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There's More to the Story:

An Organizational Analysis of Rurality and Higher Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Sabrina A. Klein

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

There's More to the Story:

An Organizational Analysis of Rurality and Higher Education

by

Sabrina A. Klein

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Patricia McDonough, Chair

The college-going journey in rural areas is shaped by a large deficit of information on rurality and higher education. From a neo-institutional and Bourdieuian lens, this study explored the field of rural higher education by (a) centering the actors and organizations in the field, (b) highlighting the internal and external forces that shape and define the field, and (c) examining the ways the field addresses regional educational inequities. Through a qualitative single-case study of a college-going pipeline in the Pacific Northwest, this study found through fields and spatial analysis that the field of higher education in this region was composed of committed stakeholders working against external forces, including federal and state policies, funding, and staffing. Further, this study demonstrated that opportunities within rural areas are complex, with costs that can detract from the proposed benefits.

This study contributes to both literature and theory. First, by applying an organizational lens, the study investigated the stakeholders who constitute the dynamic field of rural college-going. Second, this study uplifted the voices of rural educators, adding to rural scholarship by including narratives beyond those of rural students. Findings from this study demonstrate that for college-going outcomes to improve in rural areas, rural-focused equity initiatives and policies must be institutionalized at micro, meso, and macro levels. Implications from this study provide researchers, policymakers, and practitioners with constructive ideas that could strengthen the alignment of rural educational stakeholders, institutional practices, and initiatives.

The dissertation of Sabrina A. Klein is approved.

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar

Teresa McCarty

Nicholas Hillman

Patricia M. McDonough, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

DEDICATION

To Thomas Drummond, for always seeing all of the potential in me, and instilling in me that my experiences were my strengths, not my weaknesses. This dissertation embodies everything you have ever taught me, the most crucial being to advocate for those whose voices are not heard and to challenge structures and systems that keep students from reaching their full potential. This dissertation is in honor and celebration of your lifetime of work advocating, supporting, and changing the lives of thousands of rural, underrepresented students, including mine. I have never felt like there have been enough words to truly show you my gratitude, so I decided to write you a dissertation. I dedicate this to you.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation, and my educational journey thus far, would absolutely not be possible without the never-ending support of my family, friends, and community. It feels like I have been preparing for a lifetime to write these acknowledgements, and I still feel like there isn't enough room to capture the gratitude I feel for each and every person in my life. First, my education would not be possible without the significant financial contributions I received quite literally allowing me to pursue any form of higher education, including scholarships, fellowships, and graduate student employment opportunities. I am grateful for those who financially invested into my future and my education. My life is defined by the incredibly strong woman who brought me into this world. I look back to my first memories, and they are filled with moments of reading countless books together, and overcoming life's adversities just the two of us. Mom. My Mumpa. You were the first person in my life who taught me that learning is the most important thing one can do for themselves. You modeled for me that no matter what happens in life, you must pick yourself up, and keep moving forward. Mumpa, I am all that I am today, because of you, thank you.

To the love of my life, the person who has been by my side every step of this journey, my husband, Patrick. There is no coincidence of the serendipitous timing of meeting you during my new adventure to Los Angeles to pursue graduate school. I absolutely believe there was nothing random about that day we met at the Rose Bowl tailgate, and I couldn't help falling in love with you. Graduate school brought me to Los Angeles, and there I found my forever adventure, you. You have helped me find strength and determination I didn't know that I had. I thank you for supporting me every moment of this journey. From every cup of coffee, to popping every bottle of champagne, to holding me when it's all too hard, and for laughing at it all with me. Thank you

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for your "let's do it" adventurous approach that inspires me to tackle life. Thank you for being my biggest supporter and my best friend. Without you, Roscoe wouldn't be a part of our family, and I'm so thankful for all of his sweet, snuggly, pit-bull loving heart. Patrick, thank you for loving me through it all, and for every sacrifice you have made to help me accomplish this goal. I am the luckiest woman in the world to call you my husband, and to be loved by you. Here's to our next adventure.

I started my journey in this world in Selma, Oregon, and became a part of a legacy of rural people. To my grandparents, Gerald and Virginia Miller, your love has shaped who I am as a person, and how I see myself in this world. My memories spent with you both at the cabin in the forest are ones I hold close to my heart. Grandpa, I hope you can see this in heaven, and know that I was always listening when you spoke to me; even in your silence, I was listening. You both taught me to appreciate the rural spaces where I was raised, and that the way we lived life was just as valuable as any other way. Thank you to my entire family, and to everyone where my life started at the Old Homestead.

Life in that small town of Selma, on Lakeshore Drive, also brought me my chosen family and two sisters. Alyssa, you have always been a leading light in my life. Thank you for always being the person who never lets me give up, and most importantly the person who always reminds me who I am and where I come from. Thank you for being my sister, and for never leaving my side. Tim, thank you for being my brother in every sense of the word, a protector, a friend, always cheering me on. To my nephew and nieces, Ryland, Emmarie, and Elayna, I hope one day you'll see this and know that you can do anything you set your heart and your mind to. I hope you know how much Auntie loves you, and that your love has changed my life. My Twisted Sister, Megan, countless life-altering moments begin with you, including this one. After

we conquered LA together on sisters weekend, I knew I could find my way there. You push me harder than anyone ever has. You are the Cristina to my Meredith. Thank you for always dancing it out with me, and always helping me face the most unthinkable challenges. Thank you to Nick for supporting our sisterhood. Thank you, Momma Morgan, for being in my community of "Moms." To my Lakeshore girls, Alyssa, Megan, and BreAnna, thank you for your lifetime of love and support.

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How could I have known that one fateful day in the sixth grade, when I was invited to join a college access program called College Dreams, would be the impetus for my entire career. Monet, you were the first person in my life to see a little girl who lived in the woods had been forgotten by the world, and taught me that I had a world of possibilities at my fingertips. You have loved me in every way that I didn't know I needed, you have supported me in every journey, and you have held me through the most difficult moments of my life. I am grateful to you, Tim, Kaden, and Connor for always making me feel at home. There would be no College Dreams without the vision of Tom and Judie Drummond, and without Tom and Judie Drummond, there would be no basis for my passion in giving back all that they gave to me. Tom and Judie, you hired me to "do what we did with you," without an interview or a doubt. I can't thank you enough for every opportunity you have given me, and I thank you for always standing alongside my dreams; it's true, the harder I work, the luckier I get. And, the luckiest I've ever been is to call College Dreams my family. Thank you to the entire College Dreams family, including Rebecca, Jen, Kim, Brenda, Jann, and my favorite middle school principal, Rene.

I never expected to pursue graduate school; however, one encounter with my advisor and chair, Dr. Patricia McDonough, and I felt my entire trajectory shift. From our first meeting, you asked me why I wanted to be admitted to UCLA, and I presented to you all the reasons that I should be admitted despite my shortcomings. I told you that I probably wouldn't be admitted, and you looked at me and said, "Who do you think does the admitting?" You believed in me from that very first day. A month into my first quarter of the master's program, you asked me, "Ever thought about getting a PhD?" and I laughed. After you admitted me to the PhD program, you helped me step into my identity as a scholar *and* a practitioner. Pat, I can't tell you how grateful I am for you asking me that question that day, and for supporting me every step of the

way since. Your mentorship, scholarship, and friendship has been invaluable to me. Thank you for seeing Dr. Klein long before I ever knew she was a possibility. The respect and gratitude I hold for you is inconceivable; thank you for championing me and this dissertation.

I am still in awe by the members of my committee who have not only supported this dissertation, but have supported me in my journey. Dr. Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Dr. Teresa McCarty, and Dr. Nicholas Hillman, your brilliance and scholarship moves me deeply, but what has moved me even more is your support of your students. Dr. Rios-Aguilar, being in your class paved the way for this dissertation, and you have always pushed me to think bigger and better about my work. Dr. McCarty, taking your class my first quarter at UCLA was the most affirming experience I could have asked for. You made me feel welcomed and valued at a place that I wasn't sure I belonged, and you took my love for speaking to people and transformed it into research. Dr. Hillman, your scholarship shed light onto all of my experiences as rural student, and shaped my work as a researcher. Meeting you for the first time, you affirmed my identity and the work I hoped to do, and having you on my committee has given me critical insight and perspective to my work. Thank you all for supporting me and my passions.

My journey has been shaped by many faculty members and educators at UCLA. First and foremost, the late Dr. Mike Rose—the amount of money I would pay to share one more chat around that table in your office. You took my words and helped me transform them into voices and into stories. I miss the laughs we shared, and how you always reminded me to use my words to take a stand. Thank you to the numerous faculty from whom I have been honored to learn and share community with: Dr. Sylvia Hurtado, Dr. Ananda Marin, and Dr. Kim Gomez. Thank you to the wonderfully amazing and supportive people in the Education OSS Office, Amy Gershon and Kim Mattheussens, for being true champions of student success, including mine. I found a

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My time at UCLA gave me more than I could have ever hoped, including the friendship and companionship of more people I consider chosen family. My dear Alana, you helped make Weyburn Terrace a home, and became my LA partner in crime. I swear our souls have been friends for a lifetime, and I can't imagine my life without you. You have endlessly supported me through each part of this journey, and my gratitude for you and Sam cannot be captured. Annie, I have never been more grateful that Kansas City brought us together. Not only did your friendship help my survive graduate school, but sustained my soul during a pandemic. I always learn from you and your tenacity for pushing for the best. Thank you for always being by my side to celebrate every success we've had together, from quals to proposing to finishing. Here's to our

my journey at Rogue Community College and Southern Oregon University. Thank you to the Counseling Department at Rogue Community College, including Sue Orris and Katilyn Eccleston. The experiences and growth I had in the communication department at Southern Oregon University gave me the confidence and knowledge to articulate my thoughts and turn them into actionable narratives. Thank you to the entire communication department for the exceptional education I received, which has given me so many essential skills that have aided in every aspect of my life. My greatest gratitude and thanks to my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Alena Ruggerio. Dr. Ruggerio, every class I had the honor of taking with you always left me hungry to learn and be more. Your benediction has never left my mind, and I cherish every heartbeat I spent learning from you.

I have had the honor of being a part of countless students' educational journeys, and witnessing so much greatness over the past 12 years. These students have taught me more than I could have ever taught them. Thank you to my first group of TRiO Talent Search students at South Middle School, to my students in College Dreams, to my GEAR UP students at West Valley High School, including my SOAR Leadership students, to all of my students in the UCLA PEERS program, to my undergraduate students in the UCLA Education 143 Winter 2020 class, to every amazing student over the past 3 years who has taken my UCLA University Studies course. Each and every one of you has molded me into the educator I am today, and I thank you for allowing me to be a part of your journey. I hope that even a portion of this work can continue to uplift you all, and know that your stories are always with me.

The biggest thank you of all is to the incredible participants who participated in this study. Your experiences, your insights, your sacrifices, and your commitment to your work left

me humbled and inspired by each and every one of you. I vow to carry your stories with me, and

use them in my pursuit to transform higher education to be one that champions rurality.

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University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)   June 2017
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University of California, Los Angeles   Los Angeles, CA
College Academic Mentor, College of Letters & Sciences   2017–2019

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College Dreams, Inc.   Grants Pass, OR
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Oregon GEAR UP Alumni Student Success Feature Story   2018
UCLA Department of Education Diversity Fellowship   2017
UCLA Department of Education Fellowship   2016
Rogue Community College Alumni Student Success Story   2010

Chapter 1: Introduction

I will never forget the overwhelming feeling I felt I felt when I stepped onto a university campus for the first time. As a bright-eyed seventh grader from a remote mountain town, I could not yet conceptualize what college even meant, and each step I took on campus that day felt like I was in a completely different world. I lived 45 minutes away from the nearest Walmart in a remote town of 591 people. No one in my family nor close relational circle attended college other than my teachers at school. If not for a college access program called College Dreams and fiercely dedicated people in my school and community, I might have never had the opportunity to pursue and complete a postsecondary degree. College was no easy feat. I commuted long distances to pursue my undergraduate education with little-to-no familial support. From my local community college to transferring to my regional public university, I encountered barriers at every step of the path to graduation—but my story was not unique in my community. For my peers, attending college ultimately meant facing the decision of leaving their community with a high probability of never returning, and for many of the people I knew, that was not a decision they were willing to make.

Similarly, the choice to stay or leave and never return consumed me because I also dearly loved my community and rural life. My mother taught me how to grow and preserve our own food and how to survive without grocery or retail stores. I spent my summers swimming in the frigid waters of a river made from snowmelt and eating warm, sun-ripened blackberries from the vine on the banks of the mountain creek by our cabin. By the age of 7, I could chop firewood, make and keep a fire going to heat our cabin, operate a tractor, pan for gold, and operate a gold dredge machine. The tension I felt in making the decision to leave and attend college was largely because I knew those skills and salient parts of my identity were not valued outside of my

community. Leaving meant leaving all of those elements of my identity behind, too, and it was the most frightening decision I have ever made.

Background of the Study

Many rural students experience the tensions my peers and I felt, and these students have continued to struggle from low rates of postsecondary attendance and completion (Koricich et al., 2020); however, researchers have found rural students graduate from high school at higher rates than their nonrural peers (e.g., Koricich et al., 2018), and many rural students do in fact aspire to pursue higher education (Tieken, 2016). As such, the postsecondary opportunity gap for rural students becomes evident, not due to a lack of aspiration, but rather the host of barriers and challenges rural students face in obtaining a 4-year degree (Ardoin, 2018; Grimard & Maddus, 2004; McDonough et al., 2010). One significant barrier is the fact many rural students are geographically place-bound and lack access to institutions of higher education (Hillman, 2016).

If rural students do attend college, they most likely attend community college, given community colleges are more prevalent than universities in rural areas (Byun et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018). This geographic barrier helps explain why rural students historically have a low rate of obtaining 4-year degrees (Koricich et al., 2020). Still, without community colleges, rural communities would largely be left without access to public postsecondary education (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). This lack of access to higher education has long fueled an overall lack of recognition of rural students' needs (McDonough et al., 2010). These negative outcomes have been further exacerbated by a lack of access to technology and high-speed internet in rural areas (Koricich et al., 2020).

As my own personal testimony demonstrates, my local community college and regional comprehensive university (RCU) were pivotal in my completion of a bachelor's degree.

Interestingly, these institutions share challenges similar to the rural students they serve. Rural-serving institutions have been underinvested in and undervalued (Orphan & McClure, 2019), mirroring the perpetual undervaluing and underinvestment in rural students and communities (Corbett, 2007; McDonough et al., 2010; Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2016). For example, community colleges are the historic champions of rural higher education—not only in their efforts to provide higher education access to rural spaces, but in supporting local economic development and providing employment opportunities in their communities (Koricich et al., 2108). Rural students often desire degrees or credentials that will allow them to be employable by local rural industries (e.g., logging, firefighting, hospitality; Petrin et al., 2014; Tieken, 2016), and community colleges respond to the local labor market demand by providing economically sound degrees. As such, community colleges face a challenge in providing traditional academic degrees (Koricich et al., 2018).

