts.

**Home social systems.** The study also demonstrated the important role that students' home social systems played in their college persistence. Most of the rural students in this study exhibited a strong emotional connection to their home communities. Nearly two-thirds of the students stated that their families and home communities providing emotional support to them throughout their college career. Students' home social systems actively encouraged students to persist and took interest in students' college experiences. About half of the students stated that they returned home frequently, especially early in their college careers. Those who were unable to return home kept in contact with friends and family through phone and social media. Some students felt so connected to their home communities that they intended to return after graduation. Enrique best summarized how students' rural communities provided a bedrock of support for rural students:

I know whatever I do academically or just in my career in general, I'll always know I have a community to back me up, they'll always support me. So, I think that's also been another reason I do what I do.

Rural students in this study also highly connected to the college academic and social systems. Academically, students were active in the classroom, interacted with faculty and participated in high-impact academic experiences outside the classroom like internships and research. Socially, students joined clubs, engaged in service, and built community among their peers. Under Tinto's (1993) model, rural students would disassociate themselves from their home communities to integrate fully into the college academic and social systems. Yet the experiences of rural students in this study do not reflect Tinto's proposed disassociation. Instead, the findings support Guiffrida's (2006) assertion that students develop connections to the college systems *and* maintain their connection to the home social system. Given the

degree of support students received from home, the cultivation of students' connection to their home communities is important for rural students' persistence.

**Adaptations of Guiffrida's (2006) model.** Based on the findings from this study I recommend a few potential adjustments to Guiffrida's (2006) model to make it better suited to study rural student populations. Figure 5 (below) shows the intended changes.

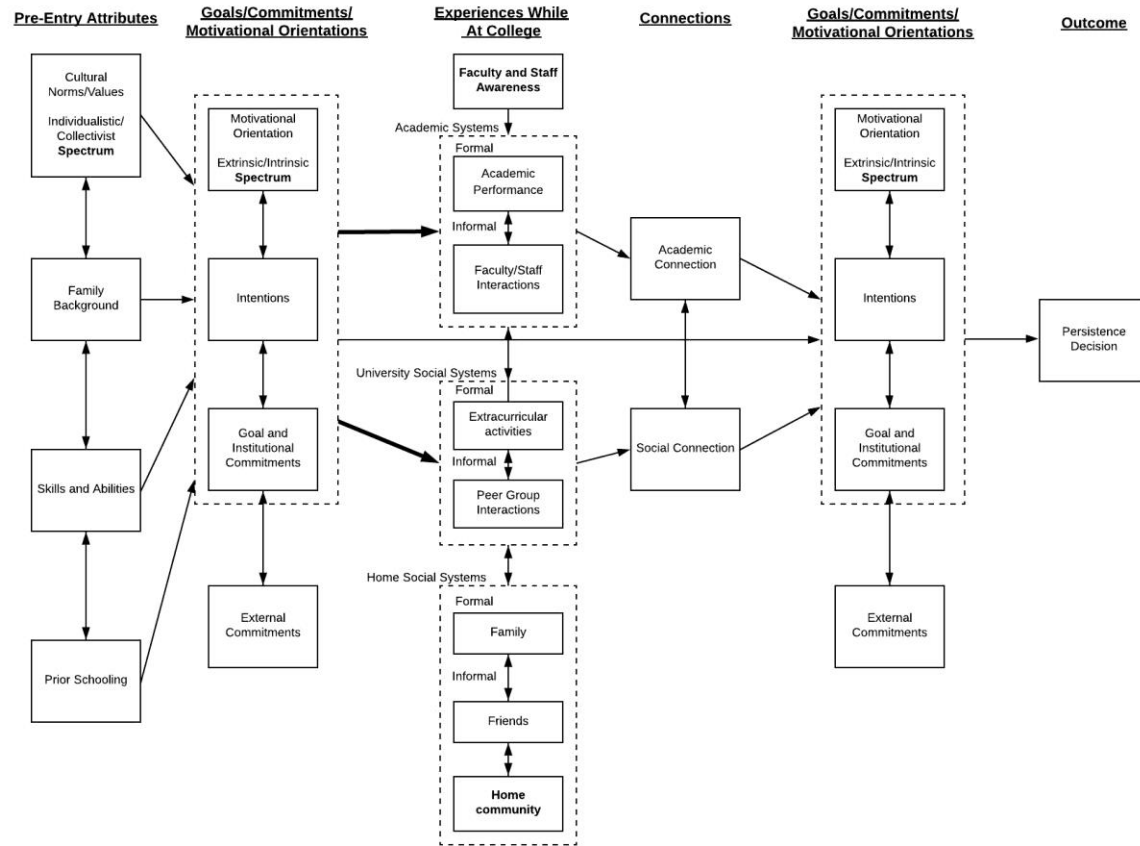


Figure 5. Proposed Changes to Guiffrida’s (2006) Model Including Additions of the Academic System and Home Social Systems.

Adapted from “Toward a Cultural Advancement of Tinto’s Theory,” by D. A. Guiffrida, 2006, *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(4), p. 461. Copyright 2006 by the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

First, I would consider emphasizing the need to consider that rural students exhibit a range of values that lie along a spectrum of individualism and collectivism, as discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, these multifaceted norms and values are reflected in students' various motivational orientations that lie along a spectrum of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. An individual's motivational orientation may even be motivated by several different sets of values, as was the case for rural students in this study in their motivations to build community and graduate (see Chapter 4). Although Guiffrida (2006) did not expressly restrict students to dualistic motivational orientations, rural students' motivations fell along a spectrum, as was apparent in this research.

