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COLLEGE STOP-OUT AMONG RURAL UNDERGRADUATES: A PHENOMENOLOGY

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College Stop-Out Among Rural Undergraduates: A Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

Rural undergraduates lag behind urban and suburban undergraduates across many measures of college success, even though they graduate from high school at a higher rate. While a small but growing body of research literature addresses the challenges and barriers rural students face during the college process, few, if any, studies have focused specifically on the experience of rural undergraduates who withdraw from college before completing a degree.

This qualitative phenomenological study examines the experiences of rural, low-income, first-in-family undergraduates who stop out of college. Study participants (n=13) attended high school in different rural communities and geographic regions across the United States. After participating in an Upward Bound program during high school, they each enrolled in a two- or four-year, undergraduate degree program at an accredited, non-profit college or university and then withdrew prior to completing a degree. Following in the tradition of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and using the framework provided by Clark Moustakas (1994), I engaged study participants in open ended, semi-structured interviews. After those conversations, participants submitted independently recorded voice memos about their experience stopping out of college.

The rural backgrounds of study participants manifested in many aspects of how and what they experienced when they withdrew from college. The phenomenon was described as an intense and devastating period of time, characterized by feelings of failure, shame, confusion, and disappointment. The distinct influence of rural families, communities, and schools shaped

participants' decisions before, during, and after their time at college. While the reasons students withdrew varied widely and may be similar to those of non-rural students, all participants perceived their rural background as deeply implicated in the stop-out experience.

This study offers a new orientation on the topic of college stop-out among rural undergraduates and presents a working persistence model for this underserved student group. The three theoretical perspectives presented in this study – transcendental phenomenology, ecological systems theory, and community cultural wealth – expose broader meaning about both the objective *and* subjective qualities of the stop-out experience, adding a depth to findings that has broad implications for scholars and practitioners. This study concludes with practical insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions that serve rural undergraduates.

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Robert Frost once said, “The best way out is always through.” As I reflect on the process of conducting and writing this dissertation, I am grateful to all those who helped get me “through” and contributed in ways large and small to this research project.

My greatest thanks goes to the “co-researchers” in this study. These thirteen individuals willingly shared their college-going journeys with me, revisiting deeply personal and sometimes painful memories. Their accounts of departing college were rich, far-ranging, insightful, and, at times, heartbreaking. This study’s contributions to the research literature on rural undergraduates is owed completely to them.

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And finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents, who taught me how to love rural places.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Rural undergraduates lag behind urban and suburban undergraduates across many measures of college success, even though they graduate from high school at a higher rate. Fewer than 20 percent of rural adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33 percent in urban areas (Economic Research Service, USDA, 2017). Immediate college enrollment the first fall after high school graduation is lowest among students from rural high schools (60 percent), compared with those from suburban (66 percent) and urban (61 percent) high schools. Students from rural schools (82 percent) are also slightly less likely than students from suburban (87 percent) or urban (83 percent) schools to return for their second year of college (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). Among people ages 18-24 in 2015, only 29.3 percent of students from rural areas were enrolled in any type of college, compared to 47.7 percent from urban areas, 42.3 percent from suburban areas, and 41.2 from towns (NCES, 2015).

Rural undergraduates are generally unattended to by higher education institutions, scholars, and policymakers (McDonough et al., 2010). For the 20 percent of Americans that live in the 97 percent of land designated as rural by the federal government (Census Bureau, 2016), college access, persistence, and completion is complicated by a web of social, cultural, historical, and economic issues. One college admission director remarked that rural students have become "the new underrepresented minority" in American higher education and are "systematically dismissed, ignored, or passed over" (Pappano, 2017, p. 2).

Despite an overall increase in educational attainment in rural areas over the past half century, significant disparities in college-going trends between rural and non-rural students remain (National College Progression Rates, 2016). While a small but growing body of research

literature addresses the challenges and barriers students from rural areas face during the college process (Irvin et al., 2017; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018a; Meece et al., 2013a), relatively few studies have focused specifically on the college completion crisis in rural America. Little is known about the experiences of rural students once they arrive on campus, and how the factors that make college access uniquely challenging for this student population affect persistence and achievement.

Research on students from rural areas who begin college but do not complete a degree is virtually nonexistent. Few studies have examined the conditions, precipitating events, and experiences of rural students who begin an undergraduate program but fail to earn a degree. The movements of rural undergraduates after they stop out of college also warrant investigation. Little is known about whether these individuals return to their rural community, remain near their college or university, or move to another locale. Given the limited career and continuing educational opportunities in rural communities, a rural student's decision about where to live after leaving college presents unique challenges. While much has been said about the effects of outmigration on the educational aspirations of rural youth (Alleman & Holly, 2014; Nelson, 2019; Roscigno & Crowley, 2009), the whereabouts of students from rural places who stop out have not been widely examined. Without this data, efforts aimed at helping these students return to college will continue to face challenges.

For decades, scholars have suggested that an insufficient body of research on K-16 rural education prohibits educational practitioners and policy makers from making well-informed, data-driven decisions (Arnold et al., 2005; Sherwood, 2000). Students from rural communities are surprisingly underrepresented in education research and very little is known about their K-16 educational trajectories (DeYoung, 1987; Gibbs, 1998; Sher, 1977). Further, since the concept of

"rurality" is inherently vague, a consistent problem in the study of rural higher education is the various definitions of "rural" used in education research (Khattri et al., 1997; Manly et al., 2019; Philo et al., 2003).

Among existing research, some scholars wrongly consider rural undergraduates as a monolithic group, when in fact the backgrounds, abilities, and aspirations of these individuals are as diverse as the rural landscapes themselves. Existing scholarship on the college aspirations of rural youth is fragmented and often focuses on one specific rural area, such as Appalachia, the Southwest, or the Midwest (Pierson & Hanson, 2015b; Schonert, Elliott & Bills, 1991; Yan, 2002). Further, higher education researchers, practitioners, and policymakers too often perpetuate a deficit perspective when considering the outlook of rural undergraduates. Current research on the future orientations of rural youth often concludes, as Corbett (2016) asserted, with "simplistic deficit assessments of educational paths, relationships, and purposes" (p. 270). Perceived disadvantages of growing up in a rural locale often obscure the many benefits these students carry with them on their higher education journeys.

As mentioned, rural high school graduates are the least likely of any other geographic group to enroll in college (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016), and little is known about their college journeys. In the early years of college, however, students from rural locales perform as well and sometimes outperform their non-rural peers (Meece et al., 2013a). One possible explanation may be that bright, high-achieving, rural youth from low-socio-economic backgrounds especially value higher education as a pathway toward economic prosperity due to declining employment in their rural communities (Elder & Conger, 2000; Gibbs, Kusmin, & Cromartie, 2005; Lichter & McLaughlin, 1995). Another reason may be that rural students are

more advantaged than non-rural student in community social resources, which increases the likelihood of bachelor's degree attainment (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012).

Upon arriving at college, however, many rural undergraduates find themselves in a new culture that may be at odds with their family, community, and religious values. Some students with rural backgrounds experience confusion, frustration, and acculturative stress as they contend with new cultural ideas, particularly those around race, gender, and sexuality (Dees, 2006). Further, rural undergraduates often find that they are different from their metropolitan peers in visible ways and sometimes feel subject to stereotyping by others on campus (Dunstan and Jaeger, 2016). During the first semester on college, they are often surprised by the stark differences between their home community and their new campus environment (Schultz, 2004).

Current data on college completion among rural undergraduates is not reliable because the definition of rurality varies so widely across research and government agencies. The most recent and accessible source of information on college degree attainment among rural students are three longitudinal datasets, each gathered a decade apart, that track a cohort of high school students through the college years. These are (a) the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988–2000 (NELS), (b) the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002–2012 (ELS), and (c) the High School Longitudinal Study (HSLS) which began in 2009.

Across all three datasets, urban students have a five to seven percent greater probability of attaining a bachelor's degree (Manly, Wells, & Kommers, 2019). Yet, other rural-nonrural comparisons are not as consistent because of the differences in how rural areas are classified. The percentage of students considered rural under the three datasets, for example, varies from 32 percent with the NELS definition, to 20 percent with ELS, and to 23 percent with HSLS (Manly, Wells, & Kommers, 2019). This inconsistency is one reason little consensus exists among

scholars and policymakers on exact college completion and degree attainment rates among rural students in the United States.

According to an analysis by Wells, Manly, and Kommers (2019), 86 percent of rural high school seniors in 2004 from the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS: 2002-12) enrolled in college, leaving 14 percent who never enrolled in college. By 2012, 20 percent of those who enrolled had earned an associate's degree and 34 percent had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Overall, 37 percent of the rural students who began college did not earn a degree within eight years of their high school graduation.

Another valuable source of data for assessing college completion among rural students is the National Student Clearinghouse, which collects data annually from a voluntary sample of roughly 1,500 rural high schools. In 2016, the Clearinghouse reported that 42 percent of all rural high school graduates in 2009 had earned a college degree (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016). While this rate is similar to those of urban and suburban graduates, students from rural high schools (83 percent) were less likely to return for their second year of college than those from suburban (88 percent) and urban (84 percent) high schools (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

In order to reduce the number of rural undergraduates who begin college but do not finish, scholars must understand their reasons for and experience of stopping out. This is important because the college-going process of rural students differs in many ways from that of their non-rural peers. Further, understanding the experiences of rural undergraduates who stop out of college is critical because higher education may provide them the clearest pathway for upward mobility (Krause & Reeves, 2017). In these turbulent economic and political times,

higher education institutions can provide access and opportunity to rural students, who may be the most likely group to help reinvigorate rural communities that have been disadvantaged for generations. With changes in the economic and cultural landscape, it is more important than ever that American higher education produce leaders who are qualified to solve problems facing rural places.

This dissertation examines the experiences of rural, low-income, first-in-family undergraduates who stop out of college. Specifically, it studies the ways that growing up in a rural place influences the experience of stopping-out of college, and what parts of that experience are broadly shared by students in different rural locations. By understanding *how* and *what* these rural individuals experienced during this time, this study also aims to provide insight on *why* these students stopped out of college and if those reasons were related to being rural. My analysis is guided by three research questions:

1) How do low-income undergraduates from rural areas perceive and describe their experience of stopping out of college?
2) How do undergraduates from rural areas describe their reasons for leaving college?
3) How, if at all, do students' reasons for and experience of stopping out of college relate to growing up in a rural area?

To answer these questions, I used a qualitative, phenomenological research design, following in the tradition of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and based on the framework provided by Clark Moustakas in *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994). I collected data from a sample of low-income rural individuals about what it was like to withdraw from college and what their rural background may have had to do with it. Keeping with the approach of psychological phenomenologists (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989), I identified common

meaning from the lived experiences of the students in the sample and discuss the shared, underlying structure of their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Drawing from clusters of meaning that emerged in the data, I crafted a composite description of the essence of stopping out of college as a student from a rural area. This description summarizes the phenomenon of stopping out of college among rural undergraduates, based on the experiences of the students in this sample.

Phenomenology is the most appropriate methodological approach for two important reasons. First, the central focus of my analysis is the essence and underlying similarities of the students' *experience* rather than the similarities between the students. As such, study participants will not be discussed as a monolithic group, as they might be in a study designed to understand rural students' similarities. Instead, this study's data collection and analysis plan accounts for the broad diversity of the sample, including the dimensions of race, gender, social class, and geographic region.

Second, the philosophical underpinnings of Phenomenology focus this inquiry on the *meaning* of one's experience in relation to the phenomenon of stopping out of college as a rural student. In this way, I seek to investigate this phenomenon simply for how it is experienced, rather than through the lens of theories, preconceptions, and presuppositions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This outlook, described in depth in Chapter Three, prevents a deficit perspective from taking root and ensures, to the extent possible, that prevailing narratives and stereotypes about rural people did not cloud data analysis.

Significance of Study

This study expands the conversation about rural undergraduates by providing valuable insight on rural, low-income, first-in-family undergraduates who stop out of college. It shares the

lived experiences of students from poor, rural families from across the United States who beat the odds by starting college but fail to complete their degree. Their stories will help scholars and educators improve college degree attainment in rural areas by shedding light on the factors, influences, and barriers that threaten persistence and completion.

As outlined in the previous sections, the higher education experiences of students from rural areas are understudied. In particular, few, if any, studies have examined the experiences of college dropouts from rural areas. As such, this study begins a new line of inquiry on rural undergraduates by exploring the experiences and perceptions of those who left college. Findings provide essential insight for scholars, policy-makers, practitioners, and higher education stakeholders in rural America and beyond.

Several different types of rural outreach programs are already in place at rural high schools and rural-serving institutions across the country. These include dual-enrollment programs, hybrid- and distance-degree programs, and college preparation programs. The success of these initiatives in closing the college completion gap for rural students depends on data to make decisions relating to program design and delivery. These initiatives can benefit from the new perspective this study provides on the challenges rural undergraduates face, as well as new insight on how students' sense of rural identity differentiates them from their non-rural peers.

This study examines the experiences of rural undergraduates who drop out of a two- or four-year undergraduate degree program, rather than certificate programs at community colleges or vocational schools. This focus is meant to address the reality, described in the previous section, that conventional approaches to higher education are failing rural youth. In order to reduce the lag in college completion, undergraduate degree programs must align more closely with the outlooks, needs, and aspirations of rural students and their families.

In addition, this study explores the experiences of low-income and first-in-family undergraduates, rather than those from middle- and higher- income families. As in all geographic locations, students from low-income backgrounds are the most at-risk and deserving of support on their journey to and through higher education. Focusing on low-income students also accounts for the social class divisions in many rural communities, especially those where colleges, hospitals, and government agencies attract highly-educated and sometimes transient high-wage workers from urban centers.

Limitations and Delimitations

The deep knowledge of a particular experience derived from a phenomenological study has far-reaching intellectual and practical implications. These research questions are best answered through phenomenology because the experience of college stop-out is often intense, complicated, and deeply personal. While each individual's experience is different, understanding the essence and common structure of this unique phenomenon can help guide the work of academics and policymakers in the field of higher education and beyond.

As with any research methodology, however, phenomenology has limitations and some drawbacks. The underlying philosophical assumptions presented in any phenomenological study are complicated, abstract, and difficult to translate into real-world practice. In addition, the structured approach promoted by Moustakas and other contemporary phenomenologists is prescriptive and at times restricting, especially when compared with the more open-ended approaches of narrative, case study, or grounded theory research.

One hurdle in undertaking this phenomenological study was the challenge of accounting for the influence of my personal experience. Much has been said about the difficulty of completely eliminating the assumptions of the phenomenological researcher in the interpretation

of data (Van Manen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2017; LeVasseur, 2003). While I adhered closely to the phenomenological procedures intended to set aside my preconceptions and assumptions, the influence of my positionality can never be resolved entirely. For this reason, more research on the techniques of "epoche" and "bracketing" is required to advance the ways in which phenomenologists can partition the influence of their personal experience during data analysis. In Chapter 3, I discuss in depth my positionality as a researcher and experience with this topic.

Finally, one aspiration of this study is to present the perspectives of students from several different rural areas across the United States, rather than one specific rural region. By selecting a sample of students that includes a maximum variation of rural cultures, demographics, and characteristics, my goal is to capture the aspects of this phenomenon that are shared by rural students of many different backgrounds. However, given that no two rural places are the same, this study's findings may or may not be generalizable to all rural students. Further, since I did not collect participants' home addresses, it was not possible to determine which Census Bureau "rural" category of where they grew up. As such, the purpose of this study is not to present fixed, fundamental truths about rural people and places. Instead, this study aims to understand the essential nature and basic structure of this phenomenon, which will help guide the work of academics, policymakers, and educators across a number of disciplines.

Definition of Terms

Stop-out/ Stopping Out

The term *stop-out* or *stopping out* is used in this study to describe an undergraduate college student who withdraws from college before completing a degree. I prefer this term to the more conventional "drop-out" for two reasons. First, stop-out reflects the fluid and sometimes temporary nature of many students' withdrawal from college over their lifetime. Second, the

term drop-out insinuates that students gave up on higher education, framing them as permanent failures and ignoring the true challenges they face.

In this analysis, the term *stopping out* is not meant to describe a single moment that marks an individual's departure from college. Instead, it describes a collection of moments that form a larger experience of withdrawing from college, in some cases more than once. This study's main interest is which of those moments, if any, relate to a student's rural background and identity.

Low-income, first-in-family college student

In this study, the term *low-income student* is used to describe an individual whose family's taxable income does not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount, as determined by the Census Bureau. Poverty level amounts change based on the number of individuals in the household and the state in which one resides. In 2019, the 150 percent of the federal poverty level in the 48 contiguous U.S states was $29,435 for a family of three and $35,535 for a family of four (Census Bureau, 2019). The terms *first-in-family or first-generation student* is used to describe an individual whose parents do not have bachelor's degrees. These definitions were chosen because they align with the definition used by Upward Bound, which uses family income and parents' educational status to determine a student's program eligibility (Upward Bound, 2019).

Rural Area

The definition of a *rural area* used in this study aligns with the framework provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which draws upon the Census Bureau's rural classification. The Census Bureau defines rural as any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area (Census Bureau, 2019). Specifically, a location is deemed rural based on its

proximity to an Urbanized Area, which has a population of 50,000 or more people, and to an Urban Cluster, which has a population of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000 people. In this way, the Census Bureau defines rural only indirectly by classifying these areas as any population, housing, and territory outside an Urban Area or Urban Cluster.

The National Center for Education Statistics divides rural areas into three sub-groups: Rural Fringe (areas less than five miles from an Urbanized Area and two-and-one-half miles from an Urban Cluster), Rural Distant (areas more than five miles from an Urbanized Area but less than twenty-five miles from an Urban Cluster), and Rural Remote (areas more than twenty-five miles from an Urbanized Area and more than ten miles from an Urban Cluster) (NCES, 2019). All three of these rural sub-groups are considered "rural" for the purposes of this study.

Organization of the Study

In this Chapter One, I identify the research topic and three research questions for study. In Chapter Two, I conduct a thorough review of the literature on the broad topic of rural undergraduates, with a focus on these students' transition to and through college. Chapter Three discusses the study's theoretical approach, including the concepts of transcendental phenomenology that inform data analysis.

Chapter Four outlines the study's phenomenological methodology, including rationale, sampling, data collection, analysis, positionality, and limitations. I discuss the three methodological steps completed in this contemporary phenomenological study: Methods of Preparation, Methods of Collecting Data, and Methods of Organizing and Analyzing Data. I detail the nature of participants' engagement with the study, including all ethical considerations related to confidentially and informed consent. In doing so, I satisfy the requirements of

phenomenology by proposing “an organized, disciplined, and systematic study” (Moustakas, 2014, p.103).

Chapter Five presents the findings of this study through thirteen individual textural descriptions that include information on participants’ background, family, and rural context. In Chapter Six, I apply the method of Phenomenological Reduction and discuss four dominant units of meeting, or themes, that emerge from the data. Then, I integrate each individual description into one Composite Textural-Structural Description of the meaning and essence of the experience and representing the study participants as a whole. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the implications of this study for scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners and conclude with suggestions for future research and final thoughts.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A rise in the national discourse on rural America has sparked an expanding body of literature that investigates the lives of the people living there (Manly et al., 2019; Means, 2018). Despite this increased focus on rural populations, however, a significant gap remains in educational research on college access, persistence, and outcomes among rural students. In the four subsequent sections of this chapter, I review existing scholarship on the post-secondary experiences of students from rural communities as they navigate to and through higher education. First, I assess the current condition of rural education research and the shifting definition of "rurality" among scholars. Next, I explore the pre-college factors and distinct characteristics of rural life that influence college-going. Then, I discuss issues related to persistence and completion among rural undergraduates. Finally, I examine why rural students appear to stop out of college earlier and at higher rates than their non-rural peers.

The Condition of Rural Education Research and Defining "Rural"

Students from rural communities are surprisingly underrepresented in education research and very little is known about how their K-16 educational trajectories differ from non-rural students (Barcus & Brunn, 2009; Gibbs, 1998; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Roscigno et al.,, 2006). Among the first scholars to identify this deficiency was Jonathan Sher, who highlighted the lack of relevant scholarship on rural education in *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom* (1977). Sher challenged the prevailing myths surrounding rural education and documented the strengths and weaknesses of rural schools at that time. A decade later Alan DeYoung (1987) advanced some of Sher's arguments by asserting that the field of educational research emerged with a clear urban bias, in part due to ongoing migration from agricultural communities to urban centers over the course of the twentieth century. After reviewing the

demographic, administrative, vocational, and community differences of rural students, DeYoung emphasized that, “Rural Americans must develop the political clout to be heard and reckoned with at the national level for their needs to be met” (DeYoung, 1987, p. 140).

An insufficient body of research on K-16 rural education prohibits educational practitioners and policy makers from making well-informed, data-driven decisions. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005), for example, confirmed that the condition of rural education research is poor and that an alarming lack of high-quality research creates a dilemma for rural-serving policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. The authors proposed a research agenda that attempts to encourage growth in research and generate the critical mass of scholarship necessary to understand the nuances within rural education. Sherwood (2000) pointed out that scholarship on rural education has suffered from a lack of government and institutional support in part due to a lack of appreciation for urban-rural differences and a corresponding “sense of crisis” that is often associated with the study of urban schools (p. 160). Moreover, contemporary research on rural education has traditionally focused overwhelmingly on K-12, with little attention given to rural students’ journeys through college and beyond (Arnold et al., 2005).

As noted in the previous chapter, a consistent problem in the study of rural higher education is the nonstandard definitions of “rural” used in education research (Khattri et al., 1997; Manly et al., 2019). The concept of “rurality” is inherently vague as it attempts to capture the physical, demographic, economic, social and cultural dimensions of rural spaces, which in themselves are extremely varied (Philo et al., 2003). The federal government currently uses two major definitions of geographic areas considered “rural”. First, the Census Bureau defines rural areas indirectly but classifying them as any “population, housing, and territory” outside an Urban Area, which has a population of 50,000 or more people, or an Urban Cluster, which has a

population of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. Second, the Office of Management of Budget (OMB) designates counties as Metropolitan (an urban area with a population of 50,000 or more), Micropolitan (an urban area with population between 10,000 and 50,000), or Neither. Under this definition, "rural" constitutes any county that is outside a Metropolitan or Micropolitan area (Health Resources & Service Administration, 2017).

The use of two different federal definitions of urban and rural presents many dangers for rural researchers and policymakers. Isserman (2005) argued that the Census Bureau's definition seeks to define "the urban-rural character" of a place, while the Office of Budget Management's definition measures the relationship between urban and rural places. "At stake," Isserman cautioned, "is the misunderstanding of rural conditions, the misdirection of federal programs and funds, and a breakdown of communication that confuses people" (p. 465). His assertions echo the earlier work of Whitaker (1983), who maintained that a lack of consensus on the definition of "rural in educational and social work research makes 'generalizability' across findings problematic" (p. 71). Whitaker assessed the problems that arise from these discrepancies and proposed a universal definition that would make it possible "to test with increased sophistication the extent to which rural-urban differences exist" (p. 76).

Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, and Shapely (2007) also investigated the ways that the federal government's definition of rural has influenced rural education policy and research. These authors documented six major definitions and classifications systems for rural that have been used by the federal government over time. In order of use, they are the U.S. Census Bureau classification, the Office of Budget and Management's metropolitan status codes, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's urban-rural continuum codes, the National Center of Education Statistic's metro-centric locale codes and core-based statistical areas, and the Census Bureau's

Urban centric locale codes. The authors argue that the way the federal government defines rural has broad and tangible implications for public policy, including national initiatives like No Child Left Behind (Arnold et. al, 2007).

Most scholars in educational research currently defer to the classification of rural put forth by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which draws upon the Census Bureau's rural classification. NCES divides rural areas into three sub-groups: Rural Fringe (areas less than five miles from an urbanized area and two-and-one-half miles from an urban cluster), Rural Distant (areas more than five miles from an urbanized area but less than twenty-five miles from an urban cluster), and Rural Remote (areas more than twenty-five miles from an urbanized area and more than ten miles from an urban cluster). This definition of rurality, however, has not been consistent across NCES datasets over the last few decades. Manly, Wells, and Kommers (2018) document how the shifting NCES criteria for defining rural has led to discrepancies in findings about college success among rural students. These authors argue that a universal and transparent definition of rural across education researcher would be beneficial, particularly "for those who wish to translate research into practical action for the benefit of rural students" (p. 1).

Pre-College Factors for Rural Students

The college trajectories of rural undergraduates are impacted by several pre-college factors that are distinct to rural culture. In this section, I begin by discussing rural schools and their effect on the academic preparedness of college-going rural youth. Next, I discuss the significance of family and community for this student population. Then, I outline certain aspects of rural life that impact higher education outlooks, including poverty, place attachment, and proximity to higher education institutions. Finally, I review the research on the college

aspirations of rural youth and the barriers they face as they make their way to and through higher education.

Rural Schools

Rural K-12 schools lagged behind non-rural schools in student achievement through most of the twentieth century, though research indicates that gap may be closing. Several large-scale studies show that high school students from rural schools now perform as well if not better than their urban peers (Fan & Chen, 1999; Haller, Monk, & Tien, 1993; Snyder & West, 1992). In one study designed to estimate the high school dropout rate in rural and urban areas, Jordan, Kostandini, and Mykerezi (2012) found that high school graduation rates were very similar for rural and urban youth. Findings from this study confirmed that the influence of gender, parental attributes, and socio-economic status were consistent predictors of high school graduation across rural and non-rural populations alike.

Rural youth are more likely than non-rural youth to experience a narrow school curriculum and have limited access to college and career counseling. Students in rural areas and small towns, for example, have less access to higher-level math courses than non-rural students, with approximately one-half of rural youth attending schools that only offer one to three advanced mathematics courses (Graham, 2009). Rural students also take advanced math at a significantly lower rates than urban students and their math achievement is less likely to improve during high school (Irvin et al., 2017). More than one-half of rural districts have no secondary students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, compared with 5.4 percent of suburban districts and 2.6 percent of urban districts (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).

Teacher recruitment and retention is difficult in many rural areas, largely due to small school size, low compensation, and a higher proportion of students with special developmental

and language needs (Monk, 2007). In some rural districts, teacher shortages have led to recruitment of those who are unprepared to teach (Gillon, 2017; Monk, 2007). Further, many rural school districts, which are less likely to be visited by admissions representatives from institutions that recruit nationally, have limited access to full-time, qualified college and career counselors (Lapan et al., 2003).

Family and Community Involvement

Ties to family and community play a crucial role in the college going process for many rural youth. Johnson and Elder (2005) found that their future orientation, including whether they are inclined to stay near home or move away, often reflects attachment to their parents and family. For rural high school students, decisions related to higher education and career choice are made within a cultural context where limited socio-economic and geographic mobility is a cultural norm passed through generations. Since college and career choices often require relocation for rural youth, educational and career outlooks are often guided by a "dual commitment" to education and to their rural communities (Howley, 2017; Lichter, Roscigno, & Condron, 2003).

Guidance counselors, admissions officers, and community-based college advisors consistently coach students into college-going by citing the lack of career prospects in struggling, rural economies (Tieken, 2016). This message, which is sometimes paired with resistance from families, complicates the college aspirations of many rural high school students. Based on interviews and observations from an ethnography of rural, first-generation students at a private-selective, liberal arts college in New England, Tieken (2016) found that this message constructs a painful and unnecessary dilemma for rural students: leave for college and achieve economic

success or face a lifelong economic struggle in order to remain connected to your family and community.

Rural parents also feel conflicted about having their children leave home for college. Corbett (2009) conducted a mixed methods analysis that examined the intersection of college decision-making for rural youth and larger socio-economic struggles in their communities. The study found that while many parents recognize the new educational requirements needed in a global economy, they also feel conflicted about the meaning of college-going for the future of their family and community. Petrin, Schafft, and Meece (2014) confirmed the contradictory feelings of rural families in college decision-making using data from a national multi-method study. Results showed that while rural educators and adult community members often encourage rural youth outmigration, their intent is to ensure, "that rural youth have the opportunity to gain skills, education, training and resources outside the community that they might ultimately bring back with them" (Petrin et al., 2014 p. 323). These incongruous messages from parents, educators, and community members heighten the dilemma rural students face when they consider their college options.

Ley, Nelson, and Beltyukova (1996) also explored the relationship between the college aspirations of rural youth and expectations held by their parents and teachers. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics and the High School and Beyond longitudinal survey, the authors found that students' aspirations to lead a successful and fulfilling adulthood are shared by their parents and teachers. Yet, students and parents are uncertain about how a college degree will lead to adult success within or apart from their rural community. Rural teachers, however, often hold different views than parents on the value of remaining in a rural community and are more likely to recognize the necessity of outward migration (Ley et al.,

1996). Ultimately, students, parents, and teachers all valued the prospect of a college degree over a commitment to their rural community.

The involvement of parents, teachers, and community members in the college-going process provides rural high school students with access to social capital during the college transition and beyond. In a qualitative study with thirty college graduates from one rural state, Nelson (2016) examined how successful rural students access and engage with various forms of social capital during the college search and application process. The study showed that while family and community social capital provided rural high students with generalized support, school social capital through peers, teachers, guidance counselors, and academic tracking had a beneficial impact on the college search and application process. These results are consistent with other quantitative studies on the effects of school social capital on rural students' educational achievement, student aspirations, postsecondary enrollment, and degree attainment (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins 2012).

Social capital from other organizations within rural communities can supplement the efforts of small, rural school districts. In one analysis of low-income students from six small rural school districts in Virginia, Alleman and Holly (2014) found that community-school partnerships often support and promote college aspirations among rural students. These community groups can aid rural high school students by, "reinforcing educational goals and programs, building students' self-efficacy and vocational imagination through connections to cultural, historical, natural, and other types of area resources, and by providing a safety net for students in need of additional assistance or encouragement (p. 9)." The authors concluded that community involvement in education benefits not only the students, but also strengthens and advances the interests of the rural community as a whole.

Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless (2009) also suggested that family and community social capital are key factors in the educational achievement and college search of rural high school students. Using survey data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey, the authors found that support from family and community may indirectly influence high school students' educational performance and help rural students find their path to college and beyond (Israel et. al., 2009). The study also reaffirmed what many contemporary studies have found for rural and non-rural students alike: parents' socioeconomic status is critical in shaping the educational performance of their children.

Rural Realities

Poverty remains a significant challenge for rural youth considering college. While data from the 2010 Census suggests that America's rural "pockets" of poverty are beginning to shrink, concentrated poverty among rural youth remains exceptionally high (Lichter & Johnson, 2007). This is especially true for rural minority children, 80 percent of whom live in high-poverty counties and whose poverty rates are well-above the national and non-metro averages. Low-income, rural youth may be more economically disadvantaged than ever before, especially if measured by their lack of access to the higher education opportunities compared with non-rural youth (O'Hare & Johnson, 2004). Khattri, Riley, and Kane (1997) found that specific studies on poor, rural students, communities, and schools are insufficient and lacking in focus. They argued that comparisons are needed between rural poor and the rural population generally, and well as between rural and urban youth, to determine whether poverty is the top factor in jeopardizing student educational achievement for rural youth.

As pathways for upwards mobility have declined in many rural places, higher education remains one of the few socio-economic ladders. The limited range of college and career

opportunities in rural areas means that college-going rural adolescents are more likely than their non-rural counterparts to pursue paths that require moving away from their home communities to which they are strongly attached (Donaldson, 1986; Hektner, 1995). As a result, rural youth may feel conflicted and angry about their educational and occupational futures. Rural males tend to feel more pressure than rural females to remain rural and find an occupation that could support a family, in part because of the traditional, collectivist values of rural culture (Hektner, 1995). This dynamic may drive rural male and female students away from pursuing college altogether.

Perhaps the most formidable hurdle in the post-secondary aspirations of rural youth is their remote geographic location. In *Education Deserts: The Continued Significance of "Place" in the Twenty-First Century,* Hillman (2016) found that 57 percent of incoming freshmen who attend public four-year colleges enroll within 50 miles from their permanent home. For rural youth, the likeliness of enrolling in college diminishes as the distance from higher education institutions increases (Hillman, 2016). He argued that higher education and policy leaders must prioritize the importance of place and understand how geography shapes the college outlook. Several studies have confirmed that rural youth, more than their non-rural peers, tend to stay closer to home or limit their college choices by geography (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Ali & Saunders, 2008). This is particularly true for rural students of color, who are more likely stay close to home due to cultural norms and family responsibilities (Hurtado et al., 1997).