Similarly, RCUs share a strong foundational mission to serve students, support their local regions, and provide access to four-year degrees for local students (Orphan, 2018); however, neoliberal policies and performance-based funding models have continued to negatively affect funding and support for RCUs, despite the role these institutions play in awarding most 4-year degrees in the United States (Orphan, 2018). Unlike K–12 school districts, where funding is based on local property taxes (Brown & Schafft, 2018), RCUs are tasked as public higher education institutions with providing access to 4-year degrees across geographically and socially diverse regions and doing so with continually limited resources.

Statement of the Problem

Educational scholars have continued to document rural educational outcomes and poverty, from (a) the relationship between rurality and the economy (Israel et al., 2001; Reid,

1989; Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2016), to (b) a lack of physical access to postsecondary education (Hillman, 2016; Sansone et al., 2020), to (c) students' aspirations for higher education (Agger et al., 2018; Ardoin, 2018; Corbett, 2016; Howley, 2006), to (d) the barriers students face in pursuing a degree or credential (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). Prior researchers have examined how rural communities strive to persist in the face of generational poverty, outmigration, rapidly changing economies, and difficulties in creating opportunities to attract and retain their own students (Brown & Schafft, 2018). Additionally, higher education attainment has been found to be connected with increased upward mobility (Reber & Sinclair, 2020). Upward mobility has subsequently become a salient issue in rural communities, particularly because the natural, resource-based economies that once provided sound employment opportunities no longer offer the same kinds of opportunities (Schafft, 2016; Sherman, 2009, Tieken, 2016).

Further, rural communities with low rates of educational attainment also tend to be located in educational deserts, areas with scarce variety in postsecondary institutional types (Hillman, 2016). Community colleges and regional public 4-year universities tend to be the most represented institutions in rural areas (Hillman, 2016; Koricich et al., 2018); therefore, rural students do not attend college nor obtain postsecondary degrees at the same rates as their peers (Byun et al., 2012). These low rates of attainment may contribute to the persistent, and often invisible, poverty experienced in rural areas (Castle, 1993). A recent report showed one sixth of rural students live below the federal poverty line (Showalter et al., 2018). Although pursuing higher education increases the likelihood of upward mobility, the pursuit may involve the student leaving their rural community for good (Corbett, 2007; Petrin et al., 2014; Tieken, 2016).

Although researchers have consistently documented the underrepresentation of rural youth at 4-year institutions, along with the barriers and challenges those student face in pursuit of

higher education, more scholarship is needed to explore the role of rural-serving higher education institutions in addressing rural educational outcomes. Recent work has pointed to the importance of RCUs in addressing regional educational outcomes (Orphan & McClure, 2019); however, little is known about their role in a field of rural higher education. These institutions have also been disregarded in similar ways to that of rural students and communities.

I argue rural students and communities in the United States will continue to face the same barriers in accessing and attaining higher education, compounded by persistent poverty, until researchers explore the organizations and actors as college-going systems and work to reimagine college-going in rural spaces. Researchers must begin to take a step further and explore the role of rural public higher education, both its strengths and challenges, to address rural educational inequities and remove systemic barriers in higher education. Importantly, the ways in which rurality is experienced is shaped by settler colonialism. Indigenous rurality is dynamic and multi-faceted, while this dissertation acknowledges Indigenous peoples as the original stewards of rural spaces, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address the vast dynamics in this context. I argue the rural college-going pipeline, mostly consisting of open-access institutions (i.e., RCUs and community colleges), have the potential to address these educational outcomes and therefore address rural poverty. I hypothesize if researchers can first explore how improving access and attainment of higher education has the potential to create authentic and beneficial opportunities for rural youth who wish to stay in their local communities, those in the higher education sector can begin to improve poverty and create more equitable opportunities in rural America.

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to contribute to existing literature on rurality and higher education by addressing college access and attainment from an organizational lens. In doing so, this

dissertation also addressed the field of rural higher education as a system of actors, organizations, and institutions. Higher education institutions not only influence students on an individual level, but significantly influence the communities they serve. Notably, the effects of higher education are particularly salient in communities geographically isolated from higher education, such as rural spaces—spaces that also remain largely understudied, particularly in higher education. Although researchers have demonstrated the unique and incredible role community colleges play in rural communities (e.g., Evans, 2016)—both in their open-access policies and in their locally viable degree options and contribution to economic development— very little is known about the relationship of community colleges and RCUs in rural communities as a college-going pipeline.

As such, this dissertation aimed to address a crucial empirical gap. The relationship between community colleges and RCUs is increasingly important, as researchers have suggested rural students do not complete 4-year degrees at the same rates as their nonrural peers (e.g., Byun et al., 2015). This evidence points to the importance of increasing postsecondary access and attainment for rural students, which connects to pervasive rural poverty; however, the role of higher education in rural spaces is still largely misunderstood. Research has yet to fully interrogate the system and structure of rural higher education itself from an organizational field lens (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which defines key actors and organizations and defines conflict and contestation in a field. Employing a multidimensional lens in this study was a necessary method of contributing to and expanding beyond existing studies.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the field of rural higher education, including (a) higher education actors and organizations in that field, (b) the internal and external forces that

shape and define the field, and (c) the ways the field addresses regional educational inequities. Accordingly, I employed a unique qualitative case study (Yin, 2017).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative case study:

1. How do educational actors and organizations in a field of rural higher education describe the field?

    a. What is the complex web of interactions that they have with each other, including the patterns, strengths, and weaknesses they identify?

2. What is the role of higher education in this rural area?

    a. In what ways and to what extent do the actors and organizations identify and address regional educational and economic needs?

Definitions of Key Terminology

Given the wide range of definitions applied when exploring rurality and higher education, I define key concepts and terms that were relevant to the scope of this study.

Rural

A major challenge to studying rurality involves the varying definitions of what rural is and is not. Rurality has been defined using metrics of population, commuting zones, and types of economic industries. Many federal departments, such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), define *rurality* as residual areas left after defining urban and suburban. While this definition encompasses more rural spaces, it also inherently does not capture the complexity of rurality in this country. However, other definitions of rurality center how rural spaces are experienced, and the tangible feelings rural spaces can elicit. Due to this study's grounding in organizational and spatial theory, I used two definitions to capture rurality. The

first, defined by the Economic Research Service (2021), defined rurality, or nonmetro counties, to "include some combination of: open countryside, rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas)" (para. 1). The second definition of rurality I employed came from Tieken's (2014) work, where she stated, "'Rural' then is a matter of commonplace interactions and events that constitute the rural 'lifeworld,' a value mostly overlooked by media and academia, and a significance impossible to quantify" (p. 5).

Rural Located Versus Rural-Serving Institution

To better understand how postsecondary institutions that are technically located in a nonrural locales yet serve a predominately rural region, this study used a rural-serving definition derived from the Rural Serving Institutions Project by the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC). In a first of its kind examination, ARRC created a metric and definition of what it means to be a rural-serving institution versus a rural-located institution (Koricich et al., 2022). Historically, location has been the primary method of identifying rural-serving institutions, which does not portray the actual number of institutions serving a rural area (Koricich et al., 2022). ARRC (as cited in Koricich et al., 2022) used data sources to create a metric to determine how rural-serving an institution is:

> Two variables, taken from data from the Census Bureau, account for the percentage of an institution's home county population classified as rural, as well as the average rural population percentage of all adjacent counties. Additionally, we derived an ordinal measure of the home county's population size and a dichotomous measure of its adjacency to a metropolitan area from the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. By using four

measures of place instead of one, our analysis was able to incorporate a more nuanced

way of accounting for the rurality of the region in which an institution resides. (p. 10)

The two institutions of higher education in this study were considered rural-serving by the metric

created by ARRC, as discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

RCU

RCUs are shaped by their commitment to open access and commitment to regional civic

and economic engagement (Orphan, 2018). One perspective, offered by Mehaffy (2015),

informed this study's definition of RCU:

> Caught in the middle between the often-better-known research universities and the more
>
> ubiquitous community colleges, regional comprehensive universities usually have a
>
> primary focus on teaching but are responsive to regional needs much like their
>
> community college colleagues, and they conduct research like their research university
>
> colleagues. Yet the institutions' primary focus on teaching, with bits of regional concern
>
> and research efforts thrown in, have not yielded a simple or coherent mission that is
>
> easily understood by either the institutions themselves or by external observers. (p. 2)

Field of Rural Higher Education

In this study, the field of rural higher education was conceptualized as a college-going

pipeline composed of a system of actors and organizations with a common goal who influence

(a) a student's postsecondary trajectory, (b) the experiences students have "to and through"

secondary education and postsecondary education, and (c) specifically reference access and

attainment. Scholars refer to the entire educational pipeline as a P-20 pipeline (Chamberlin &

Plucker, 2008; Núñez & Oliva, 2009). Núñez and Oliva (2009) conceptualized the P–20 pipeline

as the relationship between preschool, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education via a

collaborative pipeline leading to academic and workforce development. Chamberlin and Plucker

(2008) defined the P–20 pipeline as a system with the goal of:

> Preparing a highly skilled work force in the years beyond undergraduate education . . .
>
> activities usually involve collaborations linking preschool education, K–12 education,
>
> and higher education, with major roles often played by state agencies, state legislatures,
>
> and businesses . . . systems are intended primarily to smooth transitions between the
>
> different levels of education and into the workforce. (p. 472)

The scope of this study did not include preschool or elementary factors, which served as the

basis for referring to only the college-going actors and organizations which I refer to as a

college-going pipeline. The college-going pipeline is an educational pipeline toward the

transition and completion of a postsecondary degree or credential. Students experience this

pipeline in varied ways based on many factors including geographic location, racial and ethnic

identity (Langenkamp & Hoyt, 2019), socioeconomic status, and family educational background.

Theoretical Framework

To understand (a) the field of rural higher education, (b) the relationships between the

actors and organizations in that pipeline, and (c) how this pipeline might address regional

educational outcomes, I used a neo-institutional and Bourdieuian fields theoretical framework

(Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) which I integrated with the community capitals

framework (Flora et al., 2018), and grounded in geography of opportunity (Galster & Killen,

1995). To date, no researcher has included both critical spatial theory and organizational fields in

conversation to examine rurality and higher education. Using the geography of opportunity and

organizational fields creates an important opportunity to consider the role of geography in the

relationship between rural spaces and higher education. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth review of this theoretical framework, and how I applied the framework to this study.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation is composed of five chapters. Chapter 1 aimed to provide important background information, identify the problem, and specify the significance of the present work. Next, Chapter 2 focuses on three domains of literature. In the first domain, I center the present work in the larger context of rurality in the United States. The second domain concerns discourse around rurality and secondary education, and the third domain reviews the literature on rurality and higher education. Each of these domains has an underlying focus on college access and attainment. I conclude the chapter by presenting a neo-institutional and Bourdieuian fields theory and community capitals framework (Flora et al., 2018), and document how I applied this framework to my exploration of the field of rural higher education. In Chapter 3, I present this study's methodology and research design, including research site, participants and methods of data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the comprehensive findings of the landscape in this field of rural higher education, and lastly, Chapter 5 describes the findings on the factors that shaped the college-going pipeline within the field, and Chapter 6 provides a discussion of contributions to theory and literature and implications for research, policy, and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter includes a review of existing literature surrounding rurality and higher education—specifically the actors, organizations, and systems related to rural college access and college attainment. First, I provide an overview of the opportunities and challenges experienced in rural spaces to better understand the context that shapes educational institutions in those spaces. Next, I review what is known about rurality and secondary education as related to college access and attainment. I then survey existing literature on rurality and higher education to provide important contextual information on rural-serving colleges and universities. To conclude this chapter, I present a neo-institutional and Bourdieuian fields theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and employ a community capitals framework (CCF; Flora et al., 2018) informed by the concept of the geography of opportunity (Galster & Killen, 1995). Together, these bodies of literature and the proposed theoretical framework explored and defined the field of rural higher education in crucial ways that framed this study.

Rural Spaces: Opportunities and Challenges

Rural spaces are more than a zip code and more than how far they are located from the nearest Walmart. The façade of emptiness indicated by these misconceptions has been mirrored in empirical literature about rural spaces. Specifically, few attempts have been made to critically examine systems and structures that continue to reproduce poor educational and economic outcomes for people in rural communities. Researchers and policymakers have paid little attention to the factors that shape and define rural spaces, and therefore have created a "rural" problem that inherently places rurality as the problem (e.g., Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural spaces are experienced in both positive and negative ways, which are shaped by historical events and racialized pasts. Further, rural spaces are shaped by their relationship with local industry, and

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may have a very different educational network depending on their economic basis. Every rural space is defined by a history of settler colonialism, land that once was stewarded by Indigenous tribes was stolen and the history and rights of Indigenous peoples were stripped away (Wolfe, 2006). The marginalization and erasure of Indigenous peoples has defined every rural space. For racially marginalized individuals living in rural communities, discussing the challenges and complexities of rural life presents an opportunity to dispel the monolithic narrative that rural means white (Sansone et al., 2020), and this discussion is a crucial undertaking to disrupt the narrative about who lives in rural spaces. Dismantling dominant perceptions about rural spaces (Flora et al., 2018), and perpetual systemic reinforcements of spatial injustice is critical. To enact this nuanced change, scholars and practitioners must work toward a greater understanding about the multiplicity of rural spaces, both in their unique strengths and challenges.

Opportunities

The success of schools and their students often depend on local communities. Rural communities are composed of tightly woven connections and mutual interests among individuals who may be invested in the future of their communities (Sherman, 2018); however, rural communities can also be spaces of conflict and disagreement during times when the fate of the community is uncertain (Sherman & Sage, 2011). From an individual perspective, Sherman and Sage (2011) found educational goals and aspirations can vary across community members and discovered this difference can create tension in and around postsecondary education. More recently, Tieken (2016) found rural educational stakeholders have reinforced students' and parents' beliefs that the primary function of postsecondary education is for a career rather than a liberal arts education, which may be another source of discontent. Rural schools often have close relationships with their communities, and rural communities actively participate in educational

development (Alleman & Holly, 2014); yet, few studies have examined the role of school and community partnerships in rural education, particularly related to the effect of these partnerships on closing equity gaps in college access—an important direction for future research (Alleman & Holly, 2014).

Rural schools have critical potential to bridge an array of groups in their communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Schafft (2016) found reconceptualizing rural education "promotes the reconsideration—and enhancement—of the school–community linkage with an eye toward creating new opportunities in rural communities that capitalize on the strong connections and commitments to a place that many rural young people value" (p. 144). Community members are an important facet of any part of organizational change for rural areas. With specific consideration to educational outcomes, several studies have found school and community actors, organizations, and resources play an integral role for rural, low socioeconomic status students' educational aspirations and success (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Flora et al., 2018). To address educational outcomes in rural spaces, considering the role of community members and stakeholders is essential.