Second, I propose including the relationship between students' motivational orientations/goals and their academic and social connections on campus. Students in this study expressed how their rural values influenced their motivations, which in turn influenced what they chose to get involved in on campus, both in academic and social realms. Academically, rural students tried to earn high grades in college and learn. These motivations prompted students to find academic mentors, do work-integrated programs, and participate in undergraduate research. On the social side, rural students valued and were motivated by community and service, which prompted them to get involved in clubs, service organizations, and leadership roles on campus. Students' motivational orientations and their underlying values were highly influential in how students connected with the campus. My proposed modifications designate a clear relationship between students' values, motivation orientation/goals, and academic/social experiences at college.

The current study is the first known study on rural college student persistence to consider the awareness of faculty and staff of rural student populations. The awareness of

rural student populations is important because, as Dr. Smith asserts, rural students “don’t wear that [rural identity] on your forehead.” In other words, students’ rural identity was not overtly obvious to others. Yet findings from this study suggest that students’ rural identity strongly influenced their motivations and engagement to and through college. Institutional actors who were less aware to rural student populations simply did not recognize students’ rural identity as being salient to their college experience, whereas faculty and staff with greater awareness were more apt to recognize the unique challenges this population faces in college access as well as rural students’ strengths. In short, institutional actors’ awareness of rural student populations altered their perceptions of rural students. Based on these findings, I propose including faculty and staff awareness as a factor that is influential towards rural students’ academic experiences on campus. I propose that faculty/staff attitudes are included outside of rural students’ academic system because students did not express how faculty and staff’s awareness of their rural identity affected them. However, institutional actors did express how their awareness of rural students’ identity shaped the way they perceived these students, which may have influenced the way they interacted with rural students, although that relationship is unclear from the current findings.

The final suggested change in the model is the inclusion of the home community in rural students’ home social systems. Rural students in this study discussed the role of their family and home peers in supporting them through their college journey. Even beyond these sources, rural students’ hometowns were influential in supporting students in their journey. Students in this study describe how their community members stayed connected to them throughout college. In this way, the community itself becomes a player in students’ college persistence. Due to the importance of community among rural student populations, one must

include the larger community as part of students' home social networks. My proposed adjustments to Guiffrida's (2006) model—emphasis on the spectrum of values and motivation, influence of motivation on academic and social systems, and the inclusion of faculty/staff awareness and the home community—adapt the model to be more appropriate for studying rural college student populations.

### **Policy and Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this study relate to pre-entry attributes of students that affect their college access and the institutional role in support rural students once they arrive on campus. Institutions must improve their awareness of rural scholars to better support their persistence.

**Academic preparation.** Most of the students interviewed in this study, especially those who attended rural public schools, stated that they felt academically underprepared for the cognitive and non-cognitive components of the college classroom. Literature on the academic preparation of rural students strongly supports student accounts are strongly supported by the (Ardoin, 2018; Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2012c; ECS, 2017; Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008; C. C. Stone, 2014). Rural public-school students have limited access to rigorous coursework, such as AP classes, tend to have lower college entrance exam scores, and attend schools with high teacher turnover rates. In order to improve the college-going rate of rural schools, improvements are needed at the secondary, as well as postsecondary, level to prepare rural students for selective universities.

Rural schools have limited opportunities they can offer their students such as rigorous coursework due to small class sizes and financial restrictions (Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a;

Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sipple & Brent, 2008) (See Chapter 2). Limited course rigor negatively impacts rural students who are aspiring to college because it makes them less competitive than their peers who have access to more challenging courses, restricts the college credits they can transfer into college, and causes them to be less prepared academically at college (Byun et al., 2012c; Gagno & Mattingly, 2016a).

Fortunately, North Carolina has a robust community college system that offers dual enrollment opportunities to high school students through the Career & College Promise (CCP) program. The CCP program is beneficial in helping rural high school students earn college credits, as evidence by the average number of credits rural students SSU brought into SSU upon enrollment. Students who can transfer in more credits can reduce the number of courses they must take at four-year college to earn their degree, thus reducing their overall college costs. When students do not have to take additional credit hours each semester to graduate on time, they have more time to participate in extracurricular activities that connect them with the social systems at college, which contributes to their college persistence (Mayhew et al., 2016). Rural schools can also utilize distance education tools to deliver AP coursework to students at school, especially not enough students exist for an in-person class. While many rural communities in North Carolina have limited broadband, all school districts in North Carolina have access to high speed internet through the School Connectivity Program (Department of Public Instruction, n.d. b.; ECS, 2017; Flora et al., 2016). North Carolina rural schools can now deliver course content to students remotely, vastly expanding their offerings.

At a system level, North Carolina public schools should consider how they attract and retain quality teachers in rural schools. The state, as well as rural school districts, should use

incentives to attract high-performing teachers to work in rural communities. First, the state legislature should increase the pay of teachers in rural districts. The state may also develop a loan forgiveness program to new teachers who work a certain number of years in a rural school district. Currently, the North Carolina State Board of Education provides loan forgiveness to teachers who work in low-income schools, defined as 30% or more of the student body qualifying for free or reduced lunch, for at least five years (Department of Public Instruction, n.d.c). As many rural schools are also low-income, this program may already attract many new teachers to rural schools. Yet the state could modify this program to include added incentives for teachers to work in districts that are both low-income *and* rural. Alternatively, rural schools should establish incentives to grow and retain quality teachers within the districts. School districts could provide ongoing professional development for teachers, incentivized with increased pay or time off.