College attendance is a primary driver behind the outward migration of young people, or "brain drain," from rural counties. Gibbs (1998) found that 75 percent of college students in rural areas left the county to go to college, and only a third returned home by age 25. Of the 25 percent who stayed in their home county for college, only 16 percent remained by age 25. Overall, rural counties retained only 40 percent of their native college graduates, and the losses were not fully

recovered by an incoming of non-rural, college educated young people (Gibbs, 1998). Mills and Hazarika (2001) argue that the migration of rural youth to metropolitan areas is in part due to better returns on higher education in urbanized centers. Since employment opportunities for college-educated young people are often skill-specific, rural youth with college degrees have a clear financial incentive to remain in or relocate to metropolitan centers after graduation.

Place Attachment

Place attachment – sometimes called topophilia, place identity, insidedness, sense of rootedness, or environmental embeddedness – is a key factor in the identity development of rural adolescents (Altman & Low, 1992). For some, the connection to their rural home community is an important cultural norm passed through the generations. For others, this sentiment is tied to a legacy of agriculture and dependence upon the land for sustenance and livelihood. Limited mobility from one generation to another may also play a role, given that many families in rural areas can trace their ancestry in the region to the original settlers (Barcus & Brunn, 2009).

In *Place Attachment: A Conceptual Inquiry,* Altman and Low (1992) comment on the four processes associated with an individual's formation of place attachment: biological, environmental, psychological, and sociocultural. Biological processes relate to "evolutionary and physiological adaptions of the human species" experienced by a group of people who are connected to a geographical place. Environmental processes are those people-place interactions and factors that become embedded in a community's culture. Psychological processes are an individual's experiences in places during their childhood, adolescence, and adult lives, and those moments that are especially significant and tied to place. Finally, sociocultural processes are the ways in which social norms and ideologies influence attachment to place.

Rural adolescents experience each of these processes, to varying degrees, as they explore their identity in relation to their rural community. Several psychological factors, such as gender norms, religious traditions, and political ideologies, are particularly poignant for this group and play a key role in their understanding of self. Further, each of these factors are interrelated and occur simultaneously to strengthen a rural adolescent's connection to their home (Altman et al., 1992). Thus, the interaction of these processes ultimately facilitates the influence of place attachment on a rural adolescents' decision whether to leave home for college (Barcus & Brunn, 2009).

The concept of "rootedness" also frames the developmental influence of place attachment among college-going rural youth. Hummon (1992) discusses how this type of place attachment can manifest in two ways: everyday rootedness and ideological rootedness. In everyday rootedness, connection to place is an embedded, sometimes subconscious perspective that informs how an individual views themselves within their community and the world. Ideological rootedness is more complex, and represents a self-conscious identification with a specific place or community (Hummon, 1992). For rural high school students, rootedness may influence decisions related to educational aspirations, career prospects, family planning, or the decision to stay within or move away from the community.

College Aspirations and Barriers

Rural students generally have lower college aspirations than their urban counterparts and are more likely to "undermatch," or choose a school beneath their abilities (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Many high-achieving students from rural high schools undermatch simply because they live more than 50 miles from a college that matches their academic abilities (Ovink et al., 2018). Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 and the Education

Longitudinal Study of 2002, Smith, Pender, and Howell (2013) discovered that students from rural areas are more likely to undermatch than students from suburban and urban areas. These authors speculated that academic undermatch is more common among rural students because they have fewer colleges nearby and may lack information on college options.

Several factors that influence the college ambitions of rural youth are distinct to rural culture. Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin, and Weiss (2013) provided a contemporary profile on how rural students approach the transition to college by assessing the influence of family, individual, and school background. The authors found that educational aspirations for rural students vary significantly based on gender, race, family background, and grade level. Further, more than half of the sample aspired to occupations that required education and training levels beyond their reported educational aspirations. The misalignment, the study found, was related to family income, students' perception of their parents' educational expectations, and students' perception of local job opportunities after graduation (Meece et al., 2013).

Very few studies examine the differences in educational and career aspirations of rural students by race and ethnicity. Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, and Umbach (2016) conducted a qualitative case study that explored the college choice process of twenty-six rural, African American high school students. Consistent with the assertions of Meece and colleagues (2013), Means and colleagues found that the college and career aspirations of rural, African American students were rooted in the context of their race and ethnicity, rural community, and socioeconomic status. While the students in the sample had emotional support from their family, community, and schools, they also experienced a tension between staying and leaving, reported not having the "know how" to apply for college, and faced financial barriers. More research is

required on the intersection of rurality and race for African American students, as well as Latinx and Native American student populations (Means et al., 2016).

Many studies that examine barriers to post-secondary education fail to consider those facing rural youth specifically (Ali et al., 2005; Kenny et al., 2003; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). Irvin, Byun, Meece, and Farmer (2012) were among the first to explore the perceived educational barriers facing rural high school youth. In a quantitative study using a national sample of over 7,000 rural high school students, these authors found that family context – including parents' educational attainment – played an outsized role in predicting perceived post-secondary barriers. The study also found that rural African American and Latinx students perceived more educational barriers than rural white students.

College Going for Rural Students

As discussed in the previous chapter, the college experiences of rural undergraduates are understudied and require more attention from scholars and policymakers. In this section, I begin by reviewing the college choice and enrollment patterns of rural undergraduates. Next, I discuss the influence of rural identity on college-going and the widespread experience of culture shock upon arrival in a new campus environment. Finally, I discuss college completion and degree-attainment rates among rural undergraduates, as well as the significant disparity that remains between rural and non-rural student populations.

College Choice

Rural high school graduates are the least likely of other geographic group to enroll in college, according to the National Student Clearinghouse (2016). While few studies have examined institutional choice among rural youth, data from federal agencies and national datasets provide some insight into their college-going patterns. The National Longitudinal

Survey of Youth shows that 53 percent of rural undergraduates attend colleges in a rural area, and over half of rural undergraduates attend one of the 434 degree-granting institutions located within a census-defined rural territory (NCES, 2017). College students from rural counties are more likely to attend public, less-selective institutions and less likely to choose a four-year, private, or highly selective institution (Gibbs, 1998; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018). Since rural students are more likely to be first-generation and come from a low-income household compared to their non-rural counterparts, they are often less able to afford the higher tuition that private or out-of-state institutions charge (Byun et al., 2015).

Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine (1995) used data from the High School and Beyond Study (1980) to test which factors are responsible for the rural-nonrural disparity in college enrollment. Results showed that student demographic characteristics, family background and social capital, and community social capital accounted for some of the differences between rural and non-rural students in college enrollment. For rural adolescents, family income and number of siblings were not predictive of college enrollment and completion, whereas both were predictive for students from metropolitan communities (Smith et al., 1995). While church attendance predicted college enrollment across many different communities, the relationship was stronger among rural students. This study, now dated, fails to provide a complete portrait of educational attainment among rural youth because it focuses on enrollment figures rather than degree completion.

More recently, Pierson and Hanson (2015) found that rural students in Oregon were less likely than their non-rural counterparts to enroll in postsecondary education and to continue into the second year of college. Using data from the Oregon Department of Education and the National Student Clearinghouse, the authors found that the college enrollment rate was 55 percent among rural students, compared with 63 percent among non-rural students. This gap

persisted across all achievement levels, including students with high standardized test scores in reading and math. Rural black and Asian students, in particular, were less likely than their non-rural counterparts to enroll in postsecondary education, while rural Latino students were more likely than their non-rural peers to enroll in college. Further, Pierson and Hanson found that rural students were less likely to persist to the second year regardless institutional type, and that both rural and nonrural students were likely to persist if they received financial aid.

While rural students are more likely than their metro counterparts to attend college full-time, they are less likely than their metropolitan peers to enroll continuously in a college. More than half of rural youth attend two-year institutions during their college career, and about one quarter enroll in a two-year college before transferring to a four-year college (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017). Burke, Davis, and Stephan (2015) examined rural and non-rural differences in college enrollment patterns among public high school graduates in Indiana who enrolled in the state's public colleges. The authors found that rural undergraduates enrolled more frequently than non-rural graduates in two-year colleges and less frequently in the state's very selective colleges. Despite having similar academic preparation and qualifications, rural high school graduates were more likely to enroll in two-year colleges and colleges that were "undermatched with their level of presumptive eligibility" (Burke et al., 2015). In addition, the greater the distance rural graduates' high schools were from colleges, the more likely they were to enroll in a two-year college or to undermatch.

Rural Identity and Culture Shock

Some scholars have asserted that educational institutions in the United States have actively contributed to the demise of rural communities by failing to acknowledge the acute tension between rural cultural values and a student's new environment at college (Dees, 2006;

Howley, 2017). Once on campus, many rural undergraduates are likely to experience confusion, frustration, and acculturative stress as they contend with new cultural ideas, particularly those around race, gender, and sexuality. College educators and administrators are often ill-equipped to address and respond to the complexity of rural students' cultural conceptions and can negatively reinforce perceptions that devalue or oversimplify the rural experiences (Dees, 2006).

Rural undergraduates often find that they are different from their metropolitan peers in visible ways. Dunstan and Jaeger (2016) examined the role of language in the college student experience of those from rural Appalachia. Through semi-structured interviews with 26 students, they found that students tend to use language as an auditory cue for identifying others with whom they initially want to engage. The authors also discovered that students whose speech includes stigmatized features feel that they are subject to stereotyping by others on campus. One student from rural southern Appalachia remarked, "They assume by the way you talk that you grew up on a farm and that you know everything about NASCAR, you know?" (p. 47).

Schultz (2004) documented the surprise many rural undergraduates experience during their first semester on campus. In this phenomenological study, participants in the study were often unaware of the need to build new relationships with peers, faculty, or staff, and found it difficult to understand and cope with an environment that was starkly different from their home community. Yet, most participants were pleased with the "culture of learning" and few struggled with the rigor of the academic experience. Similarly, several small-scale, qualitative studies have examined factors that influence the decision-making of rural students enrolled in community colleges. Hlinka, Mobelini, and Giltner (2015), similarly, found that rural students struggle with the tensions between needing support and self-reliance, family encouragement and family responsibilities, and the desire to stay and the desire to leave.

Postsecondary Success and Degree Attainment

In the early years of college, students from rural communities often perform as well and sometimes outperform their non-rural peers academically (Meece et al., 2013). Ames, Wintre, Pancer, Mark, and Pratt (2014) used hierarchical linear modeling to discover that rural students report better social and academic adjustment to college than students from urban locations. While urban students eventually catch-up to rural students socially and academically, this study suggests that rural students may initially adjust as well and perhaps better than their non-rural peers. One possible explanation, as mentioned earlier, is that rural youth from low-income families may see a college degree as a path toward upward mobility and a ticket out of a struggling rural community (Elder & Conger, 2000; Gibbs, Kusmin, & Cromartie, 2005; Lichter & McLaughlin, 1995). A rural upbringing may also produce important social benefits for rural students when they enter college (Howley, 2006). The sense of identity, commitment, and social connection that originates from a rural background distinguishes rural youth from their non-rural peers (Elder & Conger, 2000; Morgan, 2006).

In one widely-cited study, Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) explored the factors that contribute to the rural-nonrural disparity in educational attainment. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and prior research on rural-nonrural differences, the authors examined the characteristics of rural communities that constrain and support youth's college enrollment and degree completion. They found rural students may be more advantaged in community social resources, such as church and parental networks, when compared with non-rural students. This finding discredits the "rural disadvantaged" argument since these resources were associated with "a significant increase in the likelihood of bachelor's degree attainment" (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012, p. 412).

A key study by Wells, Manly, Kommers, and Kimball (2019) provides the clearest and most current depiction of college completion and degree attainment among students from rural areas. These authors used nationally representative data from the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS: 2002-12) to examine differences between rural and non-rural students in higher education trajectories, influences, and outcomes. Following the same statistical approach used by Byun, Meece, & Irvin (2012), Wells et al. found that the rural-nonrural gaps in enrollment and degree attainment narrowed from the 1990s into the 2000s. Rural students, however, still experienced lower average rates of degree completion. Among rural high school seniors in 2004, only 34 percent had earned a bachelor's degree by 2012, compared with 41 percent of suburban students and 38 percent among urban students.

Few other studies have used longitudinal data to test which factors are responsible for the disparity in college attainment and completion between rural and non-rural undergraduates. Bryan and Simmons (2009) used ecological systems theory to assess the barriers to academic success and completion for first-generation students in rural Appalachian Kentucky. Their qualitative research study of ten first-in-family university students produced seven themes around participants' experiences in a college setting. Of those themes, all ten participants identified a very strong tie with their families and communities. Some students described their family and community connection as the core of their identity and reported speaking with a family member at least once a day. Several participants acknowledged the struggle of being an active member of the college community while maintaining a connection to their families and home communities. Of the remaining six themes – separate identities, knowledge of college procedures, pressure to succeed, returning home, the pervasiveness of poverty, and the

importance of early intervention programming – several were related to the participants' connection to family and home.

College Retention And Rural Students

As discussed in the previous chapter, few studies have directly examined the rate of and reasons for higher education stop-out among rural undergraduates. Many scholars, however, have examined the key influences of higher education stop-out among college students in the United States more generally. Table 1 lists key studies that identified significant predictors of college stop-out among at American colleges and universities.

Table 1: Key Studies on Significant Predictors of College Stop-Out

Predictor of College Stop-out	*Key Studies*
Gender	Ma & Cragg, 2013; Nora, Cabrera, Serra Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983; Stage & Hossler, 1989; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2012
Minoritized Status	Carter, 2006; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983
Socio-economic Status	Stage & Hossler, 1989; Titus, 2006; Wilson, 2016
Parents' Educational Attainment	Ishitani, 2006; Lehmann, 2007; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983
Financial Aid	Chen & Hossler, 2017; Herzog, 2018; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002
Employment and Financial Stress	Joo, Durband, & Grable, 2008; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996

In summary, these studies found that women, students of color, low-income students, and first-in-family students were more likely to withdraw from college before completing a degree. The effect of financial aid, loans, and employment on college persistence, however, is less clear. While a complete review of the deep body of literature on college retention among all college students in the United States is beyond the scope of this dissertation study, two thorough

literature reviews by Adam Burke (2019) and Alicia Harvey-Smith (2002) provide ample coverage of this topic.

Within the literature on college student retention, the theories of Vince Tinto (1975, 1987, 1987, 1988) loom large. Tinto's Student Integration Model of Attrition (1975) outlined how college dropout should be viewed as a longitudinal process consisting of individual-institutional interactions through which a person continues to modify their goals and commitments in ways that lead to persistence or departure. In light of an individual's background, characteristics, and experiences, success in college most directly relates to the depth and quality of interaction between a students and the campus structures. While Tinto's theories have been challenged and critiqued in recent decades (McCubbin, 2003; Metzner & Bean, 1987, Museus, 2014), his view that stopping out of higher education is a longitudinal process is important for understanding the experiences of the rural undergraduates in this study.

Of the cohort of students in the United States who began their postsecondary studies in the fall of 2012, just 58.3 percent of students completed a degree (Shapiro et al., 2018). Although this is a 1.5 percent increase from the fall 2011 cohort, significant demographic gaps remain, with the lowest non-completion rates among black (41 percent) and Hispanic (49.5 percent) undergraduates. Overall, only 46.9 percent of students who complete any college degree finish at the institution where they started (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Among rural undergraduate, the rates of college stop-out can only be approximated through a secondary analysis of rural populations within nationally representative datasets, including those provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Student Clearinghouse.

One important study by Erin Dunlop Velez (2014) reinforces the importance of additional research on college stop-out among rural undergraduates. Using nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youths 1997 (NLSY97), Valez compares rural and non-rural students by estimating predicted probabilities of degree completion if the at-risk student had made different initial college enrollment choices. Overall, she found that students who were not enrolled in higher education have a low predicted probability of completing a college degree had they enrolled. Further, among students who stop out of four-year colleges, most had a low predicted probability of bachelor's degree completion had they made different enrollment choices. This finding suggests that many students enrolled in four-year colleges do not have the academic preparation to successfully complete a degree at the school they choose.

The one surprising exception across both of these findings were rural students. Among minority, low-income, and first-generation stop-outs, for example, less than a quarter had a greater than 50 percent predicted probability of bachelor degree completion. For rural dropouts from four-year institutions, however, 35 percent had over a 75 percent predicted probability of degree completion had they made different enrollment decisions, and less than 15 percent had less than a 25 percent predicted probability of degree completion. Further, rural students who did not begin college had a relatively high predicted probability of degree completion. As Velez (2014) also points out, this supports Hoxby and Avery's (2012) assertation that rural students are more likely to undermatch to a higher education institution or under-predict their chances of success in college.

Summary

There is a great deal more to learn about the higher education pathways of students from rural communities. Existing research on this topic is limited mostly to rural students' transition

from high school to college and their general enrollment patterns. Previous scholarship on the college experience of rural undergraduates is narrowly focused on specific rural populations, lacks generalizability, and often offers mixed or inconclusive findings. More research is also needed on the intersection of rurality and race/ethnicity in college-going and degree attainment, particularly among rural black, Latinx, and Native American student populations. College completion and degree attainment among rural students is woefully understudied, resulting in part from varying definitions of rural at the federal level.

Scholars must continue to explore the experiences, challenges, strengths, and pathways of rural students as they navigate to and through higher education. Future research must look beyond broad trends related to access and persistence, and closely examine what these students experience at college. This dissertation study helps address this gap by exploring the specific and complicated phenomenon of rural undergraduates who drop-out of college. In this way, findings will expand the conversation about this at-risk student group and help address the persistent disparities in college success between rural and non-rural undergraduates.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Many phenomenological studies do not clearly identify the link between the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology and the methodological approach (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The purpose of this brief chapter, therefore, is to describe the theoretical grounding of this dissertation study. I begin by presenting two conceptual frameworks that are frequently and rightfully used to understand the experiences of rural undergraduates. First, I present Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the contextual influence of culture, peers, family, and community on an individual's development, behavior, and outcomes. Second, I present Tara Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model, which conceptualizes six different forms of cultural capital that individuals may carry with them on their journey through higher education.

Then, I discuss the fundamentals of transcendental phenomenology, which inform every aspect of this dissertation's methodological approach. In particular, I review the philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and those who followed in his footsteps. Husserl's original and pioneering ideas – including those about intentionality, epoche, transcendental and eidetic reduction, synthesis, and essences – focus this inquiry on the meaning and structures of consciousness that define the phenomenon of stop-out among rural undergraduates. In this way, I investigate this phenomenon for how it is experienced, rather than through the lens of preconceptions and presuppositions (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The study of college students from rural areas has, in general, been approached from a positivist viewpoint. Empirical scholarship on this topic is often grounded in an assumption of objective truth as well as a belief that the experiences of rural students can be verified, explained, and improved through scientific observation. The purpose of this chapter is not to critique this

epistemological approach, as evidenced by the inclusion of the theories of Bronfenbrenner and Yosso.

Yet, the essence of dropping out of college as a rural student cannot be achieved through a positivist viewpoint alone. While this approach can provide insight into the behaviors and outcomes *related to* the experience of a rural student, it cannot adequately explain the experience of *being* a rural college student. For this reason, I introduce the theories of Bronfenbrenner and Yosso to acknowledge the aspects of this experience that their frameworks can explain. Then, I introduce the concepts of transcendental phenomenology to acknowledge the aspects of this experience that they cannot.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2004) ecological systems theory emphasizes the contextual influence of culture, peers, family, and community on youth development, behavior, and outcomes. His conceptual framework accounts for the full picture of an individual's unique characteristics, background, and environmental context, as well as the interactions between all levels of that person's environment. Bronfenbrenner's theory has previously been applied to consider the impact of family involvement on post-secondary success for rural students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009), the alignment of rural youth's future educational and vocational aspirations (Meece et al., 2013a) and the impact of individual, family, and school on college enrollment among rural adolescents (Demi et al., 2010).

Bronfenbrenner's (2004) four levels of influence are organized in concentric circles around a person's individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, social class, race and developmentally instigative characteristics) at the core. First, the *microsystem* consists of an individual's family, peers, and mentors. Second, the *mesosystem* accounts for the interaction

between immediate people, places, and circumstances. Next, the *exosystem* accounts for key contextual influences, such as their parents' jobs, the economy and labor force, geography and population density, and the local higher education market. Finally, the *macrosystem* consists of larger societal forces, including laws, cultural attitudes, economic trends, and technology developments. Figure 1 illustrates Bronfenbrenner's human ecology model populated to reflect a sample environment of a rural undergraduate.

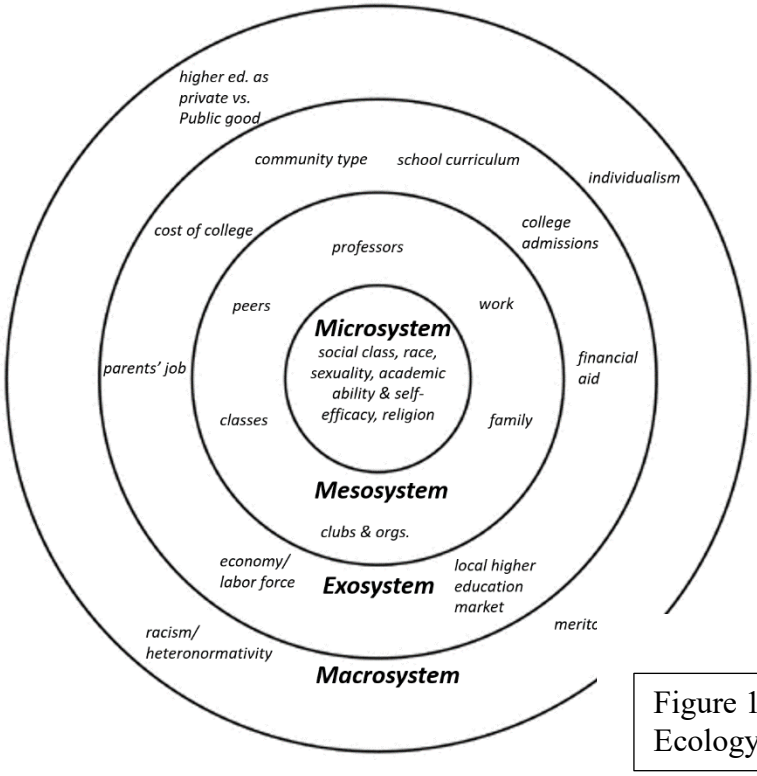

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecology Model (2004)

This theoretical lens is essential for higher education researchers, leaders, and policymakers who wish to understand the college-going process of rural students. Despite the similarities and trends among students from rural communities, each individual is susceptible to different threats and influences as they transition to and through college. To understand higher education inequality among rural youth, scholars must not only examine individual characteristics, such as race, age, gender, and academic ability, but also the influence of and

interaction between family, school, and community. In this way, the framework emphasizes how individuals are both *affected by* and *act upon* their environments.

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model

While originally conceived for communities of color, Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) is also fitting for rural undergraduates, given the many similarities between these two groups as they navigate the campus life. One recent study, for example, used Yosso's theory to examine how students utilized resources and knowledge from their rural upbringing to navigate the physical, social, and intellectual transition between their hometown and new college community (Stone, 2017).

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model conceptualizes six different forms of cultural capital that students may carry with them on their journey through higher education. First, *aspirational capital* is an individual's ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of barriers and adversity. Second, *linguistic capital* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language or dialect. Third, *familial capital* refers to the cultural knowledge from family that conveys a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition.

Fourth, *social capital* includes networks of people and community resources, including social contacts that help individuals navigate society's institutions. Fifth, *navigational capital* refers to the skills needed to maneuver through social institutions, especially those that were not created with disadvantaged or underserved populations in mind. Finally, *resistant capital* refers to the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. Each form of cultural capital, which themselves are not mutually exclusive and can develop over time, influences the higher education experiences of rural students and determines whether they

are likely to succeed in college.

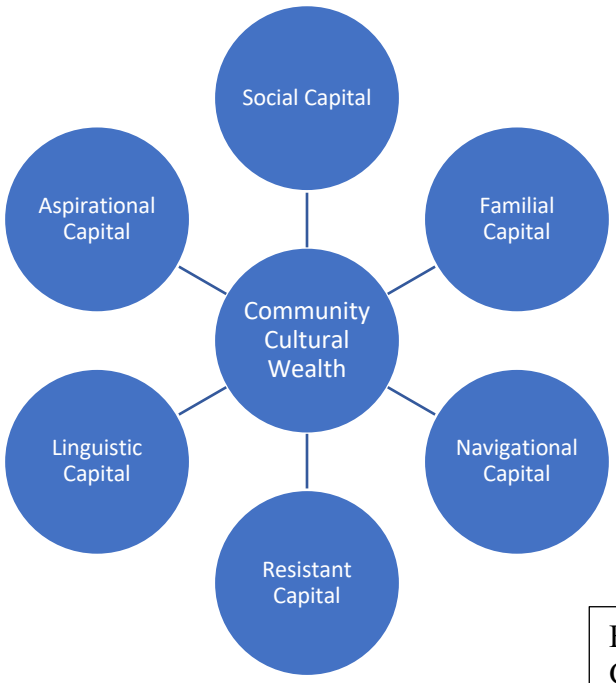

Figure 2: Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005)

The Community Cultural Wealth Model is useful theoretical grounding for the study of rural undergraduates for several reasons. First, it explains how the unique experience of growing up in a rural place can promote, rather than hinder, academic and social success in college. Rather than focusing on what rural students lack, this model articulates the distinct strengths and resources these underrepresented students bring with them to the campus environment. Similarly, this asset-based perspective is applied not only to the rural student but to their rural home community as well. The types of cultural capital from family and home community, for example, are viewed as instrumental in helping a rural undergraduate navigate a campus environment that might be different from their home. This outlook is valuable for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike as they seek to understand the complex needs of rural undergraduates.

Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology

Moving beyond the theories of Bronfenbrenner and Yosso, this dissertation's methodological approach is most directly grounded in the fundamentals of transcendental phenomenology, a philosophical tradition pioneered by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) more than a century ago. From the time of its inception, this broad movement has inspired, challenged, and vexed scholars across a vast number of intellectual contexts and disciplines. Phenomenology, derived from the Greek words *phainómenon* ("that which appears") and *logos* ("study"), explores the structures of consciousness and the meaning of one's experience in relation to a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). While approaches to phenomenology have varied widely through the last 100 years, the practice is bound together by a common focus on investigating a phenomenon for how it is experienced, rather than through the lens of theories, preconceptions, and presuppositions. As qualitative research, phenomenology remains as Husserl imagined it: an approach that "lays bare the sources from which the basic concepts and ideal law of pure logic 'flow,' and back to which they must be traced" (Husserl, 1970, p. 249).

A Brief Historical Background

Phenomenology as a philosophical tradition began with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) in the 1890s. Born in Austria and trained as a mathematician, Husserl became interested in philosophy late in his career and published several major works that became the foundation for phenomenology as a methodological approach. Widely regarded as the founder of phenomenology, Husserl inspired many other notable philosophers, including Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). While all of these great thinkers believed that they were contributing to the development of a "budding

new science," the theoretical origins of Phenomenology can be traced to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Kant's (1781) doctrine is grounded in the belief that meaning is found in the relationship between subject and object. He argued that meaning is derived in two ways. First, meaning is derived in the way that one is affected by how an object presents itself in time and space. All of the unstructured information that constitutes the object – its shape, color, texture, movement – forms *intuitions* in the mind that become the basis of consciousness. Second, the mind creates meaning in the way it organizes those intuitions using already developed *concepts*. Thus, the mind actively structures intuitions using existing concepts in order to reach understanding of an object. For example, the mind first intuits a table as a shape with a flat surface held parallel to the ground with four perpendicular legs. Cognition of the object as a table occurs when the mind applies the concept of how, when, and why it is used. In Kant's words:

> Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind…The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the sense are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise. (Kant, 1781, A51)

Transcendental deduction, which accounts for how one's subjective conditions can influence objective experience, is perhaps Kant's (1781) most significant contribution to the development of phenomenology. Embedded in this idea is the process of *synthesis,* which requires the mind to unify intuition and concepts through three tasks: apprehension, reproduction, and recognition. This active *threefold synthesis* facilitates the process of cognition. In essence, Kant's transcendental deduction attempts to prove that an individual's existing concepts and conditions are objectively valid in one's interpretation of the world. Thus, the

mind's *sensibility* and basic background knowledge of an object informs its ability to intuit, understand, and find meaning in an experience.

Three additional concepts from Kant's (1781) work directly influence the development of phenomenology and the thinking of its founders. First is the idea of *constitution*, and the insight that the subjective structures formed by the mind constitute the experience of an object. In this way, the role of the philosopher is to describe these structures and how they are affected by one's mental, physical, and cultural positionality. Second, is *the temporal nature of synthesis*, and the idea that consciousness exists with reference to the past, present, and future. While the early phenomenologists interpret the temporal nature of cognitive synthesis in different ways, the relationship between time and cognition is a recurring theme across all their work. Finally is the Kantian theme of *subject-object identity,* and the principle that the subject only exists in the relation to the object it perceives. As Käufer and Chemero (2015) summarize, "the basic idea is that any perceived limitation on our ability to know things as they are in themselves is due to an incomplete understanding of ourselves as knowing subjects" (p. 17).

Husserl's (1931) transcendental phenomenology is firmly rooted in Kant's philosophy because it accounts for the subjective qualities of experience. In defining his approach to phenomenology, Husserl stressed the importance of analyzing the structural features of an experience, as well as the need to adopt a perspective that enables the philosopher to go "back to the things themselves" (Husserl, 2001, p. 168). Husserl looked beyond the mere *facts* of a phenomenon and focused instead on discovering the *essence* of an experience, claiming, "Essence provides on the one side a knowledge of the essential nature of the Real, on the other, in respect of the domain left over, knowledge of the essential nature of the non-real" (Husserl, 1931, p. 45).

Husserl first used the name "phenomenology" in the 1890s to describe this philosophical approach, and outlined specific methodological steps in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913). While he had hoped that this method would be carefully replicated across many different areas of inquiry, Husserl's followers eventually deviated significantly from their mentor's original approach. Thus, transcendental phenomenology evolved into a broader movement that strayed from Husserl's initial methodology while still incorporating his basic concepts of intentionality, epoche, transcendental and eidetic reduction, synthesis, and essences. These concepts will be described in depth on the pages that follow.

Husserl continued to refine his approach in later writings and introduced several new concepts, including those related to the intertwinement between self, others, and the world. Well before his retirement in 1928 and death in 1938, however, Husserl's methodology was challenged and revised by his followers. After Husserl, the mantle of phenomenology was passed to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, each of whom introduced new ideas and considerations that in turn inspired adaptions from others. Yet, the degree to which phenomenology continued to draw upon Husserl's ideas through the 20th century to present day speaks to the durability and significance of his original concepts: intentionality, epoche, transcendental and eidetic reduction, synthesis, and essences. When considering how phenomenological methods have continued to evolve after Husserl, David Cerbone (2012) wrote, "to the extent that later phenomenologists *do* articulate any kind of systematic methods, they exhibit a considerable debt to Husserl's original ones: the ideals behind – if not the precise practice of – the phenomenological reduction continue to loom large" (p.277).

Key Concepts

Perhaps the most enduring concept of Husserl's (1931) phenomenological approach is that of *Intentionality.* This term refers to the direction of one's consciousness, or in other words, the process in which consciousness becomes focused on an object. An intentional object can be real, such the sight of a tree, or something that is remembered or felt, such as the memory of a tree or fondness for a tree. Whether the intentional object is *perceptual* – such as the experience of a thunderstorm – or if it is *pictorial* – such as the memory of what a thunderstorm was like – the intentionality of consciousness is complex and multi-layered. Yet, there are clear differences between them. Husserl's approach to phenomenology, and the various methodologies that emerged from it, are concerned with the distinct structures that exist within intentionality of consciousness.

Two essential but complex concepts that are critical to Husserlian phenomenology are that of *noema* and *noesis.* In *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Husserl (1913) introduces these terms as processes that relate to meaning making. Noesis refers to the act of thinking, perceiving, and remembering and the way the mind recognizes meaning in consciousness. Noema refers to the content or object of a thought, judgement, or perception. Moustakas (1994) summarizes noema as the *what* that is experienced, where noesis represents the *way* in which the what is experienced. While Husserl's precise meaning of these two terms continues to stir controversy among phenomenologists, in all interpretations they are always correlated with one another and related to the direction and act of consciousness through Intentionality.