Challenges

Rural spaces in the United States face unique challenges, from poverty, to accurate representation, to the role of the local economy in overall community well-being. As rural America continues to become more racially and ethnically diverse, it is critical to investigate the particular barriers and challenges marginalized rural students encounter (Sherman & Sage, 2011; Tickamyer et al., 2017). The experience and success of rural students is highly variable and often related to poverty (Stauber, 2001), especially because rural poverty is a persistent challenge (Jensen et al., 2003; Stauber, 2001). Markedly, poverty in rural America is persistently higher

than nonrural spaces, and has been since 1959 (Weber & Miller, 2017). Yet, a monolithic view of rural America extends to a monolithic view of rural poverty. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, n.d.), from 2015–2019 the West (as defined by the states of Washington, Oregon, and California) held a 15.6% poverty rate in nonmetro areas. The USDA-ERS (n.d.) also demonstrated that the poverty gaps in the rural West are larger than those in the East. Challenges presented by systemic barriers and poverty also are embodied in the ways pop culture and mass media have illustrated rural America as a monolithic place (Stauber, 2001), such that pictures of rural spaces often feature iconic midwestern plains, a red barn with some scattered cattle in the distance, and an agricultural way of life. This narrative erases the diversity of the many kinds of "rural" across the United States. Even in existing research, empirical studies have largely focused on essentialized midwestern, southern, and Appalachian versions of rural, and insufficient research have explored rural spaces west of the Mississippi River, such as the Pacific Northwest (e.g., Longhurst, 2013). The ways rural spaces have been falsely characterized in monolithic ways creates additional challenges to addressing several complexities in educational access, including barriers associated with technology and the economy.

Technology Barriers

Over the course of the last several decades, technology has become ubiquitous in everyday life; yet, opportunities and barriers technology creates in rural places are unique. The most prominent example is individuals' access to high-speed internet. Similar to the challenges that have arisen from defining rural in America, scholars have debated defining access to technology (Poon, 2020). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC, 2012) found nearly one fourth of the population—14.5 million people—in rural areas lacked access to broadband internet. Yet in 2020, the FCC (2020) found 22.3% of Americans in rural areas and 27.7% of

Americans in tribal lands lack coverage from high-speed broadband internet, as compared to only 1.5% of Americans in urban areas.

A recent report debated the validity of these findings from the FCC, arguing the FCC severely underreported the amount of people in the United States without internet access by about 20 million people (Busby & Tanberk, 2020). Busby and Tanberk (2020) also found the FCC particularly underestimated broadband access in states with a higher percentage of rural areas, particularly for those in poverty. Amid the COVID-19 global pandemic, reliable internet access has become a particularly salient barrier in accessing education. News articles have documented how rural students, particularly those in secondary and postsecondary education, have taken extreme measures to gain internet access, including parking their cars at fast-food restaurants for hours simply to access their classes during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Dvorak, 2020; Groetzinger, 2020; Schlemmer, 2020; Siegler, 2020). Given that society has portrayed technology as a tool to provide greater access to rural students and communities, this contrasting reality is particularly concerning.

Technology has transformed education, particularly the ways students—both in secondary and postsecondary education—receive information about pivotal information in the college-going process. Some researchers have suggested using nudging techniques may improve access to information or increase persistence in higher education, especially among students who lack access to in-person institutional agents (Castleman & Meyer, 2020). *Nudging* is an intervention derived from human and social psychology that aims to provide—often through text messaging—targeted college-going information and reminders to increase college access (Castleman & Meyer, 2020). As a further complication to the effectiveness of nudging techniques, Koricich et al. (2020) argued because many rural adults live in internet education

deserts, online solutions may add barriers for rural students, not alleviate them. That is to say, text messaging nudges, even when personalized, should not be oversold but rather carefully caveated as a rapid way to spread information. Further, technology may increase challenges in students successfully completing and attending college via online or remote course options (Hart et al., 2018), may hinder student progress in college (Bettinger et al., 2017), and may reduce learning outcomes for students who solely participate in online learning environments (Alpert et al., 2016).

King (2012) found some rural parents felt uncomfortable with technology, wherein parents did not want to attend college-going workshops that used computers because they would have to use technology. These findings demonstrated the importance of relationships with caring adults who are invested in rural students (King, 2012; Singh & Dika, 2003), and can provide assistance navigating technology. Hillman and Weichman (2016) argued for those who live in an education desert, online education may hold potential, but only if it does not further perpetuate inequalities. To summarize, technology provides access in ways that have never before been possible for rural spaces; however, due to rural poverty and problematic and expensive internet access, technology also presents many barriers.

Economic Barriers

When considering the relationship between postsecondary education and rural communities, the role of the local economy must be taken into account. Due to systemic economic barriers, students in rural communities cannot separate future economic employment prospects from their motivations for pursuing college (Ruiz & Perna, 2017; Tieken, 2016). The traditional agricultural and natural resource-based industries (e.g., logging, mining, fishing) for which students and their families once planned as careers no longer offer the same opportunities

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as they did in the past (Reid, 1989), and research has shown rural students are still advised to pursue college degrees that are easily leveraged into a career (e.g., Tieken, 2016). As these natural resource-based industries have increasingly been eliminated in rural America, students have often turned to postsecondary education as a way to repair the loss of these industries and the impact of that loss on the local economy (Tieken, 2016). Further, the increase of technology in the economy has also increased the education requirements of current and new jobs (Carnevale & Rose, 2015), potentially exacerbating the global and technical divide rural communities experience. As demonstrated, technology is a source of strain for rural communities, and becomes further perpetuated when paired with employment prospects and rising educational requirements.

Rural K–12 Students

Just as rural America is not a monolithic identity, the students of rural America are diverse in many ways. To fully understand the ways rurality, college access, and college attainment relate, an examination of secondary education characteristics in rural spaces is necessary. Educational researchers have struggled to define rurality accurately, in part due to large federal datasets that employ varying definitions over the years (Manly et al., 2020). Studies have documented the barriers rural students face in pursuing and attaining higher education (e.g., Byun et al., 2015), but much remains to be learned. For one, college choice and geographic location are not a dichotomous relationship, yet scholars have often conceptualized college choice without considering the role of geographic location (Turley, 2009). Second, researchers must address the ways mobility, community attachment, and social identities shape the college-going process for rural students (Terman, 2020); otherwise, empirical studies run the risk of reproducing harmful monolithic conclusions about rural education.

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Intersecting Rural and Social Identities

Despite what is known about rural students in the aggregate, a limited number of studies have explored the ways in which rural identity intersects with other social identities, such as race and gender (e.g., Terman, 2020). Several recent studies have pointed to the fact rural students of color experience more barriers in the college-going process than their rural white peers, but the experiences of rural students of color and Indigenous students have remained largely hidden under the misconception that rural students are synonymous with white students (Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Irvin et al., 2011; Sansone et al., 2020).

In addition, some studies (e.g., Griffin et al., 2011) have explored the relationship between gender, access to higher education, and rurality; for example, the intersection of gender and rural identity have effects on the decision-making process for rural students, wherein women seek out planning information for their futures at higher rates than men. Scholars have also found women in rural areas pursue postsecondary education at higher rates than men who tend to pursue occupations prevalent in rural areas (Agger et al., 2018; Hektner, 1995; McHenry-Sorber & Swisher, 2020). There is a clear need to continue expanding this line of inquiry and further complicate the historical monolithic narrative about who rural students are, especially to examine the unique intersections of students' rural identities and other social identities (e.g., race and gender).

Rural Schools

Rural schools are often the center, or heart, of the community (Tieken, 2014), bringing together diverse community members in the pursuit of community development (Schafft, 2016); however, rural schools have continually struggled to support students under pressure from state and federal policies and legislation specifically articulated for nonrural schools (Tieken, 2014).

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Rural schools have continued to fight against the closure of their local schools (Tieken &

Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). Further, rural schools often receive less funding on a per-student basis

compared to nonrural schools (Roscigno et al., 2006), limiting how rural schools can support the

day-to-day lives of their students.

Legislation

Rural communities have continually advocated for legislation and public policy to invest

in and support public rural education (Stauber, 2001). Policy and legislation—particularly

federal and state legislative programs—privilege nonrural places by failing to design realistic and

feasible policies for rural spaces (Johnson & Howley, 2015). Biddle and Azano (2016) argued

part of the problem could be attributed to the way writers have addressed rurality. Ruiz and

Perna (2017) argued employing place-based policies that explicitly consider the implications and

needs of rural communities and strategies that may improve postsecondary opportunities for rural

youth. As such, there is a dire need to expand the ways rurality is examined and portrayed,

increase attention to the systems and structures that guide schools, and facilitate educational

experiences in rural spaces.

Rural Brain Drain

Advancing understanding of outmigration may be one way to move the conversation

about rurality to a systems-level perspective. Outmigration is a phenomenon where an individual

leaves one region or community to settle in another, especially as part of a large-scale and

continuing movement of population. In the rural school context, researchers have referred to this

phenomenon as *brain drain*, where high-achieving youth or college-educated young people often

leave their small towns and head toward urban areas to pursue higher education, various career

fields, and higher employment opportunities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Howley et

al., 2000; Petrin et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011). In an initial exploration of this phenomenon, Carr and Kefalas (2009) executed a case study in Iowa for their book, *Hollowing Out the Middle*, which deeply examined the lives of students in a rural setting. Carr and Kefalas's preliminary work sought to understand the role of stakeholders, including educational stakeholders for rural schools, and the ways in which they perpetuate rural brain drain.

Carr and Kefalas (2009) identified four main types of students in this school, providing insight into the vast array of students and their needs. These four groups included: (a) Achievers, (b) Seekers, (c) Returners, and (d) Stayers (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Students classified as Achievers were depicted as the academically successful college-going group from professional class backgrounds. The next group of students from working class backgrounds, the Seekers, aimed to leave their communities but were average students relative to their peers labeled as Achievers. The third group, the Returners, were students who left but eventually circled back to their hometowns, sometimes with varying success along the way. The final—and largest—group of students in this study (comprising approximately 40% of the sample), the Stayers, were defined as working-class students who presented as having adult-like qualities at an early age due to upbringing. Adult-like qualities among the Stayers included work ethic development and high levels of responsibility at home. Summarizing their takeaway from this work, Carr and Kefalas (2009) stated:

> What surprised us most was that adults in the community were playing a pivotal part in the town's decline by pushing the best and brightest young people to leave, and by underinvesting in those who chose to stay, even though it was the latter that were the towns' best chance for a future. (p. 199)

Carr and Kefalas's (2009) study illuminated the challenges of the outmigration of rural youth and the role schools played in that process. Some researchers, such as Nelson (2016), have confirmed Carr and Kefalas's (2009) finding that school staff and community members invested the most resources in college-bound youth.

Arguably, not accounting for other structural forces shaping students' decision-making processes was a limitation of Carr and Kefalas' (2009) study. Other studies have challenged the notion schools are inherently to blame for rural youth leaving their communities (Corbett, 2009; Kryst et al., 2018; Longhurst, 2013; Petrin et al., 2014; Schafft, 2016). In contrast, Petrin et al. (2014) found, though high-achieving rural youth have some of the highest levels of attachment in their communities, the influence of school staff members was not as salient in their decisions to leave or stay as the role of the local economy. Petrin et al (2014) also found students similar to the Achievers often wanted to leave and return to their communities in the future postgraduation. In more recent scholarship, Kryst et al. (2018) conducted a study with three rural schools, documenting how—beyond battling rural brain drain—school officials struggled with how to best prepare their students for what was next after high school. Although rural brain drain has been examined predominantly at the secondary level, one study examined rural Oregon students' decisions to attend a local community college. Longhurst (2013) found place-attachment played a significant role in the decision-making process, and the participants particularly valued a small-town way of life and closeness to the natural world. These findings challenged the dominant narrative that rural students have no agency in their choice process, and only stay because it is the only choice available (Longhurst, 2013). However, since 2020 there has been a shift in rural areas, where rural places are gaining population, partially associated with the mass exodus of people leaving urban areas due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Davis et al., 2022).

This finding by Longhurst (2013) supported other scholars who challenged dominant definitions of success for rural students (Corbett, 2009; Schafft, 2016). Notably, none of the participants in Longhurst's (2013) study were provoked to abandon their rural communities, unlike the participants in the work of Carr and Kefalas (2009). Although the role of school staff and community stakeholders is important, school staff are actors in a system of education that has, thus far, institutionalized the narrative that leaving rural spaces can often be the best option for student's long-term success.

Teachers play a critical role in understanding the nuances and complexities of rural life to support students (Azano & Stewart, 2015) along with their families and, by proxy, their local communities. Despite the critical role teachers play in rural schools, teacher certification programs often fail to provide preservice teachers with exposure to rural classrooms and the opportunity to reflect on what it means to have a rural identity and live in a rural space (Azano & Stewart, 2015). As such, teachers must prepare for the strengths and challenges of rural education and foster renewed emphasis on understanding rurality in teacher education training programs. Further, researchers have demonstrated perceptions held by rural school staff and the local economy substantially influence students' decisions to stay or leave (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2016); however, scholars have yet to account for the ways rural communities and rural-serving postsecondary institutions might play a role in facilitating authentic opportunities that allow students to stay in their local regions.

Rural Trajectories

Rural students have higher graduation rates than the national average, which may correlate to the unique organizational structure of rural schools (McDonough et al., 2010). Engberg and Wolniak (2010) examined the influence of high school context on college

attendance patterns at 2-year institutions, and this study was valuable to understand the paradox between rural students' high graduation rates and the low rates of a college attendance. Engberg and Wolniak found evidence that academic variables, such as grade point average (GPA) and highest level of math completed, had the most significant association with college enrollment. In this study, a student's own peer network was an important factor for enrollment at 4-year institutions, and students' abilities to procure a college-linking network increased enrollment at both 2- and 4-year institutions (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Beyond these traditional academic markers of success, however, the unique nature of rural life allows rural students to develop forms of capital that are often unrecognized or valued in systems of higher education (McDonough et al., 2010). Applying this evidence to rural students demonstrates the critical importance for students to have access—not only to institutional actors at their high schools, but at the college level as well.

A recent study found rural students are not only less likely than their peers to attend postsecondary education within 2 years of completing high school, but they are also less likely to enroll in a 4-year institution (Koricich et al., 2018). These low rates of college-going are particularly salient for rural students with lower socioeconomic status (Byun et al., 2012, 2015). Particularly, lower socioeconomic students and those in economically depressed areas are more likely to attend an institution close to their homes (Turley, 2009); however, Nelson (2016) argued due to educational tracking, high-achieving rural students are isolated from their peers, and this isolation leads to stratification in the school. Rural students are 20% more likely to attend a community college than a 4-year university (Koricich et al., 2018); however this statistic is more than merely an issue of choice because rural students are more likely to have a community college located near them than any other kind of postsecondary institution.