Community colleges play a crucial role for providing additional college pathways for rural scholars. Stephen Katsinas (2007) called rural community colleges “the land-grant colleges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” because of their accessibility to rural populations and their mission of bolstering the local economy. Community colleges provide an affordable and local option for rural students. For instance, the cost of in-state tuition for the Spring 2019 semester at SSU (\$4,550.30) is nearly three times the cost of tuition at the community college (\$1,384.00) in the same county. Community college classes are often smaller in size than those at large research institutions, providing students with more contact time with faculty. Rural students who attend their local community college have the added benefit of staying close to home, allowing them to slowly transition away from their families and home communities on the pathway to college. Phoebe and Matt both stated that their time at

community colleges help them to become more academically prepared for the coursework at SSU, and Cecil was able to improve his grades at his community college before returning to the university to finish his degree. The North Carolina community college system has strong articulation agreements with the four-year public colleges. Students can therefore complete their first two years of coursework at the community college for a much lower cost to the student.

Higher education institutions must also account for rural students' academic preparation. Given the higher poverty rates of rural communities in the South, rural families may not have the financial resources to enroll their students in college prep high schools, test prep courses, and afterschool activities that improve their ability to get into selective colleges (Kennedy, 2017; NCES, 2013; Showalter et. al, 2017; USDA ERS, 2017a). Higher education institutions like SSU offer academic camps and summer bridge programs that improve the academic preparation of K-12 students. Pre-college programs have the added benefit of exposing those students to the university and soliciting them as future applicants. However, these programs often come at a financial cost to students and their families. Rural students may face financial barriers to these programs, as well as issues of transportation for programs located on college campuses. Universities hoping to utilize academic pre-college programs as a recruitment tool for rural applicants should consider the academic, financial, and geographic barriers these students encounter to participate in these programs.

**Institutional awareness.** In their critical analysis of Tinto's (1993) model, Rendon et al. (2000) argue that the model places the responsibility of departure on individual students rather than on the institution. Underrepresented students, such as students of color, often experience greater stress in their transition to college due to the cultural distance between

their home culture and the college culture (Museus, 2014; Tierney, 1999). Rendón et al. (2000) assert that a more culturally sensitive model would place greater emphasis on the institutional responsibility to support students of color in this transition. The case study on rural college student persistence seeks to address this gap by understanding how institutional actors identify and support rural students.

None of the faculty or staff interviewed in this study were completely confident in the number of rural students enrolled in their department or program. Estimates ranged from 7% to 50%. A challenge in capturing the rural student population on any college campus comes back to the larger complication of defining rurality, as previously discussed in Chapter 1. In addition, institutions do not prioritize identifying rural students. In fact, colleges and universities have only recently begun to focus on targeted recruitment and retention efforts of rural college students (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; Nadworny, 2018; Pappano, 2017). The nascent knowledge of rural scholars is evident in institutional actors' mixed beliefs on how students' rurality affects their college persistence.

The findings from this study strongly suggest that students' rural backgrounds can influence every facet of the college enrollment process, from pre-entry attributes like values and academic preparation, to their experiences in college, and even their post-graduation goals. In order to serve these students, higher education institutions must first be able to identify them. The primary benefit of establishing a working rural definition is that it would allow institutions to gain an initial estimate of the number of rural scholars at their institution. Using an established working definition, institutions could then determine how rural scholars at their institution compare relative to nonrural populations in terms of academic performance, persistence, and graduation, and develop targeted strategies for rural students as

needed. The state of North Carolina has already developed a strategic plan to begin this process. In January 2017, the University of North Carolina [UNC] System Office released a strategic plan for the public institutions, which included goals of increasing enrollment, degree efficiency, and graduation among students from rural areas. The North Carolina Tier system that was developed by the North Carolina Department of Commerce [NC Department of Commerce] (which annually ranks all the counties in the state on factors of economic distress and population size) classifies rural students. The 40 most economically distressed counties are designated as Tier 1, the next 40 are Tier 2, and the final 20 least distressed counties are Tier 3 (NC Department of Commerce, n.d.). For their strategic plan, the UNC System designated students as rural if their home county of residence was a Tier 1 or Tier 2 county according to the 2016 rankings (University of North Carolina System, 2017.).

Several challenges exist with using this definition to identify rural students. First, it is uses population density *and* economic factors as metrics for defining rurality. While rural areas in North Carolina are more likely to be low-income (Kennedy, 2017), economic distress is not a defining feature of rurality. In fact, linking these two characteristics reinforces a deficit mindset when conceptualizing rural communities. The NC General Assembly has since retracted the population density component of the Tier ranking system (NC Department of Commerce, 2019). Second, the UNC System is using the 2016 Tier designations, but tier rankings change each year. Therefore, areas determined as “rural” under this year’s definition may have since changed based on economic and population changes in the area. Finally, this definition has similar challenges to other rural definitions because it creates a dichotomous rural/nonrural designation. By comparison, Isserman (2005) allows for more nuance in defining rurality by classifying counties as “rural” or “mostly

rural” based on population and distance from an economic center. Institutions must decide on a definition of rurality that more accurately captures the characteristics of rural culture and one that be practically implemented to identify rural students on an annual basis.