Husserl's phenomenological method can be summarized through two main steps, called *reductions*, that lead to the discovery of the essential content of an experience. The first,

transcendental reduction, requires the mind to suspend ordinary beliefs about objects and experiences that exist in consciousness. This process, which Husserl calls *bracketing* or *epoche* (Greek for "abstention"), is meant to shift attention from meaning associated with the objects of consciousness to the experience of those objects (Cerbone, 2010). In practical terms, one must suspend all assumptions, preconceived ideas, prejudices, and existing theories, and freshly approach the object of consciousness with an open mind. As Zahavi (2019) remarks, "We should focus on the things as they are encountered in experience, not on how we thought they were, and then base our definitions on careful descriptions" (p. 33).

Through a second step, *eidetic reduction* or *eidetic variation,* attention shifts to the essential features of a phenomenon and the basic components that constitute an object of consciousness. The purpose of this technique is to draw out the "essences" of an object by examining which qualities can change and which must stay the same (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Eidetic reduction is often illustrated using René Descartes' ball of wax example, wherein Descartes considers the fundamental properties of a ball of wax: its round and hard form, its distinct and flowery smell, its sweet taste. When the ball of wax is moved closer to fire, however, all of those properties change. Yet, Descartes notes, "the same wax remains" (Descartes, 1912). Thus, the essence of the wax is not what Descartes had originally perceived, but instead are the things that remain unchanged: its molecular structure, mass, and existence in space.

Eidetic reduction attempts to uncover meaning by approaching a phenomenon from many different perspectives, angles, and positions. The process seeks to describe the pure essence of an experience by understanding its structure and all of the fundamental conditions and factors that make an conscious object "what it is" (Moustakas, 1994). For Husserl, the process of removing all properties of an object that are peripheral to its essence is highly imaginative. It requires

imagining that the object is somehow different than it appears to understand the ways that object cannot change in order for it to remain the same object. Discerning the essences of an object through eidetic reduction is never exact or finished, and can change continuously as new evidence and approaches are introduced (Zahavi, 2019).

Summary

This brief chapter discussed the theoretical frameworks that ground this dissertation study. I introduced Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model as two examples of positivist approaches that can help inform the study of college student from rural communities. Then, I looked beyond positivism to transcendental phenomenology, which emphasizes the subjectivity of the researcher and participant. I reviewed the historical development of the phenomenological tradition and the pioneering contributions of Edmund Husserl. Finally, I examined Husserl's key concepts of intentionality, epoche, transcendental and eidetic reduction, synthesis, and essences.

In designing this dissertation study, I was forced to contend with the reality that there is little consensus among scholars on the pure practice of phenomenology and how its fundamentals should translate into a social science research methodology. I chose to use only the original concepts of Husserl's phenomenology in this dissertation study for two reasons. First, I felt that Husserl's key concepts are clearer than the subsequent theories of his followers, and also most conducive to social science research. As Barber (2013) noted, Husserl, "examined how one encounters another person fundamentally through empathy, a unique act sharing similarities with the perception, memory, and phantasy" (p. 637). Second, Husserl's concepts fit best with the study population of rural undergraduates, who are widely misunderstood due to a set of myths and misconceptions perpetuated by the media, scholars, and other higher education stakeholders.

Husserl's processes of Epoche and Eidetic Reduction, in particular, can correct preconceived notions about this population and ensure that participants' experiences are understood in their essential nature. In the following chapter, I translate these concepts into a contemporary research method designed to understand the phenomenon of rural undergraduates who stop out of college.

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Methodology

The purpose of this study, as described in Chapter One, is to explore the lived experience of low-income, rural undergraduates who withdraw from college without earning a degree. Specifically, I am interested in how these individuals perceive and describe their experience of and reasons for dropping out of college, and the ways that their rural background may be implicated.

To that end, I conducted a qualitative study with a phenomenological research design. While the methods and procedures used by researchers in phenomenological investigations vary widely across each discipline, I used those synthesized by Clark Moustakas in *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994). In the first section of this chapter, I discuss Moustakas' comprehensive and widely used framework for organizing and conducting an education or social science phenomenological study.

Then, I detail my sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures. I explain the nature of participants' engagement with the study, including all ethical considerations related to confidentiality and informed consent. Next, I discuss steps taken to ensure reliability and validity of data collection and analysis. Finally, I acknowledge the limitations of this study and examine my positionality as a researcher.

As discussed in Chapter One, phenomenology is the most appropriate methodological choice for two important reasons. First, the study participants were not viewed as monolithic because data analysis focuses on the similarities of students' *experience* rather than similarities among the students themselves. In this way, the broad geographic and demographic diversity of the students in the sample is accounted for in data analysis. Second, this research approach

investigates this phenomenon mainly for how it is experienced, rather than solely through the lens of theories, preconceptions, and presuppositions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The rigorous application of phenomenological procedures protects against a deficit perspective or myopic attitude toward individuals from rural communities.

Overview of Phenomenological Research Methods

Moustakas (1994) outlines three methodological stages that I used in this study to incorporate the aspects of transcendental phenomenology discussed in the previous chapter. They are 1) Methods of Preparation, 2) Methods of Collecting Data, and 3) Methods of Organizing and Analyzing Data. The following section provides an overview of these stages with a focus on the major phenomenological processes that occur in each.

Methods of Preparation

When embarking on a phenomenological study, Moustakas (1994) urges researchers to choose a topic that has "both social meaning and personal significance" (p. 104). The researcher's own experience and positionality, Moustakas believes, "brings the core of the problem into focus" (pg. 104) and serves as an essential factor in designing the study. The researcher must formulate research questions that aim to uncover the essences and meanings of human experience, with a focus on the qualitative aspects of behaviors. Unlike many quantitative methodologies, a phenomenological research question should not attempt to predict causal relationships or incorporate measurements, scores, or ratings. The questions instead should be ones that can be answered "through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, pg.105).

The criteria for choosing research participants are intentionally broad. Indeed, the only unconditional requirement is that the participant experienced the phenomenon in question and

has an interest and willingness to discussing it at length with the researcher. While demographic and other general criteria are factors as in any qualitative study, the essential consideration is the participant's authentic interest in understanding the nature and meaning of their experience. Given that the subject of many phenomenological studies is often deeply personal, researchers must observe the highest ethical standards in matters related to confidentiality and informed consent agreements.

Another key step in Moustakas' (1994) Method of Preparation for a phenomenological study is conducting a thorough and strategic review of the research literature. All relevant studies on the topic, regardless of the research design and methodology, should be included in the review. Sources should include those that assess the overall body of knowledge on the topic, those that analyze existing theories and themes related to the phenomenon, and those that explore the different methodologies used to examine the research problem. In this dissertation study, this step is completed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Methods of Data Collection

The conventional method for collecting data in phenomenological studies is through long, semi-structured interviews with research participants, whom Moustakas (1994, p. X) refers to as "co-researchers." Interviews should be informal in tone, and blend prepared, open-ended questions with spontaneous comments and other questions. Moustakas recommends beginning each interview with a brief reflective activity to establish trust and make the participant feel comfortable in conversation. For a phenomenon in a co-researcher's past, it can be helpful to encourage the interviewee to spend a few minutes reflecting on the experience. After an initial introduction, the researcher should invite the co-researcher to provide an honest and comprehensive account of their full experience of the phenomenon.

Beginning in the earliest stages of the research project, the researcher must engage in the process of Epoche, which requires one to set aside preconceived ideas, bias, and ordinary judgements in order to perceive an experience freshly. In Husserl's (1970) words:

> We must exclude all empirical interpretations and existential affirmations, we must take away what is inwardly experienced or otherwise inwardly intuited as pure experiences, as our exemplary basis for acts of Ideation… We thus achieve insights in pure phenomenology which is here oriented to the *real* constituents, whose descriptions are in every was "ideal and free from … presuppositions of real existence. (p.577)

The Epoche prepares the researcher to view an experience naively without the coloring of preconceived notions and thoughts. The people, object, things, and places that constitute the experience are viewed with complete openness, so that the phenomenon can be described just as it appears in the co-researcher's consciousness.

Suspending one's ordinary thoughts, biases, and judgements through Epoche is difficult, and requires concentration, patience, and practice. The process is a retraining of the mind to perceive and reflect on an object simply for what it is before applying the everyday, preformed ideas. To practice Epoche, Moustakas (1994) recommends first finding a quiet place to focus intensely on the situation, experience, or person at hand. Then, through reflection or analytic memoing, the researcher must conduct an inventory on current thoughts and feelings about that object. Taking the time to assess and set aside these thoughts and feelings must be a rigorous and ongoing process, beginning prior to data collection and continuing through data analysis. While achieving perfect Epoche is rare, Moustakas asserts, "the energy, attention, and work involved in reflection and self-dialogue, the intention that underlies the process, and the attitude and frame of

reference, significantly reduce the influence of preconceived thoughts, judgements, and biases" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90).

Methods of Organizing and Analyzing Data

Once all interviews are complete and transcribed, a set of procedures related to phenomenological analysis may begin. These procedures are grounded in two major processes: Phenomenological Reduction and Imaginative Variation (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological Reduction is the practice of describing in text the object of consciousness, both in terms of its external features and the internal experience of the phenomenon as described by the co-researcher. As discussed in the previous chapter, the reduction process involves approaching an experience from many different angles, describing its qualities in as many different ways as possible. The researcher must first "bracket" the phenomenon, by practicing Epoche and suspending any preexisting judgements about the object or experience. Then, in a step referred to as horizonalization, the researcher examines the interview transcripts to identify significant statements that provide insight into how the co-researcher experienced the phenomenon. At first, every statement is treated as having equal value; later, statements that are determined irrelevant or repetitive are deleted. What remains, Moustakas explains, are only the *horizons,* which are the distilled "textual meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p 97). The "invariant constituents" and "horizons" Moustakis describes are the meaning units or themes that capture the essence of the phenomenon across study participants.

Imaginative Variation, which relates directly to Husserl's (1931) idea of *eidetic reduction*, is the process of using the imagination to find meaning within a phenomenon. The goal of this process is to describe the essential structures of the phenomenon, with a focus on "how" the co-researcher experienced the phenomenon. Doing so requires what Husserl calls a

"free play of fancy" (p.117), in which any perspective may be considered valuable for understanding the essence of the phenomenon. Drawing the textual descriptions provided through phenomenological reduction, all viewpoints related to the "how" and "what" of the phenomenon are considered in this stage. The key to this process is understanding that the essence and meanings of a phenomenon are not bound by one single truth, but by the infinite possibilities presented by each co-researchers' experience.

Moustakas (1994) describes the following steps to elaborate Imaginative Variation:

1. Methodically assess and reassess of all the possible structural meanings, or patterns related to the shape of the experience, embedded in the textural descriptions;
2. Identify all the possible themes or circumstances that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;
3. Conceive any universal structures that could precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, including those related to time, space, body, or relationship to self and others;
4. Scrutinize the text for examples that illustrate the "invariant structures," or themes, and allow for the development of a distilled, structural description of the experience.

In practice, the process for analyzing transcribed interviews can distilled into a set of steps. Moustakas describes his own modifications to the Van Kaam (1959, 1966) and Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen (1971, 1973, 1975) methods of analysis, which I have distilled here into my own basic outline. Using the transcribed interview data:

1. *Identify* statements and expressions that are relevant or significant for the description of the experience. Eliminate statements that are repetitive or not relevant.

2. *Cluster* the significant statements into themes, including only those statements that are necessary for understanding the moments and constituents of the experience.
3. *Synthesize* these themes into a description of the textures of the experience for each participant, using verbatim examples from the interviews.
4. *Integrate* each individual description into what Moustakas (1994) terms Composite Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole.

The Composite Textural-Structural Description, which requires the use of Imaginative Variation, aims to understand "how" the group of participants experienced "what" they experienced. While each phenomenological model varies slightly in the process and presentation of the Composite Description, the purpose of this final step is to provide a concise overview of the meaning and essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Ending a phenomenological study is in most ways similar to the closing of any qualitative research study. Findings from the data should be viewed in light of their contribution to existing research on the topic, as well as the previous scholarship examined in the literature review. The significance of the study should be related to a broader social context, addressing the ways that the outcomes impact the work of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers across academic and professional contexts. Many phenomenological studies also conclude by relating the findings to the personal and professional significance of the researcher and the participants, and by offering closing comments on possible future research directions related to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Sample

Using these three methodological stages as a blueprint, I began my own study by recruiting a sample of low-income individuals from rural communities who withdrew from college before earning a degree. A key consideration in building a sample for this study was broad diversity in rural geography. As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, many existing studies focus on one distinct rural area in the United States with findings that may not be generalizable beyond the unique characteristics of that one rural place. By seeking out broad geographic representation, in addition to variation in the areas of race, ethnicity, geography, and gender, the sample captures the aspects of rurality that are broadly shared across all rural communities and cultures. This wide array of background and experiences among co-researchers also reflects the reality that no two rural places in the United States are the same.

All co-researchers resided in a locale federally classified as "rural" at the time of their high school graduation. The Census Bureau (2019) defines rural as any "population, housing, and territory" located outside an Urban Area, which has a population of 50,000 or more people, or an Urban Cluster, which has a population of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. Thus, during their high school years, all co-researchers lived in area considered Rural Fringe (areas less than five miles from an urbanized area and two-and-one-half miles from an urban cluster), Rural Distant (areas more than five miles from an urbanized area but less than twenty-five miles from an urban cluster), or Rural Remote (areas more than twenty-five miles from an urbanized area and more than ten miles from an urban cluster).

Limited options were available for accessing a diverse and geographically dispersed sample of rural individuals who stopped out of college. For this reason, I sourced my sample through Upward Bound, a national and federally funded college access program that helps low-

income and first-generation high school students apply to and succeed in higher education. The purpose of Upward Bound is to increase the number of at-risk students who graduate high school, enter higher education, and graduate with a college degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). All Upward Bound students, and thus all participants in this study, must come from a low-income family or be the first in their family to attend college.

Participation in an Upward Bound program was an important condition for participants in this study for several reasons. First, this approach ensured that all co-researchers came of age in a low-income household and were the first in their family to attend college. Second, regardless of high school quality, participants in any Upward Bound program must receive instruction in math, laboratory science, composition, literature, and foreign language. Third, most Upward Bound sites provide summer programs where high school students take college prep classes and gain exposure to a college campus, after which weekly follow-up and tutoring is administered through the school year. While each program is different, using the Upward Bound network to build a sample guaranteed that all co-researchers entered higher education with at least a basic foundation of academic and college preparation, reducing the probability that college stop-out was primarily or exclusively the result of insufficient academic readiness for college studies.

To identify co-researchers, I collected staff email addresses from websites of one-hundred and ninety Upward Bound programs in forty-four different states. The states not included in my outreach were Delaware, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Maryland, Connecticut, and Hawaii. While each of these states have some territory classified as rural by the Census Bureau, I was unable to locate any Upward Bound program that specifically served rural high schools. The relatively small geographic size of these states also made it difficult to identify regions where rural territory was not closely intertwined with metropolitan sprawl.

In total, I contacted over seven-hundred Upward Bound staff members by email between January 2020 and July 2020. In my outreach email messages (Appendix A), I introduced myself, shared the purpose of the study, and ensured confidentiality of study participants. I embedded a link to a study sign-up and asked that Upward Bound staff forward my email to any individual in their network who had a) participated in an Upward Bound program; b) started an undergraduate, two- or four-year degree program; and then c) withdrawn or did not complete the degree. I also encouraged these staff members to post the study description and link on their Upward Bound social media pages.

Applicants signed-up for the study using a link to a demographic data and Informed Consent form (Appendix B) designed in Qualtrics XM Survey Software. The first page of the form provided an introduction to the study and Informed Consent document, which allowed applicants to provide consent digitally. Applicants were asked for basic contact and demographic information, including their name, preferred email, preferred phone number, date of birth, ethnicity, gender, Upward Bound program location high school name, and high school town and state. Finally, applicants were asked for basic details of their college withdrawal, including month and year of college entrance, month and year of college withdrawal, and name of institution(s). Once the applicant completed the survey, they received a confirmation message indicating that if selected for study they would be contacted by email, text, or phone.

Forty-five applicants completed the demographic data form and Informed Consent. Using stratified, purposeful, criterion sampling (Patton, 2014), I ultimately selected a sample of thirteen co-researchers (Table 2) who represented maximum demographic and geographic variation. The final sample consists of individuals with diverse racial and gender identities who attended high school and college in many different regions within rural America. As participants in an Upward

Bound program, all students grew-up in low-income households and are the first in their family to attend college. Following the suggestion of Creswell & Poth (2018) and Guetterman (2015), I increased my sample size until the point of saturation was reached and no new codes, categories, or themes were generated during data analysis.

Table 2: Study Co-researchers and Characteristics

Pseudonym	*State*	*Sex*	*Race*	*Institution Type (all non-selective)*	*College Entrance*	*College Departure*
Tracy	Missouri	Female	White	Public state college	2004	2005
Thomas	Nebraska	Male	White	Private college	2015	2016
Sarah	Wisconsin	Female	White	Private research university	2015	2017
Braylee	North Dakota	Female	Native American	Public, flagship research university	2018	2019
Dawn	Arkansas	Female	White	Public university	2015	2016
Nicole	Oklahoma	Female	White	Public community college	2019	2019
Robby	Minnesota	Male	White	Public university	2016	2019
Jamie	Vermont	Male	Prefer not to Answer	Public state college	2014	2019
Dolly	Mississippi	Female	Black	Public community college	2014	2016
Bella	Kentucky	Female	White	Public university	2010	2013
Sophie	Montana	Female	White	Public university	2015	2018
Jerry	Mississippi	Male	Black	Public university	2009	2011
Carolina	Arizona	Female	Latinx	Public community college	2018	2020

Data collection

Co-researcher involvement in this study consisted of two components: an initial interview lasting approximately sixty to ninety minutes and a subsequent five-minute or longer independent audio-recording, which I refer to as a voice memo. Since co-researchers were based in many different areas of the United States, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, it was not feasible to conduct in-person interviews. I chose videoconference software instead of over

the telephone in order to see the non-verbal communication of the participants. Given the nature of the research questions and difficulty of finding responsive participants, I decided not to follow the Seidman's (1998) three-interview structure for phenomenological interviewing, which includes significant life-history exploration. Instead, I adhered to the one-interview suggestion made by Moustakas (1994), followed by a flexible and innovative follow-up voice memo recording.

The interviews, conducted between January 2020 and July 2020, were semi-structured and followed the broad Interview Protocol suggested by Moustakas (1994). The conversations averaged about sixty minutes and took place virtually using Zoom, a videoconference software. During the interviews, I asked co-researchers open-ended questions about their experience of stopping out, as well as questions about key events and relationships that shaped their experience. The Interview Protocol (Appendix C) consisted of six total questions:

1. Can you provide a full description of your experience of dropping out of college?
2. What are the moments that stand out for you as you think back on that time?
3. What feelings were generated for you during this experience? Are there thoughts you had that stood out for you when it was happening?
4. How did your experience affect those who are closest to you, and how did they affect you during this experience?
5. Do you think your rural upbringing had anything to do with this experience?
6. Were there changes to your mental or physical health that you were aware of during this experience?

Approximately two to four weeks after the interview, co-researchers received an email with a prompt and technical instructions for completing a voice memo of at least five-minutes as follow up to the first interview. The prompt varied for each participant depending on the content discussed in the interview conversation. This approach provided me with the opportunity to ask questions that approached aspects of co-researchers' interview description from a different perspective. Sequencing the voice memo several weeks after the interview also provided an opportunity for co-researchers to share additional information that might have surfaced in their memory since the initial conversation. One example of an audio-recording prompt, which I tailored for each co-researcher, is included below:

> *Sample Prompt #1:* Hi, [Name]! Thank you again for speaking with me two weeks ago and sharing your story. I really appreciate it.
>
> I have three follow-up questions for you:
>
> 1) If you were to write a book about this experience, what would the names of the chapters be?
>
> 2) When we last spoke, you started to describe some physical feelings you had during your difficult discussion with the Dean at the end of your first semester. Can you tell me more about what you felt? Do you remember specific thoughts you had during that conversation?
>
> 3) Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience of withdrawing from college before earning a degree?

Co-researchers received compensation for their time participating in the study. Rather than providing cash, which constitutes taxable income, I provided each participant with a $100 Amazon gift credit to be used at their discretion, including for books or supplies if they choose to return to college. The incentive was delivered by email as a digital gift card to co-researchers, who received an initial credit of $50 after the interview and the remaining $50 after they completed and submitted the voice memo.

It was important to me that the research participants benefited in some way beyond the financial incentive for their contributions to this study. As such, I offered participants the opportunity to have an optional follow-up conversation with me about their future educational or career aspirations after the study was complete. I also offered to share any helpful digital resources that might be helpful to their specific situation and stressed that I am neither a trained counselor nor am I qualified to discuss issues that do not relate to students' educational or career aspirations. Ultimately, none of the co-researchers took me up on this offer, though two emailed me directly and unprompted with more detail about their stop-out experience after the interview and voice memo were complete.

Data Analysis

After data were collected, I transcribed all thirteen interviews and corresponding voice memos. Using these transcriptions, I then drafted individual descriptions presented in the following chapter, for each co-researcher. Some phenomenologists forgo coding of data altogether out of concern that it conflicts with the practice of Epoche and Bracketing (Salanda, 2016; van Manen, 1990). Those concerns notwithstanding, coding is an essential procedure for ensuring the methodological rigor in qualitative research. As such, in this phenomenology I used first- and second-cycle techniques to identify clusters of meaning and themes from the Individual Textural Descriptions.

First cycle coding approach began with In Vivo coding techniques, followed by descriptive coding. In Vivo codes captured the participants' own language by highlighting key words, terms, or phrases from the interviews or voice memos (i.e. "felt overwhelmed," "not enough money," "I was terrified"). Descriptive codes summarized words or phrases on the basic topic in a portion of the transcripts (i.e. financial struggles, rural schools, personal hardship,

future thoughts, etc.). A provisional list of descriptive codes was developed based on the literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in this study. These codes were refined after the data collection process based on the interview conversations and voice memos, resulting in a final structured code list (Appendix D).

Second cycle coding identified patterns from data collection and grouped codes into themes that emerged from data collection. Saldana (2016) describes a theme as an "extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means" (p. 199). By grouping the first-cycle codes in this way, I was able to condense a large number of codes into the phenomenological *clusters of meaning* that summarize themes, relationships, and explanations.

Separately, I also practiced analytic memoing and took extensive notes throughout data collection and analysis. This process began with a brief, unstructured analytic memo immediately after each interview conversation to capture my initial thoughts, ideas, and impressions. Subsequent memos were similarly free form and iterative and written concurrently with coding. After second cycle coding was complete, I revisited many of these memos and revised them based on further reflection and data collection. Ultimately, these documents summarized the content of the data and introduced initial ideas and theoretical connections.

Finally, I synthesized each of the major themes and lesser ones into a Composite Textural-Structural Description (Moustakas, 1994) of the meaning and essence of the experience, representing the group as a whole. This description, which is presented in Chapter 6 and a discussion on each cluster of meaning, summarizes the phenomenon of stopping out of college for low-income, rural undergraduates based on the experiences of the co-researchers in this sample.

Reliability and Validity

Several steps were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of data collection and analysis. As described previously, a phenomenological approach aims to minimize my influence as the researcher on the participants' description of their experience. It is impossible, of course, to entirely eliminate the influence of who I am as a researcher on data collection and analysis. Later in this chapter, I discuss my positionality as researcher and the aspects of my background, identity, and experience that I attempted to "bracket" during this exploration.

The two different forms of data collection in this study – semi-structured interviews and voice memos – helped ensure the validity of data by enabling participants to orally convey the meaning of their experience in contrasting settings. The interview questions, which closely align with Moustakas' (1994) suggested protocol, provided enough structure to uncover the essence and fundamental structure of the experience without leading the participant in any particular direction. The voice memos provided participants the opportunity to share additional reflections in a free-form and independent setting without the influence of my questions, voice, or facial expressions. Sequencing the voice memos several weeks after the interviews also gave participants the benefit of time to reflect on, add to, or revise their description of their experience.

After an initial draft of the Composite Textural Description was complete, I revisited both the raw transcripts and the Individual Textural Descriptions to ensure that the shared meaning applied across all co-researchers while accounting for the specific contents of each individual experience. The final Description presented in Chapter 6 went through several stages of reworking until it held across each co-researcher's experience, thus capturing the essential, invariant structure of the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 57).

Some phenomenologists provide criteria for testing the quality and validity of a phenomenological study. This study was evaluated according to the criteria provided by van Manen (2014 p. 350-356), which is best summarized by Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 272):

- *Heuristic questioning:* Does the text induce a sense of contemplative wonder and questioning attentiveness – *ti estin* (the wonder what this is) and *hoti estin* (the wonder that something exists at all)?
- *Descriptive richness:* Does this text contain rich and recognizable experiential material?
- *Interpretive depth:* Does the text offer reflective insights that go beyond the taken-for-granted understandings of everyday life?
- *Distinctive rigor:* Does the text remain constantly guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning of the phenomenon or event?
- *Strong and addressive meaning*: Does the text "speak" to and address our sense of embodied meaning?
- *Experiential awakening:* Does the text awaken pre-reflective or primal experience through vocative and presentative language?
- *Inceptual epiphany*: Does the study offer us the possibility of deeper and original insight, and perhaps, an intuitive or inspirited grasp of the ethics and ethos of life commitments and practices?

These criteria were used to assess the validity, reliability, and quality of my data interpretation of the Individual Textural Descriptions, the clusters of meaning, and the final Composite Textural Description. While the specific standards used to assess phenomenological

studies vary widely, these steps were chosen because they most closely align with the theoretical grounding of Husserl (1934) and the research methodology advanced by Moustakas (1994).

Limitations

The results of this study cannot be broadly generalized. As with any qualitative study, the circumstances and characteristics of the co-researchers are unique to the sample. Since all participants were sourced through an Upward Bound program, they might possess academic skills and capabilities that other rural college stop-outs do not have. Further, the students in this sample have all remained connected in some way to an Upward Bound staff member, whose full-time job is to promote the education and career success of their student network. Not all rural high school students benefit from this type of relationship.

As mentioned earlier, it was impossible to remove all aspects of my identity from the data collection and analysis process. It is possible that some individuals who were invited to participate in the study chose not to due to perceptions of me based on my status as a doctoral candidate at Boston College. It is also possible that participants' responses were influenced by perceptions of my identity, including my race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. Students may not have felt comfortable sharing sensitive information with me because of how I presented in writing or during the semi-structured interview. Given the sensitivity and complexity of this phenomenon, co-researchers also might not have disclosed the true and complete nature of their experience. Finally, my limited digital interaction with these participants may not have been sufficient for uncovering the essential, invariant structure of this phenomenon.

Researcher Positioning

I live on a dirt road that often washes out during thunderstorms. It winds between two mountain ridges along the border of my town, which covers nearly 45-square miles and has fewer than 3,400 residents. My neighbors and I are almost always the first to lose power when lightning strikes or ice bends tree limbs and the last to get dug out by the plow trucks during a winter snowstorm. Internet is delivered through a copper telephone wire at a speed that is insufficient for the video-conference software required for this dissertation study.

The woods near my northern New England home are filled with remnants of vanished ways of life. Crumbling stone walls wander through forests that a hundred years ago were pastures for sheep and cattle. If you know where to look, you can find an old cellar hole, a lone chimney, or a collapsed barn that once marked the mountain homestead of European and early-American settlers. For thousands of years before them, the native Abenaki tribe hunted, gathered, fished and farmed the same mountains and streams. Relics from their time here are harder to find.

This landscape is always changing. The passage of different people to and through the region has shaped its ecology, culture, history, and traditions. The land is simultaneously beautiful and bleak, welcoming and threatening, familiar and unknowable. Past inhabitants might not recognize this land as it is today. They also would not recognize me, because I am an outsider here.

I grew-up on the edge of the rural-urban divide. In less than an hour's drive from my hometown, you could find yourself on a farm or on Fifth Avenue. As a white kid from a family that worked its way into upper-middle class suburbia, I was fortunate to have opportunities that exposed me to life in the city, the country, and the places in between. Throughout my childhood

and adolescence, I paid attention to what made these places different and what made them similar. I learned how people in each of these areas lived, what mattered to them, and what problems they faced.

When I became an adult, I made a choice to live in rural places. It was a choice that was only possible because of my privilege, and because I had the necessary forms of cultural capital to relocate into a community that was very different from the one where I had come. I choose to live rurally because I relate and aspire to many rural values: self-sufficiency, respect for the land, quality of life, and social consciousness.

I became interested in the higher education experiences of rural youth while working at an elite liberal arts college in a remote rural location. I grew unsettled by the estrangement between the College and the surrounding rural community that struggled in many ways. Through interactions with colleagues at the College and with local residents, I sensed that each group knew very little of the other, apart from a collection of myths and tall-tales that seem to have persisted since both groups arrived to the area in the early nineteenth century. These groups spoke different dialects, wore different clothes, shopped at different grocery stores, and drove different cars. Bitterness among local rural residents abounded as the secluded "college on a hill" imported metropolitan academics and professionals to occupy its high-wage positions. College enrollment consisted mostly of affluent out-of-town students, mostly from the coasts, that paid an annual tuition that well surpassed local household incomes. The resentment was returned by the college-affiliated residents, who could live in town for decades and never feel quite at home.

I also noticed that local families had far fewer college options than families in the suburban and urban areas I had lived. I began to see first-hand how rural kids, specifically those from low-income families, are forgotten and systematically ignored in the college-going process.

Very few college admissions representatives ever recruited from local high schools, especially those from elite and out-of-state institutions.

When I started volunteering at my town's K-12 school, which graduated about 40 students per year, I saw how students were routinely coached into post-secondary paths below their aspirations and educational abilities. I also wondered why a substantial number of those high school students returned home for good after only a semester or two away at college.

While I did not grow up in a rural place and never stopped out of college, I am uniquely positioned to conduct this research. I grasp the complexity of rural-nonrural differences in higher education because I experience them every day as a rural resident, higher education scholar, and college administrator. I strongly believe that college leaders and policymakers must consider the needs of rural students who pursue post-secondary opportunities. Rather than perpetuating myths and stereotypes about rural people, higher education stakeholders must learn more about their higher education outlooks, challenges, and aspirations. This research is animated by a belief that harnessing the potential of these bright students will revitalize rural communities and help secure the future prosperity and well-being.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to expand the understanding of the experiences of rural, low-income undergraduates who stop out before completing a college degree. The findings presented in this chapter are based on analysis of both virtual interviews conducted between January 2020 and June 2020 and independent voice memos completed independent of researcher presence one to three months after the interview conversation. As discussed in Chapter Four, these data are gathered from thirteen research participants who each grew up and attended high school in different rural communities across the United States. For confidentiality, the names used are pseudonyms chosen by me and any identifying information has been concealed. The states and rural regions of the research participants, however, have not been changed to avoid impacting the essence of the findings as they relate to rural identity and background.

Keeping with the theoretical grounding of Husserl (1934) and the research methodology of Moustakas (1994), this chapter is organized into thirteen individual textural descriptions that include information on the participants' background, family, and rural setting, with ample verbatim statements from the interviews and voice memos.

Tracy | Missouri

The seven rural counties that make up the Lead Belt region of Southeast Missouri are some of the poorest in the United States. At the height of the industrial age one hundred fifty years ago, prosperous mining towns sprung up and boomed as rich lead deposits were mined and smelted into batteries, ammunition, and other products. The region's fortunes have declined steadily since the 1970s, however, when the auto industry faltered and the ecological impact of lead mining brought scrutiny to a previously unregulated industry. Since that time, widespread poverty, population decline, and contaminated mining waste have scarred the landscape and devastated the region's rural communities.

Tracy's ancestors were among the first European settlers to settle in the region in the early 1800s. Raised by a single mother who had her at the age of eighteen, Tracy is the first in her family to graduate high school in three generations. The trauma of poverty shaped much of Tracy's childhood. She and her mother were occasionally homeless between their stays in government-subsidized housing. They subsisted on food stamps and Medicaid, and more than once were forced to flee a domestic violence situation. As a teenager she became primary caretaker for her younger siblings and for her mother, who had "a borderline personality disorder and major depression."