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College Access and Aspirations

Research has documented rural students are just as likely as their peers to have postsecondary aspirations (Howley, 2006); yet, rural students attend postsecondary education at lower rates than their nonrural peers (Adelman, 2005) and experience an information disparity in the college-planning process (McDonough et al., 2010). In examining why this disparity might be the case, Demi et al. (2010) found the strongest predictor of postsecondary enrollment for rural students was school context, meaning the school environment plays a salient role in rural students enrolling in higher education. This finding was congruent with Tieken's (2014) study and demonstrated the interconnected nature of rural schools and rural community life.

In and beyond rural communities, scholars have long examined the role of school counselors in the college-going process (Holland, 2015; McDonough, 1997; Nelson, 2016; Poynton & Lapan, 2017; Robinson & Roksa, 2016), providing evidence that counselors play an integral role in shaping how students think about their college pathways and possibilities. School counselors often wear many hats, which makes it difficult for them to devote time to college counseling (McDonough, 1997). With regard to counseling in a rural context, McDonough et al. (2010) voiced concerns about the prevalent ways rural students and communities are perpetually underrepresented in higher education and problematized the lack of devotion to rural college access in policy and legislation. The findings of McDonough et al.'s (2010) study were particularly crucial in directing future attention toward an examination of organizational structures. McDonough et al. (2010) found money to be the single largest barrier to accessing higher education for rural Californian students, and the authors also documented how rural schools were often not made aware of changes in college admissions practices that affected schools' ability to enhance students' competitiveness. Lastly, McDonough et al. found rural

schools were highly promising in their ability to create a college-going culture but struggled to implement such a culture due to staff members being overextended. Collectively, these findings underscored how micro, meso, and macro structures keep rural schools and their students stuck outside the metaphorical gates of higher education (McDonough et al., 2010).

Taking a broader view, dominant research on college access has discussed how dedicated resources to the college-going process (e.g., financial aid information, college knowledge-building activities, and ability to take college-level coursework in high school) are associated with increasing the number of students who attend 4-year institutions (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Bridging Engberg and Gilbert's (2014) findings with those from McDonough et al.'s (2010) study provides a deeper view of the complexity of the barriers faced by rural students. Together, these findings illuminated the role and influence of 4-year universities as imperative to shaping and developing rural students' college-going aspirations. Tensions in this research-to-practice disparity have been evidenced through the ways researchers have continually documented the challenges rural students face in the pursuit of higher education, yet have failed to explore the educational, political, and social systems accountable for (re)producing those barriers.

College-Going Culture

As demonstrated, many scholars (Holland, 2015; McDonough, 1997; Nelson, 2016; Poynton & Lapan, 2017; Robinson & Roksa, 2016) have provided evidence high school staff and teachers play a large role in developing student's aspirations for college and their later attainment of a postsecondary degree. Grimard and Maddaus (2004) noted, "Caring teachers, guidance counselors and rural school and community leaders play a crucial role in helping students to overcome the obstacles they may face in preparing for college" (p. 35). In line with the previously mentioned phenomena, wherein teacher training programs do not prepare K–12

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teachers for rural school contexts (Biddle & Azano, 2016), school counselors must prepare for their vital role in the college-going culture of a rural school, rural students, and ultimately the local community (Grimard & Maddus, 2004). Changing the college-going culture of a school may be particularly difficult if the staff inherently do not believe in the abilities of their students (Jarsky et al., 2009). Establishing partnerships that encompass each area of the P–20 pipeline are important; however, researchers have discussed how changes in college-going cultural beliefs and practices take time (Jarsky et al., 2009). Rural students and schools experience tensions in the college-going process, and while changing the college-going culture of any school is complicated, but particularly for those rural schools that are physically isolated from higher education.

Rurality and Higher Education

Rural students and communities are likely to be physically isolated from postsecondary educational institutions. Hillman (2016) categorized the term *education desert* as a geographic area where there is a dearth of postsecondary institutions, or even no institutions at all. Hillman (2016) found "these 'education deserts' are disproportionately located in the nation's poorest and most racially minoritized communities" (p. 988). Also drawing on the spatial work of Massey (2005), Hillman highlighted communities with low educational attainment maintain that status because of the choices of policymakers who do not advocate for rural communities to gain access to higher education.

Given the evidence on access to postsecondary education, it is apparent the paradox of systemic issues experienced by rural America will not change until access to postsecondary institutions changes. Koricich et al. (2018) argued establishing access to higher education is a tangible way to combat poverty in rural areas. Researchers have also documented the ways in

which geography and space shape college opportunities (Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman, 2016; Ozias & Pasque, 2019; Reyes et al., 2019; Rios-Aguilar & Titus, 2018), but have paid less attention to examining systems of higher education that influence rural students and their communities. For example, Sparks and Nuñez (2014) called for research "to identify more meaningful organizational and institutional characteristics that are salient for persistence of students in different locations" (p. 13). The complexities of these institutional types and what defines them to be rural-serving colleges or universities was discussed further in Chapter 1.

Community Colleges

Rural community colleges are historic open-access champions. Katsinas and Hardy (2012) showed in 2007–2008, of the 1,078 public community colleges in the United States, 53% were rural institutions and enrolled 33% of students enrolled in all public community colleges. Rural community colleges also enrolled the highest number of first-time, full-time degree and certificate-seeking students, accounting for 39% of all students enrolled in public community colleges (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). Community colleges clearly provide vital access to higher education in rural spaces.

Despite funding challenges, rural community colleges have been widely celebrated for their contributions to economic development. Specifically, Miller and Kissinger (2007) found rural community colleges contribute to three areas of economic development: (a) contract training, (b) developing small businesses, and (c) local economic-development training. Further, Miller and Kissinger found rural community colleges remain underappreciated for the role they play in improving rural quality of life—an outcome that is measured quite differently than economic development. Due to the embedded nature of community colleges in rural

communities, social and cultural activities at community colleges are likely to affect the entire rural space, and scholars have found this may be particularly true with activities concerning students' identity development (Miller & Kissinger, 2007). Researchers have argued rural community colleges are undervalued when they are only viewed as postsecondary institutions, and not for the vital role they play in advancing the public good (e.g., Miller & Kissinger, 2007). It is important to consider the role community colleges play, not just in economic development, but in the importance of higher education as a public good (Gumport, 2001).

Rural students experience various polarized choices in the college-going process, such as whether or not to stay or leave and potentially never return, or whether to pursue a traditional academic degree or a practical, economically sound degree. Particularly for underrepresented students, community colleges provide access to higher education that otherwise may not be available because of systemic inequities; however, researchers have documented racially marginalized students face many challenges in navigating the community college system, such as taking courses that do not count for degree requirements or grappling with the effects of remedial course taking (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Still, research has indicated strong articulation agreements between community colleges and universities, particularly for rural students, can mitigate some of these challenges (Jaeger et al., 2015).

Building upon the work of Hillman (2016), Doyle and Skinner (2016) found an increase in educational attainment for a geographic area was associated with the number of community colleges in that area. Two notable findings were salient for my study. First, traditional-aged college students (i.e., individuals who are 18–24 years old) who lived near affordable postsecondary institutions were more likely to obtain higher levels of education, and those levels of education continued to increase over time. This finding demonstrated the importance of

access—not just to any higher education institution, such as private or for-profit institutions, but to public, broad access institutions. Second, Doyle and Skinner (2016) found evidence students who, in their sample, were exposed to a higher density of community colleges also experienced a 9.7% increase in annual earnings. In other words, by having access to a higher number of postsecondary institutions that were affordable, students not only increased their wages but attained greater levels of higher education over time.

Although their analysis and findings did not speak to variances by geographic area (e.g., rural and nonrural), these findings have important implications for rural students and communities (Doyle & Skinner, 2016). Previous studies have shown, as rural students make decisions in the college-going process, they are often concerned about employment opportunities and the effects of their local economy (e.g., Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2016). These concerns are magnified by the fact many rural students live in an educational desert (Hillman, 2016). These studies also demonstrated that access to myriad affordable public postsecondary institutions is crucial to improve educational outcomes for rural students. Students' attainment of higher education may also aid efforts to confront pervasive poverty in rural areas; for example, one study found rural community colleges account for 53% of public community colleges and serve 33% of all students enrolled nationally at community colleges (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). Interestingly, rural students also accounted for the highest percentage of Pell Grant recipients, at 39% (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). These numbers reflects the important role community colleges play in providing access to higher education, particularly for poor and working-class students (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012; Koricich et al., 2018). The polarizing choices rural students make about higher education often continue in the transfer process to 4-year institutions. Hlinka et al.

(2015) noted the ways in which rural community college transfer students felt the tension between leaving or staying in their community, which often delayed their transfer process.

Although rural community colleges play a foundational role in college access, researchers have also demonstrated it is important to consider transfer pathways between 2- and 4-year institutions in rural areas. Institutional agents, such as individuals in positions of power, have potential to be key facilitators of students' successful transfers to a 4-year university, particularly for first-generation and low socioeconomic status students (Dowd et al., 2015). Although their study was not conducted in a rural area, Dowd et al.'s (2015) findings apply to rural higher education and rural students due to their acknowledgement of the salient role of school context. As such, it is important to consider the role of institutional agents as an important factor for rural students' success at the community college level.

Evans (2016) examined how attending a rural community college impacted success for first-generation students, both academically and nonacademically. Specifically, Evans's study demonstrated the small-sized nature of the community college was a good choice for rural first-generation students, and the smaller nature of community colleges led to students having greater access to faculty, support staff, and services. Overall, community colleges are a crucial access point to higher education for rural students; however, they do not mitigate the need for access to 4-year institutions.

Regional Comprehensive Universities (RCUs)

Overall, 4-year institutions experience a unique dilemma in serving rural geographic areas. As Tieken (2016) noted, stakeholders often find it difficult to encourage rural students to pursue liberal arts degrees versus professional degrees and credentials. Tieken also found conversations between students and institutional actors about postsecondary degree choice were

shaped by the role of the local economy, which can have large implications for students. For institutional actors at rural-serving institutions, means looking critically at the ways rural youth engage or disengage with a 4-year institution. Further, Tieken (2016) critically argued:

If these rural, first-generation students are corralled into higher education options with greater attrition or less long-term utility or economic benefit, this message then risks furthering economic stratification by geography and ensuring that private liberal arts schools remain a "playground of the affluent." (p. 219)

For rural students, a university environment can elicit a range of emotions, and these emotions may be further compounded by students' intersecting social identities. For some rural students, a university environment can provide an escape from the gendered roles and expectations they experience in their rural communities; for others, it means an uncomfortable distance from the people that matter most (McHenry-Sorber & Swisher, 2020). Rural students' complex experiences with university environments are important to explore in a 4-year institutional climate, particularly given recent scholarship has illustrated how some 4-year institutions—specifically RCUs—can play an important role in alleviating rural regional poverty (e.g., Orphan & McClure, 2019).

The role of public 4-year institutions in serving rural areas and fostering educational outcomes is imperative to address, as rural students may begin their higher education experiences at 4-year institutions or transfer from a community college. Before attending to the specific experiences and opportunities at RCUs—which was the predominant type of 4-year institution on which I focused in this dissertation—it is important to contextualize the presence of such universities in rural areas. Koricich et al. (2020) presented the distribution of public, 4-year institutions by Carnegie Classification and locale, finding only 40 of 661 institutions in the

United States were considered rural. Of those 40 institutions, 28 were baccalaureate-granting institutions, 11 were master's-granting colleges and universities, and one was a doctoral-granting university (Koricich et al., 2020). Still, an important distinction in these data was that these institutions were in a rural place, which did not account for institutions located in nonrural locales but which *serve* predominantly rural areas. Further, the findings from Koricich et al.'s recent study demonstrated the prevalence of baccalaureate-level institutions in rural areas— institutions that are also known as regional comprehensive universities.

RCUs award most bachelor's degrees in the United States (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2016; Orphan, 2018) particularly for underrepresented students (Orphan, 2018). Further, researchers and policymakers have continued to use a deficit-lens when examining RCUs (McClure, 2018). Given how many bachelor's degrees are awarded by RCUs, these institutions are largely misunderstood (McClure, 2018), and much is left to learn about the structures and assets of rural-serving RCUs.

In another study of one RCU that served a rural area, Orphan and McClure (2019) found RCUs can serve as anchors to their region and increase the local community's capital (Flora et al., 2018). Although Howley (2006) found rural high school students are likely to aspire to baccalaureate-level higher education, Howley also found rural high school students are less likely to have graduate school aspirations. In a similar vein, researchers have found rural students are less likely to even pursue education at research-intensive institutions that award graduate degrees (Byun et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018). Given this finding, rural students may have more favorable impressions of RCUs relative to research-intensive 4-year institutions. One reason for this preference may be that RCUs have a student-centered mission, thereby providing

students the opportunity to take remedial coursework and facilitating a tangible entrance into 4-year institutions for rural students (Orphan, 2018).

For postsecondary education to be truly rural serving, college and university personnel must consider how they respond to rural ways of life (McDonough et al., 2010) and how they create authentic opportunities with rural spaces in mind (Schafft, 2016). RCUs are uniquely positioned to answer this call and can do so by enhancing their public mission and establishing shared purpose among administrators (Orphan, 2018). Among the few studies that have focused on the western geographic region of the United States, Ganss (2016) examined rural Oregon students' experiences as they transitioned from their communities to a large, public university. Ganss found participants experienced feelings of tension around their rural identity, particularly around their nonrural peers. Further, Sparks and Nuñez (2014) found due to the embedded nature of the institution in the community, students attending rural institutions have a unique opportunity to participate in social activities and community service, and they exhibit increased persistence rates.

The role of rural-serving RCUs in increasing educational outcomes has gone fundamentally understudied and underemphasized in educational policy. Approximately 2 decades ago, Stauber (2001) advocated for public policy to invest in institutions that develop rural human capital, such as community colleges, tribal colleges, technical institutes, and regional public colleges. Given the persistent barriers rural higher education has faced, it is clear this call has remained unfulfilled. More recently, Orphan and McClure (2019) advocated for specific policies and funding tailored to rural higher education. Given that RCUs are often the largest employer in rural regions (McClure, 2018), this empirical omission not only perpetuates a crucial gap in knowledge about rural students' experiences, but also one about rural spaces and

communities. Relatedly, Orphan (2020) argued regional public universities are largely misunderstood in higher education, and most are committed to their mission-centered core values that focus on serving the local community and their students.