A potential risk in identifying rural students is that it may create bias among institutional actors regarding rural scholars. Institutional actors may perceive rural students through a deficit lens (e.g. not academic capable to attend college, unable to leave home), which could color the way institutional actors behave towards rural students. Rather than asking university faculty to identify specific students in their courses who identify as rural, the institution could encourage faculty and staff from rural background to self-identify as rural to their students to make rural college students feel more comfortable that faculty and staff share their identities. The institution may also encourage faculty and staff to develop and implement strategies that benefit all students, such as making sure students are aware of academic support resources. Strategies such as these could support rural students without having students openly identify themselves as rural. Institutions should aim to strike a balance between identifying rural students for tracking and informational purposes while also respecting students’ right to self-identify and privacy.

Moreover, institutions may consider developing programming to support rural students, as well as other low-income, first-generation, or underrepresented populations. For instance, universities with high populations of students enrolling from rural areas may include a portion of orientation catered to students from rural communities. Such orientation acknowledges the common challenges rural students face upon enrolling in a large institution (e.g. adjusting to size, advocating for oneself) and suggest strategies for adjusting to these challenges. Students could self-select into such programs as they choose. Universities may

also develop academic support programs, such as the summer bridge program proposed by Dr. Khan, to specifically address rural students' gaps in academic preparation early in their college careers, as well as other student populations with lower levels of academic preparation. Finally, universities in the South should consider how they work with rural students of color to help them explore their racial, cultural, and rural identities in college. Findings from this study suggest that rural students of color utilize campus resources to connect to other peers of color and learn more about their racial and ethnic identities, while also maintaining connection to their home communities to fulfill their rural identities. Student support offices should acknowledge this balance and offer resources for students of color to explore many facets of their identity at college.

**Utilizing home connections.** Rural students in this study exhibited strong connections to their home communities, so much so that several pursued academic majors that would help them return home. Even students who did not plan to return to their home communities immediately after college graduation discussed a desire one day return to raise their family, or to stay close enough to home to be able to return easily on the weekends. Other students felt they must permanently leave their home communities in order to seek employment opportunities. College career centers serving rural students should consider how rural students' connections to family and community shape their career aspirations when advising students (Crain, 2018). Institutional actors can also work with rural students to navigate new possibilities of returning home while also pursuing their career goals. Improved internet access in rural areas and changes to the work culture have increased the ability for workers to work remotely from home. Working remotely has fostered new opportunities for

an educated workforce to become more mobile and return to live in small towns (Foster, 2018).

Institutions may consider how they can leverage students' relationships with home communities to recruit and retain students from those areas. Most students in this study had a friend or family member who also attended SSU, suggesting that rural students may be more likely to enroll in large institutions if they know someone else from home. University admissions could send targeted recruitment to rural areas advertising the number of students from a particular county who are enrolled at the institution. Institutions may also consider connecting prospective students with currently enrolled students from their communities or counties to highlight local connections to the institution.

### **Future Research**

The current study explored the college experiences of late-stage undergraduate students from rural areas. Previous qualitative studies on rural college students have primarily examined the experiences of students in their first year (Ganss, 2016; Maltzan, 2006; Schultz, 2004; C. C. Stone, 2014). Studies of rural students early in their college transition found that these students struggle with the size of the college campus and diversity of the student body. Yet the current study demonstrates that many rural students successfully navigate these challenges to persist in college. Future research should explore the college experiences of rural students along their college career, either through a longitudinal study or by sampling students at different points in their college career and comparing their experiences.

Furthermore, findings from this study illustrate how the experiences of rural college students differ based on pre-entry attributes, enrollment type, and the case setting. As

previously discussed, the findings illustrate how students who attended college preparatory schools in high school felt more academically prepared than those students who attended the local public school. Apart from the student who attended the STEM school, many of these college prep schools were in the same general community as the local public institution, and students who attended these prep schools still encountered similar personal transitions as the public school population when adjusting to an urban college environment. By contrast, the student who attended STEM school left his home community for the final two years of college, which helped him with the transition to an urban environment when he attended SSU. Future research may explore how different types of college preparatory high schools may influence the academic and personal transition of rural college students in different ways.

Moreover, future research may address how the context of the case study influenced students' college preparation. One surprising finding from this study was the number of rural students who transferred college credits into SSU despite their high schools offering fewer AP courses relative to the state average. I attributed these findings to the strong state-wide partnerships between public high schools and community colleges in North Carolina, formalized through the CCP program (i.e. dual enrollment coursework). The findings regarding transfer credits suggest that state education policy influenced rural students' academic preparation. Future research should consider how the state context, specifically regarding access to dual-enrollment credits, influences academic preparation of rural students in states that do not have strong K-12-community college partnerships.

Furthermore, findings from this study suggest that students who transferred into the institution encountered different transitional challenges than those who enrolled directly. The

transfer students in this study suggested that starting at another institution was beneficial in their academic preparation, but that it may have made the social transition to SSU more difficult. All students (rural and nonrural) had to establish their networks upon first arriving on campus. Among students who enrolled directly into SSU, nearly all the students in their class were going through this transition at the same time; yet for transfer students, they were trying to establish networks among their peers at a time when most of the students in their class already had established social networks, which these students perceived as being more difficult than if they had started at SSU as freshmen. Given the relatively high number of rural students who transfer into four-year institutions, future research is needed to better understand the college experiences of rural transfer students specifically.