Since much of her youth was dedicated to meeting the needs of others, she remembers that, "the only place I let myself thrive was in my education." In high school she was a "very precocious student" who excelled in the "kind and supportive" environment of her majority white rural school district, graduating in the top 10 percent of a 98-member high school class. "I knew in order to have a better existence I needed to go to college. And I really did bust my butt to do it." She was accepted into all three colleges to which she applied: a selective national

research university on the East Coast, a selective private university in the Midwest, and a non-selective, public university in Missouri. Her decision to public university in Missouri – her safety school – was ultimately determined by the need-based and academic scholarships she received, which covered full tuition and living expenses.

When she arrived at college, she discovered for the first time she had "zero people to focus on outside of myself." Although the college was in Missouri, the campus was six hours away from her hometown in an area where she had no other connections. She found herself socially isolated and spent the first half of the fall semester "profoundly lonely." She quickly shifted into a deep depression, finding it difficult to get out of bed each day. "I just fell apart…A lot of the social rules governing a college campus are geared more towards middle-class, upper-middle class minds – and that's the culture at college. Rural and lower income people, they transit though society in a *much* different way. I didn't have those rules in place in order to navigate."

Seeking helping from others did not come naturally to Tracy. She remembered initial "misgivings toward people who didn't come from my own culture" and recalled that, "at first, it was hard to make friends who did not feel like a rural person to me." Halfway through the first semester, however, she began to warm to campus life and found, for the first time, that she had the opportunity to develop a sense of self beyond the cultural confines of her rural hometown. The aspects of college Tracy enjoyed most were social. She joined the dance club, discovered a love of anime, and forged friendships with students who participated in live-action role playing. In a "critical moment" she was introduced to politics that were different from anyone at home through her involvement in a women's advocacy group on campus.

Her success in the classroom was mixed. She found that most professors were "full of themselves" and that many of her peers were not as invested in learning as she was. Navigating an academic environment with large number of students was paralyzing. "It was confusing. I didn't know how to ask to help because it was a really big class. I didn't know how to engage in a larger environment. I grew up in rural environment, a high school that had 98 kids in my class. My one biology class was bigger than my entire graduating [high school] class. I didn't know what to do with that."

In the spring of her first-year, Tracy attempted to switch from a history major to the nursing program, only to discover that fulfilling the new requirements would lengthen her degree program by two additional semesters. She felt like she wasn't getting the information and support she needed from her advisor or financial counselor. By the end of the semester she was "dejected…helpless…hopeless" and believed she had no options for crafting a college experience that aligned with her academic and career aspirations.

To make matters worse, a change in Tracy's family's personal financial circumstances brought the financial viability of attending college into question. Her mother unexpectedly married a man who had retired from regional railroad company with a steady pension. As a result, Tracy lost her need-based scholarship for her second year and was faced with an estimated family contribution of $6,500 that she could not pay. After meeting with her financial aid counselor, she learned that her only option was to take out a student loan, which she decided against. "Being a rural person, my family is very much about you don't take out loans you can't pay."

By the end of her spring semester of her first-year, Tracy realized that her inability to pay for tuition would prevent her from returning to campus that fall. Before leaving campus, she

emailed her academic advisor and financial aid counselor to notify them that she would not return to campus that fall. As difficult as it was to send that email, Tracy remembers experiencing, “a sense of release, and a sense of relief because I did not see how I could return and get toward a future that made sense to me.”

The thought of returning home to her family having withdrawn from college filled Tracy with dread. “Everyone was looking to me to be the rocket that launched. This felt like failure, I didn’t want to let anyone down.” She returned home to Missouri for one night. The next morning, she bought a one-way ticket to Washington State where she lived with and later married a man fourteen years her senior whom she had met online. “I was not making safe or sane decisions at that point.” After living for fifteen years in Washington State, Tracy and her second husband returned to her hometown in Missouri, finding that they could no longer afford rent in the Greater Seattle area and having no place else to go.

Since withdrawing from college over fifteen years ago, Tracy transitioned her credits into an associate’s degree in history at a community college in Washington State. She even attempted to complete her bachelor’s degree in Special Education through an online university, stopping out for a second time due to financial constraints. While Tracy would like to return to college and complete her bachelor’s degree, she remarked that, “At this point I feel like I am stuck. There is no way for me to continue.”

Tracy feels “saddened” by her path through higher education and “angry” that she must now work jobs she feels are below her intellect and ability. She wonders if many rural people feel resentful and skeptical of higher education because of the financial and systemic barriers that stand in their way. “It really hurts. Now, any time someone tells me that I am intelligent or that I should already have a degree…I get hurt. If my access to education had been decided based on

my intelligence, my ability to learn, and that's it… not, how much money my parents have or how much support I received from my family. If I had been measured just on my own merits I would have had access to the education I wanted and needed. But I don't get those things."

Robby | Minnesota

Robby's small, rural village in Northern Minnesota is surrounded by lakes that feed the headwaters of the Mississippi River. In the summertime, you can hear the call of loons echoing off the lakeshores through the morning midst. During the dark and snowy winters, temperatures often dip below -30°F. His hometown of fewer than 5,000 residents looks much the same today as it did throughout Robby's childhood. "It's almost like the town remains untouched through time. Nothing really changes."

Robby is the eldest of four children and the first in his white, low-income family to attend college. His father worked at a local automotive part factory until he had a stroke that left him paralyzed and living full-time in an assisted living facility. His mother worked as a Licensed Practical Nurse at a local hospital, providing what she could as a single mother to four school-aged children.

From the time he was young, Robby's parents, grandparents, peers, and teachers all encouraged him to attend college. "Everyone had the same idea that you should go to college. It doesn't matter where, you just need to go." He remembers his high school guidance counselor, "This guy sat down with every single student in the graduating class and wanted to know, 'Where are you going to school?' It was not like 'are you going?' it was like 'where are you going?'". When any student in his 100-member high school class made their college choice, "They took your name and your picture and which school you picked, and they *slapped* it on the wall for everyone to see."

During high school, Robby participated in Upward Bound and visited dozens of college campuses across the country. When he toured a public in-state University 90-minutes from his hometown, Robby was enchanted. "I thought, this is going to be the school of my dreams." After

he was accepted, Robby planned to enroll in the University's music engineering program, following his dream of working in a sound studio or professional theater.

The summer before college, Robby spent as much time with his family as possible. "Maybe I knew that things were going to be a lot different and I was going to come back a more mature person with a different set of skills, a different mindset." He made a point to visit with his grandparents and engage with his younger siblings. He remembers that summer as, "the last remnant of childhood… Adulthood starts real fast after that." His feelings of excitement about leaving for college were mixed with those of apprehension. As eager as he was to meet new people and have new experiences, he was overwhelmed by all the unknowns about what college would be like.

When Robby arrived at college that fall, he was "freaked out." The diverse campus environment stood in stark contrast to the overwhelmingly white, older demographic of his hometown. "I experienced culture shock. I got to meet people from Asia, from Europe, from Africa, and it was so cool. I was excited that I had the opportunity to meet these extraordinary people from all over the world." At first, Robby thrived in the classroom. He felt prepared for and intellectually stimulated by his music theory and composition courses. As the year wore on, however, the courses became more challenging and he started falling behind. He struggled, in part, because he didn't have the money to buy his textbooks. "I winged it a lot. My first year was very hard." Eventually, he realized that his passion for music would not transfer into a career path. With the help of his academic advisor in the music department, he switched into the University's early childhood education program, pursuing a life-long interest in working with kids.

But all other challenges Robby experienced at college paled in comparison to the struggle of paying for it. To cover what the Pell Grant and institutional aid did not, he took out a private, high-interest loan, co-signed by his grandmother. Completing his FAFSA was a yearly struggle, mostly because his mother did not cooperate by submitting her personal tax information. His frustration and anxiety mounted because no one at his university seemed interested in helping him. “I couldn’t figure out the financial aid department. They weren’t being very helpful, it was so confusing. I felt like no matter how much I reached out, I really wasn’t getting anywhere.” To cover basic living expenses, Robby worked as a barista on weekends and a swim instructor at night.

During his sophomore year, Robby’s paternal uncle stepped in to help him navigate his financial challenges. Robby was relieved when his uncle advocated on his behalf to the financial aid office. “He knew what to ask and who to talk to. It was because of him I had a glimmer of hope.” His uncle tried to establish Robby as an independent student so he would no longer need to rely on information from his mother to qualify for aid. Despite the help he was getting from his uncle, however, Robby’s aid was so delayed by the fall of his junior year that the University prevented him from registering for spring courses.

Robby’s mental health steadily declined as his financial struggles and confusion continued to grow. During his junior year, he remembers “anxiety to the point where you just feel like your insides are shaking.” He was constantly worried about “how I was going to get this figured out, how I was going to pay for it.” A turning point came for Robby when his uncle died unexpectedly in a car accident. “After that point, I didn’t know what to do. The one person who was helping me had passed away. I gave up. I couldn’t figure it out. I didn’t know how to get the

money." Communication with the financial aid office ground to a halt. "I just never heard back from the financial aid officer. They never reached out."

As Robby accepted that he needed to withdraw from college, he experienced a profound sense of relief. His anxiety disappeared almost immediately. His family took the news better than he expected. "Everyone was understanding. They were all just like, 'Ya know what, it happens.' And everything was OK." He recalls that at the time, the prospect of having to pay back his $21,00 in student loans seemed more feasible than the process of trying to take them out.

Despite the relief of withdrawing from college, Robby found it difficult to leave many aspects of the life he had built on campus. He had forged deep friendships with peers and faculty, whom he descripted as "really caring and wonderful people." Leaving those relationships behind was painful. "That broke me in half."

Robby believes his rural upbringing influenced his path through higher education. He speculates that while most of his rural peers aspired to a four-year, residential degree program, his non-rural counterparts may have a broader outlook on different pathways. "Somebody from a big city has people around them who have different life experiences. Some that go to college, some that don't. And you get a more mixed view on how adult life should be. They have more possible pathways drawn out for them. In my community everyone had the same pathway drawn out for them."

Robby is proud of the life he has built for himself since withdrawing from college. He is actively paying down his student loans while contributing to two savings accounts. He feels in control of his future and his finances because he has the ability to work at local window manufacturing factory and earn money without having to juggle academic obligations. "I am really happy right now, and I am excited for the future, which I did not experience when in

school." He intends to go back to college as some point to finish his degree, though he has no immediate plans. Looking back, he reflects:

> "It wasn't until after I had dropped out that I realized that you don't need to go to school to live a life or to make money. Sure, maybe you don't have that marine biologist dream job that you wanted, but there are a lot of great people and a lot of great work out there. But they don't really tell you that in high school. The pretty much chock it up to, 'if you don't go to school you are going to be miserable.' And I found my experience to be the opposite. I found my school experience was quite negative and my time outside of school was quite positive."

Dolly | Mississippi

Dolly grew up on the edge of the Mississippi Delta, a region in the northwest corner of the state sometimes referred to as The Most Southern Place on Earth. Originally inhabited by the native Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes, the region was settled in the early 19th century by white planters and enslaved West Africans, whose labor began an era of agriculture that persists to this day. "I am from a small town, no bigger than a dot," Dolly, who is Black, reminisces. "Everybody know everybody, everybody get along with everybody." Fewer than 1,000 residents inhabit her rural, predominantly Black town, where the median household income is $24,712 and nearly a third of the population lives below the poverty line. When she visits her family in her hometown, "Sometimes I just like to get in my car and take the backroads – country roads – and just drive. The smell of fresh cut grass, I love that smell. All you see is trees and sunlight and fields of different things. Cows, sheep, horses, dogs walking up the street."

Dolly was a bright and motivated student who graduated near the top of a 43-member high school class. Early in her school years, she developed an academic interest in Mortuary Science and the circumstances surrounding death. She remembers explaining to her bewildered guidance high school counselor, "I don't want to be no nurse, I don't want to be no police…Mortuary Science, that's what I want to do. I've been fascinated since I was a little girl, and I'm still fascinated." With plans to become a funeral director and own a funeral home, Dolly enrolled in an associate's level business administration program at a nearby community college after high school. A scholarship covered the full cost of attendance, and she hoped that the degree program would provide her with a foundation of business skills to successfully run a funeral home and crematory. Near the end of her two-year program of study, however, Dolly

realized that her coursework had not brought her any closer to reaching her career goals. “Everybody else was graduating. I felt like I was just wasting time.”

She decided to transfer to another community college an hour away from her hometown to enroll in one of the state’s best funeral service technology degree programs. “My family was thrilled, they were all for it. They let me move.” She lived in a campus residence hall and quickly made friends with the other students in her program cohort, who all had diverse backgrounds and came from different areas of the state. She became “the class clown” and described the group of students as one big family. “I liked it. I loved the college life, being away from parents. The freedom, not being told what to do.”

Classes were invigorating but also extremely challenging. Her anatomy class the first semester was particularly difficult, and she remembers reaching out to professors, tutors, and other classmates for support. “I barely made it. I passed, but I barely made it.” A highlight of the program was participating in live autopsies and embalming procedures.

Halfway through her fourth and final semester in the program, Dolly gave birth to a daughter earlier than expected, which required her to take a medical leave of absence before the end of the term. Unable to return to take her finals, she lost credit for the entire semester. With her newborn, Dolly returned to her hometown and tried to figure out a way to return to school that fall and complete the 12-credit semester needed to finish her degree and qualify for her mortuary license. Making ends meet financially became a constant struggle, and the $8,000 in student loans she accrued to cover books and living expenses became a psychological burden. She was ashamed by having to return home and felt like she had let her family down – especially her grandparents, who had always wanted her to complete a degree and build a financially secure future.

That summer, Dolly was recruited for and offered a job at a local automotive manufacturing plant. After agonizing over the decision for weeks, she ultimately took the job because of the financial stability it would provide for her young daughter. “I like the money. It pays my bills, I don’t need to struggle from paycheck to paycheck. But they say if you’re going to work somewhere make sure you’re where your heart is. It’s not where my heart belongs.”

Dolly misses the learning she experienced at college, as well as the close relationships with classmates and professors. She hopes to return at some point and complete her final semester, though she does not have any immediate plans and would like to pay down her remaining student debt before re-enrolling. She also has concerns about how she would manage being a student with a young child and the associated cost of having to pay for child care while she was at class.

Looking back, Dolly acknowledges the ways her rural background may have shaped her path through college but does not believe that her upbringing stopped her from reaching her goals. Her outlook remains positive as she considers her future: “Where you are from should not stand in the way of reaching your goals. If you want to make it, you’re going to make it. That’s how I feel.”

Braylee | North Dakota

In the late 18th century, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians migrated from the dense woodlands of present-day Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan to the vast, open plains of what is now North Dakota. For more than a century the Chippewa roamed freely and prospered on the austere landscape, hunting the bison and wild game that were once abundant in the region. A century later, White settlers abetted by the Homestead Act of 1862 encroached into the Chippewa's eleven-million-acre domain, sparking a cycle of broken treaties that reduced their territory to the six-by-twelve mile tract of land that today constitutes the Turtle Mountain Reservation. Decades of economic hardship have decimated the once powerful and prosperous tribal nation, plunging residents into generations of extreme poverty. On average, resident tribal members now live on $4,681 per year.

As a teenager on the reservation and member of the tribe, Braylee was determined to be the first person in her family to graduate from high school and attend college. Despite suffering from lifelong depression, she worked hard and made good grades with little support from her family and community members. "I wanted to get out of here. I wanted to get a degree and move away and start my life." Many of her high school classmates were on a different path, and less than three-quarters of the class made it to graduation. "Lots of kids here are in trouble, on probation, on drugs, addicted to alcohol, whatever. And there are not a lot of programs here to help them."

Braylee's family did not support her decision to attend college. She went through the application process on her own using materials she had saved from her high school's Upward Bound program, including how to write an admissions essay, apply for financial aid, and complete the FAFSA. "I winged it." She was thrilled when she was accepted with a full

scholarship into the state's public-flagship university and chose to enroll in the school's criminal justice program. Her decision immediately put her at odds with many in her community. "I got a lot of hate because not a lot of Native Americans go to a University right away. Let alone one that far away… And a lot of people here don't care. They don't care about going to school, about their future or anything. Because they want to live off the government, I feel like. That is a lot of peoples' mindset around here. And I didn't want to be like that."

Braylee thrived during her first semester at college and quickly acclimated to the rhythm of campus life. She kept a busy schedule, emerging from her residence hall each morning at 6:30am and not returning until late in the evening. "I wanted to stay active. I got into the habit of doing stuff every day." She made friends with classmates and peers through student organizations, including the university's American Indian Association. The symptoms of depression that Braylee suffered from her entire life disappeared within days.

Classes were challenging for Braylee, and she soon discovered that she was not as academically prepared as many of her classmates. "When I got to college [the professors] were all like, 'Well, you should have learned this in high school.' But I didn't learn this. I think that was one of my biggest struggles. Trying to do the work but not understanding because I didn't get taught it before." She spent extra hours in the library researching and teaching herself the concepts she needed to stay on track. Many of her Native American peers struggled in a similar way, "It was hard at first for the Native Americans, for the minorities, poverty kids. Because our people have problems. Most of the time it was the colored kids who struggled because they don't get the education that other people did."

Despite these challenges, Braylee loved her classes and savored the opportunity to learn. As she worked toward a major in criminal justice with a minor in juvenile justice, she put

together a plan to return home after graduating to help the youth in her community. She wanted to reopen her community's beloved youth center, which had lost its funding and closed, in order to help struggling and impoverished kids on the reservation. She remembers thinking, "I can come back here and help my people with my degree. I can do a lot with what I have. I made this whole plan to come back here and do something big."

Braylee found it easy to form bonds with her professors. "Everybody said that it's like really hard to talk to your teachers and find time and I didn't think it was like that. I was able to talk to my teachers one on one. And be able to talk to them and have them help me." Her favorite course was sociology and the professor who taught it. "Most of the time it was good days."

Yet Braylee did face significant personal challenges during her first year at college. One of her closest friends from home, who was a key source of emotional support, was tragically killed in a drug-related conflict. She also got pregnant unexpectedly and then miscarried during her second trimester, resulting in health complications that required her to take a 10-month course of antibiotics. During both of these incidents Braylee found the strength to attend classes and finish the semesters.

One of the best parts of college, Braylee remembers, was the opportunity to have a job for the first time. She took great pride in her on campus job with the University's dining services. "I was twenty years old when I got my first job. It was because I wasn't able to get a job here. They said, 'You've never had a job?' It's hard to get a job [where I am from]." She took as many hours at they would give her. "It was nice. I liked work."

During the fall of her second year, the financial aid office contacted her to advise her that she owed the university $800 in fees that were not covered by her scholarship. She went to the financial aid office for help but was unsuccessful in having the charges waived. Her academic

advisor, who was also director of the multicultural center, intervened on Braylee's behalf to try to work something out. Despite these efforts, the University placed a hold on Braylee's account, preventing her from registering for spring classes until she paid the debt. "I couldn't afford it. So I had to take a break." She returned home at the end of the fall term, devastated that she would not return for the spring semester. "I have come this far to look forward. I came all this way just to give up. I feel like a failure. That's what I keep feeling. I really just went all the way there, did all of that, just to end up back here with nothing." She decided not to tell anyone at Turtle Mountain that she had withdrawn:

> "It's hard telling people here that I am not in school because people here are judgmental. They always got something to say. I worked so hard to do my best right before I had to quit. At college I didn't have drama, I didn't have problems. I got along with everybody, everybody was friendly. It was really nice being around people like that. Coming back here, like a lot of people don't talk to you after because of the fact that you went to college. And they are like, 'Oh, you act White, you act too good, you can't do this, you can't do that.' All because I left. Going to school somewhere and then coming back, you get a lot of hate. You get told a lot of shit. You get yelled at because people think you are better than them."

The adjustment to living back in her hometown has been difficult for Braylee. Her depression returned, driven by a feeling that she has let herself down. "I am kind of dumbfounded by it myself. I can't wrap my mind around that I am not at school. Some days I wake up and I'm like, 'Oh crap, I am late for class.' And I don't even have school. I feel stuck. I feel like I am stuck in a slump." She misses her friends, her classes, and her job, and even longs

for “the stress of homework and deadlines.” She is overwhelmed by the negativity of those around her. “I feel stuck. I feel lost.”

When Braylee’s younger sister found out that she had withdrawn from college, she told others in the community without Braylee’s permission. Since then, she feels that many in her community have turned their back on her. “It’s hard to deal with that. I was getting shit yesterday for going to school in a White man’s town. Like people here are judgmental, a lot of people here are racist… There is racism here in my community and it sucks.”

Braylee longs to return to college but sees no plausible way to earn and pay the $800 she owes her university:

> “I feel like I am not going to be able to go back in the fall because I can’t afford it. I have my phone bill, that’s $100 [a month]. Here it is different because of what a lot of other people call their necessities. Like your phone bill or your electricity or your water. Those are necessities to other people. Here, those are privileges. Like, having your phone on, is a privilege. And Wi-Fi. That’s a privilege. Having running water is a privilege, because half the people here don’t have running water. They don’t have lights or electricity.”

She described seeing her dreams slip out of sight and fears having to return to college as an adult student, taking classes only for the purpose moving up the pay ladder at a job. She feels frustrated that college costs as much as a it does, and feels that it shouldn’t be so expensive for students like her who came from extreme poverty. She realizes that she doesn’t have many people to talk to in her home community about her college struggles. “Sorry I cried, man. You are the only one who has heard any of that. That’s the first time. All the shit I just said to you was the first time I have said any of that out loud.”

Dawn | Arkansas

The eastern region of Arkansas where the Red River Basin drains in the lower Mississippi River floodplain was once the site of a vast, dense bottomland forest. Rich in biological diversity, this 25-million-acre wetland flooded each winter and spring, replenishing the forest and swamp habitats with nutrients for fish and wildlife. The population growth and development of the riverbanks beginning in the early 19th century brought a dramatic change to the natural landscape and floodtides, reducing the native forest habitat to less than one-fifth its original size and devastating a once abundant natural environment.

Dawn grew up amidst one of the scattered patches of Cypress forests that remain. Her small, rural hometown of fewer than 300 people sits on the banks of an oxbow lake that was formed when a small channel of the Mississippi was cut-off by early European settlers. The overwhelmingly White town is economically depressed and isolated. “There’s not much to do here. Lots of fast food, dollar stores. Most other businesses have left. Most of them left when I was little.”

Attending college was always a foregone conclusion for Dawn. “I made good grades so everyone just kind of assumed that was the best path for me to take – to go to college.” She was a bright, motivated, and self-directed student with far-ranging academic interests. When it came to higher education, her parents were strict, hoping that she would become the first in her family to earn a college degree, “They pushed me because they wanted a better life for me.”

Dawn applied to private and public universities all over the country and hoped to move as far away as possible from her hometown. “I wanted to be far away from here, I didn’t want to stay. I didn’t want to know anybody where I was going, and I didn’t want anybody to know me.” She ultimately chose to attend a public, less-selective state university four and a half hours away

from home, where she was awarded a full academic scholarship and an additional state scholarship that more than covered her living expenses. She enrolled in the University's well-funded science program with the plan to eventually attend pharmacy school.

Many aspects of the college transition were difficult for Dawn. In her first few weeks on campus, she remembers experiencing culture shock. "It was different going from a place from where you know everyone to place where you know no one. [The University] wasn't that different demographically from my town, but the shock was that change." She found that she was not suited to on-campus living and felt that the rules imposed in her residence hall encroached upon her independent spirit. Her roommate withdrew after two weeks.

Few people that Dawn met at college seemed to share her rural, small town background. Most of her classmates were from the state's metropolitan capital of Little Rock and the suburban sprawl that surrounds it. "We didn't really have much to connect over. I've never been a big fan of having a lot of close people around. I don't do crowds." Nonetheless, Dawn formed a close social group with sophomores in the science program and began to participate in several co-curricular activities, including the university's Christian Fellowship group.

The classes were more difficult than those she had taken in high school, where she "didn't have to try very hard to slide by." She rose to the challenge, making time to study and seeking out the help of professors when necessary. But she was rattled by a change in how she viewed her intellectual identity. Dawn writes:

> "In high school and junior high, I made good grades with little effort, and I think, as a result of that, my teachers all just immediately supported whatever I wanted to do and never doubted that I was capable of excelling. When I got to college, that changed drastically, and it really caught me off guard because I had never experienced that before.

> I feel like this sounds a little dumb, but I had never a teacher do anything other than expect me to overachieve. Where I grew up, it was assumed most kids would not go to college, so if you were one of the more advanced students (from an academic standpoint), then you were never really presented with any kind of doubt like that."

After completing her freshman year, Dawn traveled home with every intention to return to campus that fall. She completed two online courses through the university that summer to get ahead, taking out a total of $10,000 in loans since these courses were not covered by her scholarship. She moved in with grandparents to avoid a challenging dynamic with her mother and father, who had split up and remarried. Being home was "not a stable place to be," and in the past tensions with her parents had gotten in the way with Dawn's school work.

That summer Dawn took a position as a dispatcher at a local trucking company, making more money than she had at any other job. She relished the financial independence the work provided, and she was also surprised to discover she enjoyed living in her hometown again. "Being home, someplace that was familiar, really made me feel like I had missed out by leaving." As the summer turned to fall, she decided not to return to campus and instead enrolled in online courses for the semester. "I think I got so attached to the idea of working, being independent, doing what I wanted to do that I decided not to go back to campus."

After a few weeks, Dawn realized that online courses were not a good match for her learning style. "It felt menial. I was just on the computer all day. I felt like I was not accomplishing anything." She withdrew from those courses on focused on her full-time work at the trucking company. She also began a long-term relationship with a man she would later marry. When the new year arrived and the spring semester began, Dawn stopped responding to the University's inquiries about her enrollment and eventually forfeited her scholarship.

Dawn's family did not respond well to her gradual withdrawal from college. Her mother would regularly initiate arguments on the topic. "My mom ordered me to go back. My dad wanted to encourage me but was smart enough not to yell." Her college friends reached out and unsuccessfully pleaded for her to return. Eventually they stopped calling.

In the years since dropping out, Dawn has considered returning to college. She started a new online program at a different institution for medical coding and billing but quickly lost interest. "It was not challenging, it felt tedious. I couldn't make myself do it." She has continued to work full time and now holds an administrative job she loves at a law-firm in a small city an hour from her home.

After Dawn got married, she and her husband moved back to the small town she once so desperately wanted to escape. She has embraced the "deep-rooted relationships" that she and her family have had there for generations:

> "Now that I have lived here as an adult I feel like I could never live anywhere else. I think that there is something that resonates with me about the isolation. I feel like there is fresh air. It's nice to go home and feel like the closest person is two or three miles away. If I need to go out in my backyard and scream as loud as I can, no one is going to hear me. But it's also comforting to feel like there is such a tight-knit community… I feel like there is no way I could ever leave."

Nicole | Oklahoma

The immense, grassy prairie that constitutes present-day Oklahoma is one of the last territories to have achieved statehood in the early twentieth century. The region has a wild and at times troubled history, which includes periods of lawless land development, natural exploitation and ecological disaster, and the tragic and forced resettlement of entire Native American tribes. A pioneering spirit defines the culture for many current inhabitants of the state, which retains a motto that translates to "Work Conquers All."

Nicole's mother and father worked hard to provide as best as they could for their children, sometimes holding more than one low-wage job to make ends meet. She was raised in a modest home on the shores of a peaceful lake, surrounded by extended family and a close-knit community she was immersed in her entire life. After graduating in her high school's largest-ever class of 200 students, Nicole and her twin brother became the first in their family to pursue and attend college. While they considered several in-state options, they both ultimately choose to attend the public community college twenty miles from home that had sponsored her high school's Upward Bound program.

Nicole recalls spending the summer before her first semester "buying things little by little" so that she was well provisioned for her freshman year. "I was excited to go to college. I thought that I was really prepared." When Nicole moved into a residence hall at the start of the fall term, she was initially pleased by the bustling campus environment. She ate most meals with her roommate and her brother, socializing most often with students she had previously known from Upward Bound or her hometown. "When I showed up at college, I felt in place but I was also a little intimidated… because I wasn't sure what to expect when I walked into class and that teacher started talking."

Nicole enrolled in a Nursing pre-bachelor's program with the intention of eventually becoming a Registered Nurse. "My advisor told me what I needed to be in, so I enrolled. The classes weren't hard, but the teachers were really disorganized. I just kind of did what they told me to do." She was at times affected by the number of new people she encountered at college. Having attended a smaller high school, she was not accustomed to "there being a lot of strangers around." She recalls:

> "They have a lot of foreign exchange students there. So, there is a lot of, uhm, how do I say this, don't take this in a racist way. There are a lot of African American people there. So, they have a different background than a lot of the people from around here. There's not a lot of African American people around here so those people were pretty interesting. They, I don't know, they stuck to themselves, a lot of them didn't want to talk to us, I am not sure why. We had some Africans, uhm, I don't know if Jamaica is in Africa I think that is another country, I can't remember. There was someone from Ireland. That's not in Africa, obviously. There was a German person…there were a bunch of foreign exchange students."

Thanks to an Upward Bound Scholarship, a music scholarship, and state support through the Oklahoma Promise initiative, Nicole's tuition and living expenses were fully covered. Still, she felt the needed to work while attending college in order to meet other financial obligations, including a car payment and new tires. At the same time that Nicole was enrolled as a full-time nursing student, she also worked as a concierge at an assisted living residence in her hometown. She also was taking additional classes toward a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate that was sponsored and paid for by her employer. "It was really stressful. I didn't get any sleep at all." She would begin her college classes at 8:00am each morning, drive half an hour to her

hometown for her CNA classes, then drove to the assistant living facility to begin her shift, which ended at 10:00pm. On weekends she worked a double shift. “I was so drained. I was tired. I wasn’t really happy where I was at.”

As she weighed her options, she realized that she had fallen so far behind in course work that she would not earn any credits that fall semester, putting her Oklahoma Promise scholarship at risk. She remembers, “Something had to go and it ended up being college. Once I decided to drop out I was a lot happier. It was like a weight lifted off my shoulders.” Her decision to withdraw was not well-received by her parents. It sparked a difficult argument, resulting in Nicole’s decision to move in with her fiancée rather than back home with her family. “My dad never got a college education, he didn’t want me to be in his shoes.” During that time, she relied heavily for support on her roommate and her brother, both of whom remained enrolled at college.

“Once I had made the decision to drop out I was relieved. I could breathe.” After she withdrew, Nicole filled the time by picking up more shifts at her job. She plans to stay in her hometown and start a family with her fiancée, whose family also lives nearby. Completing a college degree is not currently in her future plans. “I don’t think college was for me.” She might consider attending a nearby technical school, either to become an EMT on the path to becoming a paramedic or to earn her Licensed Practical Nurse certificate. “I wouldn’t recommend to anyone working full time and going to school full time.” To other students in her position, she cautions, “Don’t let people pressure you. Save money up. Think through what you are doing.”

Thomas | Nebraska

Nebraska is known for its wide horizons. Despite an aging population and gradual shift away from agriculture, many of the people who live there have a strong attachment to their rural roots and the open landscape of the Great Plains. Though some outsiders dismiss the land as flyover country, many residents with deep roots cherish the state's tightly knit communities, farming heritage, and distinct small town culture.

Thomas was born and raised in the same quiet, rural town where his parents and all his grandparents have spent their entire lives. Most community members he has known his whole life, including many of the 150 graduates from his high school class. "Growing up," Thomas remembers, "I only wanted to go to college because no one [in my family] had." He took advantage of every opportunity provided to him during his four years in Upward Bound, and packed away several college credits through a dual-enrollment program offered by his high school through a local community college.

Thomas, who is White, only considered attending college in Nebraska, ultimately choosing an expensive, small private institution where he could run track and fulfill his lifelong dream of playing collegiate sports. While his passion for athletics animated his desire to attend college, he intended to study business and accounting because he had always been good with numbers.

Upon entering college, Thomas quickly embraced the rhythm of his new campus environment. "Being from a rural place might have helped me. I wasn't afraid to meet new people or to introduce myself to people." But he soon found his daily schedule was consumed entirely by coursework and athletics, leaving little free time for socializing. Classes were much more difficult than they were in high school, and he found it difficult to juggle school and sports.