Conclusion of Literature Review

In bridging the literature on rural spaces, rurality and K–12 education and higher education, I demonstrated the ways researchers have focused on individual actors, organizations, and institutions influencing college access and attainment in rural spaces. I also demonstrated how each actor and organization in the system of higher education has been scantly examined, and often with a deficit lens. Further, I showed how systems and policies have kept rural students and communities from actualizing their full potential. Research has yet to fully interrogate the system and structure of rural higher education itself from an organizational field lens, thereby justifying the contribution of this dissertation to existing studies.

Across each section, salient themes emerged on the misunderstandings pervading rural life along with the social and cultural isolation experienced at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels of rurality and higher education. First, rural spaces are complex and nuanced. These spaces are undervalued and forced to fit in a modernity-dominated world (Corbett, 2007). Second, rural students have deep connections to their schools and their communities. They are presented with a historically unchanged, mutually exclusive decision: stay or leave. Yet, more authentic opportunities for these students would have the dual potential to blur this dichotomous decision and greatly impact students, communities, families, and regions. Finally, research (e.g. McDonough et al., 2010) has consistently documented the need for genuine access to higher education for rural students. This evidence points to the importance of increasing postsecondary access and attainment for rural students, which is connected to pervasive rural poverty; however,

the role of higher education in rural spaces is still largely misunderstood. This dissertation contributed to existing literature on rurality and higher education by addressing college access and attainment. In doing so, this dissertation also considered each component of rural higher education as a system of actors, organizations, and institutions. Most importantly, I acknowledged the nature and challenges of rural life in pursuit of creating better more authentic opportunities for rural youth and communities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this dissertation study comprised three pillars. The first pillar employed neo-institutional and Bourdieuian conceptualizations of fields to examine and define the field of rural higher education. The second pillar was composed of critical theories of space to explore the field of rural higher education and the relationships between rurality and higher education. To date, no researcher has combined both critical spatial theory and organizational fields in conversation to examine rurality and higher education. Using critical spatial theory and organizational fields created an important opportunity to consider the role of geography in the relationship between rural spaces and higher education. The last pillar of the present theoretical framework was a rural community development framework, which provided a lens to operationalize these three theories in conjunction with one another. I begin by defining critical spatial theories as an overarching lens for this study. Then, I explain Bourdieu's (1975) theory of fields and neo-institutional theory of organizational fields, including isomorphism.

Critical Theories of Space: Geography of Opportunity

Although rural spaces are not inherently empty, their spaces and experiences are also not the product of happenstance. Rural spaces are the products of complex social, political, historical, and spatial histories. Critical spatial theory helps researchers capture a deeper

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understanding of rural spaces and the interconnections of these histories temporally and contextually. Derived from the field of geography, several scholars have leveraged critical spatial theory to challenge dominant definitions and theorizations of space and offer theoretical spatial lenses as a way to uncover new theoretical understandings of the world (Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010). In the field of higher education, research has called for more empirical studies to center on the concept of space (Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman, 2016; Rios-Aguilar & Titus, 2018; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Further, many rural scholars have called for space to be used as a foundational lens for understanding rurality (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Corbett, 2016; Koricich et al., 2018; Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). In this dissertation, I responded to these calls both theoretically and methodologically, and gleaned considerable potential to advance scholarship in the field of rural higher education.

This study centered on a critical theory of space, the geography of opportunity, which is derived from an examination of the intersection of race and housing policy (Galster & Killen, 1995). Geography of opportunity is a conceptual lens that has been used to explore the relationship between geographic location and access to educational opportunities (e.g., Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Reyes et al., 2019), and has proven that access to such opportunities depends on where an individual resides. In one application of access to higher education and geographic location, Turley (2009) provided two mechanisms of college proximity that shape educational opportunity for students: convenience and predisposition. Essentially, the closer a student lives to a college the more *convenient* it becomes for the student to attend, and when a student lives closer to more colleges they live in an environment that is *predisposed* to college-going culture (Turley, 2009).

These two mechanisms assisted in understanding space, and I applied these concepts to examine one rural higher education area as a space filled with dynamic interrelations. Lastly, Galster and Killen's (1995) concept of the geography of opportunity complemented the second pillar of this study's theoretical framework, organizational field theory, by accounting for the complexities in how geography shapes educational opportunities, a crucial lens to examine the field of rural higher education.

Field Theories

Given the focus of this study, I examined the field of rurality and higher education using two theoretical representations of field theory: (a) the concept of fields of struggle (Bourdieu, 1975) and (b) neo-institutional theories of organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2015). Organizational field theories provided the lens to define key actors and organizations, and organizational field theories were also useful in defining conflict and contestation in the field. In my application of these theories, I examined the field of rurality and higher education in a geographical region by blending Bourdieuan fields of struggle with neo-institutional and organizational field theory. Using these theories in tandem allowed for a collective focus on actors, organizations, and institutions, along with individual voice and agency. In this study, I was particularly interested in how the field of rural higher education intersects with college access and attainment, education institutions and organizations, social capital, political capital, and economic capital.

Organizational studies (e.g., Meyer, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) have long focused on the dynamic relationship between an organization and its environment. Organizational fields derive from neo-institutional theory, which studies institutions and examines the effects of both formal and informal rules on both individuals and groups (Meyer, 1977). In neo-institutional

theory, organizations comprise groups of people who collectively share similar goals or identities, and institutions are longstanding establishments in society that influence organizations (Scott, 1995). Yet, all institutions were once organizations and have developed a decentralized authority or power (Meyer, 1997; Scott, 1997).

The theoretical concept of organizational fields emerged to explore why organizations were more similar than dissimilar, a concept known as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizational fields do not originate as products of isomorphism; rather, they become similar to other fields through environmental constraints and demands (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Understanding the effects of neo-institutionalism and isomorphism shed light on how isomorphism has defined the field of higher education in rural spaces. One limitation to organizational field theory is the inability of the theory to examine the role of the individual voice and action in the field (Scott, 1997). This limitation was remedied by employing Bourdieu's (1975) concepts of fields of struggle, which recognize the aggregate of individuals in a field by bringing their agency, actions, and voices to life in an attempt to secure scare resources.

Fields of Struggle

Bourdieu (1975) argued a *field* is an arena defined by the struggle to obtain necessary resources for advancement. Bourdieu's work on fields advanced organizational literature by recognizing the actors in a field and their relationships to the acquisition of power, building upon literature that simply explored organizations and processes of structuration (Giddens, 1979) and isomorphism. As such, fields define a place of conflict and contestation over valuable and scarce resources (e.g., power, money, status). Bourdieu argued when resources (i.e., educational access) are scarce, it is because that resource is the most valuable.

Organizational Fields

Several organizational scholars have defined the concept of organizational fields (Bourdieu, 1975; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott,1994; Wooten & Sacco, 2017). One widely cited definition originated from DiMaggio and Powell (1983), who defined an organizational field as: "Those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (p. 148). Relatedly, DiMaggio (1983) defined an organizational field as "sets of organizations that together accomplish a task" (p. 75) and posited an organizational field is an arena of strategy and conflict, where organizations share a common purpose (e.g., art museums, colleges, and universities). DiMaggio (1983) also recognized an overlap in organizational fields and Bourdieu's (1975) concepts of fields, where a field holds a shared purpose and acts as an area of strategy and conflict. For example, this includes the extent of the relationships and interactions of actors, organizations, and institutions and their areas of shared conflict. Other organizational theorists have defined a field as "a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field" (Scott, 1994, pp. 207–208). Although an organizational field defines a place, its actors and organizations, and its areas of conflict and contestation, it does not include the aggregate of individuals in the field. A widely held critique of organizational fields is that individual actors lack agency in the field; however, applying Bourdieu's (1975) theory of fields addressed this critique (Scott, 1997). Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields of struggle added this crucial individual-level aspect, amplifying individuals' voices and agency in the field. To operationalize these concepts in

tandem, I turned to relevant literature by McDonough et al. (2000), who examined and outlined the field of college access by employing both organizational and Bourdieuian concepts of fields.

One challenge of organizational fields entailed defining what does and does not constitute a field. In more recent works that leverage field theory, Wooten and Sacco (2017) argued, "Common across any investigation of organizational fields is the desire to identify the organizations, collectives, and individuals that interact with one another to produce some outcome, be it homogeneity or the development of a shared understanding" (p. 297). In their study, Wooten and Sacco (2017) drew on two foundational areas that define what constitutes a field: *action* and *organization sets*. An action-set is the "focus on the partnerships or alliances that develop between multiple organizations to achieve a collective goal" (Wooten & Sacco, 2017, p. 292). Further, Wooten and Sacco (2017) demonstrated "action-sets target strategic action, and the ways in which that mutual interest brings a set of organizations together for the purposes of strategic action" (p. 292). This addition to organizational fields is helpful because it highlights the many ways education institutions come together and form partnerships to work toward achieving a shared goal, whether with members inside the field or those external members who have an interest in the field itself.

The second area Wooten and Sacco (2017) noted, an organization-set, "analyzes an organization or group of organizations as they relate to and interact with the broader network of their environment" (p. 293). Organization-sets "provide a methodological approach to empirically examine the contexts in which organizations operate" (Wooten & Sacco, 2017, p. 293), which Scott (as cited in Wooten & Sacco, 2017) articulated as the "examination of a particular resource and information flows, specific networks ties, and their consequences" (p. 293). Sets are crucial to include in studies of fields and specifically for examinations of how

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educational organizations operate and relate with each other. Action and organization-sets aligned with Massey's (2005) three propositions for space, as discussed, because both concepts merge the context of space and environment. Further, action and organization-sets aligned with DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) theories on the organization and its environment.

Integrating these theoretical concepts from Bourdieuian and organizational literature (Bourdieu, 1986) provided an innovative framework to examine the relationships between actors, institutions, and organizations in a field. Researchers have yet to apply a field-level analysis in understanding the relationship between rurality and higher education and in a bounded geographic area. By employing a field-level approach to understand rurality and higher education—including its actors, institutions, and organizations—I made a significant contribution to research and addressed largely unanswered questions about the relationship between rural spaces and higher education. Although not widely employed, fields are a useful approach to understand how institutions interact and affect each other and their environments (Wooten & Sacco, 2017). Organizational scholars have called for researchers to conduct studies using field-level analysis (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1994; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017; Wooten & Sacco, 2017). This study answered the call from such scholars by employing field theory as a theoretical lens and as a methodological framework, which is discussed further in Chapter 3. By examining the institutions and organizations that define and control the field of rural higher education, I argued without studying rural spaces and places with an asset-based lens, these entities will continue to experience the same disparities in access and attainment of higher education.

Community Capitals Framework

The third and final pillar of this dissertation's theoretical framework used the community

capitals framework (CCF) developed by Flora et al. (2018), who argued every community has

assets. Their CCF presents a systemic view of community and economic development that seeks

to identify (a) a variety of capitals, (b) which capitals are being invested into the community, and

(c) how each of these capitals interacts with each other (Flora et al., 2018). As depicted on the

Figure 1, a community needs cohesion across each capital (e.g., built, financial, political, social,

human, cultural, and natural capital) to achieve a flourishing economy, social inclusion, and a

healthy ecosystem. The capitals in the CCF interact with one another as pictured.

Figure 1

Community Capitals Framework
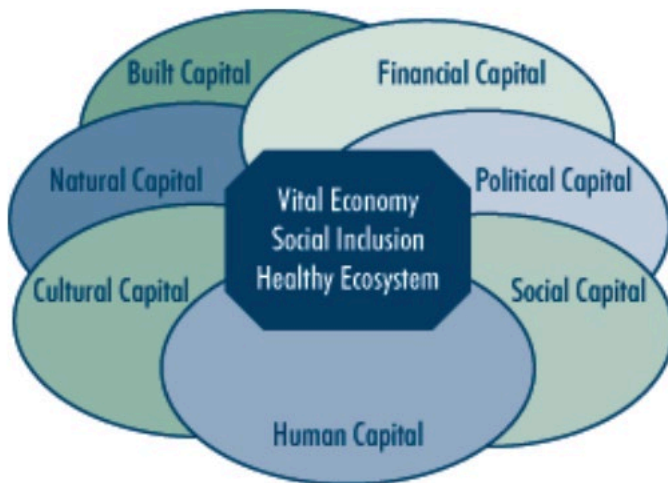
Note. From "Rural Communities: Legacy:+ Change" by C. B. Flora, & J. L. Flora (5th ed., p.

17), 2018, Routledge.

In CCF, there are seven different components of community capital, Flora et al. (2018) defined each of the capitals as follows:

1. Natural capital is the basis for the rest of the capitals and includes the air, water, soil, wildlife, vegetation, landscape, weather, and natural beauty of a community. Natural capital has been used historically to build other kinds of capital.

2. Cultural capital is the lens through which a group uses to see the world, the connections around them, and the issues in their lives. It is a person's way of seeing the world.

3. Human capital is the skills and potential of individuals that can be built upon or taught informally, such as education, skills, health, and self-esteem.

4. Social capital includes the relationships and interactions between individuals and groups, intricacies of social groups and networks, and a shared sense of identity.

5. Political capital refers to the ability of a community or group to influence and determine how resources are decided and distributed.

6. Financial capital has the most agility compared to the other capitals, and most communities depend on financial capital. There are two forms of financial capital public and private. Public capital comprises a community's resources and private capital uses individual or groups own assets to invest.

7. Built capital is the physical and intangible foundation that facilitates human connection and supports community life. It includes roads, bridges, daycares, and schools.

These capitals, when used individually or collectively, either produce or detract from community change. The CCF was an appropriate conceptual lens for this study, as it not only captured the

importance of capital as a driving force of community change, but placed equal importance on the specific kinds of rural capital that have often been left unaccounted for in other conceptual frameworks. In coordination with spatial and field theory, the CCF contributed to a better understanding of the intricate web of opportunities in rural spaces in this study, creating the possibility to discover ways to create and sustain more authentic and beneficial opportunities for rural communities.

Application of Theory in the Present Study

To explore the field of rural higher education, I applied a neo-institutional and Bourdieuian field theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) which I integrated with the CCF (Flora et al., 2018) and the geography of opportunity (Galster & Killen, 1995). This multifaceted theoretical framework was best suited for the study for several reasons. First, use of a spatial lens was critical for this study, particularly because of the highly contextual and interrelated nature of rural communities, and to acknowledge the various forms of spatial inequality experienced in rural spaces. Second, I previously demonstrated there is a dearth of literature examining educational outcomes in rural spaces using an organizational lens, and this study added nuance to the existing body of literature on rural higher education. Third, because rural spaces and the people who live there are often viewed through a deficit-based lens, I employed a strengths-based framework to examine the various kinds of community capitals present in the geographic regions that rural-serving institutions serve. This theoretical framework provided the lens to explore the field of rural higher education and equally informed the research design and methodology. Figure 2 portrays how I operationalized the theoretical framework that guided this study:

Figure 2

Neo-Institutional and Bourdieuian Fields Theoretical Framework
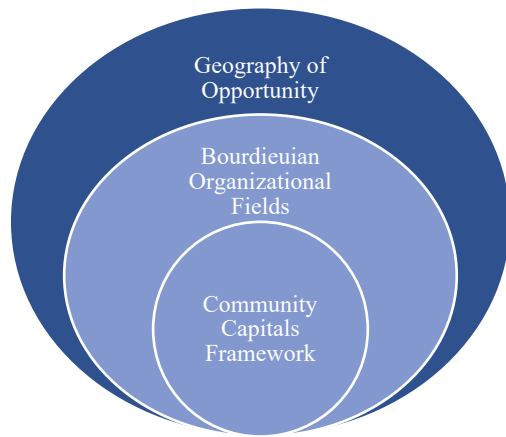
Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was structured as a qualitative case study, and in this chapter, I outline the methodology that guided the work. First, I define case study methodology and explain why it was appropriate for this study. Then, I outline the research design for this study, including (a) research site and participant recruitment, (b) methods of data collection and analysis, and (c) researcher positionality.