While there were relatively few rural students of color in this study, findings suggest that the college experiences of these students were different than those of White rural students. For instance, many rural students of color discussed the importance of being able to explore their racial or ethnic culture at college by connecting with other students or faculty members of color. Yet Enrique pointed out that he saw few students of color who were also from rural communities, and that made it more difficult at times to connect with other students of color. Previous studies have explored the experiences of rural students of color, but most of these studies focused on rural students in the K-12 pipeline (Means, 2019), or include rural students of color as a subset of the study population (A. Stone, 2019). Future research should explore the specific college experiences of rural students of color, and how their experiences may be unique relative to White rural students.

This study also focused on the experiences of rural students from one public land-grant institution. Previous studies have explored the experiences of rural students from large

public institutions (Ganss, 2016; C. C. Stone, 2014) and community colleges in Appalachia (Hlinka, 2017; Hlinka et al., 2015). Findings from this study and previous studies (Dunstan, 2013; Yoder, 2007) suggest that rural students may be attracted to land-grant institutions because of the institutional mission and branding. Institutional characteristics, such as size, location, and public or private, can shape student outcomes (Mayhew et al., 2016). Future research should explore the experiences of rural students at different institutional types, such as public regional universities, private universities, and for-profit institutions. Studies could compare the experiences of rural students at different types of postsecondary institutions to understand how institutional type impacts rural college student experience.

Finally, this study only interviewed a small sample of faculty and staff to understand how institutional actors identify rural students in their programs and whether they modify how they work with those students based on their rural background. The current study did not find much evidence that faculty and staff had a thorough understanding of rural student populations, which could be due to small sample size. Subsequent research should conduct a more extensive study on how institutional characteristics and actors influence rural college student persistence.

### **Conclusion**

The rural population represents more than one-third of the population of North Carolina, yet they are reflected among only 18.1% of four-year college graduates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b; USDA ERS, 2017b). Research suggests that education beyond high school must occur for individual career opportunities and state-wide economic growth in the upcoming decades (Carnevale et al., 2013; Ma et al, 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). By failing to address the issue of college access and

persistence among rural populations, we are doing a disservice to our rural citizens and the state as a whole.

The goal of the current study was to explore how successful rural college students—rural students who had persisted to their fourth year of college—perceived their rural upbringing and the way that it shaped their college persistence. In doing so, the study aimed to illustrate the unique challenges that students from rural populations face. More importantly, the study aimed to highlight the strengths that rural students bring to the college environment that aid them in persisting considering these challenges. Furthermore, the study sought to highlight the awareness of faculty and staff regarding rural students. Using this knowledge, practitioners working on college campuses should find ways to capitalize on these strengths to promote college persistence among rural populations. Policymakers may also consider how the strong connection between rural students and their communities represents an opportunity to develop pathways for college-educated rural students to return to their home communities after college graduation (if they so choose) to foster economic growth in rural areas. In short, bolstering the college persistence and completion of the rural population in North Carolina represents an invaluable opportunity for the state to invest in its human capital and establish North Carolina as a leader in educational and economic equity.

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**APPENDICES**

### Appendix A: Interview Protocol from the Initial Study

Start by asking for NAME, MAJOR, YEAR IN SCHOOL, WERE YOU A TRANSFER STUDENT (if transfer, ask where they transferred from and when- some of the questions below then you might also want to ask about how being transfer student influenced experiences)

1. Tell me a little bit about where you are from (**BACKGROUND/RURAL IDENTITY**)
  - a. Did you like growing up there? (**ORIENTATION TO COMMUNITY-toward or away**)
  - b. Do you feel connected to your community there? (**ORIENTATION TO COMMUNITY-toward or away**)
2. How did you choose to come to SSU? What about SSU appealed to you? (**COLLEGE CHOICE**)
3. What factors did you consider when choosing a college? (**COLLEGE CHOICE**)
  - a. What was the most important factor for you when choosing a college? (**COLLEGE CHOICE**)
4. Where did you get information/whose help did you seek when making decisions about attending college? (**COLLEGE CHOICE/CULTURAL CAPITAL**)
  - a. What role did your family play in these decisions? (**COLLEGE CHOICE/CULTURAL CAPITAL/ROLE OF FAMILY**)
  - b. What about other influences-
    - i. Counselors (did you have guidance/counselor or meet with them)
    - ii. Teachers?
    - iii. Community members?
    - iv. Peers?
5. Do you have parents or siblings who attended SSU?
  - a. Have others in your family (parents or siblings) attended a community college or four- year college?
6. What were some things that surprised you when you first came to SSU? (**TRANSITION/EXPECTATIONS VS LIVED EXPERIENCE**)
7. What aspects of college life were similar to what you expected? (**TRANSITION/EXPECTATIONS VS LIVED EXPERIENCE**)
8. How do you think that coming from a rural area/small town influenced your transition into college? For example, did moving to a more urban area feel natural or did it require getting used to? (**TRANSITION/UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND**)
9. Tell me about your academic preparation before you came to SSU.