He also found that he lacked motivation and interest in his courses. “Academics were going OK, but I wasn’t really learning a lot. I was taking my tests, but I wasn’t really comprehending.”

Thomas’s college town was even more remote and rural than his hometown. “There’s not a whole lot to do there. A Walmart and that’s about it.” On most weekends he would make the 40-minute drive home to visit family, his girlfriend, and other friends from high school. “I like living somewhere that feels like home and [my college town] didn’t feel like home.” He considered joining a fraternity or clubs, but he found that he did not have the time with his school and track commitments.

The cost of attending college weighed heavily on Thomas. He needed to take out loans of over $25,000 a year to cover what his family’s contribution and a small athletic scholarship did not. The uninspiring coursework did not seem worth the significant financial investment, especially since it was not leading to a clear career path. “I was just going into classes and regurgitating information, then it’d all be gone. If I am going to learn something I want to comprehend it, then be able to use it in the real world forever.” His intense schedule also prohibited him from finding a part-time job, making it difficult for him to pay for simple necessities like gas or supplies for his dorm room. He was grateful when his parents would occasionally provide small sums of spending money, though he realized they did not have much to spare.

In the spring of his first year, Thomas suffered an injury that sidelined him from the track team for the next year and a half. This harsh reality compounded his financial stress and lack of academic and professional direction, leading him to seriously consider withdrawing from college and returning home. “What really made me make the decision [to withdraw] was not really knowing what I wanted to do. And I didn’t want to waste any more money.” Thomas recalls

feeling intense confusion during this time. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew it wasn’t that.” He vividly remembers the fear and anxiety he experienced about sharing the news with his parents. “They always told me ‘if you start something, finish it.’ I was scared.” When Thomas spoke with them, his parents were understanding, though they warned him not to make the decision lightly.

After telling his advisor and coaches that he would not return in the fall, he returned to his hometown, moved in with his parents, and took a job as a bank teller at a local credit union. He spent the next four years working full-time and cobbling together the credits for an associate’s degree in business administration at the local community college. He now commutes one hour each way to one of Nebraska’s two metropolitan areas, where he works in a call center providing IT support to law firms across the country. “I love troubleshooting and fixing things. I enjoy it.” He is currently engaged to his longtime girlfriend from his hometown.

Thomas may consider returning to college for a bachelor’s degree, though he does not have any immediate plans. “The expense side of things turns me away. Throwing all that money at just another piece of paper that hopefully will help you pay some of it back.” Now that he has earned an associate’s degree, Thomas “can’t think of one reason” why he would return to college. “What would be the point of me going back to get a bachelor’s degree? Do I really have the time slash the want slash the need to do it? I don’t really think that I do.”

Looking back, Thomas does not regret his decision to withdraw from college and return home. If he could go back in time, however, he would focus less on sports and concentrate instead on succeeding academically and working toward a degree that would help him professionally. “Coming from a first-generation family, I really didn’t have anything to go off of. I was kind of on my own, so I decided to follow sports. It didn’t pan out for me.” While he has

fond memories of the year he spent away at college, he views a college degree as “just a piece of paper.” On balance, he reflects, “I had a good experience with higher education, it just wasn’t for me. I went to class every day, did my homework, got decent grades. I just wasn’t getting my money’s worth.”

Bella | Kentucky

Decades of economic and cultural decline overshadow the verdant natural beauty of Eastern Kentucky. The region is still referred to as Coal Country, even though most of the mines are long-abandoned and the majority of coal jobs have vanished. Many isolated Appalachian communities have been fading for generations, undone by economic collapse and the unforgiving drug epidemic that has followed. Residents of the impoverished, mostly White towns in this rural region face an uncertain future, depending on government welfare and food assistance programs for survival.

Most young people in Bella's hometown move away at their first opportunity. "I never want to go back there. It's full of all kinds of drugs and people who bring back all sorts of memories." She describes a main street with shuttered storefronts that have not seen business in decades and "houses and trailer parks that are all run down and in pretty bad shape." Her family and neighbors in her "really tiny, really country" hometown do their food shopping at the nearest Walmart thirty miles away.

The county where Bella grew up has just one high school. She was a bright and accomplished student, whose straight As and 4.0 grade point average placed her near the top of her 156-member high school class. "I was on the academic team and everything." School served as Bella's escape from a difficult and abusive family dynamic at home. As a high school sophomore, she began participating in the school's Upward Bound program as a way to get out of the house. "But I always knew that college was something I wanted to do. It was always something in my mind."

Bella applied to two local colleges, both within an hour's drive from her hometown. She was accepted only into the pubic, non-selective state university that hosted her high school's

Upward Bound program. Despite receiving a Pell Grant, academic scholarships, and in-state tuition, Bella needed to take out private student loans to cover the cost of attendance and living on campus.

Her familiarity with the campus and relationships with several Upward Bound staff helped smooth the transition when she enrolled the fall after her high school graduation. “My first semester started out really great.” The advising she received from the University’s NOVA program, which provides student support services to low-income, first generations students, helped Bella thrive during her first semester. As a devoted member of her hometown’s volunteer fire department, she decided to major in the university’s Fire, Arson, and Explosion Investigation program.

Bella remembers the culture shock she experienced when she transitioned from her small, rural community to a bustling university environment. “I felt like I was at a disadvantage.” She noticed that she had been offered fewer academic and co-curricular opportunities in high school than her peers. She also had difficultly navigating the small city where her University was located and often got lost when venturing off campus. Most of all, she was overwhelmed by the volume of relationships she needed to form during her first month at college. “I am so used to being from this town where you can really go talk to anybody and know everybody. Coming [to college] you don’t know anybody, and there’s people you pass every day that you’ve never seen. It was different.”

Despite a strong start academically, Bella’s newfound social life soon began to interfere with her studies. “Coming from an abusive situation at home, going into college, I was trying to find myself, and I was trying to figure out who I was and who I fit in with. And I got into a bunch of friend groups that were doing stuff that I probably normally wouldn’t do.” At one point

in the spring semester, Bella noticed that her roommate and several friends had stopped attending classes without any repercussions. “I was like, ‘Oh, going to classes isn’t something you have to do.’”

Toward the end of her first year, Bella was put on academic probation and ultimately suspended because she stopped attending classes. It was around that time that her lifelong mental health issues began to flare up, which she suspects was a result of the academic pressure and the isolation she felt from being away from her home for the first time. “The first semester I had a good support system through NOVA, but the second semester I was more free, and I was able to do more myself, and I think I really didn’t have that great of a support system.” She successfully appealed the University’s decision that she take a semester off, motivated by dread at the prospect of having to live back at home with her father and abusive step-mother.

That fall she returned to campus determined to get back on track academically. But the same behaviors she struggled with during her first year returned, compounded by her persistent mental health challenges. “I honestly don’t know why I stopped going to classes. I was really depressed and really anxious, it all got the better of me. Really I just stayed in my room a lot.” Her professors and advisors contacted her by email, warning her that she was missing too many classes and would fail. On one occasion she even received a visit from one of the university’s mental health counselors in her residence hall, but Bella felt that she could not be honest during their conversation. “I didn’t want to admit that I was failing or struggling in any way. I wanted to be able to do it on my own and didn’t want to admit that I couldn’t.”

Bella struggled for six semesters before the university put a hold on her account and rescinded her financial aid. She was notified that she owed the university $8,000 in order to re-enroll or transfer her credits to another institution. “After that I think I finally gave up.” Her

mental health spiraled when she realized she would have to withdraw from her degree program with no immediate plan to return. “I developed more anxiety because I was afraid that everybody viewed me as this failure.” Bella’s father, who was her closest and most supportive family member, did not hide his disappointment. “I think it affected my dad a lot because he saw more in me than what I was able to do.”

After moving out of her residence hall Bella stayed temporarily with her boyfriend’s family, who lived nearby. “I was definitely really disappointed with myself. I know a lot of it was my fault. It was really hard because I always thought of myself graduating college and doing something great with my life. And I couldn’t finish it… and it’s very hard to accept that.” Within a few weeks she found work at a local retail store and eventually moved into an apartment of her own with her boyfriend, whom she later married. Eight years later, she still lives in the city near her university and is a full-time parent to two young children.

Looking back, Bella’s warmer memories of her time at college are darkened by feelings of regret and disappointment. “I really wish I would of seen college more as an opportunity for me to find my career and study and do what I need to do…I think I used it more as an excuse to get away from [my hometown] and get away from my home life because it wasn’t great. I used it more as, like, trying to find myself and find my freedom than I did as an opportunity to actually start my career or try to get myself ready.” She acknowledges that, while the friends she made in college were among the best she has ever had, her social life played a role in hindering her academic progress.

Bella and her husband are working hard to pay off Bella’s debt to the university so that she can have the option of continuing a degree program. She currently owes the University $3,000 on top of $23,000 in student loans which she also began repaying in recent years. She

now realizes that she did not understand the financial realities of paying for college when she was a student. “I think I would’ve taken it a lot more seriously. I don’t think I really knew how to manage money or what money really was when I was there.”

Bella feels that her plans to re-enroll in college are always thwarted by the financial realities she and her husband face, paired with the daily challenges of parenting two small children. As time passes her college experience and aspirations seems more distant. “It’s kind of a big blur in my mind, something I try to forget about.”

Jamie | Vermont

The idea of Vermont as a rural paradise began in the late eighteenth century, when settlers from overcrowded, southern New England states migrated north amidst a frenzy of unregulated land speculation. Rich in natural beauty, the mountainous region fostered a sense of unlimited possibilities for those looking to begin life anew in an agrarian society. By the mid-1800s, however, the land had taken more than it could handle, and the consequences of reckless and unsustainable agriculture and mining gave way to a rugged, rocky, and completely deforested landscape. A combination of poor soil, bad weather, and an outdated transportation system prompted thousands of Vermont families to abandon their homesteads and move west through the second half of the nineteenth century. Since then, the white-steepled, bucolic charm of the small villages has coexisted with harsh, hill-farm poverty, and the landscape and culture of the state has continued to change.

Jamie was born and raised in a small Vermont village nestled in a valley between the Green Mountain range. The relics of his town's ever-changing past are everywhere, from the tree-lined hayfields of the now-shuttered dairy farms to the school's marble façade, sourced from the nearby stone quarry. "It is a very interesting dynamic being from a small Vermont town," Jamie remembers. "Everyone knew everyone. It was like growing up with family." His high school class had sixteen graduates, most of whom had been together in the town's tiny, central school since kindergarten.

Jamie describes his hometown as "very small-town cliché." Most residents live on or off of five main roads that weave through the township. The few businesses in town are a mix of local shops and national chain stores, including a grocery store, a dollar store, a gas station. The town has three historic and stately churches that each serve elderly and dwindling congregations.

Children and dogs roam freely about the village, which is always decorated for an approaching holiday. “We have a Christmas tree lighting every December where we light up this tiny tree in front of Town Hall. For some reason the tree gets smaller every year.” A middle child of three, Jamie leaned heavily on the support system provided through the school and community. Both parents worked a lot, and he shared few common interests with his siblings. Much of Jamie’s childhood was spent out in the community on his own, at school, or in the homes of friends and neighbors. He began participating in his school’s Upward Bound program and made it his personal goal to become the first person in his family to attend college.

In high school, Jamie was a bright, motivated student who formed close bonds with his teachers. During his senior year, he participated in a dual-enrollment program through the local state college and earned eighteen college credits before even enrolling in a bachelor’s degree program. He felt a lot of pressure from his family, teachers, and community members to attend college. “It was not something that seemed optional. I didn’t feel like I had another choice.” That year he applied to three colleges: his “dream school” in a neighboring state, the local college where he had completed dual-enrollment coursework, and Harvard University, on account of a bet from his father that he would not apply. “I was rejected, but I got money out of it,” Jamie remembers with a smile. He was accepted into his dream school but chose to remain locally because it was the only option he could afford. With in-state tuition and local scholarships awarded through his high school, the cost of his first two years were covered.

Jamie’s transition to college was hectic at first, and he was not accustomed to the lack of structure in his daily routine as a full-time college student. Even though he was familiar with the small campus, he often got lost when looking for his classes or seeking out professors during their office hours. More than once he napped through a class by accident. “My first month or so

of college was very stressful and confusing. I just tried to take it all on my own when I really should have been looking for the support I had all through high school." It was important to Jamie that he live on-campus during his freshman year, despite the fact that his hometown was a less than fifteen-minute drive away. He quickly bonded with roommate and others in his residence hall. By the middle of his first semester on-campus he was thriving. "Being from a small town definitely made me hesitant to go to a bigger school. I had never experienced larger schools, big auditoriums, super movie style universities. A smaller school was what I knew how to handle."

His plans to study psychology changed after taking an introductory course his first semester. He discovered an interest in history and switched his major with hopes of someday becoming a museum curator. When he struggled in classes, he went to the academic help center for support. He discovered a passion for theater in an elective course he initially took only to satisfy a general education requirement. The theater department quickly became the center of his social life on campus, and he gradually became more involved theater productions. "I was the Prop Director. I got thrown into it freshman year and was like, 'I like this, this is what I am good at.' And that's what I stuck with."

With support from his academic advisor, the campus TRIO director, and theater faculty, Jamie built a support network that helped him succeed academically. He sought out professors who fostered a classroom environment that synced with his personal learning style. "When I started college I was very, very shy and I didn't know how to jump into groups and do groupwork. But I worked on it and eventually got into the flow." Jamie's new campus life precipitated a positive change in his mental health compared to high school. "I felt like I belonged. Even though I struggled with stress, I had the support I needed." The freedom and

opportunity Jamie felt each day was refreshing. “I felt stuck in high school. I had been there since preschool. All the same people for over thirteen years. We never got a break from each other. At college, you get to pick who you hang out with and who you don’t. In a small town you don’t have that option.”

Toward the end of Jamie’s sophomore year, he began experiencing health issues that interfered with his studies and life on campus. His condition gradually worsened to the point where he could no longer drive or be left alone in his residence hall. “My health started to go downhill pretty fast so I had to take a year off, a leave of absence for medical reasons.” He spent that year living at home with his parents and later with his brother’s family in Kentucky. Jamie remember struggling with feeling of isolation and loneliness that year, a stark contrast to his vibrant life at college.

The fall following his medical absence Jamie was well enough to return to campus and continue his course of study. The process of reenrolling was confusing, and he was surprised to discover that he no longer qualified for his scholarships due to his medical leave. To cover costs, he took out a student loan and decided to live off campus at his grandmother’s house nearby. “I slept on her couch for a whole year. It was a time.” Jamie had difficulty readjusting to campus life that year. He seemed to have missed so much socially during his medical leave and developed a perception that he had fallen behind. “I felt like I wasn’t achieving as much as them. Trying to overcome that feeling of failure was really hard. I wanted to be successful so bad.” As his medical condition continued to flare up, Jamie began missing classes and had difficulty gathering the energy required to study.

His decision to withdraw from college was gradual. “It was a really long process. I ended up talking to my mom a lot about it. I talked to the director of the Upward Bound program. I

talked to my doctor and my therapist." He agonized with the decision and struggled with a persistent feeling of failure. He remembers thinking, "I don't want to do this. I want to go to college, I want to finish my degree. I want to work where I want to work. I don't want to feel like I am held back and I am failing when everyone else is succeeding."

Jamie's friends from the theater department were supportive, but he began to worry that he was annoying them with the issue. "I needed validation from others that this was the right move. It took a good month for me to rationalize that it's not a competition, this is my own path, I need to be able to take it one step at a time." Ultimately, Jamie believes his decision to withdraw was the right one, citing his tenuous medical condition and the $10,000 student loan debt he had accrued as a result of the lost scholarships. Two years later he still struggles with feelings of failure and missed opportunity. "I am 13-credits short of getting my bachelor's degree… Dropping out was a really hard decision to make because I really just wanted to get it over with and be done with it because I am so close." He misses his friends and the "non-stop socialization" his life at college provided. "I've found out that I actually miss learning things. Now I am just left to Google things I am interested in, and it's just not the same as in the classroom."

Graduation season is always difficult for Jamie, and he tries to stay away from social media in the month of May to avoid seeing his peers' graduation photos. "I still have the ghost of failures past when I see my friends online or talk to my friends about graduation. That should be me, I should be there." Jamie plans to return to complete his bachelor's degree in the future, but sees no immediate path due to his medical condition and his desire to pay off his student loans before he reenrolls. "I am determined to get it at some point. But right now is not that part of my life."

Carolina | Arizona

The U.S.-Mexico border in southern Arizona spans about 370 miles through arid mountains, desert valleys, and hollow canyons. Most of the rugged terrain in this sparse region of the state is uninhabited by humans. The fence that divides the two countries consists mainly of three-strand barbed wire that transitions to chain link fence or tall metal panels near any of the state's nine points of entry.

Carolina was born and raised on the outskirts of a border towns in this dry and sparse rural region. Her parents, aunts, and uncles all immigrated to the United States from Mexico decades ago with hopes for a better future. Finding work and community within the area's agricultural and industrial economy, the family put down roots and raised the generation of children as American citizens. She and her cousins grew up among a tight community of migrant families, many of whom passed back and forth across the border each day as day laborers.

For as long as she can remember, Carolina felt a pressure to pursue higher education. "Since [my mother's generation] wasn't able to go to college, and because they were born in Mexico and came over here, they try to, like, pressure education onto us so that we are able to have a better life than they did." In high school, Carolina was a high-achieving but understated student. "I was pretty much the quiet student who would keep to herself. Do my work, wouldn't bother anyone." She refrained from participating in any extracurricular activities and mostly hid within the shadow of her high-spirited and accomplished older sister. "I am a very shy person. I like to keeping to myself. My sister is the total opposite of me. And that's why my mom compares us."

During her senior year, Carolina was accepted into two out of three of the in-state colleges where she applied. She received a generous scholarship from her top choice, the state's

flagship public research university, but decided instead to attend the local community college ten-minutes from her home. The choice was driven in large part by a new romantic relationship Carolina began during her senior year of high school.

Since the campus hosted the local Upward Bound program, Carolina already knew her way around when she enrolled that fall. “I was pretty excited. It wasn’t a huge transition because I would [move there] every summer with Upward Bound. I was pretty used to going over there.” Her plan was to complete a two-year associates degree and then transfer to a bachelor’s degree program in veterinary science at the state’s public flagship.

With her cousin as a roommate, Carolina moved into an on-campus residence hall designated for students in a year-long federal grant program supporting first-in-family, low-income college students from migrant or seasonal farm working families. She took full advantage of the extra support provided through the program, forming a close bond with the director and some professors. Carolina thrived in the classroom that first year and earned straight As in all of her classes. “Math classes, I got them all, they were easy for me.” Socially, Carolina and her cousin kept to themselves and made few friends beyond those they met through their residence hall. “I was pretty much focused on school. I didn’t have any distractions.”

Sophomore year brought more challenges for Carolina, in part because she no longer lived on campus through the first-year transition program. She rented an apartment with friends near her family and commuted to campus for class. At the start of her second year, Carolina began having “issues” with her boyfriend. “That made me not want to go to school. I ended up failing a lot of classes.” Eventually, her GPA dipped so low that she no longer qualified for the financial aid she received. “Since I failed classes, I wasn’t able to qualify for FAFSA so I had to pay for it.”

Carolina remembers the isolation she experienced during this time. “I pretty much did it on my own. I didn’t speak to anyone, I just saw the emails [from the financial aid office].” She considered asking the director of the first-year transition program for help, but she hesitated because she saw how he was now focused on another class of students. “I didn’t want to bother him.” Her cousin, who continued to thrive during her second year at college, lent a listening ear but tried to avoid the topic, allowing Carolina to “cope by herself.”

Toward the end of her sophomore year, Carolina, “pretty much stopped going to classes” and realized she would not be able to reenroll the following fall. “Once I started seeing how bad I was doing it didn’t help because I got pretty sad.” She had accrued several thousands of dollars in debt as a result of losing her financial aid. To make matters worse, she also went through a difficult break-up with her boyfriend, leaving her hopeless about the future. “I wasn’t in the right mental state.”

Carolina had great difficulty telling her family members about her departure from college. She dreaded having to tell her mother. “I didn’t tell her for a while because I didn’t want her to know.” When Carolina finally shared the news, her mother told her to go back to school. “She didn’t understand what was going on. She wanted the best for me, she saw how my sister did it and wanted me to follow in her footsteps.” Her cousins were more understanding, though Carolina sensed that they thought she had fallen well short of her potential.

After leaving college Carolina immediately sought out a job to begin paying down the student debt she owed the University. She spent several months working as a waitress at a chain restaurant near her home, then left to take a job as an accountant for an agriculture company. She enjoyed the full-time work and was relieved when she paid down all of her student debt within a year of departing college.

Carolina has no immediate plans to return to college, though she still holds on to her dream of studying at the public, flagship university and becoming a vet. Had she started there directly after high school, Carolina believes she might have already completed her bachelor's degree by now. "I would have been more focused over there." She also wonders why she didn't apply to school outside of Arizona. "I thought I wouldn't be able to afford any other state. I am not sure why I didn't apply to California or any other place."

Since withdrawing from college, Carolina has also come to terms with her desire to move away from her rural hometown and spend her adult life in another place. "I don't like it here, personally. I don't like the sun, I like gloomy. The sun is very draining for me, it makes me really tired… It's a small little town. When people ask you what is fun to do here, the answer is: not much."

It pains Carolina that she is not currently working toward her college and career dreams, especially because she knows she has the intelligence, capabilities, and motivation to be successful. "I see everyone else around me – like my friends and everyone – like, still going to college. And I am the only one working a full-time job, not being able to go back to college for a while because I wasn't able to afford it. So, I just feel like, I would envy them for being able to go and me just being stuck not being able to finish my education."

Sophie | Montana and North Dakota

When Sophie was nine years old, the shale oil boom transformed her small rural town in the North Dakota Badlands. By the time she had reached eighth grade, the population had grown by almost 70 percent as oil industry outsiders relocated to her quiet community to take advantage of the economic opportunity unleashed by technological advances in hydraulic fracking. The rapid and expansive growth brought both benefits and costs for residents of Sophie's hometown. A new public infrastructure, including a $60-million-dollar high school and several new civic buildings, provided the once sleepy agricultural town with services and amenities that were unimaginable a decade earlier. But the influx of a large, low-skilled workforce also introduced natural exploitation and crime that stunned those with deep roots in the rocky landscape. "With the oil boom," Sophie remembers, "we had to stay with one other person at least and always had weapons on us because there is a lot of kidnappings and murders happening."

Unable to cope with the change, and fleeing a domestic violence situation, Sophie's mother moved her five young children over three hundred miles west to a windy and remote rural town in eastern Montana. The White, low-income family moved into a run-down mobile home community while Sophie's mother searched for work. "I lived in the country. Lots and lots of dirt, lots of plateaus, and lots of horses. We lived in a trailer court. When you think about trailer trash we were kind of that area. We ended up with a baby rattle snake in our trailer."

The rural Montana township where Sophie lived had no school system, so she and her sister were bussed more than 30 minutes each way to a district on the outskirts of a nearby small city. She was a "straight A, honor student type" who succeeded naturally in science and math and was also talented in art. She would occasionally be teased for her North Dakota roots. "When my accent comes out everyone will make fun of me and start making North Dakota

jokes." During her high school summers, she participated in the Upward Bound program that was affiliated with the local campus of the state university system.

When Sophie began her college search, her aspiration was to enroll in a degree program in the medical field. Planning to stay in Montana in order to qualify for in-state tuition, Sophie researched the pre-med program at the state university's flagship campus and nursing programs at other public colleges. To help provide financial support to her mother and younger siblings, and to save on living expenses, she ultimately enrolled in the nursing program at the same local university that sponsored her Upward Bound program.

Sophie's college classes were nothing like her high school teachers and Upward Bound instructors said they would be. She had been warned about exacting and intolerant professors who "were not going to allow for excuses or missing work." On the contrary, she found that most of her instructors were laid back, unorganized, and so accommodating that many students coasted through courses with little effort. "They didn't care how you wrote, they didn't care if you brought a computer into class to do other work."

Since she lived at home, Sophie did not join any student clubs or campus organizations. "I have Asperger's, so making friends is really hard for me to do, so I was kind of secluded." To continue providing financial for her family, she worked afternoons and evenings as a substitute teacher at a preschool near her home.

Halfway through her first semester, the police raided Sophie's family's trailer and arrested her new step-father for using meth. She remembers, "having to call my teachers and tell them, 'hey, I can't make it in today because I am sitting in front of a cop talking to them about our door being busted in.' It was really embarrassing. They didn't believe me until the cop got on the phone and told them I wasn't allowed to leave."

After that, Sophie saw no other choice but to withdraw from her two chemistry courses in order to pick up more hours at the preschool. “I had to work more to help with my family. We were going through a rough time and my mom needed me to help bring in more money.” By the end of the semester, despite working almost full time at the preschool, she managed to finish her remaining courses. She decided to take a leave of absence that spring semester to focus on working and supporting her family.

The following fall, Sophie reenrolled in one course as a way to ease herself back into her college studies. In addition to her federal student loans, she took out a private student loan to cover the cost of books and school materials she had previously gone without, including a laptop. After successfully completing that one course, she registered for a full course load for the spring semester and attempted to get back on track toward completing her bachelor’s degree in nursing.

Despite her best efforts that term, issues related to Sophie’s health and finances became barriers to her academic success. She missed several weeks of classes due to emergency tonsil surgery and the subsequent, longer than expected recovery time. Medical bills and lost wages led to an eviction from her apartment a few months later, leaving her without a place to live – let alone study – during her course finals. She secured a $2,000 emergency loan from the university to move into a new apartment, but ended up forfeiting all course credit from that semester.

Beleaguered by persistent health and financial issues, Sophie took stock of her college journey that summer and realized that for all the effort and expense she had only earned a total of 12-credits. She doubted that she would be able to pay back the emergency loan before the fall semester, which was required before she could register for classes. After several weeks of indecision, Sophie withdrew from college altogether to focus on her health, family, and finances. “I was really scared because growing up it was, you needed to have a college degree to, you

know, do anything with your life." Her relationship with her mother was negatively affected by the decision, and Sophie felt that some of her mother's guilt for Sophie's needing to withdraw manifested in disappointment and anger.

During that time, Sophie's mental health took a turn for the worse. "It kind of pulled me deep into depression because I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do, I wasn't able to pursue the career I've been wanting to. It was really just a terrifying and depressing time." Sophie remembers feeling lonely by not having anyone she could talk to about the difficulties she was experiencing. "It was difficult for me to accept it but I was able to do it because family is more important." A year after leaving college, Sophie got married and started a family of her own. She now has two children and provides full time care for her nine-year-old sister. She finds her greatest sense of community from her church, which "just makes me feel like home."

Sophie has not let go entirely of her dream to finish college and become a nurse. "I am hoping at some point I can back but it's not looking very logical at this point because I have so much I have to pay back before I can start college." She does not know how much she owes in student loans, beyond the $2,000 debt to the university for the emergency loan she must repay in order to reenroll. "I've started to pay back in little increments, I don't remember."

Looking back, Sophie believes her rural upbringing has affected her path through college. Among the ways she feels she has been disadvantage was the hour and a half commute one way from her rural town to the college campus. "It was a lot of extra time I could have been doing other things." She also cites the lack of jobs near her home as another factor complicating the educational pursuits of people who live in rural places.

As she assesses her own path and those of her peers, she is skeptical that a college degree is necessary for a fulfilling and financial stable career. "You definitely don't need to have a

college degree." Some of her friends work in hospitals and in the health care industry and make a good living with a college degree and the corresponding debt. Yet, she acknowledges that a degree is essential for her become a nurse and work with patients. "I've always just wanted to be able to help people… You need a college degree to do that."

Jerry | Mississippi

The pace of life is slow in Jerry's small Mississippi hometown. "It's kind of like being in a time capsule. You go back there and you're like, 'Oh, so much hasn't changed.'" The predominantly Black town has fewer than 1,500 residents and little in the way of economic or cultural activity. "It's still boring. There's basically nothing there." Many families, including his own, have been rooted in the area for generations. "Everyone knows everyone, or so they think."

Jerry, who is Black, graduated from high school in a class of 32. He made good grades with little effort and spent as much time participating in extracurricular activities as he did in the classroom. "I didn't feel like I was really pushed or anything. Everything came easy for me, which kind of set me up for failure once I made it to college." He played baritone horn in the school's marching band and enjoyed participating in band trips and playing music at school football games.

Growing up, the prospect of attending college was rarely a topic of discussion among his family. None of his relatives any post-secondary education, and his parents were agnostic about whether Jerry should pursue a college degree. "It was never really talked about, so I wouldn't say that I had plans to go. I didn't really have plans not to go. If I go I go, if I don't I don't." In a high school accounting class where Jerry excelled, his teacher encouraged him to pursue a bachelor's degree in accounting and begin a career in business management. In the spring of his senior year, Jerry was accepted into one of the state's public, non-selective universities, which he had become familiar with through his high school's Upward Bound program.

Jerry was enchanted by the endless possibilities of college life when he arrived on campus the fall after his high school graduation. He instantly made friends with peers in his classes, residence hall, and the university choir, which filled up much of his free time. He

registered for a full load of accounting classes and had earned straight As by the end of the term. “My first semester freshman year was a piece of cake…My best semester was my first semester. It was also probably the most hectic. But I was focused, I was eager.”

When Jerry returned to campus for the spring semester, however, the momentum built that fall began to fade. Classes were more challenging because he had to enroll in courses outside of his major to satisfy general education requirements. He also had difficulty making ends meeting financially. “I guess you could say there were money issues. Paying for books became a concern.” Unable to find work in his small, rural college town, Jerry began picking up weekend and evening shifts as a grocery store stocker in his hometown ninety minutes away.

Halfway through the spring term Jerry reached a breaking point. The due dates for two major assignments, one for an accounting class and another for an English class, coincided on the same week. In both courses he was confused by the assignments and unclear about the professors’ expectations. He remembers calling his mother and telling her, “This is overwhelming, I can’t do this. This is just too stressful for me. I am coming home.” One evening, without telling anyone, Jerry gathered the contents of his dorm into his car and drove home. “I just left. I just packed up my room and left.”

After spending the summer at home working full time at the local grocery store, Jerry made the decision to reenroll. He successfully appealed his academic suspension and registered for a full set of accounting courses. “I thought I was ready.” To save money, he decided to remain living at home and clustered his classes into two days on campus. That semester his academic success was mixed. “I did well in the classes that were interesting to me.” But the burden of his commute began to wear on him. During that semester, Jerry’s grandmother became

ill, adding another distraction from his studies. That semester he remembers being, “not focused, not really caring, just driving back and forth for work.”

As Jerry juggled his studies with a family illness, financial pressure, and a ruthless schedule, he came to realize that his academic interests were waning. “I just didn’t feel like school was the thing I wanted to focus on at the time. It wasn’t really my top priority.” By that point he had grown weary of investing his parents’ and his own money into something that was no longer important to him. “At that point I was just tired of wasting money.” In the middle of that fall semester he stopped attending his classes and began to ignore outreach from his advisor, professors, and friends.

At the time, Jerry recalls that, “Me leaving school didn’t really bother me because I was so focused on my career, family, and making money.” Jerry does not remember ever speaking with his family about his decision to withdraw from college. He knew that eventually he would need begin paying down the $15,000 in federal student loads he had taken out to cover the difference between tuition and his family’s modest contribution. Jerry left the job at the grocery store and began working full-time at a local dollar store, eventually rising to the rank of manager. He lost that position after being robbed in the store at gunpoint, an incident for which he blames himself. Soon after, he returned to stocking shelves at the grocery store.

At his grandmother’s funeral the spring after Jerry’s college withdrawal, his aunt encouraged Jerry to return with her to her home in the Virginia suburbs of Washington DC. Jerry immediately agreed. “I knew I didn’t want to be in Mississippi. I knew the small country vibe was not really my thing.” He became involved with Year Up, a one-year training and job placement program that provides under-served young adults with skill and professional

development. Ultimately, he secured a position at a mid-size information services company, where he now works as a senior telecom engineer.

Ten years after his departure from college, Jerry has no immediate plans to pursue a post-secondary degree. “I am not sure if I will ever go back. I want to just because I don’t like the thought of having started and haven’t finished yet.” He has no interest in enrolling in an online degree program that would allow him to work full-time while pursuing his degree. “I lack the discipline of staying focused from that standpoint.”