The purpose of this study was to explore the field of rural higher education, including: (a) the actors and organizations in that field, (b) the internal and external forces that shaped and defined the field, and (c) the ways the field addressed regional educational inequities. Further, I was specifically interested in how the field of rural higher education addressed regional poverty, a lack of regional opportunities, and a lack of equity in college access and attainment. Accordingly, a unique qualitative, case study (Yin, 2017) was employed. This study was framed by the following questions:

1. How do educational actors and organizations in a field of rural higher education describe the field?
    a. What is the complex web of interactions that they have with each other, including the patterns, strengths, and weaknesses they identify?
2. What is the role of higher education in this rural area?
    a. In what ways and to what extent do the actors and organizations identify and address regional educational and economic needs?

Case Study Methodology

To explore the field of rural higher education, I employed a qualitative, single-case study methodology (Yin, 2017). In this section, I first provide an overview of case study methodology

and how it aligns with the present work. Then, I present the areas core to case study methods: (a) context of the case, (b) the phenomenon to be examined, and (c) the unit of analysis and boundedness of the case. A case study approach is best suited for studies where the context and phenomenon being examined have overlap (Yin, 2017). Specifically, case study methodologies are best suited to answer "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2017). Lastly, case study methodology provided a lens to analyze data in cases that identify unique contexts guided by goals and strategies, which I observed in this study (Stake, 1995). Additionally, this approach strengthened this study's validity, as it allowed for observation in the case to capture divergent viewpoints that might vary from the rest of the data.

This study aligned with aforementioned guidelines for case study research, as I explored the unique phenomenon and context of rural higher education, including rural-serving education institutions in both higher education and secondary education to address educational inequities in the studied region. A single-case study was best suited for the study because each organization in a field of rural higher education in the region has a unique context and set of experiences, and each organization represents a key point in the college-going pipeline. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I provided an in-depth description of the college-going pipeline, which is often referred to as a P–20 pipeline. This contextualization allowed for the actors and organizations in the region to be examined through their location's unique context. This component was crucial in gaining an in-depth understanding of a rural region and the rural-serving higher education institutions in that region. The phenomenon of this case study was a rural higher education field bounded by a geographic region in the Pacific Northwest, and the unit of analysis was the college-going pipeline.

Pilot Study

In 2018, I conducted a pilot study of this dissertation. The pilot study explored a rural, regional, five-county collective impact partnership in a neighboring state. This partnership was established to address educational disparities to improve other outcomes, such as community and economic development.

Several findings and implications from the pilot study were relevant for this dissertation. Participants included local educational stakeholders at the 4-year and community college level, as well as public health and workforce development officials. Two themes shared by the community stakeholders guided this study to employ an organizational lens to examine rurality and higher education. First, participants in the pilot study confirmed they struggled with policies and structures of higher education that did not consider the unique challenges of their rural community. Second, most participants shared technology did not always mean greater access for their community members, but often it presented more challenges than benefits. For this dissertation, I included questions in my interview protocol that addressed these issues raised by previous participants, and I expanded my sample to include both a state-level official and postsecondary administrator to speak to these issues. Lastly, conducting a pilot study for this dissertation allowed me to rehearse my interview protocols, navigate interviewing participants across large geographic areas, and conduct field observations. Each of these aspects allowed me to refine and develop many aspects of the present work.

Research Site and Participants

To explore a rural, regional college-going pipeline, several factors must be present in the research site. First, the region must have some degree of access to a regional comprehensive university (RCU) and a community college. Second, those institutions must serve a

predominately rural area. As previously described in Chapter 2, only a small number of traditionally rural-classified postsecondary education institutions exist, yet there are many institutions that serve rural regions despite being located in a nonrural locale. Therefore, higher education institutions located in the region—even in a nonrural metro area—that are rural serving did in fact align with this study's design. For the purposes of this study, I referred to the institutions and organizations with pseudonyms. The RCU was referred to as "Northwest University," the community college was referred to as "Mountain View Community College" (MVCC), and the K–12 school district was referred to as "Forest School District." These organizations were physically located across two counties in the studied region; those counties were referred to as "Lake County" and "River County." Other pseudonyms were assigned upon participant and organization recruitment.

Research Site or Region

Context is a key component to case study research. This case study was conducted in a geographic subarea of the Pacific Northwestern region of the United States. For the purpose of this study the Pacific Northwest criteria ranged from the Pacific Ocean to the Rocky Mountains and included the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. To fully contextualize this study's location, it is helpful to understand the dynamics of the Pacific Northwest. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2017) offered a comprehensive overview of the relationship between people and the lands of the Pacific Northwest:

> The Pacific Northwest, perhaps more than any other region in the United States, is
> defined by its public lands. More than 30 percent of Washington and 53 percent of
> Oregon, are managed by the Federal government. These lands provide the people and

communities of the Pacific Northwest their livelihood, recreation, visual backdrop, and

identity. (p. 1)

The Pacific Northwest is an expansive region, defined by the embeddedness of the natural world within life in the 21st century. Incredible mountain ranges, the Columbia Gorge, rainforests, the infamous Pacific Crest Trail, all reside in the Pacific Northwest. Outside of settler metrics to define territories, the history of the Pacific Northwest is shaped by the original and rightful stewards of the land, Indigenous peoples. The Pacific Northwest is the traditional homeland to 42 Federally recognized tribes (USDA, 2017), and it is important to honor and recognize the beginnings and histories of Indigenous land that now constitutes the land occupied in the Pacific Northwest.

This site was optimal for several reasons. First, I sought to diversify existing literature on rurality by explicitly examining a western geographic area. In my review of the literature, scarce empirical studies examined students or communities located in the U.S. western states. This Pacific Northwest region, for the purposes of this study, was bounded by the farthest reach of the organization's preestablished service areas, or catchment areas, and also took into account county-level demographic information. The two-county region where these organizations were located had similar and varying demographics. In River and Lake County, 90% of the population had a high school diploma as their highest credential. Yet, a massive drop occurred in the attainment of bachelor's degrees, where in River County only 17% of the population had a 4-year degree compared to 27% in Lake County. The higher percentage of degree attainment in Lake County likely correlated with the location of Northwest University in that county. Finally, I had existing relationships in the geographic region, particularly with key administrative

stakeholders in each of these institutions, which allowed me to access the sites and recruit participants.

Participants

The purpose of this study was to explore a field of rural higher education, including the college-going pipeline of actors and organizations in that field, the internal and external forces that shaped and defined the college-going pipeline, and the ways the field has addressed regional educational inequities. As such, I interviewed university administrators, community college administrators, university and community college faculty, student affairs professionals, K–12 administrators, regional education stakeholders, state higher education officials, and current postsecondary students. This sample was appropriate in for answering my research questions because it included participants from each level of the organizations I studied.

Participants were identified for this study through their association with the higher education institutions in the region. Potential participants were screened to determine eligibility. I recruited 30 participants for this study. Of the 30, six participants were at the community college level, seven participants were at the regional comprehensive university level, five participants were at the K–12 level, four participants were regional educational stakeholders, and three participants were at the state level. Three current postsecondary students were recruited: one student at the RCU, one at the community college, and one recent high school graduate. Students were compensated for their time with a $25 gift card which was emailed to them after completion of the interview.

In total, 18 participants identified as the first in their family to go to college, and 15 identified as being raised in a rural or remote area. Of those participants, 11 identified as both rural and first-generation students, 19 participants identified as female, 10 identified as male, and

one identified as nonbinary. The majority of the participants lived and worked within the studied

region, and three participants lived in other more urban areas of the state. Given rural education

officials often do many jobs in their schools and regions (McDonough et al., 2010), I used an

openly defined recruitment criterion. All participants had to meet at least one criterion to be

eligible for this study; they either (a) held a position at an educational organization in the region,

or (b) served on an education board or coordinating board as a part of their current position, or

(c) were an elected position whose duties included postsecondary access or attainment. I

employed purposive and snowball sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). First, I employed

purposive sampling to recruit participants based on in-organization points of contact. Once I

went through this initial round of recruitment, I used snowball sampling and asked participants to

recommend additional participants that met the study's criteria (see Appendix A).

Methods of Data Collection

Case study methods are most effective when multiple forms of data are collected (Yin,

2017). To answer this study's research questions, I employed semistructured interviews. By

pairing semistructured interviews, the data aligned both with this study's spatial and

organizational theoretical framing, but also supported recommendations to use multiple forms of

data as a means to obtain a strong case study methodology (see Appendix B).

Semistructured Interviews

Although my first preference for conducting interviews was an in-person format, I

conducted interviews via Zoom due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. One-hour, one-on-one

semistructured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were conducted with participants (see

Appendix C). This procedure allowed interviews with participants to have structured questioning

yet maintain a sense of openness for the participant to explore areas and topics that surfaced

organically. Participants were questioned in four domains: (a) their personal and professional

experiences in their communities and in their institutions; (b) their roles in increasing

postsecondary access and opportunities; (c) the strengths and challenges of their communities;

and (d) how they were poised to address these issues (see Appendix D). Consent for interviews

was obtained prior to the interview via email, and again orally as the interviews began. Lastly, I

solicited documents from interview participants, which were used for document analysis.

Interviews with participants were recorded, transcribed, and located on a secure platform. I

triangulated the data by collecting and compiling documents, and writing analytic memos.

Further, I integrated publicly available data from the National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES) and the U.S. Census Bureau to provide deeper spatial context related to educational

access and outcomes (i.e., income, average postsecondary degree attainment, high school

graduation rates).

Throughout the entire process, a research journal of notes and analytic memos were

maintained. Table 1 presents the study's data collection strategies, including organization and

participant type, and number of participants.

Table 1

Data Collection Plan

Organization	Participant type	# of participants
Regional comprehensive university	University administrators	1
	Faculty	2
	Student affairs/outreach professionals (i.e., admissions, financial aid, or college access programs)	4
Community college	Community college administrators	2
	Faculty	2

Organization	Participant type	# of participants
	Student affairs/outreach professionals (i.e., admissions, financial aid, or college access programs)	2
K–12 education	School board administrators	2
	High school counselors	1
	College access programs	2
Regional educational stakeholders	Local economic workforce board, public health director, or coordinating boards or commissions	4
State higher education official or policy advocate	Coordinating staff	3
Regional/local philanthropy	Executive/Program director	2
Current postsecondary students	Community college or regional comprehensive university students	3
	Total	30

Case Study Analysis

The data collected during the interviews, including documents, were analyzed

qualitatively. Based on the literature and theoretical frameworks, initial data analysis focused on

identifying major themes or subjects, and I then assigned codes based on these themes or

descriptions (see Table 2). To code, I used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative coding software, and I

developed a codebook. For data analysis, I employed a case study mode of analysis called

explanation building (Yin, 2017). Explanation building is a way to develop an explanation about

the case being studied, and a way to build causal links in the data. I began this process by

creating a matrix of the case to begin data analysis, and I developed and wrote analytic memos to

organize initial reactions and thoughts. I completed three rounds of coding: (a) one round of

precoding, (b) one first-level coding cycle, and (c) one second-level coding cycle. After data

were collected, I performed precoding to become familiar with the data, and highlighted rich

narratives and quotes that emerged.

The first cycle of coding used attribute, process, and value coding (Saldaña, 2015). Attribute coding illuminated demographic information and variances in the data, and process coding helped me understand different processes exhibited among individual participants in their sphere of influence and in participant observations where decision-making processes are made explicit. Value coding provided context on participants complex values and priorities, both individually and through their role in their organization. The second level of coding used pattern coding (Saldaña, 2015). Pattern coding is an appropriate second-cycle method of coding to examine emergent themes (Saldaña, 2015). Table 2 outlines how the theoretical framework aligns with this study's research questions, and potential themes and hypothetical examples of those themes.

Table 2

Analytical Plan

Theoretical framework	Research questions	Themes and codes	Hypothetical examples
Geography of opportunity	(RQ2) What is the role of higher education in this rural area?	• Access • Economy • College	• Higher education has a lesser value because there aren't jobs that need a postsecondary degree
Neo-institutional and Bourdieuian fields	(RQ1) How do educational actors and organizations in a field of rural higher education describe the field? (RQ1a) What is the complex web of interactions that they have with each other, including the patterns, strengths, and	• Rural identity • Challenges • Partnerships • Collaboration	• Actors and organizations might validate other organizations purposes but feel they have different challenges and needs

Theoretical framework	Research questions	Themes and codes	Hypothetical examples
	weaknesses they identify?		
Community capitals framework	(RQ1a) What is the complex web of interactions that they have with each other, including the patterns, strengths, and weaknesses they identify?	• Poverty • Capital • Opportunity • Technology • Lack of opportunities	• Actors student-level data to assess needs • Actors using personal experiences to shape assessment
	(RQ2a) In what ways and to what extent do the actors and organizations identify and address regional educational and economic needs?		

Trustworthiness

Due to the nature of case study research, I employed several methods to ensure validity and trustworthiness of this study. A strength of case study methodology is the ability to collect multiple forms of data (Yin, 2017). I created and maintained construct validity by collecting various types of data to perform data triangulation. Lastly, to ensure dependability, I thoroughly documented how I conducted this study. Additionally, I maintained a research journal to document notes about context and areas for further exploration. This space was also used to develop and maintain analytic memos.

Positionality

I present this transparent version of myself and how I approach this study. I consider myself a child of the mountains and rivers, a formerly homeless and foster youth, and a first-generation college graduate. I am the product of a life lived in spaces that are often looked down

upon, and whose stories go untold as they are erased within a monolithic view of rurality. Although this dissertation explored rurality and higher education, this dissertation is also an extension of myself, as I strive to dismantle a one-sided narrative about rural people and their spaces. Further, I full-heartedly believe there is a way forward for these communities, that both support and challenge them. My deep passion and connection to rural spaces served as the foundation of this dissertation, and allowed me to explore rurality in ways that outsiders to the rural experience may not be able to.