- a. How academically prepared did you feel before you arrived? What about after you arrived and began classes? (ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS/ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY)
  - b. Maybe ask about AP class offering, etc.
10. Tell me about your major/what you are studying. How did you choose this major?
11. What kind of experiences would you like to have during your time at SSU?
12. What do you plan to do after you graduate? (FUTURE ORIENTATION/CAREER PLANS/CAREER PERCEPTIONS)
  - a. How did you make that decision?
13. Do you think you will return to your home community? Why or why not? (ORIENTATION TO COMMUNITY/RURAL IDENTITY/CAREER PLANS/PERCEIVED OPPORTUNITIES)
14. What challenges do you feel you have faced or overcome as a student at SSU?
  - a. How have you dealt with these challenges? (CHALLENGES/RESILIENCY)
15. What are some successes you have had as a student at [SSU]? This could be anything from acing a hard test to going out of your comfort zone and attending an event you wouldn't normally go to. (CHALLENGES/RESILIENCY)
  - a. What makes you most proud of these successes (CHALLENGES/RESILIENCY)
16. Tell me about your primary group of friends
  - a. How did you choose/find these friends?
17. What activities are you involved in outside of your classes on campus?
  - a. How did you choose those activities? (CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT/SOCIAL INTERACTIONS/BACKGROUND)
18. How did you choose your primary group of friends on campus? (CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT/SOCIAL INTERACTIONS/BACKGROUND)
19. Coming from a rural area, are there aspects about your experiences in college that you think might be different than for students from suburban or urban areas? (RURAL IDENTITY/UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND)
20. How often do you visit your hometown/are you in contact with folks from your hometown? (RURAL IDENTITY)
21. Have you ever considered leaving SSU? (FACTORS INFLUENCING RETENTION DECISIONS)
  - a. If so, why? If not, why not?
22. Do you feel a sense of belonging on campus? (SENSE OF BELONGING)
  - a. If so, what has contributed to this?
  - b. If not, why do you think this is?

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol from Current Study - Students

1. Take a minute to think about your home community. In three words, how would you describe your home community? **(HOME CULTURE)**
  - a. What characteristics do you think make your home community different from other communities? **(HOME CULTURE)**
2. How does the culture at SSU compare to your home community? **(CULTURAL TRANSITION)**
  - a. What aspects of SSU felt familiar or natural? **(CULTURAL TRANSITION)**
  - b. What aspects of SSU were more difficult to adjust to? How have you navigated that adjustment? **(CULTURAL TRANSITION)**
3. What values were most important to you when you first arrived at SSU? **(CULTURE)**
  - a. Do you think any of those values have changed over time? How? Why?
4. Take a minute to think over your career at SSU. In three words, how would you describe your college experience?
5. What were some of your personal or academic goals when you initially enrolled at SSU? **(GOAL COMMITMENT)**
  - a. Have your goals changed over time? If so, how? **(GOAL COMMITMENT)**
6. Tell me a little more about your academic experience at SSU. What have you enjoyed the most? **(ACADEMIC CONNECTION)**
  - a. What aspects about college academics have been the most challenging? **(CHALLENGES)**
  - b. What aspects about college academics have been the most rewarding? **(ACADEMIC CONNECTION/GOAL ORIENTATION)**
7. How do you think being from a rural area has influenced your academic experience at SSU? **(ACADEMIC CONNECTION)**
8. What type of interaction do you have with your faculty? (e.g. just teaching, undergraduate research, etc.) **(FACULTY INTERACTION)**
  - a. How has your interaction with faculty changed over time?
9. Are there any ways in which you interact with faculty outside the classroom? **(FACULTY INTERACTION/ACADEMIC INVOLVEMENT)**
  - a. Are there other staff or students you work closely with in an academic context (e.g. grad students, postdocs, lab managers, etc.)? **(STAFF INTERACTION)**
10. In general, how supportive do you feel that faculty are of you as a student?
  - a. How do you perceive your faculty as being supportive of students? **(FACULTY SUPPORT)**
11. Tell me a little bit about your involvement outside the classroom. What do you do with your time when you are not in class? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT/EXTERNAL COMMITMENTS)**
12. How has your involvement outside the classroom changed over time? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT/EXTERNAL COMMITMENTS)**
13. What kind of interaction do you have with non-faculty staff members at SSU? That could be club advisers, spiritual leaders, counselors, housing staff, etc. **(STAFF INTERACTION)**
  - a. In general, do you feel that staff have supported you at SSU? If so, how?

14. Are you involved with any activities or groups off campus? How did you get involved in those activities? **(EXTERNAL COMMITMENTS)**
15. Do you have a job on- or off-campus? If so, what do you do? **(EXTERNAL COMMITMENTS)**
  - a. If so, what made you decide to get a job?
  - b. How many hours per week do you work?
16. How does getting involved on a college campus like SSU compare to your involvement in your high school or your home community? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT)**
17. Tell me a bit about your connection with your home community. How often do you connect with peers or family? **(HOME SYSTEM)**
  - a. What role do you feel that your home community has played in supporting you the last four years? **(HOME SYSTEM/ROLE OF FAMILY OR FRIENDS)**
  - b. How do you feel your relationship with your home community has changed over time? **(HOME SYSTEM/ROLE OF FAMILY OR FRIENDS)**
18. Who have been the greatest support systems for you during your time at college? In what ways have these individuals supported you? **(FACULTY AND STAFF INTERACTION)**
19. **Prompt:** Are there any faculty or staff who have supported you during your time at SSU?
20. What factors have motivated you to persist at SSU? **(MOTIVATION)**
  - a. Were there times that you considered leaving SSU? If so, why?
21. What advice would you give to students from your town who were considering attending SSU?

**Appendix C: Interview Protocol from Current Study – Student Affairs  
Practitioner/Staff**

Start by asking name, their title, and the department where they currently work.