Jerry acknowledges that his rural, small town background may have influenced his college trajectory and decision making. As he reflects on his outlook as a high school student, he recognizes the limited range of potential career and education opportunities that he was exposed to:

> “I wish I had known about other avenues and resources prior to wasting so much time and money going to college right out of high school. I would have definitely taken a different route and pursued an alternative. I think it was a lack of not knowing about other resources as well as wanting to make a difference. It was me wanting to be the first one to go to college and finish. I knew that I wanted to be successful I just didn’t know how that would come about. And at that time I thought college would be the only way. And so, I went.”

Sarah | Wisconsin

The high school kids in rural, northwest Wisconsin know how to party. "We all come from working class families," Sarah recalls, "so we didn't have parents at home to monitor the situation. If you wanted to have fun on the weekend, you drank." In the remote, mostly White town of 600 where Sarah grew up, "Everybody had cars because we lived in the country. Even if your parents were home, kids would leave and just go off and do whatever."

Sarah was bused 40 miles round-trip each day from her home to a small, post-industrial town nearby where she attended high school. She describes the area as "homogenous and dead-end" without "a lot of upward movement." Most of the high school graduates remained local, many taking low-wage positions at lumber yards, the local hospital, or the nearby oil refinery. Her parents split when she was seven, after which her mother began an abusive relationship that lasted through Sarah's teen years. In high school, she enrolled in Upward Bound because she had older peers who went through program and attended college. "There was always this mentality of, if you want to leave you have to go to college." At home, she described an expectation that "Sarah would go to college. Sarah would be the one who made it."

She applied to several different types of colleges throughout the Midwest, ultimately choosing a private, urban, Jesuit research university a full day's drive from her hometown. "It eventually came down to who was giving me the most financial aid. It *seemed* that [this school] was giving the most aid." While she qualified for the Pell Grant, she knew she would also need to take out several loans to cover the cost of tuition.

Once enrolled, Sarah quickly adapted to the vibrant campus environment. She joined several student organizations, including the rainbow alliance and feminist voices club. She felt that she fit in academically and socially. "I had my own community. I had people I could reach

out to." Sarah settled on a Secondary Education and English double major and found that the professors were "laid-back" and more focused on her success that many of her high school teachers. Over time she observed a significant class disparity that permeated all aspects of campus life. She discovered "an entirely different class of people in terms of spending" and remembers being appalled that some classmates would trash the contents of their dorm rooms, including furniture, food, and school supplies, at the end of each semester.

As much as she enjoyed being away at college, she also missed certain aspects of her life at home. City life was at times overwhelming. "Travel was always really hard for me. Where I grew up you had to drive everywhere. I don't understand city transit at all. I don't know how to access it. The buses in [this city] terrify me. I am afraid I am going to get lost." She also missed the deep, quiet forests of northern Wisconsin. In the city, "You can't drive 10 minutes and just be in the woods."

Financing her college education was an unrelenting stressor for Sarah. Her mom continued to claim Sarah as a dependent, despite not providing any form of support, and was reluctant to share her financial information required for the FAFSA. "Three or four semesters in a row I couldn't apply for aid because she wouldn't give me the information." She ended up paying for her whole first semester tuition out of pocket. The university's financial aid office was similarly unhelpful. "The phone calls from the financial aid office were terrifying." No one Sarah spoke to seemed able to explain the scope of her financial obligation or help her understand the process for meeting it. During one conversation her sophomore fall, Sarah remembers a financial aid counselor stating, "You can't come here this semester if you can't pay this amount."

When winter break arrived, Sarah was unable to come up with the $250 needed to travel home for Christmas. “My mom said, ‘Oh, sorry. Can’t do anything to help you.’” During that time Sarah’s parents sent her younger brother, whom she relied on for emotional support, away to military school, putting him out of touch at a challenging time.

The unrelenting financial stress exacerbated mental health issues for Sarah. “It was a big snowball effect… I didn’t go to classes because I was depressed and I couldn’t get out of bed.” She described the fall of her junior year as a “spiral” that resulted in a withdrawal from half of her classes. She began mental health counseling and realized, “Where I am is not healthy for me, even if I am technically bettering myself”.

Halfway through the fall of her junior year, Sarah remembers a key meeting with an academic advisor. She explained, “I can’t handle what is happening right now. I need at minimum to take a gap year.” The advisor helped her withdraw from some classes in order to complete credit for others. “Sitting down with [my advisor] was really helpful in the whole process. She gave me all my options. She helped lighten the load. She bridged the gap in reaching out to professors.” She also drew support from her group of friends.

“College was about getting to a place of safety. I got to a place of safety and I was going to lose it because I couldn’t afford it.” At the time of Sarah’s departure from college, she had completed four semesters’ worth of academic credit and accrued $22,000 in student loans. Three years later, she misses many aspects of her college life, including her friends, classes, and extracurricular advocacy groups. She has remained in the city of her university and, after three years serving at various restaurants, now works as a circulation clerk and youth services assistant at a public library. She would like to return to college and finish her bachelor’s degree, which

she estimates she could complete in roughly a year. “The biggest deterrent is my student loans are coming due and they are asking a lot more than I can afford.”

Looking back on her college journey, the most persistent emotion for Sarah is a “huge element of shame.” She finds it difficult to explain to potential employers that, “I dropped out college but I promise I am not flaky.” She also experiences shame during interactions with her family and members of her rural hometown community in Wisconsin. Every time she sees her grandfather, he asks when she is going to return to college. “I was supposed to be the one who made it. I was supposed to be the one who went to school and got away from poverty.”

CHAPTER SIX: PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to apply the method of Phenomenological Reduction to the Individual Textural Descriptions. As Husserl (1931) describes, "In order to note the uniting relations in a whole, analysis is necessary … Each part is thrown into relief by a distinct act of noticing, and is steadily held together with those parts already segregated" (p. 114). In this way, the act of Phenomenological Reduction exposes the essential nature of the phenomenon through a focus on how the separate parts of an experience form a whole. The process of returning to the textual descriptions again and again with careful awareness to how they relate to each other allows for shared meaning to emerge. Or, as Moustakas (1994) explains:

> The process involves a prereflective description of things just as they appear and a reduction to what is horizonal and thematic… Reflection becomes more exact and fuller with continuing attention and perception, with continued looking, with the adding of new perspectives. Reflection becomes more exact through corrections that more complete and accurately present what appears before us. Things become clearer as they are considered again and again. Illusion is undone through correction, through approaching something from a different vantage point, or with a different sense of meaning. Some new dimension becomes thematic and thus alters the perception of what has previously appeared (p. 93).

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss four dominant units of meaning, or themes, that emerge from Phenomenological Reduction of the co-researchers' experiences: 1) Family Influence and Interaction, 2) Rural Cultural Identity, 3) Feelings of Distress, and 4) Reconstructing Self and Future. Family Influence and Interaction refers to the bi-directional impact of family members on the stop-out experience of rural undergraduates. The theme Rural

Cultural Identity refers to how co-researchers' perceived their rurality as implicated in the stop-out experience. Feelings of Distress refers to the negative affect on mental and emotional wellbeing that co-researchers experienced during the stop-out process. Finally, the theme Reconstructing Self and Future addresses how the stop-out experience reshaped co-researchers' identity and outlook for the future.

The data in this study could be organized in many different ways, and several findings easily fit in multiple themes. These four themes provided the most stable and salient categorization, particularly in the ways that the data shed light on aspects of co-researchers' experience that are distinctly rural.

In the second section of this chapter, I integrate each individual description into one Composite Textural-Structural Description (Moustakas, 1994) of the meaning and essence of the experience, representing the group as a whole. This description summarizes the phenomenon of stopping out of an undergraduate degree program for low-income, rural undergraduates incorporating these and lesser themes based on the experiences of the students in this sample.

Family Influence and Interaction

All of the co-researchers in this study spoke frequently about the influence of family members on their experience of stopping-out of college. While the nature of the relationship with parents, siblings, and extended family varied widely, these relationships unquestionably shaped how and what co-researchers experienced as they withdrew from college. For approximately half of the co-researchers in the sample, family members served as an important resource and system of support when faced with adversity at college. For the others, the nature of family relationships was more nuanced and, in several cases, very troubled. For all co-researchers, however, the perceptions and reactions of family members loomed large as they navigated college departure.

Tracy, for example, was haunted by the prospect of disappointing her family when returning home from college without a degree. “Everyone was looking to me to be the rocket that launched…I didn’t want to let anyone down.” The negative reaction that she anticipated from her mother, whom Tracy had cared for through all of her pre-college years, was so severe that she spent the next fourteen years thousands of miles away from Missouri. Sarah similarly chose to build a new life away from her rural Wisconsin town due to the shame she felt for withdrawing from college. She still dreads when, on rare occasion, she returns home for holidays and is asked by relatives when she will finish her college degree. Dawn experienced outright aggression from her family when she returned to Arkansas. The news of her withdrawal sparked a hurtful argument where her mother “ordered me to go back.”

The most difficult aspect of Braylee’s stop-out was being viewed and treated differently by her family and others in her small Native American Community in North Dakota. Having made the difficult decision to leave home for college less than two years before, Braylee felt doubly scorned for returning to the community empty handed. “It’s hard to deal with that,” she explained. Her sister relished the opportunity to share the secret with community members, fully knowing how their perceptions of Braylee’s future potential would change.

Indeed, a defining moment in the experience of stopping out for every co-researcher was informing their families, even for those who knew they would receive support. Dolly, for example, felt ashamed to return to her hometown in Mississippi to tell her family, who were initially “thrilled” and “all for” her higher education pursuits, that she would not graduate with her mortuary degree. She felt “ashamed” that she had “let my family down” by not achieving her dreams of a college degree. For Robby, anticipating the conversation with his parents became a significant source of anxiety. The feeling of relief he felt after leaving college set in after his

family responded with support. “Everyone was understanding. They were all just like, ‘Ya know what, it happens.’ And everything was OK.”

For co-researchers, the reactions of family members meant so much because parents and elders desperately wanted their youth to find success in college and achieve life-long economic and career stability. When deciding to withdraw from college, Nicole recognized what her college education meant to her father in Oklahoma, “My dad never got a college education, he didn’t want me to be in his shoes.” It pained Bella to devastate her father in Kentucky with the news that she would not be the first in her family to earn a college degree, “I think it affected my dad a lot because he saw more in me than what I was able to do.” Dolly realized how much hope her grandparents had placed in her college education, and she was burdened by their worry that her lack of a college education would prevent her from a financially secure future. Carolina realized that by withdrawing from college she was falling short of the dream her parents, aunts, and uncles had for her, “Since [my mother’s generation] wasn’t able to go to college, they try to, like, pressure education onto us so that we are able to have a better life than they did.”

Rural Cultural Identity

Rural cultural identity emerged as a key factor in co-researchers’ experience of withdrawing from college and in their higher education experience more generally. Participants described the cultural values and norms within their rural hometown environment in great detail, especially their effect on the circumstances surrounding college withdrawal. Tracy, for example, developed an awareness of the specific ways her rural Missouri background made her different from peers. “Rural and lower income people, they transit though society in a much different way.” She observed that non-rural classmates seemed to automatically understand the hidden rules and assumptions in everyday campus life, connecting her eventual withdrawal to a

perception that she, “didn’t have those rules in place in order to navigate.” Dawn felt that she did not have much in common with her metropolitan peers from the urban and suburban centers in Arkansas, commenting that the difference in life experiences meant that “we didn’t really have much to connect over.” Bella remarked that her rural background made her “feel like she was at a disadvantage” compared with her non-rural peers, especially in the critical moments leading to her departure from college.

Many co-researchers discussed how the need to navigate large groups of people contributed to their troubles at college. Tracy shared, “I grew up in a rural environment, a high school that had 98 kids in my class. My one biology class was bigger than my entire [high school] graduating class. I didn’t know what to do with that.” Bella was similarly overwhelmed by all the new faces. “I am so used to being from this town where you… know everybody. Coming [to college]…there’s people you pass every day that you’ve never seen. It was different.” Jamie described that he was, “hesitant to go to a bigger school. I had never experienced larger schools, big auditoriums, super movie style universities. A smaller school was what I knew how to handle.”

All co-researchers described how everybody knew one another in their rural hometowns. Dolly, Jerry, Jaime, Dawn, Robby, and Bella were all explicit about how growing up in these small, insular environments affected their path through college to the point of their withdrawal. Dawn never quite adjusted to the larger scale, commenting that “I don’t do crowds” and finding that it was difficult for her to form “deep rooted relationships.”

Co-researchers mostly framed their rural background as a barrier to success in college. Braylee described the stark class differences she noticed when she arrived on campus. What a lot of peers “call their necessities,” like running water, electricity, or the internet, Braylee and her

family viewed as a "privilege." Sarah discovered, "an entirely different class of people in terms of spending" and was shocked by the wealth of some college peers, whose wasteful and opulent behavior was unlike anything she had seen in her working-class rural hometown. Both Jerry and Sarah observed how losing time by commuting from their rural hometowns to college impeded their studies. Sarah's 3-hour round-trip commute to campus took "a lot of extra time I could have been doing other things." One of Jerry's most enduring memories of college was "just driving back and forth" between home and school.

Importantly, co-researchers consistently described how their rural backgrounds exposed them to a more limited range of potential education and career opportunities than their non-rural peers. Jerry wished he had "known about other avenues and resources prior to wasting so much time and money going to college right out of high school." Sophie explained how the limited number of jobs in her rural hometown complicated how her high school classmates planned for their future. Braylee shared that youth in her hometown "didn't care… about their future or anything" and had a hopeless "mindset" that was constrained by the cycles of poverty on the reservation. Bobby was the most explicit:

> Somebody from a big city has people around them who have different life experiences. Some that go to college, some that don't. And you get a more mixed view on how adult life should be. They have more possible pathways drawn out for them. In my community everyone had the same pathway drawn out for them.

For some co-researchers, one damaging aspect of their rural cultural identity was a hesitancy to seek out support from others when they struggled. Two different dynamics related to co-researchers' rural background prevented them from asking for help. First, some were wary of approaching those who did not share their rural identity. Tracy, for example, described initial

"misgivings" about "people who didn't come from my own culture." Looking back on her experience, she recognized how her avoidance of people who "did not feel like a rural person to me" limited the support network she needed when faced with difficulty at the end of her first year. Second, some co-researchers' were hindered by traditional rural values of self-sufficiency and independence. Thomas was haunted by his parents' "if you start something finish it" expectations, which led to a belief that he should draw only on his inner resources when faced with hardship. Navigating academics and a busy track schedule, Thomas remembers, "I was kind of on my own."

Bella also had a hard time seeking support: "I didn't want to admit that I was failing or struggling in any way. I wanted to be able to do it on my own and didn't want to admit that I couldn't." Jamie also did not know how to ask for help when struggling: "I just tried to take it all on my own when I really should have been looking for the support I had all through high school." Tracy remembers not knowing "how to ask to help because it was a really big class. I didn't know how to engage in a larger environment." A critical barrier in Carolina's stop-out experience was her inability to reach out for help from others: "I pretty much did it on my own. I didn't speak to anyone."

And yet, other co-researchers voiced how their experience growing up in a small, intimate rural community was useful in forming new relationships in an environment that was starkly different from their hometown. While most students reflected on the difficulties of transitioning from small school to large college campus, others – notably Thomas, Dolly, and Jaime – acknowledged how skills they had developed in their adolescence were beneficial and helped them move through college life with ease. "Being from a rural place might have helped me," Thomas remembers, "I wasn't afraid to meet new people or to introduce myself to people."

Jaime was refreshed by the chance to choose a friend group, "At college, you get to pick who you hang out with and who you don't. In a small town you don't have that option." Dolly thrived socially and did not feel different from her classmates because of her rural background. "Where you are from should not stand in the way of reaching your goals. If you want to make it, you're going to make it. That's how I feel."

Feelings of Distress

For all co-researchers, one traumatic aspect of stopping out of college were the feelings of distress that intensified in the period leading up to and during their withdrawal from college. Despite the varying circumstances related to their college departure, every participant in this study described an acute decline in their mental and emotional wellbeing as they departed college. For some, the experience worsened a lifelong struggle with anxiety or depression. Others encountered symptoms of mental health disorders for the first time in their lives. For every co-researcher, however, the experience of withdrawing from college was defined as a period of profound and powerful emotional suffering.

Tracy, Bella, Carolina and Sarah struggled with depression so intense during their stop-out experiences that they found it difficult to leave their dorm rooms. Tracy remembers that she "just fell apart," and she wonders about the link between her mental health issues at college and her low-income, rural background. "I lot of the social rules governing a college campus are geared more towards middle-class, upper-middle class minds – and that's the culture." Bella's depression flared up from feelings of isolation and loneliness from being away from home for the first time. "I really didn't have that great of a support system." She stopped going to college because, "I was really depressed and really anxious…Really I just stayed in my room a lot." Sarah described the "big snowball effect" of her worsening depression. "I didn't go to classes

because I was depressed and I couldn't get out of bed." Carolina "pretty much stopped going to classes [because] I wasn't in the right mental state."

Robby experienced "anxiety to the point where you just feel like your insides are shaking" while attempting to finance his college education. He found it difficult to think about anything apart from "how I was going to get this figured out, how I was going to pay for it." Financial stress prompted similar feelings for Sophie during her final days at college. "It kind of pulled me deep into depression because I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do, I wasn't able to pursue the career I've been wanting to. It was really just a terrifying and depressing time."

For Braylee and Jamie, college was initially a place where lifelong mental health issues subsided. Jamie remembers a positive change in his mental health compared to high school. "I felt like I belonged. Even though I struggled with stress, I had the support I needed." When faced with the prospect of departing from college without a degree, both student's depression returned swiftly and has persisted in the years following their stop-out.

A common feeling of distress among co-researchers was a fear of disappointing themselves and others. Tracy remembers that, "This felt like failure, I didn't want to let anyone down." Having to withdraw from college was similarly agonizing for Braylee, "I have come this far to look forward. I came all this way just to give up. I feel like a failure. That's what I keep feeling. I really just went all the way there, did all of that, just to end up back here with nothing." Jamie constantly compared himself to his peers, "I felt like I wasn't achieving as much as them. I wanted to be successful so bad." Sarah is still burdened by the feelings of failure and disappointment, "I was supposed to be the one who made it. I was supposed to be the one who went to school and got away from poverty."

Co-researchers also described feeling overwhelmed by confusion during many critical moments in their stop-out experience. When faced with hardship or difficult choices at college, students felt flooded by confusion and the feeling of not knowing how to deal with their troubles. Realizing he was uninspired by his classes and sidelined from the track team, Thomas felt confused and remembers that, "I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew it wasn't that." Jerry was confused by the expectations and explanations of professors, leaving him overwhelmed and thinking, "I can't do this. This is just too stressful for me."

Specifically, several co-researchers were confused by interactions with the financial aid office. Robby recalls that the financial aid officers "weren't being very helpful, it was so confusing. I felt like no matter how much I reached out I really wasn't getting anywhere." Jamie encountered similar difficulty when he applied initially for financial aid and again when he reenrolled after taking a leave of absence. Tracy felt, "dejected…helpless…hopeless" when she was unsuccessful in getting the information and support she needed from the financial aid office. Sarah was also confused by the financial aid office, finding she couldn't get the information she needed and remembering the phone calls as "terrifying."

Most co-researchers found it difficult to maintain their hopes and dreams for the future in the face of adversity and these challenging feelings. In several cases, participants described feeling "stuck" or left behind. Tracy shared, "At this point I feel like I am stuck. There is no way for me to continue." Braylee described that "I feel stuck. I feel like I am stuck in a slump…I feel stuck." Jamie remembers feeling paralyzed by emotional stress he experienced during and after his college departure: "Trying to overcome that feeling of failure was really hard."

However varied the circumstances leading up to withdrawal, the experience of stopping out was defined by intense and deeply personal feelings of distress. These feelings were so

powerful for some co-researchers that the moment of stop-out brought a wave of relief. Tracy remembers feeling, “sense of release, and a sense of relief” after the trials of her final semester on campus. Bobby experienced a “profound sense of relief” when he made the decision to withdraw and realized he no longer would focus on navigating out the financial aid system. Nicole remembers, “Once I had made the decision to drop out I was relieved. I could breathe.”

Overall, co-researchers’ warmer memories of college are dwarfed by the negative feelings of distress that precipitated or aggravated mental health issues during the experience of stop-out. Sophie felt “scared.” Nicole felt “drained…tired” and generally miserable. Tracy was “sad” and “angry.” Braylee was “dumbfounded” and “lost.” For Robby, leaving college “broke me in half.”

Reconstructing Self and Future

All co-researchers initially viewed higher education as a path to a brighter future. Sarah described college as “getting to a place of safety.” Tracy “knew in order to have a better existence I needed to go to college.” Braylee “wanted to get a degree and move away and start my life.” Dawn’s family pushed her in high school because “they wanted a better life for me.” As a result, these students transitioned to and through college with the expectation that a college degree with move them toward a future with more possibilities. Sarah voiced this outlook explicitly when she described her family’s belief that “Sarah would go to college. Sarah would be the one who made it.”

When they fell short of that goal, the expectations and beliefs once held about themselves and their futures fell apart. Perhaps the most painful aspect of the stop-out experience was a perception of falling short and a permanent set back in life. For Tracy, not having a college degree “really hurts. Now, any time someone tells me that I am intelligent or that I should

already have a degree…I get hurt." Dolly struggles to find meaning in her professional life, sharing that her current job is "not where my heart belongs." Bella still feels deep disappointment because, "I always thought of myself graduating college and doing something great with my life." Years later, her time at college is "kind of a big blur…something I try to forget about." It pains Sarah that her lack of a college degree is thwarting her career aspirations: "I've always just wanted to help people…You need a college degree to do that."

Every co-researcher went through a process of reorienting their identity and future goals in response to the new realities of their lives after college. For most participants, returning to college is not part of the near-term futures they have constructed. Sarah, Jamie, and Sophie's plans to finish their college degrees are stalled by financial barriers, notably large student loan balances. Sarah shared, "The biggest deterrent is my student loans are coming due and they are asking a lot more than I can afford." Sophie hopes to finish college eventually but "it's not looking very logical at this point because I have so much I have to pay back before I can start college." Jamie is a few credits shy of finishing his bachelor's degree but sees no viable path given his student debt: "I am determined to get it at some point. But right now is not that part of my life."

Others now envision a future without a college degree because they have found success, financial stability, and satisfaction in life after stopping out. Robby took a job first as an early childhood teacher and now works at a local window factory, which he greatly enjoys: "I am really happy right now and I am excited for the future, which I did not experience when in school." Dawn is thriving in an administrative position at a nearby law firm, which she prefers to the "not challenging…tedious" online classes she attempted after withdrawing from college. Thomas "can't think of one reason" why he would return to school and leave his lucrative

position in information technology. Jerry similarly has little desire to return to college and abandon his promising career path at a telecommunications firm: “I am not sure if I will ever go back.”

Indeed, a central realization for all co-researchers in this study was how profoundly the stop-out experience rewrote their understanding of self and plans for the future. Robby, for example, realized that the college-going imperative he absorbed during his rural school years was a fallacy: “It wasn’t until after I had dropped out that I realized that you don’t need to go to school to live a life or to make money… there are a lot of great people and a lot of great work out there.” He acknowledged that his experience stopping out of college revealed, as Käufer and Chemerow (2015) described, an “incomplete understanding of [self] as knowing subject” (p.17). For Robby, this new understanding of his identity, others, and the world after stopping out manifested in his choice to pursue a future that did not involve higher education.

Braylee articulated how the experience of stop-out reshaped not only her identity and future plans but also the perceptions of others in her small, tribal community. This change in self-understanding and future outlook was especially painful given all she had risked to attend college. She had left home as a top student with bold future plans and returned dejected two years later to the jeers of those who gave her “a lot of hate because not a lot of Native Americans go to a University.” For Braylee, the essence of the phenomenon is characterized by diminished hope for the future and the corresponding implications for her identity. And yet, she was the only participant in this study who had a specific plan to return to college in the near future. She fears having to return to college someday as an adult learner and sees finances as the only thing standing in her way: “I feel like I am not going to be able to go back…because I can’t afford it.”

It took moving away to college and then stopping out for Dawn to realize that the future she wanted was rooted in her rural hometown. During high school, she "wanted to be far away from here" and "didn't want to stay" in the place where she grew up. After withdrawing from college and returning home, she realized that she "could never live anywhere else…I feel like there is no way I could ever leave." In the year following her departure from college, Dawn has realized that the most meaningful aspect of her stop-out experience was how it clarified who she was and what she wanted from the future.

Finally, Tracy described how systemic inequities in the higher education system deprived her of the bright future she felt she deserved. She is "saddened" and "angry" by her transformation from an optimistic, resilient, and high-achieving high school student to a struggling, cynical adult. The essence of her experience was the difficult lesson that her plans for a better future were foiled by the systemic inequalities of the higher education system. "If my access to education had been decided based on my intelligence, my ability to learn, and that's it… If I had been measured just on my own merits, I would have had access to the education I wanted and needed. But I don't get those things."

Composite Textural-Structural Description

Stopping out of college is an experience that pulls rural undergraduates to pieces. Feelings of confusion, disappointment, shame, and failure cut into the sense of hope and optimism that once accompanied the prospect of earning a college degree. A future full of possibilities vanishes with a new reality that one would not be the first in family to make it through college and break the cycle of rural poverty. For college students from rural places, stopping out disrupts life's established meaning and plans, leading to a shift in identity that occurs in conjunction with significant emotional and physical distress.

Rurality is implicated in the experience of stop-out long before students set foot on a college campus. In rural hometowns, college outlooks are molded by small, insular, and supportive rural schools, where academic and social success is achieved with little effort. Friendships are formed by default rather than by choice among students who spent nearly all their primary and secondary school years together. Pursuing higher education was presented as the only viable pathway to adulthood, to upward and outward mobility, and to a better existence.

The influence of parents and family manifests in nearly every aspect of the experience. In rural towns, many parents know how it feels when dreams slip out of sight. These mothers and fathers do not want their children to end up in their shoes – underemployed, supporting a family paycheck to paycheck, stuck in time and place. For these students, earning a college degree is not an option but an expectation. Attending college is about reaching a place of safety.

Reminders of rural life surface often in campus interactions, and college does not feel like home. The scale of rural schools pales in comparison to that of the university, where the enrollment in a single college course can rival the student population of an entire rural high school. Absorbing the values and rhythm of a starkly different campus environment takes time.

The initial days at college are defined by a feeling of not knowing what to expect. Eagerness mixes with a sense of intimidation by the newness of campus life. Non-rural peers seem to navigate campus life with greater ease, possessing a broader set of knowledge, skills, and life experiences that give them the upper hand. They know what it is like to see new faces every day.

When academic, social, and financial challenges arise, rural undergraduates are often unclear about where to turn. Professors, advisors, and other administrators often complicate the confusion and frustration that students experience. Those who listen never seemed to have the agency or influence to solve challenges. Those who *can* help react with cool disinterest or abject incompetence. Mounting academic, social, or financial challenges precipitate a decline in mental and physical health. Symptoms of depression and anxiety penetrate daily routines. As time passes, fewer options remain for overcoming challenges that began to feel insurmountable. Flooded with emotions of hopelessness, confusion, and dejection, students see no other option but to give up.

When rural students depart college, feelings of failure and shame wash together with those of relief, acceptance, and surrender. The initial emotion of having let oneself down is followed quickly by questions about how family and community will react. A fear of being perceived differently overshadows the responses of empathy or disappointment received from those who are closest. The period immediately following college departure is characterized by feelings of self-blame, naivety, unfairness, and confusion. The path that was drawn out led nowhere.

The time spent at college now feels like a dream. Memories of people and places from campus life seem distant and out-of-focus. As peers finish college and pursue a future bright with possibility, a sense of being stuck and left behind lingers. The brave effort to overcome the odds

and become the first in the family to attend college feels wasted. Time passes, life moves on, and the experience of stopping out recedes from consciousness. Remnants of the former self are tucked away as new goals are formed to account for a life without a college degree. With the future now uncharted, the search for a new horizon begins.

CHAPTER SEVEN: OUTCOMES AND IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation study sought to provide a perspective on college stop-out among rural undergraduates. This final chapter begins with a summary of how the key findings discussed in the previous two chapters answer the study's research questions. Then, I present three main conclusions. First, this study offers scholars and practitioners a new orientation on the topic of college stop-out among rural undergraduates. No previous study has examined what and how this at-risk student population experiences when they withdraw from college. Second, the three theoretical perspectives presented in this study – transcendental phenomenology, ecological systems theory, and community cultural wealth – have broad implications for research on and practice with this student group. As a third conclusion, I present a new working persistence model for low-income, rural undergraduates. This final chapter concludes with implications for policy and practice and by highlighting additional ways this topic could be studied.

The primary research question in this study is: How do low-income undergraduates from rural areas perceive and describe their experience of stopping out of college? This question is answered primarily in Chapter 6 through the Composite Textural-Structural Description as well as three of the four major themes: Family Influence and Interaction, Feelings of Distress, Reconstructing Self and Future. Taken together, these descriptions and themes provide critical insight on how low-income undergraduates from rural areas and small towns perceive and experience the process of withdrawing from college.

For rural undergraduates, stopping out of college is an intense and devastating period of time that changes their understanding of self and hopes for the future. Students' rural backgrounds manifest in many aspects of how and what they experience. The distinct influence of rural families, communities, and schools shape what decisions students make before and after

their departure from college. Feelings of failure, shame, confusion, and disappointment characterize the rural stop-out phenomenon. After leaving college, the experience gradually recedes from memory as students reconstruct their identity and plan for a future without a college degree.

The secondary research question in this study is: How do undergraduates from rural areas describe their reasons for leaving college? This question is answered for each co-researcher in the individual textural descriptions presented in Chapter 5. As predicted, the reasons for college departure vary widely and may be similar to reasons students from any geography withdraw. In this study, students perceived their reasons for stopping out as related to financial challenges, family considerations, mental or physical health issues, personal hardships, or shifting educational or career aspirations. They often described how their reasons for stopping out were connected to their rural background. Some personal hardships that arose, for example, were due to logistical constraints of being from and/or attending college in a rural locale. Shifting aspirations were often attributed to the limited number of educational or career pathways visible in small, rural hometowns. Family issues that contributed to students' departure were often tied to dynamics and values distinct to rural life.

The third research question in this study is: How, if at all, do students' reasons for and experience of stopping out of college relate to growing up in a rural area? While this question is addressed in part through the first two research questions, a direct answer is provided in the theme Rural Cultural Identity, presented in Chapter 6. Co-researchers perceived their rural background as playing a central role in their experience of stopping out of college. In different ways and at different moments, co-researchers acknowledged how growing up in a rural area set them apart from their non-rural peers. Some students felt they did not understand the rules and

assumptions of campus life due to their rural background. Others felt that culture shock at college entrance or difficulty navigating large groups of peers contributed to their higher education journey. In general, as outlined in the individual descriptions, students' rurality was closely connected to the reasons for and experience of stopping out.

These findings have profound implications for research and practice within the context of American higher education and for those who work with rural undergraduates. In the sections below, I outline the study's three main conclusions: 1) A New Orientation on Stop-Out Among Rural Students; 2) Theoretical Implications; and 3) A Working Persistence Model for Low-Income, Rural Undergraduates.

A New Orientation on Stop-Out Among Rural Undergraduates

This study begins a new line of inquiry within educational research. As discussed in Chapter Two, few if any studies examine the topic of college persistence and retention among low-income students from rural places. The findings from this phenomenology start a fresh conversation in the literature about the experience of and reasons for stop-out among rural undergraduates, which is a population that completes college at a lower rate, than non-rural undergraduates. Drawing from a diverse sample, these findings provide the most complete interpretation of rural undergraduates' experience as they depart college and set a new course for their futures.

The main objective of this study was to understand "what" and "how" rural undergraduates experience stopping out of college. Findings suggest that *what* students experience may also be shared with those who grew up in different geographic settings. Undergraduates from non-rural locales, for example, almost certainly experience feelings of

distress when they depart college without a degree. Financial struggles or family considerations may also be key reasons non-rural undergraduates withdraw from college.