As a child, I spent most of my childhood in a rural, remote community with high levels of generational poverty. I went on to attend a community college in the same area, and later travelled a long distance to attend the closest public, 4-year university. Throughout my postsecondary experiences, I worked for rural, college access programs that sought to improve postsecondary attendance and partner with rural community members. These experiences gave me insight into the vast and unique issues experienced by my peers, my coworkers, and my students. These experiences throughout my entire educational journey allowed me to have an emic perspective when conducting research in rural communities. An emic perspective, is when a researcher has an insider view into the world of their participants. An emic perspective provided a different lens from which to view rural communities; however, as a graduate student at a public research university in a large urban area, this positionality did make me an outsider to these communities, and I remained mindful of power dynamics throughout my interactions. Beyond recognizing this power, through my extensive personal and professional experience in rural communities and in higher education, I gleaned context and tensions outsiders may not have been able to identify. These personal and professional experiences allowed me to have an

emic perspective that brings depth and strength to this dissertation and ultimately gives nuance to rurality as it is known.

Limitations

The largest critique of case study research entails the replicability and applicability of the findings; however, Yin (2017) argued each case is a replication of the first, which can help overcome this critique to some extent. It could be argued the unique site of this study limits the generalizability of the findings; however, research generally has tended to lapse the identities and the experiences of rural communities, and it is important that more studies highlight their uniqueness and strengths. This study helped diversify the rural monolith by exploring the unique ways a set of rural higher education organizations in the Pacific Northwest addressed college access and attainment in a rural area.

Another limitation was the sample of this study centered the understanding and experiences of organizational actors who may hold positions of power in their organization and in the region and may hold largely different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds than local community members. However, I did examine the experiences of the individuals who experience the effects of the decisions made by these leaders by interviewing three current postsecondary students who attended high school in the region.

Lastly, the COVID-19 global pandemic limited this study in the ability to conduct in-person field observations. In case study methodology, field observations provide a means to gather in-depth, thick descriptions about a phenomenon and a way to triangulate interview data. In order to ameliorate this limitation, I examined documents, themes, and patterns observed from interviews and triangulated those themes with documents and institutional data sources likely increased this study's credibility.

This chapter provided important context and implications for the methodology used to examine the aforementioned research questions. Chapter 4 provides findings on the field of higher education in the study, Chapter 5 details findings that detail the factors that shaped the college-going pipeline across the field, Chapter 6 concludes the study by offering a discussion, and implications for research, policy, and practice.

Chapter 4: Findings on the Field of Rural Higher Education

This chapter provides the findings of my study on the landscape of this field of rural higher education. First, I provide essential contextual information about the region and the participants who participated in this study. I also share broadly the implications and impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic and natural disasters that significantly shaped participants' personal and professional lived experiences. I then describe the field of college-going in the region on three levels: the community level, the K–12 level, and the higher education level, including community college and a regional comprehensive university (RCU). I then describe the strengths and challenges experienced in each sphere.

Interviews with participants in this study were conducted in Spring 2022. As such, the COVID-19 global pandemic still affected operations at all levels of education, and participants actively described how the pandemic had shaped life in the region. Although most restrictions had been lifted in this area, many organizations shared their employees were not fully back in-person and that many still worked in a hybrid format. Additionally, in 2020 and 2021, this region was severely impacted by devastating forest fires. Many participants shared personal experiences with the impacts of the fires and felt the region had not fully recovered from the loss both structurally and culturally. Though these historical events had changed many facets of life in this area, they were not the center of this study, but help to better situate this study's findings in the broader scope of how communities are moving forward in a post-pandemic world. Table 3 details the participants, their organizations, and their positions. All names and identifying information were changed to protect participants' identities.

Table 3

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Organization	Position
Carl	K–12	School district leader postsecondary education
Megan	K–12	High school counselor
Timothy	K–12	School district leader
Bianca	K–12	College access advisor
Meredith	K–12	College access advisor
Hannah	MVCC	TRiO Advisor
Daniel	MVCC	STEM professor
Kristi	MVCC	Administrator
Corrine	MVCC	Administrator
Mariah	MVCC	STEM professor
Tanya	MVCC	Admissions
Destiny	Philanthropy	Program director
Kate	Philanthropy	Executive director
Sarah	RCU	Administrator
Rebecca	RCU	Pre-college leader
Brandon	RCU	Faculty member and admissions specialist
Connor	RCU	TRiO Advisor
Diana	RCU	Faculty support program staff
Maggie	RCU	Admissions
Hessa	RCU	STEM professor
John	Regional education stakeholder	Executive director
Pierce	Regional education stakeholder	Collaboration coordinator
Faith	Regional education stakeholder	Board member
Robert	Regional education stakeholder	Board member
Brad	State higher education	Leader state higher education
Charlotte	State higher education	Former director
Dean	State higher education	Housing authority
Andres	Student	University student
Adelina	Student	Recent high school graduate and starting at university this fall
Marisol	Student	Community college student

Lake County and River County

Within this region, there are two counties, Lake and River. Rurality in the United States is a beautiful spectrum of unique spaces, and in these counties rurality is celebrated and brings unique challenges. This particular region was affluent in natural capital, which is the basis for all other forms of capital in rural spaces (CCF; Flora et al., 2018). However, natural disasters and environmental concerns have constrained the region's ability to transform natural capital into other forms of capital. Both counties offer incredible access to mountainous areas, rivers, lakes, and wildlife. This access makes tourism a large component of the economy in this region, and also is home to a large population of retirement-age community members, who are individuals over the age of 65, according to the USDA Economic Research Service (n.d.). Of the two counties, River County is home to a larger rural and remote area, and experiences higher levels of poverty. Although participants in this study identified River County and its communities as predominantly rural and remote, organizations such as the USDA Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS, n.d.) classify this area as "metro." As such, River County is listed on federal data and infographics as not being rural, conflicting with other data points from the state that conversely identify this county as rural. Moreover, although data that show county-level demographic information are helpful, they do not account for variances of rurality within the county. River County is known for incredible mountain scenery, endless recreational opportunities, and access to forests managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Historically, River County has a longstanding connection with logging, mining, agriculture, and healthcare industries. Though the logging industry has shifted and changed, it still remains a part of local economic industry and is inextricably tied to forest fire management, another large industry within the county. The USDA-ERS (n.d.) county typology from 2015 defined this

county as having persistent child poverty and high unemployment rates, and reported 15.8% of River County experiences poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) estimates, 92% of the population in River County identified as white, 8% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 1.7% identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, and 1% identified as Asian; however, the USDA-ERS and U.S. Census Bureau data do not provide a complete picture of the these two counties due to limitations in their data. For example, according to publicly available data from the state, 1 in 3 individuals is below the federal poverty line in one of the more remote areas in River County, and this area experiences high concentrations of poverty. Because the communities in this remote region of River County have populations below 5,000 people, specific information on their communities is not provided on the U.S. Census Bureau website.

Lake County is still home to many rural areas; however, it is also the county where the regional airport and Northwest University are located. Agriculture, tourism, education, and healthcare are the predominant economic industries within Lake County, and the industries that provide a majority of local employment opportunities. Outside of agriculture and healthcare, Northwest University and MVCC are two of the largest employers in the region. The largest nonrural city with a population of over 75,000 people is located in this county as well. Stemming from strong agricultural ties, this county holds a strong value for local culinary arts. Though the county has areas with larger populations, it has areas that are considered isolated and remote. Filled with picturesque views of mountains, rivers, and lakes, Lake County offers an idyllic view into rurality in the Pacific Northwest. Despite the contradictory listing of this county as a not being rural, the participants of this study referred to this area as predominantly rural. Further, one of the regional philanthropic organizations in this study considers this county predominantly rural. According to participants, life in Lake County had dramatically changed due to regional

wildfires. The community at the time of this study was still coping with the aftermath of the devastation, and participants were coping with the effects of the aftermath on education. In Lake County, according to the USDA-ERS (n.d.), 11.9% of the population is below the federal poverty line. Yet according to state data that are publicly available, in 2014 the most nonrural city in Lake County held one of the poorest census tracts in the state. For reference, a census tract is a permanent statistical subdivision of a county. According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2021 estimates, 91% of the population in Lake County identified as white, 14% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 1.7% identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, and 1.7% identified as Asian.

Community Investment

Rural life is an intertwined and dynamic space, and participants reflected on both the strengths and challenges of their communities. Many participants shared the people contributing to education in rural spaces were dedicated and invested. These attributes also reflected a sense of self-determination within the region, stemming from grassroots efforts to address regional needs. Destiny was a program director at a regional philanthropic organization whose focus is to support and uplift the philanthropy's predominately rural region. From an outsider perspective, Destiny reflected on the state of the community, noting:

> In rural communities, we really see a broader array of people taking leadership in that
> space. So while our rural communities may not have all of the college access programs
> that we see in urban communities, there is oftentimes what seems to be more of a
> community commitment to helping those students so it might end up being a coach, or it
> might be someone in a church.

From her perspective, communities in the region are aware of the challenges their students face, and instead of waiting to address the problem through a formalized program, they take action. Despite sharing that many of the regions her organization supports lack capital and resources, Destiny continued to share that although these challenges are a reality for rural spaces, the community is composed of invested community members. She noted:

> The positives are that the people who work in this space are very committed. I joke this entire state is a small town. The nice thing is that the network is strong, and people are willing to connect with one another. And I have not yet run into any place where somebody isn't willing to share information, connect with other people try and think about how to do it better, like nobody's kind of holding it in. So I think that's a real positive in our state is there's a very committed group of people who care a lot and are student focused.

For context, Destiny considered herself to be from a rural area in the state. As she shared the challenges she faces in her work to support rural communities, she often would reflect on her emic personal experiences with these challenges to support her knowledge of rural areas. The sentiments of rural camaraderie and collaboration were echoed by Kate. Kate was the executive director of a different philanthropic organization located within the region. She had been in this position for over 2 decades and was present in many collaborative spaces within the area. From her perspective, "As a rural general region, that fabric is very thin, there's some unbelievable people and resources in terms of talent and skills. But again, they're not a lot of them." The self-determination shared by participants is a result of a strong sense of community and trust. Kate recalled the devastation caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic and natural disasters and described the community's effort to recover, stating:

We in the community here rallied around trying to rebuild our education sector, rebuild

our community sector, rebuild our housing, you know, we brought people together to

really look at these things that need to be rebuilt after the natural disaster.

Rural communities are self-reliant spaces accustomed to making do with what they have and

finding creative ways to access resources. One participant, Pierce, worked in a leadership

position entirely dedicated to organizing regional collaborative initiatives, and assessed the

region's ability to collaborate, noting:

Our area has got a great reputation for collaboration, because . . . we're small enough that

we can develop relationships, but we're large enough to have some resources as well. So

it's a great combination to be able to do collaborative work. Given that you get to know

people, they're working in the education, healthcare, human services, and then you have

some resource, you can say. . . now it's this college access program, yes. If they can

cover this part, and if our homeless shelter can cover this part, then we're taking care of

this population in a way that's going to give them the resources to, to move forward.

This collective impact approach to addressing community needs was prevalent throughout many

of the interviews with participants. Their collective and internal approach represents the social

and human capital elements described in the community capitals framework (CCF; Flora et al.,

2018) and was a prelavant form of capital in this region. The community capitals framework

suggests that forms of capital are used to create new forms of capital, and social and human

capitals were invested by participants in pursuit of creating new forms of regional capital.

Participants articulated the sense of community, and affirmed that individuals and organizations

were passionate about creating positive changes. Faith, a college access program board member

in Lake County described this sense of community when she stated.

I think one of the major strengths, of course, is the nonprofits that are working to better

this population. I think there's a really big collective heart. In Lake County, for those less

fortunate, I mean, it doesn't extend to everyone, but there's a lot of people working to do

a lot of good, and reaching out to higher ed and trying to coordinate a relationship

between organizations and higher ed.

Similarly Robert, a college access program board member, echoed this sentiment, however, he

added that in his experience, there was tension in the sense of community:

There's some major polarities in here, we have people who could care less, they just want

to pay less taxes, they don't want to hear about think about or invest a cent into things

that would make life better for low-income first generation kids. On the other hand, there

are both individuals and organizations that rise above that, and are truly commendable.

These polarities were present for Megan, a high school counselor in the predominately remote

school district in River County, who commuted upward of 45 minutes from another very remote

area of River County for work. Her perspective provided an outside view, because Megan also

spent the majority of her life outside of the Pacific Northwest, where she attended both

undergraduate and graduate school. According to Megan:

I feel like there's a disconnect in a rural setting in an . . . I think it's the rural setting but

it's also just, this area has a very strong culture that's influenced by a lot of different

things. It's influenced by the culture of the state, it's influenced by the culture of the West

Coast, it's influenced by poverty.

As Megan shared, poverty was the challenge participants discussed the most when asked about

the current state of their community. Timothy, leader at one of the school district offices in River

County, provided a big-picture view of poverty in River County. In his assessment of local

poverty he stated, "I think the numbers are around 9% of this town's population owns about 90% of the wealth. And so most people here are living at or below the federal poverty line." Pierce provided a similar assessment of both counties, stating:

> We also have very high poverty rate in Lake and River counties. It's something close to 60% of the families with kids at the age of five, in both counties are at 200% of the federal poverty level. So close to 60% of our kids under the age of five are growing up, either in poverty or close to poverty.

This sentiment was echoed by Carl, who also held a director position focused on postsecondary education at the other predominately remote school district in River County. For Carl, poverty was directly connected to students in his district and their college aspirations and expectations, and he noted:

> But I think the thing that is keeping most of our students from getting to college is the life piece in they're working to provide for their family, the poverty in our area, that the drug problems that have you know, that have hit our area where it may have broken up the family . . . that it takes multiple people in their household to be able to, you know, afford housing, those types of things that were if they leave their family may not be able to support, you know, a mortgage or rent or car payments, whatever it may be. I think that's the biggest thing that's keeping our students staying at home is that they're, their life experiences don't allow them to leave what they're currently in. And it's that generational poverty . . . it's hard to break that mold for some. And I think . . . that would be the number one thing that keeps our kids from going to college.

The challenge, as Carl described, involves breaking rural generational poverty to increase access and attainment to any postsecondary degree or credential, and other participants knew the depth

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and breadth of trying to confront such a challenge. Corrine, a community college administrator in the region, shared for one of the schools in Carl's district, poverty was also connected to the completion of secondary school. This particular community is located 30 minutes from one location of MVCC, and the majority of the journey to the college is through a mountain pass. Corrine noted, "That rural community has a really high population of people who have not finished high school. They have three of the state's top 20 highest poverty zip codes, all in that little area." Pierce substantiated the presence of widespread rural generational poverty in the region, noting

> I don't want to sugarcoat this at all, high poverty rate, high drug use and the impact of drug use addiction, including overdoses, low rental availability, very high housing costs, they're really impacting particularly the rural communities. So if you if you take that further, you know, say you're raising a high school student now, and you're trying to think, God, I can't even . . . we're stuck in this house, we can't get to a bigger house or better house. I'm not making enough money really, even to make ends meet. And my kid wants to go to college. How am I going to make that happen? You know, how do I make that happen?