1. How did you choose to come work at SSU? **(BACKGROUND)**
  - a. How do you feel that your work contributes to the institutional mission?  
**(INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS)**
2. How many hours, or what percentage of your week, would you estimate that you work directly with undergraduate students? **(LEVEL OF INTERACTION)**
3. How would you describe your interaction with students? **(INTERACTION TYPE)**
  - a. **Prompt:** In what ways do you interact with students? **(INTERACTION TYPE)**
4. Is there a specific student population that you or your office works with the most? Do you see any similarities across your students?
  - a. How many of your students would you estimate are from small towns or rural areas/identify as rural? How do you know?
5. Are there any institutional characteristics that you think draw rural students specifically to SSU or schools like it? **(INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS)**
6. From your experience, what do you perceive as some of the unique characteristics of rural students? **(UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND)**
7. Have you perceived rural students bringing a different perspective to a group or problem as compared to their urban or suburban peers? **(UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND)**
  - a. Can you think of an example of this?
8. What do you perceive as some of the experiences any student faces in their transition to college? **(TRANSITION/CHALLENGES)**
  - a. How do you think coming from a rural area or small town influences students' transition into college? **(TRANSITION/UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND)**
9. From your experience, how do students from rural areas perform academically at SSU? **(ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE)**
  - a. In general, how prepared do you find that rural students are for college academics? **(ACADEMIC PREPARATION)**
  - b. Can you give me an example of the type of academic preparation (or lack of) that you have seen in working with rural students? **(ACADEMIC PREPARATION)**
  - c. How have you seen rural students connect academically with other students? What kinds of behaviors do they engage in that improve their academic success? **(ACADEMIC CONNECTION)**
10. What types of organizations or activities do you see rural students get involved in on campus? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT)**
  - a. Off campus? **(EXTERNAL INVOLVEMENT)**
  - b. Do you find that rural students gravitate to specific types of activities or clubs? Can you provide an example of this? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT)**
11. How have you seen rural students' background students' involvement or social interactions in campus life? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT/PEER INTERACTION)**

- a. In what ways have you seen rural students' backgrounds influencing the degree to which they are involved on campus or the types of activities they get involved in? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT)**
12. In general, what role do you perceive rural students' home environments playing during their time at college? **(HOME SOCIAL SYSTEM)**
  - a. How do you think this relationship is different for suburban or urban students? (Or is it?) **(HOME SOCIAL SYSTEM)**
13. How do you approach a conversation with your students about navigating or maintaining a relationship with their families or home communities? **(HOME SOCIAL SYSTEM)**
  - a. Is it different for rural students?
14. What strengths do you think students from small towns or rural areas bring to the university? **(UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND/STRENGTHS/RESILIENCY)**
  - a. Describe some of the specific strengths you have seen in your rural students.
15. How would you describe the persistence of your rural students relative to other student populations? **(PERSISTENCE)**
  - a. What have you perceived as being some of the most prominent factors in shaping rural college students' ability to persist? Can you provide an example? **(PERSISTENCE)**
16. Does your office or your colleagues specifically recognize which of their students are from rural areas? **(INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS)**
  - a. If so, how does that influence the way in which you support these students? **(INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS/SUPPORT)**
17. What are some ways that your department or the institution could better support students from rural areas? **(PERSISTENCE)**
  - a. What advice would you give to other staff members who advise rural students?

### Appendix D: Interview Protocol from Current Study - Faculty

Start by asking name, their title, and the department where they currently work.

1. How did you choose to come work at SSU? **(BACKGROUND)**
  - a. How do you feel that your work contributes to the institutional mission?  
**(INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS)**
2. How many hours, or what percentage of your week, would you estimate that you work directly with undergraduate students? That could be teaching, advising, doing research, etc. **(LEVEL OF INTERACTION)**
3. How would you describe your interaction with students? **(INTERACTION TYPE)**
  - a. **Prompt:** In what ways do you interact with students (e.g. purely teaching, advising, mentoring, undergraduate research, etc.?) **(INTERACTION TYPE)**
4. Describe the student populations that you or your department works with the most. Do you see any similarities across your students?
  - a. How many of your students would you estimate are from small towns or rural areas/identify as rural? How do you know?
5. Are there any institutional characteristics that you think draw rural students specifically to SSU or schools like it? **(INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS)**
6. From your experience, what do you perceive as some of the unique characteristics of rural students? **(UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND)**
7. Have you perceived rural students bringing a different perspective to the classroom as compared to their urban or suburban peers? **(UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND)**
  - a. Can you think of an example of this?
8. What do you perceive as some of the experiences any student faces in their transition to college? **(TRANSITION/CHALLENGES)**
  - a. How do you think coming from a rural area or small town influences students' transition into college? **(TRANSITION/UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND)**
9. From your experience, how do students from rural areas perform academically at SSU? **(ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE)**
  - a. In general, how prepared do you find that rural students are for college academics? **(ACADEMIC PREPARATION)**
  - b. Can you give me an example of the type of academic preparation (or lack of) that you have seen in working with rural students? **(ACADEMIC PREPARATION)**
  - c. How have you seen rural students connect academically with other students? What kinds of behaviors do they engage in that improve their academic success? **(ACADEMIC CONNECTION)**
10. What types of organizations or activities do you see rural students get involved in on campus? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT)**
  - a. Off campus? **(EXTERNAL INVOLVEMENT)**
  - b. Do you find that rural students gravitate to specific types of activities or clubs? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT)**
11. How have you seen rural students' background students' involvement or social interactions in campus life? **(CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT/PEER INTERACTION)**