Rurality was clearly implicated, however, in *how* co-researchers experienced their withdrawal from college. In this way, the stop-out phenomenon is experienced differently among students who grew up in rural places than among those who did not. In rural high schools, for example, college is often presented as the only viable pathway to adulthood. Rural youth generally have less visibility than nonrural you into financially stable and fulfilling alternatives to earning a college degree. Further, co-researchers described the fright of navigating large groups of people for the first time in their lives and how values from their hometown shaped their decision-making at key points.

Most importantly, all co-researchers were explicit about how their rural background was connected to their experience of stopping out of college. The awareness these individuals expressed about how hometown geography shaped their college experience was striking. Whether non-rural students are equally cognizant of the impact of geography on college going is beyond the purpose and scope of this dissertation. Among co-researchers in this study, however, rurality was central to the stop-out experience – in part because they said it was.

The backgrounds, aspirations, and life experiences of co-researchers in this study generally fit the profile of college students from rural communities portrayed in previous studies. All participants attended small, insular, rural schools with narrow curriculums and limited access to college and career counseling (Graham, 2009; Irvin et al., 2017). When makings college plans, the future orientation of co-researchers were deeply influenced by family circumstances, which both enabled and constrained the college aspirations and decision-making (Brown, Copeland, and Costello, 2009; Johnson & Elder, 2005; Howley, 2017; Lichter, Roscingo, & Condron,

2003). Parents, teachers, and community members in co-researchers' rural hometowns all presented college as the most promising path to a successful, fulfilling, and financial stable future (Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996).

Consistent with findings in Hillman's *Education Deserts* (2016), all but one co-researcher chose to attend a non-selective, public institution near their rural town and stayed close to home, often because of community ties, rural cultural norms, or family responsibilities (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Ali & Saunders, 2008). Several co-researchers enrolled at the institution nearest to or within their rural community, a campus which in some cases also served as the site of their Upward Bound program. Since co-researchers chose non-selective, public institutions within close proximity to their rural hometown, the risk of undermatch or educational-career misalignment was greater (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Burke et al., 2015).

Findings from this study also align with previous research on what rural undergraduates experience once they arrive on campus. Co-researchers experienced culture shock, confusion, and frustration during their early days at college when they became immersed in a new cultural context that was starkly different from their hometown (Howley, 2017; Schultz, 2004). They felt that many professors and administrators were not equipped to address the complexity of their rural cultural outlooks and cultural conceptions (Dees, 2006). Many perceived that they were different from their peers in noticeable ways; notably, they felt less academically prepared and less advantaged in family financial resources. Also consistent with previous studies, co-researchers showed access to social capital through school, family, and community that aided the transition to college (Byun et al., 2012; Nelson, 2016).

Wells, Manly, Kommers, and Kimball (2019) stopped short of theorizing why rural students still earn college degrees at lower rates than their non-rural peers. Findings from this study suggest the lag is related to the ways that students' rurality is implicated in their experiences at college. Family circumstances, for example, play such an outsized role in the college experiences of these students because of the distinct qualities of many rural families: a deep connection to place, a cultural norm of limited geographic and socio-economic mobility spanning many generations, and a dual-aspiration for educational achievement and community preservation within families. Given that less one-third of students from rural areas return to their home county by age 25 (Gibbs, 1998), college-going can be higher-stakes for rural families than non-rural families. Further, college graduates with student loan debt are less likely to remain in rural areas than those without no student loans (Federal Reserve, 2019).

One key finding of this study is the significant influence of limited educational and career visibility in rural towns on the choices students make in college. This study shows that the lack of variety in professions and industries in stagnant rural economies, as well as insufficient post-secondary options, shapes the outlook and decision-making of rural undergraduates. As discussed in the previous chapters, study participants often arrived on campus with misaligned educational-career aspirations, career goals that would change and cause setbacks, or no plans at all for how college would help them achieve future goals. A consistent realization among students in the study was how different their choices would have been – from picking a major to deciding whether they should have attended college at all – had they been more aware of the diverse pathways available to a successful, fulfilling, and financially stable adulthood.

This outlook may contribute to the intense fear and distress rural students experience as they withdraw from college. Rural students who stop-out of college not only lose hope for a

better future, but also find themselves at a loss for what a new future will look like. In other words, the anguish rural students experience as they depart college may be more intense than for other student populations because they have fewer ideas about how to rebuild their future. Leaving college for most co-researchers in this study meant returning to where they started, with no progress made in advancing their dreams or living up to their potential. Others were surprised by the fulfillment they found in new jobs after leaving college. But for all co-researchers, the intensity of the stop-out experience can be attributed to their belief that failing to earn a college degree left them with no options for a brighter future beyond the few available within the confines of their hometown.

The greatest barrier to college completion for low-income rural undergraduates, based on findings from this study, may be a financial illiteracy about the true cost of college and how to pay for it. Every participant described at least one moment where they did not understand the cost of college and their financial obligation. Students' who accrued large student debt load did so without a concrete plan for generating income to pay what they owed. Those who paid nothing due to scholarships or government grants never knew the amount of money those programs covered until they lost their eligibility due to poor academic standing and were required to reimburse the institution. No co-researcher in this study described family, school, or community guidance on issues related to paying for college.

This finding is important for at least three reasons. First, that students lacked this critical financial knowledge upon entering college is surprising because every co-researcher participated in Upward Bound, which aims to prepare low-income, first generation college students for all aspects of the college process. Many co-researchers also participated in dual-enrollment programs and began taking college courses and earning credit while still in high school. The lack

of financial understanding among participants suggests these programs are inadequately preparing at-risk rural students to navigate the burden of paying for college. Second, the level of financial illiteracy among students in this sample is concerning for the vast majority of rural youth who do not benefit from a college transition program like Upward Bound. Students without this level of support may be even less likely to understand the true cost of attending college and the financial resources that exist for students who otherwise do not have the funds to attend.

Third, this finding calls into question whether some low-income rural students receive the correct kind of support as they embark on their higher education journeys. Many participants in this study described how they coasted through high school and onto a college campus, where they fully expected to be successful. While the level of academic preparation among co-researchers varied, all agreed that they benefited greatly from supportive, rural school environments, their Upward Bound program, and for some, a first-year remedial or college transition program. As soon as students were no longer participating in those support systems, however, a lack of information and expertise around key aspects of college life – notably an understanding of how to pay for it – became apparent.

This observation does not suggest that rural schools, Upward Bound programs, and other government or institutional supports are failing all rural students in these ways. This study and others clearly demonstrate how vital these programs are for this otherwise at-risk and disadvantaged student population. And yet, the experiences of the rural undergraduates in this sample indicates these existing systems and resources may be missing an opportunity to help rural undergraduates better understand the costs, benefits, and trade-offs related to attending college.

Finally, this study adds a valuable new research perspective because the sample draws on the experiences of co-researchers in thirteen different communities across Rural America. Many previous qualitative studies on rural undergraduates focus on one specific rural region. As a result, researchers often portray this student population as monolithic and conclude, as Corbett (2016) asserts, with "simplistic deficit assessments of educational paths, relationships, and purposes" (p. 270). By seeking to understand the college stop-out experience through the eyes of students from many different rural regions, rather than just one, this study offers a broader, more complete perspective on the essence of stop-out for rural students.

The thirteen rural communities featured in this study illustrate the diverse character and content of rural locales across the United States. Co-researchers' perspectives from regions like Appalachia, northern New England, the Deep South, the Midwest, tribal lands, the Great Plains, and the Southwest reveal remarkable variation of place. Yet, this study's findings show not only how these places are different, but also how they are similar. When surface level differences in geography, history, demographics, and economy are set aside, the same systemic challenges facing rural college-bound rural youth become clear. The barriers to college access and persistence facing rural students – dual-commitment to education and family, limited visibility to career options, financial illiteracy, etc. – are shared universally across rural youth in all areas. As such, the persistent lag in college degree completion uncovered by Wells, Manly, Kommers, and Kimball (2019) is rooted not only in the way that any one rural community is disadvantaged, but in the systemic inequalities facing them all.

In summary, the clear depiction of college stop-out among rural students presented in this study suggests that these students experience the phenomenon differently than those from other student populations. While findings on the background and transition of rural undergraduates

generally align with prior research, this study provides a new perspective on what these students experience when they stop out and how their rural background is implicated. The limited education and career options visible to rural youth intensifies what the experience of withdrawal, driving crippling fear and distress regardless of the reasons for leaving college. For students in any rural community, college access and success are both enabled and hindered by rural schools and programs like Upward Bound, which may be missing an opportunity to raise awareness about the true costs, benefits, and trade-offs of earning a college degree.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in three theories: Edmund Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology (1971), Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2004), and Tara Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005). Each framework offers a different viewpoint on the behaviors and outcomes *related to* rural college students and *on being* a rural college student. Some aspects of these theories have previously been applied to the study of rural education and rural youth generally. None have been applied specifically to research on college persistence or stop-out among rural undergraduates.

As discussed in Chapter 3, this research topic is often approached from a positivist perspective. Many quantitative and qualitative studies have sought rational, scientifically observed explanations to why rural students lag across nearly every measure of college success. Scholars have also made comparisons between rural and non-rural students with an empirical mindset about causal relationships, logic, and objective certainty. In some ways, this study does not deviate from that approach, as evidenced by the inclusion of Ecological Systems Theory and the Community Cultural Wealth Model. By applying these theories alongside key concepts of transcendental phenomenology, however, this study aims to expose broader meaning about both

the objective *and* subjective qualities of this experience. This blended theoretical approach adds a depth to findings that has broad implications for scholars and practitioners.

Community Cultural Wealth and Ecological Systems Theories

Understanding the essence of the stop-out experience for rural undergraduates is not possible without addressing pre-college factors and outlooks, which in this study are examined through the positivist lenses of the Community Cultural Wealth Model and Ecological Systems Theory. The types of cultural capital these students possess and lack has a profound impact on their pathway to and through college. Similarly, the environments in which rural youth come of age, and how those environments change at college, contribute significantly to post-secondary experiences and outcomes. Yosso (2005) and Bronfenbrenner's (2004) frameworks are particularly useful for the study of rural undergraduates because they draw attention to the ways that rural undergraduates are different from non-rural undergraduates.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's (2005) theory was conceived specifically to examine the cultural capital that students of color bring with them to their educational environments. She conceptualizes six asset-based forms of cultural capital: social, familial, navigational, resistant, linguistic, and aspirational. Her work challenges traditional interpretations of cultural capital by shifting the focus from a deficit view of students of color to an additive perspective where socio-cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts are recognized and acknowledged (Yosso, 2005). A key aim of her theory is to deploy a Critical Race Theory approach to education in order to "develop schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of Communities of Color in order to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice" (p. 69). The theory's strength is its

critique of deficit theorizing and data that omits of the voices of underserved groups within educational systems.

Applying the Community Cultural Wealth Model to this study's sample shows the many similarities between college students of color and rural undergraduates as socially marginalized groups within higher education. Findings suggest that rural undergraduates have their social identities and histories overlooked in similar ways when they transition out of their home community and into higher education. Professors, peers, and even co-researchers themselves often framed their low-income, rural status as a cultural disadvantage compared to non-rural peers. The most articulate example in the data was a statement from Tracy, who said, "Rural and lower income people, they transit though society in a *much* different way. I didn't have those rules in place in order to navigate." Further, this model can also help uncover the distinct cultural capital rural students of color might possess, as well as ways this population may be doubly disadvantaged relative to rural white peers and non-rural peers.

While co-researchers often described the influence of their rurality from a deficit perspective, the Community Cultural Wealth Model highlights how much they benefited from aspects of their rural background. Co-researchers drew upon several forms of cultural capital outlined by Yosso, in different ways and to varying degrees. For example, as discussed in the previous section, *familial capital* was a critical support at each stage of the college-going process for Tracy, Thomas, Robby, Dolly, and Jerry. For these individuals, the dream of a college degree was not just their dream but one held by the entire family. This family support was crucial for getting co-researchers to college and through initial challenges, though it amplified the sting of failure they felt at time of departure.

Social capital played an important role in nearly every student's path to college. The networks formed through Upward Bound and dual-enrollment programs were strong influences in the college choices of co-researchers. Some students, including Bella, Carolina, Nicole, and Jamie, chose to enroll in the institution that hosted their Upward Bound program due to existing contacts or support networks there. School and community networks within the rural hometowns also fostered college access through the widely-held view that success for a high school student meant enrolling in college the first fall after graduation. While this college-or-bust attitude restricted some students from exploring alternative education and career options, it set a community standard for college going in a manner that might be distinct to rural communities.

All co-researchers also displayed significant *aspirational capital* by pursuing a college degree as a pathway to a better and more hopeful future. Braylee, Sarah, Sophie, and Dolly stand out as students who persisted through difficult times in high school and college by envisioning a life of possibilities beyond their present circumstances (Yosso, 2005). A small number of co-researchers also displayed significant *navigational capital* within their new college environment. Dawn, Jamie, and Sarah sought out academic advisors or professors when they struggled, drawing on a skill likely developed in small rural classrooms where low student-teacher ratios made teachers accessible to every student.

Co-researchers often described the ways that their rurality was perceived as a cultural difference by the dominant voices and systems within mostly white, metropolitan, and upper-middle class institutions. As a result, they felt their rural cultural identity hindered rather than empowered their success in college. The Community Cultural Wealth Model, however, shows how many distinct strengths and skills these students bring as a direct result of their rural background. This was evident for the white students as well as the students of color in this

study's diverse sample. Jerry and Dolly, who both identified as African American, noted how aspects of their upbringings in predominantly black rural towns helped develop social networks at college. Carolina's familial capital was on full display through her first year at college when she benefited from having her cousin as a roommate. Regardless of racial identity, all co-researchers' persistence and outcomes may have been improved had they and others on campus better understood the nature of their rural cultural wealth.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory defines the complex outlook of rural undergraduates in a similar way. Applying this theory to the experiences of co-researchers illustrates how the changing "layers" of a student's environment can influence stop-out decisions and outcomes. Consistent with prior research, findings from this study show how family, school, and community environments are especially salient for rural youth. Changes and conflict within co-researchers' microsystems sent ripples through other areas. The transition from a small, rural K-12 school to a massive university, for example, reconfigured both the immediate and outer layers of co-researchers' environments. This drastic change in school setting often precipitated new family dynamics within the microsystem as well changes to larger cultural values and beliefs in the exosystem and macrosystem.

This theory explains the outsized influence of family in co-researchers' experience of stopping out. As the social context of these rural students changed in the transition to a new cultural setting at college, the influence of family as a key factor within the microsystem remained. In addition, co-researchers described what Bronfenbrenner terms *bi-directional influences* between themselves and members of their family. In other words, the influence of family had impact in two directions: the student was as much affected by the beliefs,

expectations, and behaviors of family members as the family members were affected by the beliefs, expectations, and behaviors of the student. In this way, family dynamics and interactions strongly influenced students' environment at college and the circumstance surrounding their stop-out.

This study shows that there are two keys to understanding how Ecological Systems Theory can apply to research on college stop-out among rural students. First, the *interaction* between factors in a student's evolving environment reveals how rural students are different from other populations. As noted in the previous example, the transition from a small rural school to a metropolitan university campus can alter family relationships as students' cultural and societal beliefs change. Braylee, Tracy, Dawn, and others found that their family relationships were affected by new relationships and beliefs acquired at college. As another example, the support programs that some co-researchers benefited from during their college transition had a direct and lasting impact on connections to peers and staff during their first year at college. The importance of this environmental interaction between program and connections is evident in the cases of Jamie and Carolina. As soon as those programs were no longer part of students' campus ecology, however, these promotive relationships changed in nature or ended altogether.

A second key to viewing the college stop-out among rural students through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory is acknowledging how disruptive college can be to their ecological map. For rural students who move away from their hometown to a larger college or university setting, the surrounding environment changes almost entirely. Rural students' ecological composition is reconfigured in three major ways: 1) the nature of connections and interactions within the meso-system as home, school, neighborhood, and work settings change; 2) the indirect

environmental effects of new campus factors within an exosystem, including academic programs, faculty, and student organizations; and 3) the influence of different social and cultural values in macrosystem, which are sometimes in conflict with values from students' rural hometowns.

To be sure, every student experiences a significant change in their environment when they leave home for college, regardless of where they grew up. Factors from secondary schools and hometowns are inevitably replaced by new ones at college. Applying Bronfenbrenner's theory to findings from this study, however, sheds light on which changes are particularly meaningful for students from rural communities. As discussed in the previous chapters, changes to family relationships in the microsystem have an outsized effect on rural students' college persistence and stop-out experience. The new cultural values and beliefs students encounter at college also play a role, either advancing feelings of self-authorship or heightening a perception of being different. In addition, several co-researchers described that the environmental change during the college transition seemed more intense for them than for their non-rural peers. Whether this ecological disruption for rural students is more extreme than for non-rural students presents an important opportunity for future research.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Key concepts of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology are valuable for the study of rural undergraduates because they strip away preconceived notions and ideas that have long dominated research on rural populations. The stop-out experience for rural students is so complex and multi-layered that it requires a theoretical framework that suspends all assumptions, fixed ideas, and prejudices. As discussed in the previous section, disregarding the more conventional, positivist outlook is a disservice to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who

seek to improve post-secondary outcomes for this population. And yet, transcendental phenomenology offers a fresh way for the study the rural undergraduates' experiences at college.

One key goal of this study was to examine "how" and "what" rural students experience when they withdraw. Indeed, the primary research question of this study is, "How do low-income undergraduates from rural areas perceive and describe their experience of stopping out of college?" The premise of this question is rooted in two complex concepts within Husserlian phenomenology: *noesis* and *noema.* The term *noesis* describes the act of thinking, perceiving, and remembering. In other words, "how" one experiences a phenomenon. The term *noema* describes the content of a thought, judgement, perception, or memory. This represents "what" one experiences during a phenomenon.

Combining the "how" (noesis) and "what" (noema) forms the distinct structure of the rural stop-out phenomenon as it appears in the consciousness of those who experienced it (Husserl, 1970). These two concepts are important in this phenomenology because they speak to the full nature of one's experience as it occurred. In other words, *noesis* and *noema* ensure that the individual and composite descriptions in this study are complete because they account for how co-researchers were affected by the phenomenon (thoughts, feelings, memories) as well as the way co-researchers experienced the phenomenon (moments, influences, actions).

The concepts of *epoche* and *intentionality* played an equally important role in discovering the essential content and structure of this phenomenon. Both require the mind to suspend ordinary, preconceived beliefs and notions about the experience prior to data collection and analysis. *Intentionality,* which refers to the process of directing one's consciousness, was useful because it drew attention to the distinct qualities of each object and moment that co-researchers' described as they reflected on their college departure. As co-researchers described their rural

hometowns, for example, my task as researcher was not just to focus on *what* they described (buildings, people, rural scenes, etc.) but also *the way* they described it (details, memories, analogies to other objects) and *why* they were describing it (what meaning does this object hold?).

The concept of *epoche* and practice of bracketing gives phenomenology an edge over other qualitative methods, especially for studies like this that open a new line of inquiry on a diverse and sometimes misunderstood population. As discussed in Chapter Four, the practice of *epoche* is critically important in phenomenology because it helps disassociate prior meanings, biases, and judgements at every state of data collection and analysis. This process of suspending my preexisting judgements about the object or experience, was especially useful while drafting the Individual Textural Descriptions, the Composite Structural-Textural Descriptions, and the four themes that define the stop-out phenomenon for rural students. Completing this exercise before each interview conversation, and before every stage of data analysis, ensured that my mind was open to the true and essential nature of co-researchers' experience as they described it to me. A consistent challenge in this regard was detaching from what other scholars have written about this student population.

A common shortfall of many phenomenological studies is a lack of rigor in how scholars apply abstract and at times contradictory concepts. Too often, researchers draw upon a grab-bag of ideas from competing phenomenologists as a basis for, as described by Miles, Huberman, and Salanda (2014), "highly inductive, loosely designed studies" (p.19). Without the methodology developed by Clark Moustakas (1994), this dissertation would have likely taken that shape. Moustakas' model, however, serves as a guiding framework for how a phenomenology in the

social sciences can incorporate the theory, concepts, and processes of leading phenomenologists while portraying the essence of an experience in a manner that is useful to contemporary readers.

Moustakas' method for organizing and analyzing data serves as case in point. His incorporation of major phenomenological processes – epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis – both honors Husserl original intentions and provides a scientific methodology that can be applied across disciplines. Findings in this study are a direct outcome of the process he describes; from the initial stage of developing a set of research questions to the final analysis. The Individual Textural Descriptions and Composite Textural Structural Descriptions, while labor intensive, ensured that the complete experiences of co-researchers are documented, adding validity and context to the four themes outlined in the previous chapter as well as the major conclusions for of the study.

In the previous section, for example, I conclude that there are systemic higher education inequalities facing all rural students. I assert that findings from this study show how barriers influencing stop-out among rural students are broadly shared, even though rural communities in the United States are diverse and varied. This claim could not be supported without carefully composed Individual Descriptions, as Moustakas instructs, that apply the phenomenological concepts outlined above. Similarly, the Composite Description, another Moustakas creation, would lack all credibility as the defining statement of the essence of the phenomenon had those Individual Descriptions not been included. Thus, Moustakas' practical and rigorous methodological approach, which explicitly incorporates Husserl's key concepts, provides a true and pure phenomenological framework that is superior to more loosely designed phenomenologies and other qualitative methods.

A Working Persistence Model for Low-Income, Rural Undergraduates

The third main conclusion of this study addresses the college retention and completion crisis that has long afflicted Rural America. As noted in Chapter 2, only 34 percent of high school seniors in 2004 had earned a bachelor's degree by 2012, compared with 41 percent of suburban students and 38 percent of urban students (National College Progression Rates, 2018). The path to reducing the lag in post-secondary graduation rates for rural undergraduates begins with improving their persistence at college. To that end, this section presents a working persistence model that is informed by the literature review and developed using study findings, which clearly depict the factors that enable and threaten college persistence for rural students. The purpose of this model is to conceptualize those factors in a framework that is useful to higher education scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

The working persistence model presented in below and in Appendix E displays three stages: 1) *preparing*, which defines the period leading up to when rural students leave for college; 2) *beginning*, which defines rural students' early days and first year at college; and 3) *persisting*, which includes students' return for a second year through their degree completion. The stages change at major inflection points in a rural undergraduate's journey. The first transition from *preparing* (stage one) to *beginning* (stage two) occurs when students matriculate at college for the first time. For all co-researchers in this study, and 61 percent of all rural high school students in the United States, this transition occurred the first fall after high school graduation. The second transition from *beginning* (stage two) to *persisting* (stage three) occurs when students return to college for a second year. In this study, only 53 percent of the students progressed to their second year, although 84 percent of all rural students who enroll in college return for a second year (National College Progression Rates, 2017).

The persistence arrow that runs through each of the three stages is divided into two categories. The category above the arrow defines the *promotive factors*, or assets, that help rural students as they move through college. The category below the arrow defines the *risk factors*, or threats, that rural students face at college. Within each stage, the promotive and risk factors interact with one another, influencing an individual's capacity to persist through each stage and reach degree completion.

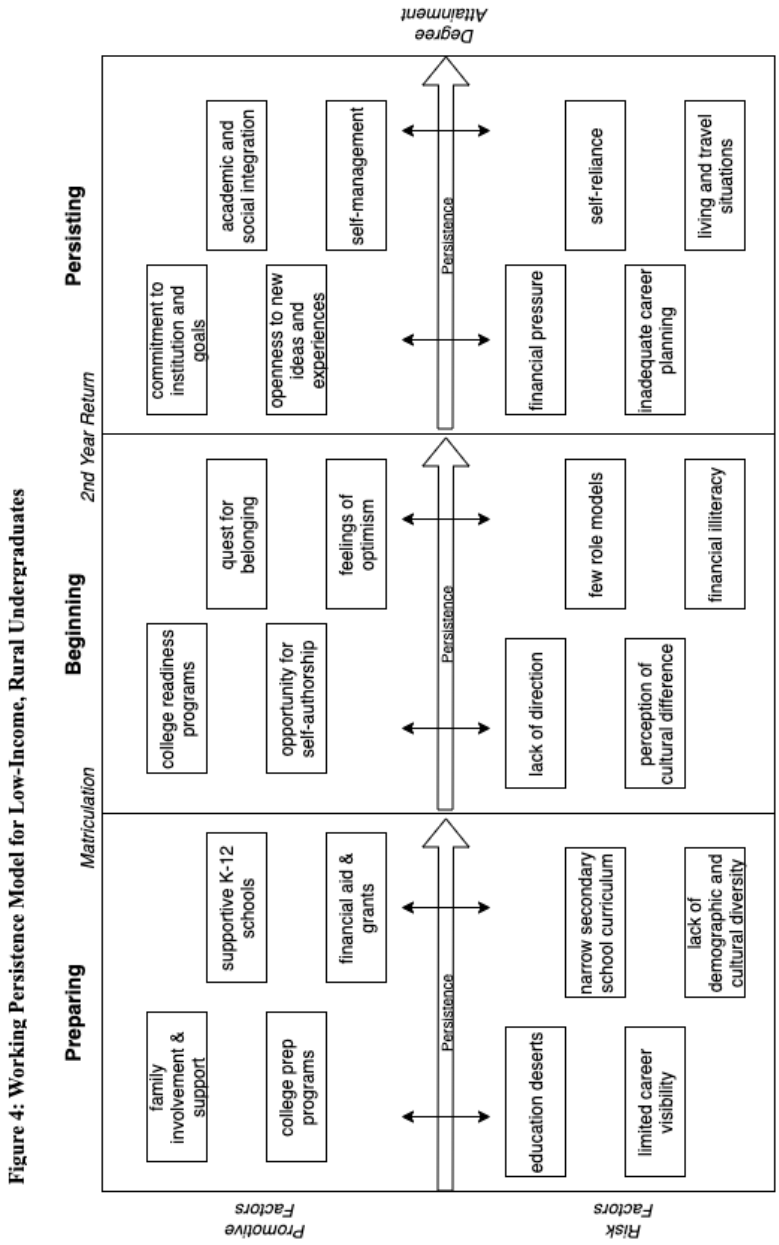

Figure 4: Working Persistence Model for Low-Income, Rural Undergraduates

Stage 1: Preparing

On the top left of the model are promotive factors of students' pre-college life that help them persist at college. The first factor is *family involvement and support,* indicated by family members who encourage their youth to pursue a college degree for the developmental and professional benefits it provides. A second factor is *supportive K-12 school* environments*,* where students benefit from small class sizes, wide participation in sports, clubs, and extracurricular activities, and a setting where struggling students are likely to receive extra support. A third factor is *college preparatory programs,* including dual-enrollment programs and Upward Bound, which specifically targets low-income, first-in-family college applicants. A fourth and final factor, *financial grants and programs,* includes federal (Pell Grant), state (Oklahoma Promise, Vermont Incentive, etc.) and institutional (need- or merit-based scholarships) financial aid programs that help low-income, first-in-family students manage college costs.

Acting against these assets are pre-college risk factors, shown on the bottom left of the model. These are threats that hinder college persistence for rural students before and during the transition to college. First, *education deserts* reflects the reality that the likeliness of enrolling in college decreases as the distance from higher education institutions increases (Hillman, 2016). Second, *narrow secondary school curriculum* reflects how small, rural schools do not provide the breadth of advanced academic courses offered by non-rural schools (Graham, 2009; Irvin, et al., 2017). Next, *limited career visibility* defines the limited exposure rural youth have from growing up within a rural economy with few and dwindling career options. Finally, there is *lack of demographic and cultural diversity.* While rural populations broadly continue to diversify, most individual community remain homogenous across many demographic and socio-economic measures.

Stage 2: Beginning

Four asset characterstics in the upper-middle section of the model contribute directly to persistance during rural students' first year. First, *college readiness programs,* like the Federal TRIO or CAMP programs, help low-income, first-in-family rural students navigate their early days on campus. These programs empower the same student population that benefited from Upward Bound during high school. Second, a *quest for belonging* animates the first-year academic and social pursuits of rural students, who tend to be community-minded and place a high value on fitting in (Brown, Copeland, and Costello, 2009). Next, the *opportunity for self-authorship* presents rural undergraduates with a chance for identity development that they may not have had within rural hometowns. This was most evident in the first-year experiences of Tracy and Sarah, who took leadership roles in student organizations that would be seen as counter-cultural in their rural hometown. Finally, many rural undergraduates benefit in the early days at college from *feelings of optimism and possibility.* Having achieved the dream of being the first-in-family to attend college, co-researchers in this study greeted the moment with a positive attitude and belief that they would be successful.

Countervailing these advantages are several risk factors that threaten persistence during the first-year, shown in the lower-middle section. There is a *lack of direction* that rural students often exhibit in academic and social settings as they navigate an unstructured campus environment with an array of opportunities. By the time that some co-researchers in this study absorbed all that college had to offer, decisions to switch majors or find new friends came at a cost to their persistence. There are also *few role models* for low-income, first-in-family rural students to emulate as they begin their first year at college. Similarly, rural undergraduates often develop a *perception of cultural difference* from non-rural peers within campus environments

that place a high value on metropolitan, upper-middle class values, beliefs, and norms (Dunstan and Jaeger, 2016). Perhaps most threatening, the consequences of rural students' *financial illiteracy* about the true cost of college can directly contribute to circumstances surrounding stop-out.

Stage 3: Persisting

The upper right section of the model displays promotive factors that can enable degree completion among rural undergraduates who return for a second year at college. The first and most important factor is *commitment to institution and goals*, which describes a student's internal motivation to complete their degree. One explanation for this drive among rural undergraduates is that they may see college as a path toward upward mobility (Elder & Conger, 2000; Gibbs, Kusmin, & Cromartie, 2005; Lichter & McLaughlin, 1995). A second promotive factor is *academic and social integration,* which indicates that a student has established enduring relationships with peers, professors, or mentors through courses, activities or social life. A third promotive factor is an *openness to new ideas and experiences*, as indicated by rural students' willingness and intellectual curiosity to engage with the culture of learning at college (Schultz, 2004). A final promotive factor are skills related to *self-management.* Co-researchers in this study, especially those who returned for a second year, initially displayed significant responsibility for their daily routines, studies, and social life.

Based on findings from this study, four major risk factors threaten college persistence for rural undergraduates in their second year through completion. The same self-management behaviors described above cross a line into a *self-reliance* when individuals fail to seek help and support from others. This was a clear among co-researchers in this study, who tended to rely only on their own resources and abilities when faced with hardship. For rural students from low-

income families, *financial pressure* is another central risk factor. The burden of covering expenses – ranging from everyday living expenses to daunting tuition bills – can quickly derail a student's progress toward degree completion. Similarly, *inadequate career planning* in the later years at college becomes a grave threat. For several co-researchers in this study, trouble began when they questioned the professional value of their degree in the face of mounting student loans. Finally, changes in students' *living and travel situations* can also complicate persistence in the later years of college. Several co-researchers' in this study were pushed off track when they moved from a residence hall to an off-campus dwelling or spent hours each day commuting home or to an off-campus job.

Using the Model: Advantages and Considerations

This model offers several advantages to scholars, policymakers, and practitioners who seek to improve college persistence for rural undergraduates. For example, much has been said in the literature about how pre-college factors play a role in college *access* for rural students. This model shows, using study results, how these factors also play role in their *persistence* at college. These characteristics remain in the conciousness of rural undergraduates and continue to counteract one another, influencing decisions, emotions, and behavoirs. In fact, the interaction between these factors forms the basis of many key tensions facing rural undergraduates: dual-commitment to family and education, educational-career misalignment, academic indecisiveness. Each co-researcher in this study showed, to varying degrees, the extent to which these pre-college factors influenced their persistence in college. For co-researchers who withdrew before the end of their first year – notably Dawn, Nicole, and Thomas – their ability to persist declined as the influence of the promotive factors was overtaken by that of the risk factors.

Another advantage is how this model illustrates the paradox facing many rural undergraduates, who discover when they arrive on campus that the skills that got them *to* college are not as useful in getting them *through* college. Without exception, every co-researcher in this study started their first year feeling like a winner. Having beat the odds and made it to college, none questioned their ability to be successful. What they discovered, either incrementally or all at once, was that the rules of the game had changed. Those who had support from transition programs, felt like they belonged, and sustained a sense optimism were able to navigate the first year without difficulty. Those who had no support structure or felt out of place struggled and were less likely to return for their second year.

That all students in this study withdrew before completing their degree does not diminish the credibility of the promotive and risk factors in final years of college outlined here. Assessing persistence factors through the perspectives of rural undergraduates who completed their degree would provide an incomplete and perhaps misleading portrait. Since college completion rates for rural undergraduates are so low six years after high school graduation, those who complete in under that time are outliers. For this reason, the conversation about improving college outcomes for rural undergraduates must begin with those who stop-out, never earning a college degree or taking longer than six-years to finish.

A few points of clarification about using this working model are also warranted. Some perspectives outlined here are similar to those presented by scholars in other theoretical models on persistence in higher education (Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1980; ETS, 2013). The utility of this new model for scholars and practitioners is how the content and structure focuses specifically on what matters most to rural undergraduates specifically. The three stages, two transitions points, and

selected promotive and risk factors illustrate how these students' rurality is implicated in their higher education experiences.

Finally, rural undergraduates may contend with more promotive and risk factors than those displayed in this working model. The specific factors outlined here are only those supported by the findings and literature review presented in this dissertation study. As new data on rural undergraduates are collected and analyzed, the factors within each stage may be added to or revised. In addition, it is also possible that the influence of risk or promotive factors currently presented in one stage belong in a different stage. Indeed, a strength of this working model is that it provides a framework for future research that is flexible enough to adapt to new discoveries about rural undergraduates' experiences in higher education.

Further Implications for Policy and Practice

This study provides meaningful insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions that serve rural undergraduates. Based on the experiences of the students in this study, it is clear that systemic educational inequities in rural America are hindering higher educational outcomes, especially for low-income rural youth from families where neither parent earned a college degree. In this section, I discuss implications for rural-serving policymakers, educators, Upward Bound leaders, and higher education institutions.

Redefining Rural-Serving Higher Education Institutions

The co-researchers in this study all enrolled at institutions with a significant population of rural undergraduates. Several of these colleges and universities are located within remote, rural areas. Others are embedded within small urban centers of mostly rural states. Of the thirteen total colleges and universities in this study, however, only three are classified as "rural-serving" by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. According to the Carnegie

Classification, institutions identified as “rural-serving” are only public, two-year associates-level colleges located outside a federally designated metropolitan area. Dolly, Nicole, and Jerry are the only co-researchers who attended one of the 570 institutions that meet this criteria.

This myopic characterization of “rural-serving” falls short for obvious reasons. Worst of all, it can lead to the misappropriation of government funding, including grants to “rural-serving institutions” of higher education through U.S. Code § 1161q. It excludes any degree-granting institution located within a metropolitan center that serves a critical mass of students from rural areas, making some rural students invisible in the eyes of the government. According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 47 percent of rural high school students attend college outside a census-defined rural territory. Under the current classification, nonrural institutions which have a significant or majority rural student body population are not considered “rural-serving.”

The University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO), to use an example not represented in this study, serves students from 78 out of the 93 counties in its mostly rural state. Since the campus is located in Omaha, one of Nebraska’s few urban centers, the university is not recognized as “rural-serving” and, therefore, is not eligible for federal grants allotted to “rural-serving” institutions. UNO is also disqualified as rural-serving due to its status as a doctoral-level-granting rather than associates-level-granting institution.

The 2021 update of the Carnegie Classification presents a once in a decade opportunity to redefine ‘rural-serving’ in higher education research and practice. Changes in the economic, cultural, and demographic landscape requires a framework that accounts for what makes rural students unique as they travel through higher education. A new definition must account for any

institution where a significant population of these students enroll, not just those who are physically located in a rural place location that focus on vocation-specific degree programs.

A Carnegie Classification of "rural-serving" should instead be awarded to all degree-granting institutions whose rural student populations exceed 25 percent, criteria currently used across other Minority Serving Institutions for purposed of Title V and federal grant funding. This measure should also be the basis for public grant eligibility intended for this underserved student population. Under this new criteria, at least twelve of the thirteen institutions represented in this study would qualify as "rural-serving" and have success to state and federal resources aimed at improving college persistence and completion.

For decades, higher education scholars and policymakers have looked to the Carnegie Classification as the leading framework for mapping the diverse landscape of higher education institutions in the United States. With an increase in national attention on rural populations, the accuracy of this classification is more important than ever.

Implications for Rural Educators

Findings from this study confirm a familiar and puzzling problem for rural educators: despite superior high school graduation rates, rural youth lag behind their non-rural peers in college enrollment rates and are less likely than suburban or urban students to return for their second year of college (National College Progression Rates, 2016). In small, rural communities, high school teachers and guidance counselors serve as important gatekeepers to higher education and the clear path toward upward mobility it provides. While many individual teachers and counselors have a profound influence on the college trajectories of their students, this study suggests that a significant portion of rural high school students do not develop the necessary abilities to succeed in college.

These disparities can in part be explained, as discussed in Chapter 2, by the persistent resource challenges that plague rural schools. Recruiting and retaining teachers in many rural areas is challenging, largely due to small school size, low compensation, and a higher proportion of students with special developmental and language needs (Monk, 2007). Many rural districts have limited funds for and access to full-time, qualified college and career counselors, and instead fill the role on a part-time basis. These individuals can be ill-qualified to help rural students navigate the college-going process, presenting a formidable college access problem.

These resource and talent challenges notwithstanding, findings from this study imply that the conventional college advising methods are not effective for all rural high school students. In fact, current practices may actually complicate students' college and career decision-making process. Many co-researchers, including Robby, Jerry, Dawn, and Nicole, expressed regret that they were not exposed to future options that did not involve a traditional path to earning a college degree. High school teachers and guidance counselors were not clear about how a college degree would lead to success. Other co-researchers, including Sophie, Thomas, and Jerry, described the dilemma they faced in high school about the meaning of college-going for the future of their family. This key consideration for rural students was overlooked, or explicitly ignored, as students agonized over the decision to leave home for college

The conversation about college-going for rural high school students must begin with an assessment of how those decisions will affect family and community ties. High school teachers and guidance counselors are well-positioned to acknowledge the dual-commitment many of their students have to higher education and their rural community. These educators must also prioritize the importance of place and understand how significantly rural geography shapes the college outlook for their students. Since rural areas present a limited range of college and career

opportunities, students need support contending with the difficult reality that they will likely need to move away from home to reach their education and career goals.

As shown in this study, some rural students are eager to leave home and family for a fresh start at college. Tracy, Sarah, and Bella all saw college as a pathway to escape from toxic family dynamics and what they viewed as a dead-end small town. Even for students like these, family is a key influence on college-going and deserves attention from rural teachers and guidance counselors.

Rural education leaders and researchers alike must examine the nature and quality of the interactions between rural educators and students to better understand what influence they have on higher education outcomes. Particular attention should be paid to the types of support and interventions that might lead toward higher rates of college retention and completion, not just college access. Given the importance of rural schools on the development of rural youth, these teachers and counselors have an important role to play in solving the alarming rural-nonrural higher education disparities.

Implications for Upward Bound

This dissertation study would not have been possible without the help of Upward Bound programs in rural communities across the United States. In total, I corresponded with Upward Bound directors, advisors, and other staff members in forty-four different states. The responses I received to my outreach were overwhelmingly supportive. “Thank you for thinking of our program. Good luck on your research, the data will be of value to us all,” one director wrote. Another responded, “I will touch base with our staff and try to get you some names. Take care.” Many recognized the value of this study for their students. “I would love to help you out, and my students.” Several UB staff members quickly took action. “I posted the information on our

Facebook page. Good luck." That these educators were willing to help me amidst the ongoing disruption presented by the Covid-19 pandemic spoke volumes about their commitment to their students and communities.

Every co-researcher, without exception, spoke fondly about their experience with Upward Bound. Many shared how helpful the program had been when they were navigating the college application process. Several were still in close touch with UB staff years later. (One co-researcher even referred to me as, "a friend of Caroline," referring to the director of her UB program) Given the sample selection process, of course, it is possible that only those who kept in touch and felt positively about Upward Bound applied for the study. Yet, the degree of affection among co-researchers toward their Upward Bound program demonstrates the program's value on an otherwise rocky college journey.

Findings from this study suggest at least three areas where Upward Bound programs can better prepare rural high school students for college. First, rural-serving Upward Bound sites should strengthen efforts to improve financial literacy among program participants. As discussed in Chapter 5, every co-researcher in this study described at least one moment where they did not understand the cost of college and their financial obligation. Many participants accrued large student debt loads without a concrete plan for paying those loans off. In several cases, co-researchers were unaware of how much tuition was covered by scholarships or government grants until they lost their eligibility due to poor academic standing and received a bill asking for repayment.

Upward Bound programs in rural areas can improve the financial literacy of college-going rural students simply and inexpensively by incorporating more information about college costs into existing programs, courses, and activities. Improving students' understanding about the

cost of college may increase the odds of completion. Increased financial literacy would likely broaden the number of institutions students consider by encouraging college selection not based on geography but on the relative cost of attendance. For high-achieving rural students at risk of undermatch, exploring different financial aid programs might also lead to consideration of more-selective institutions with better resourced scholarship programs. These institutions are also those that are more likely to have systems and resources in place to address persistence and retention challenges faced by at-risk populations.

Further, improving the financial literacy of rural students before they apply to college could decrease the likeliness of their stopping out later on. As this study shows, financial challenges are central in rural undergraduates' reasons for and experience of leaving college. For some study participants, like Jerry, Nicole, and Braylee, financial pressures compounded other problems, like symptoms of anxiety and depression or finding time to study amidst a busy class or work schedule. For others, like Thomas and Robby, financial pressures were the deciding factor in their withdrawal when the cost of attendance began to outweigh the perceived benefits of staying at college and completing a degree.

In 2009, federal policymakers enacted a new provision through the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity ACT that made financial literacy a required component of all TRIO programs, including Upward Bound (Yang & Dezar, 2009). While TRIO has put great effort into preparing TRIO program administrators for this new mandate, findings from this study suggest there is still more work to be done. To improve college access, persistence, and completion among all low-income students – especially rural undergraduates – financial education must be a central part of Upward Bound curriculum and programming.

A second area of improvement for Upward Bound relates to its founding purpose. When the program was enacted in 1965 as part the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and Higher Education Act of 1965, the goal was, "to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Several studies conducted by the Pell Institute have measured the effectiveness and success of Upward Bound in achieving that goal (The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2020). But more than half a century later, when there has been a fourfold increase in college enrollment in the United States, does this goal best serve low-income families?

Robby, Thomas, and Jerry were explicit about how, in retrospect, enrolling in college may not have been the best option for them immediately after high school. All three of these co-researchers believed they would have decided against higher education if other viable options for their futures had been presented during high school. Since stopping out of college, these men have built fulfilling and financially-stable lives in professions that do not require a college degree. They now describe the decision to attend college immediately after high school as a fruitless and misguided decision that resulted in wasted time, money, and effort.

For rural youth who are ambivalent or not equipped for higher education, the unilateral message that college is the best decision for their future can bring great harm. Since return-on-investment on higher education depends on *completing* a college degree, rural educators must present others alternatives for students to consider in addition to traditional two- or four-year undergraduate degree programs. This is especially important for rural high school students whose career aspirations are still unclear, and for those who voice a strong desire to remain within their rural hometown.

Upward Bound programs are well-positioned to help students like Robby, Thomas, and Jerry set realistic expectations about higher education and explore viable non-college options after high school if they decide that is their best choice. Better information about the cost of college, graduation rates, and expected earnings in the Upward Bound curriculum would have likely improved the college choices these co-researchers made when they applied to and enrolled in college as teenagers. Had viable alternatives to college been promoted rather than stigmatized, these individuals and all their rural peers would have been more prepared to make the smartest decisions for their future, based on their unique strengths, personal circumstances, and aspirations.

A third and final area of improvement area relates to how rural high school students "match" with a postsecondary institution. Many co-researchers enrolled at colleges or universities that were misaligned with their academic abilities, interests, and aspirations. As discussed in Chapter Two, rural students are more likely than their non-rural counterparts to undermatch, or choose a school beneath their abilities, due in part to location and a widespread perception among these students that they are not good enough for college (Koricich & Koricich, 2007). While several non-academic factors shaped the college-going process for co-researchers, many undermatched or mismatched simply because their hometown was more than 50 miles from a college that matches their academic abilities. This was the case for Dolly, Jerry, and Carolina. During the college search and application process, Upward Bound staff can address this dynamic by ensuring that geography does not disproportionately influence the higher education institutions to which rural high school students apply.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions

Each co-researcher described how, at critical moments, specific people and systems on campus hindered their ability to persist in college. Interactions with financial aid staff, in particular, stirred frustration, confusion, and even terror among these rural undergraduates. As discussed in Chapter 6, financial aid offices often communicated about unforeseen expenses without care or consideration for students' precarious financial circumstances. Braylee, as one example, was forced to withdraw because she could not afford the $800 in fees not included by state and federal grants that covered her tuition. Over the objections of Braylee's academic advisor, the financial aid office placed a hold on her student account that prevented her from registering for classes and returning to campus for a second semester.

Findings from this study are clear that financial hardship is a key factor in the experience of and reasons for stop-out among rural undergraduates. As such, colleges and universities should consider how the practices of their financial aid office might adversely affect student retention. Among the institutions represented in this study, many financial aid offices functioned as a collection agency that operated in a silo without regard for the school's broader mission. If this administrative area were reoriented to serve and educate students, rather than merely bill them, many of the financial roadblocks described by co-researchers could have been easily resolved. Some could have been avoided altogether. Financial aid offices, of course, have a fiscal obligation to act responsibly and within the limited resources provided by the institution. But better integrated, student-centered, financial aid advising could mitigate the risk of stop-out among rural undergraduates for reasons related to money.

Co-researchers who participated in college success programs during their first year at college initially thrived. Carolina and Jamie are two examples of students who succeeded

academically and socially as freshmen in part because of support programs tailored to their low-income, first-in-family outlooks. When they became sophomores and were no longer eligible for these programs, their campus environment changed drastically. Relationships and support that were once readily accessible immediately felt out of reach.

Extending these programs to students' later years at college is currently beyond the scope of the federal grants that fund these initiatives. Further, many rural-serving institutions, especially those with large low-income and first-in-family student populations, are unlikely to have the resources to lengthen the duration of these programs within their own tight budgets. Given these realities, existing first-year programs must broaden their focus to teach students not only about the initial adjustment to campus life but also how to persist in college through their later years. These programs need to consider what specific lessons rural undergraduates need to learn about what it takes to persist through college. Findings from this study, as shown by the Working Persistence Model presented earlier in this chapter, suggest that content should address the implications of students' rural cultural identity, their connection to family and home, mental and emotional well-being, financial literacy, and career planning.

The majority of co-researchers – eight out of thirteen – put down roots near their institution after stopping out. This was not only the case for those who attended college close to their hometown, like Nicole, Sophie, and Jamie, but also for those who had moved a significant distance to attend college in a new place, like Bella and Sarah. While these eight co-researchers did not detail how they interacted with their former institution after stopping out, all built lives within and around the community where they had attended college.

This pattern presents a clear opportunity for institutions to reenroll rural undergraduates who stop out of college and remain nearby. For those wish to complete their degree, enhanced

virtual or evening course offerings could accommodate students who have decided to prioritize career or family since withdrawing from full-time status. Efforts focused on tracking and readmitting students who withdrew will benefit not only the students themselves, but also the institution's bottom line. Even though loan repayment might begin later than anticipated when students reenroll, the likeliness of loan fulfillment only increases if the borrowers enter the workforce with a college degree.

Finally, this study shows how the steady erosion of state and federal funding of public institutions disproportionally affects rural undergraduates. Since students from rural counties are more likely to attend public, less-selective colleges and universities than non-rural peers (Gibbs, 1998; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018), the decline in public higher education spending hits rural students hardest when revenue is cut and expenses rise. Each of the interventions outlined above require significant investment of financial and human capital. Until public colleges and universities can identify alternate and dependable sources of revenue, the fortunes of rural undergraduates at risk of stop-out are unlikely to improve.

Future Research Directions

This research focused solely rural undergraduate stop-out through the qualitative lens of Phenomenology. While the benefits of this approach are discussed in detail earlier in this chapter, other theories and methods could be used to examine the same topic and provide different perspectives. In particular, narrative or ground theory research designs have the potential to reveal new, in-depth information about this experience. Given the extended time horizon of college stop-out, longitudinal research on this topic would enable further study of both the immediate and longer-term impact of college departure across a variety of career and life outcomes.

In addition, this qualitative study would be better supported with the backing of quantitative research that documents the frequency of stop-out among rural undergraduates and effects of rural geography on college completion. Currently, as discussed in Chapter 1, the rates of college stop-out among rural undergraduates can only be approximated through a secondary analysis of rural populations within nationally representative datasets, including those provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Student Clearinghouse.

Comparisons between rural and non-rural students are useful in understanding how educational systems and outcomes vary by geography. While significant research has been conducted on higher education stop-out generally, research that compares the stop-out experiences of students from rural, urban, and suburban areas would yield useful results. Further, it would be interesting to conduct multiple studies across differing institutional types and sectors. Most co-researchers in this study, and the vast majority of rural undergraduates generally, attended public, in-state institutions near their hometowns. Understanding the stop-out experiences of rural undergraduates who attended elite, private institutions in major metropolitan areas, as one example, would be particularly insightful.

Another possibility is to compare the stop-out experiences of different subsets of rural undergraduates. Approximately one third of this study's sample identified as students of color. A more complete view about how rurality, race, and post-secondary outcomes intersect would be useful to many higher education stakeholders, but particularly those rural institutions with a majority or emerging population of minority students. The same can be said of non-traditional or adult learners, who are generally ignored in rural education research but represent a significant proportion of students at rural community and public four-year institutions.

Additional potential areas of inquiry springing from this research include:

- The impact and influence that financial aid offices have on both college persistence and financial literacy of rural undergraduates.
- The ways in which current academic advising systems and processes address the unique needs of rural undergraduates.
- An Ecological Systems Theory analysis of the high school to college transition, comparing students from different geographic locations (urban, suburban, rural).
- Further exploration of the types of cultural capital rural undergraduates possess and lack on their journeys through higher education.
- An examination of career and vocational interest of rural students, beginning in high school through college and beyond.
- The role of high school guidance counselors on the educational and career aspirations of rural youth and the implications for their college-choice.
- Further exploration on campus mental health services and their capacity to identify students in distress who are unlikely to seek support.
- The college access, persistence, and completion implications of online degree programs for students from remote geographic locations.
- An analysis on rural-nonrural differences on remedial college course taken during the first year at college.

The need for rigorous research on rural undergraduates will remain as long as their post-secondary representation and outcomes lag behind other geographic groups. More perspectives, theories, and models are required to understand and address the systemic inequality facing college-going youth from rural communities.

Final Thoughts

To outsiders, rural culture can be difficult to understand. Those who never set foot out into the vast rural spaces beyond America's big cities and suburbs will never truly grasp what it is like to live there. In the wake of recent elections, many educated urban and suburban onlookers have had difficulty reconciling iconic notions of rural charm with the bleak outlook of a population who seems to vote against their own self-interests. Whatever one's political leanings, the present era shows that people in rural and metropolitan areas see things differently. We in higher education need to have a broader conversation about what is going on.

In *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War,* author Joe Bageant writes that, "Never experiencing the life of the mind scars entire families for generations" (Bageant, 2007, p.10). Those who cannot, or do not care to, empathize with the plight of rural Americans fail to realize that they are unjustly disadvantaged by a lack of educational opportunity. Scholars and pundits who believe that America's rural-urban divide is rooted in social class differences are mistaken. After all, deepening economic inequality in the United States has given rise to poor, underprivileged people in all areas of the country. It is also misguided to place blame solely on issues of race, especially as racial and ethnic diversity continue to increase in rural places. Education has become the true fault line between rural and urban America. Where a child grows up makes a difference in what type of educational opportunities they receive – from early childhood through higher education.

This study began with an overview of the many higher education outcomes across which rural students fall behind non-rural students. Even though rural youth graduate high school at higher rates, immediate college enrollment the first fall after high school graduation is lowest among students from rural populations (60 percent), compared with those from suburban (66

percent) and urban (61 percent) populations. Students from rural schools (82 percent) are also slightly less likely than students from suburban (87 percent) or urban (83 percent) schools to return for their second year of college (National College Progression Rates, 2016). Overall, fewer than 20 percent of rural adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33 percent in urban areas (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

And yet, the results of this dissertation study offer reasons for optimism. While this research covers new ground, nothing discovered here is so formidable that it could not be addressed through straightforward public policy and modest investments from governments and institutions. Further, the reasons for college stop-out among rural undergraduates are generally shared by students across all geographies. These include financial challenges, medical or mental health issues, inadequate academic preparation, family dynamics and responsibilities, and shifting educational or career outcomes.

This phenomenology teaches us that rurality is deeply and distinctly implicated when a rural undergraduate departs college without a degree. The influence of growing up in a rural place directly contributes to the intensity and devastation of the stop-out experience. The complexity of college-going for rural students, families, and communities means that withdrawing from college has profound and lasting consequences for the future. For this reason, higher education scholars must continue to research this important topic. College retention and completion outcomes will only improve when rural students are no longer overlooked, dismissed, and pushed to the margins of American higher education.

In closing, I am brought back to quote from Tracy:

> Rural and lower income people, they transit though society in a *much* different way. I didn't have those rules in place in order to navigate… Now, any time someone tells me

that I am intelligent or that I should already have a degree…I get hurt. If my access to education had been decided based on my intelligence, my ability to learn, and that's it… not, how much money my parents have or how much support I received from my family. If I had been measured just on my own merits I would have had access to the education I wanted and needed. But I don't get those things.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Initial Email to Upward Bound Directors

To: Upward Bound Directors
From: Chris Jacobsen (jacobsuv@bc.edu)

SUBJECT: Upward Bound Request: Seeking Study Participants for a College Stop-out Study

Dear [name],

I hope you, your family, and your students remain well and healthy at this challenging time.

I am conducting a study through Boston College on the college experiences of low-income students from small towns and rural areas. I write with hopes that you might put me in touch with some of your former Upward Bound students through Upward Bound Rio Grande City and La Grulla who enrolled in college and withdrew before completing a degree. **Participants receive $100 from Amazon for completing the study!**

The purpose of the study is to learn what these students' experiences at college were like, as well as the reasons for their stopping out. Participation in the study consists of a 60-90 minute video-interview with me and a follow-up voice memo of at least five minutes. This study is confidential, and the names of students, Upward Bound programs, or institutions will not be used.

Please forward this email to any of your Upward Bound alumni who enrolled in an undergraduate program and withdrew before completing a degree. Or, please post my information with the link below on your UB Facebook page!

Sign Up for the Study! (link)

If you have any questions or if you would like to learn more, please do not hesitate to reach out by email [redacted] or phone [redacted] any time.

Many thanks and all best wishes,
Chris Jacobsen

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Education Leadership and Higher Education
Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development

Appendix B. Demographic Data Form and Informed Consent

Start of Block: SURVEY INSTRUCTION

Start of Block: Block 3

Q21
Thank you for your interest in my study!

Hi! My name is Chris Jacobsen and I am a Ph.D. student at Boston College. I research the higher education experiences of students from rural places.

For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study about the experiences of low-income students from rural communities who depart college before earning a degree. If you are from a rural place and withdrew from college before earning a degree, I am interested in hearing your story!

- ○ Yes, I would like to be considered for your study! (1)
- ○ No, I do not wish to participate in your study. (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Thank you for your interest in my study! Hi! My name is Chris Jacobsen and I am a Ph.D. studen... = No, I do not wish to participate in your study.

Skip To: End of Block If Thank you for your interest in my study! Hi! My name is Chris Jacobsen and I am a Ph.D. studen... = Yes, I would like to be considered for your study!

Page Break

End of Block: Block 3

Start of Block: Informed Consent

Q1 **Study Information and Informed Consent**

If you are selected, you will be asked to participate in two research activities. First, a **video-interview** with me that will last approximately 60-90 minutes and include questions designed to understand what your experience was like withdrawing from college. Second, an independent **audio-recording** of at least five minutes where you will respond to a prompt related to this experience. The video-interview will be recorded but you will not be identified by name.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time, either before or during the interview. If there is a question you do not wish to answer, you are free to skip one or multiple questions.

If you would like any of your comments to be included in my notes after the interview, I will delete them. It is possible that you may experience unpleasant memories related to your experience of withdrawing from college. As with any research study, there could be unknown risks.

Your responses to the my questions are confidential to the extent allowed by law. The information recorded is confidential and no one except me will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be encrypted and transferred to a secure Boston College server. There will be no linking of comments to names. I will ask you to choose a pseudonym for yourself, and I will obscure any identifying information about you.

If you are selected to participate in the study, and if you complete both the interview and audio-recording, you will receive a $100 Amazon gift certificate delivered to your preferred email address.

If you have any questions about the research no or at any time, please ask. You may contact me by email [redacted] or phone [redacted].

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Director of Office for Research Protections, Boston College at 617-552-4778 or email: irb@bc.edu

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

- ○ I consent to participate in the study (1)
- ○ I do not consent, I do not wish to participate (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Study Information and Informed Consent If you are selected, you will be asked to participate in t... = I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Skip To: Q3 If Study Information and Informed Consent If you are selected, you will be asked to participate in t... = I consent to participate in the study

Page Break

Q3 Please share your contact information here. All of your responses will be kept confidential.

Q4 Your name (i.e. Chris Jacobsen)

_____

Q5 Preferred Email Address

_____

Q6 Preferred Phone Number

_____

Q7 Date of Birth (mm/dd/yyy)

_____

Q8 Name of High School

_____

Q9 Town and State of High School (i.e. Clinton, New York)

_____

Q32 Pronouns:

- ○ he/his (1)
- ○ she/her (2)
- ○ they/their (3)
- ○ Some other pronouns: (4) _____

Q33 I identify my ethnicity as:

- ☐ Asian (1)
- ☐ Black/African (2)
- ☐ Caucasian (3)
- ☐ Hispanic/Latinx (4)
- ☐ Native American (5)
- ☐ Pacific Islander (6)
- ☐ Prefer not to answer (7)
- ☐ Some other race, ethnicity, or origin: (8)

_____

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Block 4

Q27 College or University Name

_____

Q28 Town and State of College or University (Clinton, NY)

_____

Q31 Type of degree program

- ○ Associate's degree (2-year) (1)
- ○ Bachelor's degree (4-year) (2)
- ○ Unsure (3)
- ○ Other (4) _____

Q29 Approximate Month and Year of First College Entrance (mm/yyyy)

_____

Q30 Approximate Month and Year of Most Recent College Withdrawal (mm/yyyy)

_____

End of Block: Block 4

Start of Block: Block 4

Page Break

Q27 Thank you for your interest in my study! If selected, you will be contacted by email, text, or phone with further instructions. If you have any questions, please contact me at jacobsuv@bc.edu.

End of Block: Block 4

Appendix C. Interview Protocol/Script

Thank you for your willingness to have a conversation with me today!

As I noted in my email and video, I am working on my Ph.D. at Boston College. For my dissertation, I am interviewing people from rural places who withdrew from college before earning a degree. My goal is to make connections between their experiences and provide recommendations for how campus leaders can provide student support and cultivate a thoughtful campus environment.

In this interview, I will ask you questions about your college experience and your reflections on your time leading up to and after your time in college. The interview will last between sixty and ninety minutes.

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the project at any time. If there are questions you do not wish to answer, you are free to skip them. I can remove any comments from our conversation that you would not like included in the transcript.

Your responses to these questions are confidential. I will obscure any identifying information about you, including your name. Is there a pseudonym or nickname you would like me to use?

Finally, are you OK if I record this conversation? The recording will be saved on a secure server, and it will help me take better notes. You are free to decline this request.

Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Questions:

1. Can you provide a full description of your experience of dropping out of college?
2. What are the moments that stand out for you as you think back on that time?
3. What feelings were generated for you during this experience? Are there thoughts you had that stood out for you when it was happening?
4. How did your experience affect those who are closest to you?
5. Do you think your rural upbringing had anything to do with this experience?
6. Were there changes to your mental or physical health that you were aware of during this experience?

Appendix D. Initial Coding Schema for Qualitative Data

Category: Home Community	**Abbreviation: HC**
HC: Nuclear Family	HC-NF
HC: Extended Family	HC-EF
HC: High School	HC-HS
HC: School/Community Activities	HC-SCA
HC: College Prep. or Counseling	HC-CPC
HC: Friendships	HC-FS
HC: Rural Identity	HC-RI
HC: Social Class/SES	HC-SES
Category: Campus Life	**Abbreviation: CL**
CL: Residential Living	CL-RL
CL: Academic Match	CL-AM
CL: Social Life	CL-SL
CL: Campus Activities	CL-CA
CL: Culture Shock	CL-CS
CL: Financial Problems	CL-FP
CL: Teaching and Learning	CL-TL
CL: Moment of Adversity	CL-AD
CL: Sense of Belonging	CL-SB

Category: Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model	**Abbreviation: YC**
YC: Aspirational	YC-AS
YC: Linguistic	YC-LI
YC: Familial	YC-FA
YC: Social	YC-SO
YC: Navigational	YC-NA
YC: Resistance	YC-RE
Category: Bronfenbrenner Ecology	**Abbreviation: BR**
BR: Microsystem	BR-MI
BR: Mesosystem	BR-ME
BR: Exosystem	BR-EX
BR: Macrosystem	BR-MA
BR: Interaction	BR-IN
Category: Miscellaneous	**Abbreviation: MI**
MI: Quotable Quote	MI-QQ
MI: Prompt Follow-up	MI-PF

APPENDIX E: Illustration of Working Persistence Model

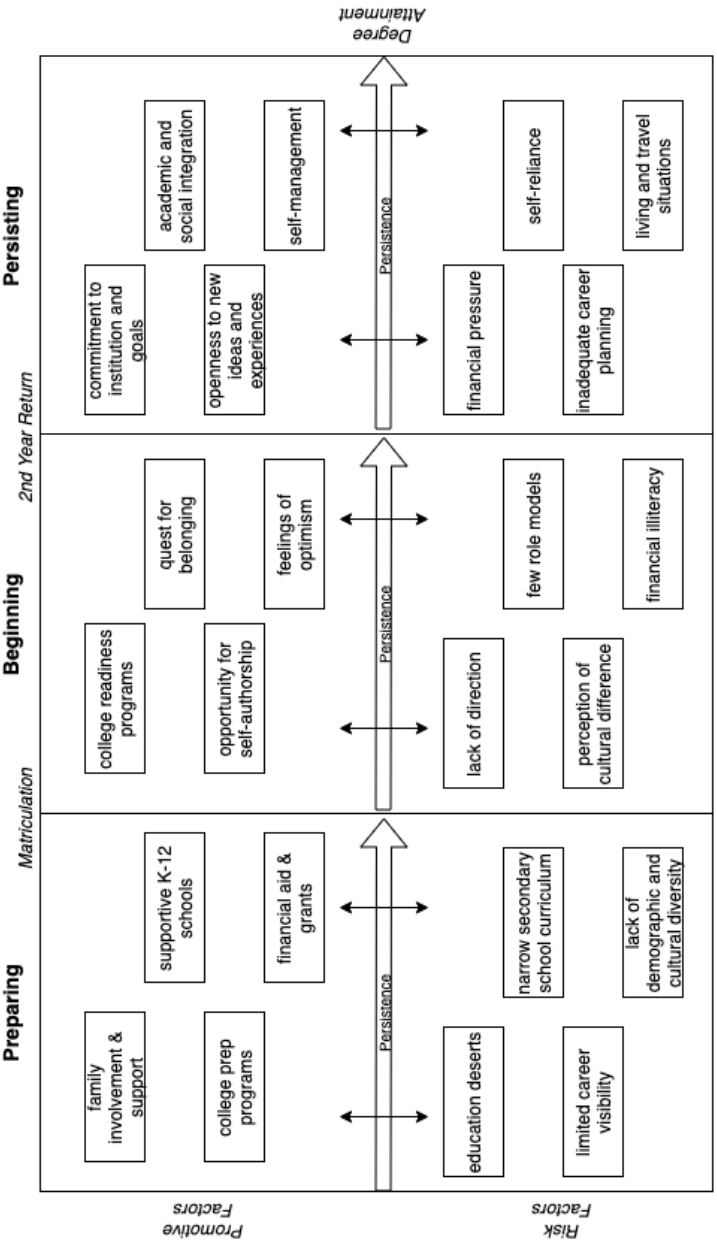

Figure 4: Working Persistence Model for Low-Income, Rural Undergraduates

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