12. In general, what role do you perceive rural students' home environments playing during their time at college? **(HOME SOCIAL SYSTEM)**
  - a. How do you think this relationship is different for suburban or urban students? (Or is it?) **(HOME SOCIAL SYSTEM)**
13. How do you approach a conversation with your students about navigating or maintaining a relationship with their families or home communities? **(HOME SOCIAL SYSTEM)**
  - a. Is it different for rural students?
14. What strengths do you think students from small towns or rural areas bring to the university? **(UNIQUENESS OF RURAL BACKGROUND/STRENGTHS/RESILIENCY)**
  - a. Describe some of the specific strengths you have seen in your rural students.
15. How would you describe the persistence of your rural students relative to other student populations? **(PERSISTENCE)**
  - a. What have you perceived as being some of the most prominent factors in shaping rural college students' ability to persist? Can you provide an example? **(PERSISTENCE)**
16. Does your department or your colleagues specifically recognize which of their students are from rural areas? **(INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS)**
  - a. If so, how does that impact the way in which you support these students? **(INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS/SUPPORT)**
17. What are some ways that your department or the institution could better support students from rural areas? **(INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS/SUPPORT)**
  - a. What advice would you give to other faculty who teach or advise rural students?

### **Appendix E: Student Recruitment Email**

Dear [student's name],

Welcome back to [Southern State University]! My name is Nicole Ditillo and I am a doctoral candidate. For my dissertation research, I am studying the experiences of college students at [SSU], and the institutional support for rural students. I believe that rural students bring a unique perspective to our institutional and am interested in hearing about college experiences from the student perspective.

Based on institutional records, you have been identified as a rural student. I would like to invite you to participate in this study about rural college students. I would be very interested to learn more about your rural background and your college experiences so far at [SSU].

Your participation will include one interview, lasting about 30-60 minutes. You will be compensated for your participation in the study with a \$15 gift card. We can arrange an interview at a time and location that works best for your schedule. I have attached the consent form for the study, which provides an overview of the study to give you a better idea of the information I am exploring.

If you are interested in participating in this study or you would like to learn more, you can contact me at [email] or [phone number]. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences at [SSU]!

Best,

**Appendix F: Faculty and Staff Recruitment Email**

Dear [faculty/staff name],

My name is Nicole Ditillo and I am conducting research on college students from rural areas, and the factors that influence their persistence at [Southern State University].

Earlier this semester, I interviewed current rural college students at [SSU] and asked them to identify a few faculty and staff who have supported them during their time at [SSU]. You were identified as one such staff member who has supported rural students.

Due to your experience with students, I would like to interview as part of my research study to better understand how faculty and staff identify and support rural college students. Your participation will include one interview, lasting about 30-60 minutes, at a time and place that is most convenient to you. I have attached the consent form for the study, which provides an overview of the study to give you a better idea of the focus of the study and the information I am hoping to obtain.

If you are interested in participating in this study or you would like to learn more, you can contact me at [email] or [phone number]. Thank you and I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences working with rural college students.

Best,

## Appendix G: Student Consent Form

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH**

Title of Study: Rural College Student Persistence and Institution Support

Principal Investigator: Nicole Ditillo

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore rural college students' experiences in college that influence their college persistence. The study seeks to better understand how students background characteristics and previous experience shape their college choices and explore their experiences at college. It also seeks to better understand how faculty and staff identify and support rural students.

#### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. Interviews will be held on [SSU's] campus or in the surrounding area at a location most convenient to the participants. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Interview questions will ask about students' background before coming to college, their college experiences (academic and extracurricular), as well as any faculty and staff who have supported them during their college careers.

If you consent, the researcher will also access previous interview data from your participation in a previous study on rural college student success, led by [name] and [name] to understand how your experiences may have changed over time.

#### **Risks and Benefits**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are that participants may build on the literature about rural college student persistence, and that this knowledge may improve institutional practices that benefit future rural college students to persist and graduate from college.

**Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on a password protected laptop belonging to the principal investigator. Student and staff participants will only be identified by pseudonyms. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

**Compensation**

For participating in this study, you will receive a \$15 gift card to the [SSU] Bookstore. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will receive a \$15 gift card to the [SSU] Bookstore.

**What if you are a [SSU] student?**

Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at [SSU]

**What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Nicole Ditillo ([email], [phone number])

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact [name], Regulatory Compliance Administrator, at [email] or by phone at [phone number]

**Consent To Participate**

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I consent to allowing the researcher to access and use previous interview data from my participation in the study with [name] and [name]

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I consent to participating in an interview for the current study.

**Subject's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix H: Faculty Consent Form**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH**

Title of Study: Rural College Student Persistence and Institution Support

Principal Investigator: Nicole Ditillo

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore rural college students' experiences in college that influence their college persistence. The study seeks to better understand how students background characteristics and previous experience shape their college choices and explore their experiences at college. It also seeks to better understand how faculty and staff identify and support rural students.

#### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. Interviews will be held on [SSU's] campus or in the surrounding area at a location most convenient to the participants. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Interview questions will ask about the role of the participant at the university, their experiences in identify and working with rural students.

#### **Risks and Benefits**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are that participants may build on the literature about rural college student persistence, and that this knowledge may improve institutional practices to support future rural students to persist and graduate from college.

#### **Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on a password protected laptop belonging to the principal investigator. Student and staff participants will only be identified by pseudonyms. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

**Compensation**

You will not receive compensation for participating in this research.

**What if you are a [SSU] employee?**

Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment at [SSU], and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Nicole Ditillo ([email], [phone number])

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact [ Regulatory Compliance Administrator] at [email] or by phone at [phone number]

**Consent To Participate**

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

**Subject's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_