Megan, who worked at a school where the students are not necessarily from one community, but some travel at least 45–50 minutes to attend the high school, witnessed this socioeconomic divide every day. At her high school, the more remote students were the more impoverished students. According to Megan:

> And it is very clear, the haves and the have nots, I mean, I can tell when I'm standing outside in the morning, like I can just tell by which bus pulls up where it's coming from, or about what area based on even just like the cleanliness of the kids coming off the bus,

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the brands that those kids are wearing, are they wearing the same clothes that they wore

the day before, they're probably not coming from downtown, they're probably coming

from more of the outskirts.

Poverty is a large facet affecting many aspects of this region, particularly access to affordable

housing. Pierce elaborated on this issue, stating:

We don't have the housing units that we need to deal with the housing crisis. We don't

have the behavioral health workforce that we need to deal with the behavioral health

crisis. And all of that leads to the drug crisis that we have, with drug addiction and

overdose. We have very high rate of drug use in River and Lake County.

After the natural disasters that impacted the region, all of the communities were experiencing

shortages in all housing types (e.g., rentals and homes for sale). For students in secondary

education, this was a challenge illustrated by Timothy, who stated:

Most data is almost consistent every year, about three quarters of our homeless

population means they're doubled up. So mom and dad lost the lease to their apartment . .

. they would have lost their home for whatever reason. And so they're now doubled up.

So they're living with friends or relatives in the area. But about a quarter are living in

shelters or are unsheltered. So they're in tents, and things like that. So, which is a pretty

high number for our community.

This high rate of homelessness indicates that although affordable housing was impacted by the

regional wildfires, it has been an ongoing and consistent barrier in this area. In another college

access program, Bianca was an educator and college access leader who was very passionate

about helping underrepresented students succeed in secondary education and pursue

postsecondary education. This passion stemmed from her identity as a Latina, first-generation

college student. She shared a current challenge she faced in her position entails advocating for parents, and explained:

> Parents don't look at emails, I mean, really, you're not gonna find Latinos looking at emails. And then . . . I mean, and even our Caucasian parents . . . we work with, you know, low-income parents, they've never gone to college. . . . And they're asking them to read emails. And then they start with, "Well, we're trying to teach the students to be more what is that word . . . like accountable . . . be more accountable," you know. They don't know that. So that's the whole point of us holding their hand and teaching them that throughout. So that's a hard thing. That's probably like the hardest thing.

Bianca was concerned that despite a majority of the communication occurring via email, students and families in the program do not utilize use as their primary form of communication. She believed the purpose of her college access program is to partner with students and families, and provide them a relationship, not weekly emails.

Although participants largely conveyed positive sentiments around their community and the individuals within the community, they also were acutely aware of the challenges present. Challenges ranged from poverty, to access to support services including mental health, technology, transportation, and housing.

K–12: Secondary Education

In Lake and River Counties, participants were recruited from two school districts, along with participants who worked in advisory roles and supported several different districts throughout the region. Although both districts are considered rural located and rural serving, one school district serves the most rural parts of the county, whereas the other serves the largest town in the county. Many participants shared how these schools were doing so much, with so few

resources. With the school's successes and exemplary acts of determination also came challenges. In both districts, the majority of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Timothy, who also coordinated services for homeless students for his school district, stated, "We [have] about 500 children each year that will be homeless, and that is just in one district in River County." Yet, although the school districts in both counties have their share of challenges, they are full of caring adults who create meaningful educational relations. Charlotte, a former director of education, reflected on former projects she had managed with rural school, and noted:

> But also, one of the things that we found when we did the project on smaller rural schools . . . was the resources they already had. And it was just, it was an eye opener for us, it was an eye opener for many of those rural schools to say, "Oh, we've got this, this guy that lives in the community, who's a pilot," all of those resources. . . . And especially in this day and age of technology, you find, you know, there are more people who have these phenomenal backgrounds that live in rural communities to some degree. But I think . . . that the strength is those relationships that can occur in rural communities.

Rural schools are often deeply embedded in their communities, and Charlotte experienced this phenomenon. She conveyed that rural schools could be unique intersections of education and committed community members to provide opportunities that may not be found as prevalent in nonrural areas.

COVID-19

The effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic still pervaded the K–12 environment in Lake and River Counties. Megan, a counselor at a high school that enrolls about 400 students and is located in a more remote area of the county, provided important context when asked about how students were fairing at her high school. She commented about the divide between those

who had started high school during the pandemic and those who started before the pandemic, noting:

> There's a huge academic gap, especially in our younger kids. Our seniors are okay, because they had enough time in high school, but especially our ninth and 10th graders, like they're either doing well, academically, or they're like, not passing anything.

Megan, along with the other administrators, noted that academic divide was prevalent for all ages in K–12. They also indicated this divide was also present in state test scores in both school districts in River County.

School Support

Schools in rural areas are often places of shared commitment and involvement from the community. They hold special meaning and opportunities for social support and engagement. Rural schools provide a foundation for a shared sense of community identity, and participants conveyed the value of their local schools as places where students acquired social capital (CCF; Flora et al., 2018). Rural schools do not simply serve their student; they support the entire rural ecosystem. Megan conveyed this sentiment when she said, "I think that our staff is very good at building relationships with our students in meaningful ways. And care about the student as a whole." This sense of community at the K–12 level was shared by a student, Adelina. Adelina, a Latina first-generation student, had just graduated high school a couple of weeks prior to her interview. Her family and community had been severely impacted by wildfires, which caused her academic performance to greatly suffer. Adelina recalled:

> And my teacher at the time she really helped me improve my grades. She's like, "Hey if you can't do this class, don't worry about it, focus on these ones more." She was a really big support system for me at the time.

Due to the small community feel of her school, her teacher was able to dedicate time to supporting Adelina in recovering her grades, which allowed Adelina to continue her journey to higher education. Andres, a junior at Northwest University who identified as a Latino, first-generation student, also reflected on his experience at another small rural high school, which was impactful in his journey. He stated:

> When I was in high school, I don't know how it is right now, it could have changed especially after the pandemic but I really liked the kind of culture that was at my high school in the sense of it was a small school, but everyone knew you and for the most part, the professor teachers, and like the counselors want to help. Like, they actually cared for you.

The sense of belonging Andres felt in his school made him feel that even if he did not understand the college-going process, he knew he could turn to the adults at his school for authentic support. He went on to connect this feeling of being supported to his identity as a rural student and societal perceptions of what opportunities look like for rural students. According to Andres:

> I think that because I'm rural student, like a lot of people think, oh, you know, you can't do as much like there is less, I guess, obvious opportunities. But if you just look a little, and just like, do some digging, you'd be surprised that there's a lot of people that want to help, they just don't know how.

Societally, rural spaces are often portrayed as having less opportunities. Andres' perspective countered that portrayal by arguing there are opportunities, but they are different than opportunities in nonrural areas, and he was able to see his school and community through a rural perspective that allowed him access to unique opportunities in his school.

College-Going Culture

The culture around college-going in K–12 was both one that supported students in wanting to pursue higher education and one that struggled with the nuanced barriers faced by schools and students. As Adelina, a recent high school graduate in Lake County, discussed her high school experience, she shared not many of her peers would be attending Northwest nor a 4-year college in general in the fall. Instead, they would either be attending MVCC or not attending college at all. A similar sentiment was expressed by Andres who shared, to his knowledge, there was not a high rate of college going or completion in his graduating class. As he noted:

> I think all my close friends, most of them started college, but they were dropped out within like the first year. I think out of my class, I think my class was like 60, I want to say that there is still like six or seven that are still in college graduating this year, graduating the following year, and I think I might be the only guy.

Andres attended high school in the school district where Carl works. From an administrative standpoint, Carl shared an example of how that particular high school was working to increase a sense of belonging and diversity within specific programs, and hopefully increase the district's college-going rate. According to Carl:

> That high school has one of the highest underrepresented populations in our career and technical education programs. . . . Because we have a ton of females that are in the manufacturing world there and so the instructor there does a great job of making it an all-inclusive, everybody can do this type of approach, and our other schools have taken that on as well.

Carl had the sense that because the school had a female career and technical education (CTE) teacher, she was able to foster a supportive and welcoming environment for female students in

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her courses. CTE courses have been spaces where women are underrepresented, and in rural areas, many positions of employment are in CTE fields. For Carl, this connection between K–12 and the local workforce was important. For other staff members like Meredith, a TRiO advisor at the same high school, administrative support was the most important aspect of her being able to do her job supporting students in their college-going journeys. Meredith stated:

> If they really support postsecondary training and education, then that principal is very supportive. And so you feel like you're more you're valued, just as any staff member . . . but if that principal or administration isn't, then it's a whole different story.

TRiO programs are federally funded college access programs that act as external support systems designed to support and increase the amount of first-generation and low-income students who access and attain higher education. Because Meredith had been a TRiO advisor at this school for a very long time, she had witnessed both supportive and unsupportive school staff, administration, and faculty, which determined the success of her program.

Many participants shared a similar value when they described who goes to college and who does not. Most shared they believed any postsecondary education or training after high school was essential in today's world. Megan connected her value to the idea that maybe not everyone goes to college, and how that might look different in a rural school and community. She noted:

> I think a lot of the training I received as a school counselor and being a, you know, a progressive university that doesn't necessarily understand the rural student and the rural impoverished student. I was not adequately trained to walk into a school and go, "Okay, wait a second, let's be realistic. Every kid shouldn't go to college." And that's okay to

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say. That's really okay to say, but that doesn't mean we don't have high expectations for

kids. Right? It's not about college. It's about high expectations.

Megan's experience in her school had demonstrated to her that a lot of her students would not go

on to higher education, yet she believed high expectations were crucial regardless of a student's

postsecondary aspirations, as they helped foster a culture of success.

School Counselors

For rural and nonrural alike, school counselors often wear many hats and contribute to

many aspects of daily operations within a school (McDonough, 1997), and this is particularly

salient in rural high schools. Carl echoed this sentiment, stating, "Our counselors at the high

school, unfortunately, spend a lot of time, you know, in the scheduling of students, and not a

whole lot in the counseling side of it." From a counselor's vantage point, Megan shared an

insider perspective of what being a part of the fabric of rural school entailed; often, her job meant

supporting the entire school, as she described:

> As far as like my role is, I'm the mental health support in the school, but I'm not staff
>
> members' counselor. So being that listening ear, and I have had more staff members do
>
> that, this year than before. Part of it is that I've, this is my 4th year here. So at this point,
>
> I've been here about as long or longer than about half of our staff. So it's just more trust,
>
> I have more of that trusted role within the school.

Megan's conceptualization of her multifaceted position also disclosed the struggles rural school

counselors experience. Carl had witnessed this challenge at the school district level, and shared

how the district was working to alleviate some of the burden counselors were experiencing:

> Our counselors at the high school unfortunately spent a lot of time, you know, in the
>
> scheduling of students, you know, and not a whole lot in the counseling side of it. And so

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to give them more help and more support in that area, we've added some behavior

specialists at the secondary level working with middle and high school students that can

really work the small group settings and the one on one stuff.

Carl demonstrated he knew finding new ways to support school counselors was important to both

student and school success, and would allow school counselors to have the capacity to address

supporting students in other ways.

Recruiting and Retaining Staff

However, for those participants who worked directly within K–12, recruiting and

retaining staff was one of the largest universal challenges they faced. While participants

described their colleagues and associates as self-determined and reliant, acquiring and sustaining

new human capital was a growing, taxing challenge. From a school district-wide perspective,

Carl articulated the spectrum of challenges associated with recruitment and retention, stating:

It's difficult on a good year to attract to this area, we have some of the highest cost of

living in the state. We don't have housing. We've hired teachers before from out of the

area, who have had to turn down the job because they haven't been able to find housing.

And so it is a, it's a very difficult thing in our rural area, to attract people to in the first

place. And then, you know, and then staying is a whole different thing. So we may get

them here, but keeping them here is difficult. We have a pretty high crime rate. Pretty

high poverty rate, but the cost of living and housing is significantly higher than most

areas. And so between those, it makes it real difficult for a new teacher starting out to

come in and find housing and then want to stay here.

For Carl, these challenges stemmed from regional economic and infrastructure barriers, not

necessarily from what the school district had to offer to potential teachers. He noted:

We've had several teachers that are actually leaving education . . . seems to be a trend

across not just our district, but across all schools, where people, especially at the

secondary level, say yeah, "I'm a trained teacher, but I can also go because of the level

I'm teaching at, I can go and be employed within my field." So yeah, as a staff, I would

say, the ones that are here, we're doing pretty good. But the ones that aren't good are like

out.

Conversely, Dean, a former policy advocate with the state housing authority, offered a different

insight into the root cause of recruiting in rural schools when he stated:

I don't know if this is statistically true, but my impression is that a lot of people who get

into education will go to a small rural school to start out. But because opportunities are

better, pay is better. . . That's both again, a plus and a minus because you have fresh

blood bringing new and fresh ideas to the community. But it also means that you have

people who aren't necessarily committed to staying there and, and really building a sense

of community in the school.

Dean's perception captures the historical depth of the challenges rural schools have long

endeavored in retaining staff. Carl's perspective aligned when he shared, "We can't always pay

what neighboring districts can and . . . that makes it difficult to attract as well." Horizontally at

the other district in River County, Timothy connected his school district's recruiting challenges

so a shortage in teacher education, stating:

I would go to the job fair every April and we'd have our booth out there and there'd be

3,000 people walking around the job fair, looking for jobs all over the state. And that

number is half what it was, you know, 5 years ago . . . I think half as many people have

gone into education in the last 5 years, or so than it used to. So we don't have a lot of

people to draw from who are coming out of university. So yeah, we're a little worried about that.

At the school level, Meredith reflected on her high school's challenges with retaining teachers, noting:, "But so often, you know, we get a strong teacher, and things are going well, like the science program, you know, we might have a really strong science teacher who is doing wonderfully, then they leave."

Carl provided an example of the school district's status with recruiting for open positions. He shared, "Teacher wise right now where we have openings or positions that we've had open for about a month now that we don't have any applicants for." For Megan, the recruitment challenge was more elaborate, and was more about the qualifications of the teachers who were being employed at her high school. She explained:

I'll pick on science for a second. . . . My chemistry teacher doesn't understand chemistry, my physics teacher, separate teacher, never has taken a physics class and is a science-endorsed teacher, but not even in high school did they take a physics class. So my kids are going to college to be nurses, and they're taking their freshman-level chemistry class, and they're going, "What the heck, I've never even seen any of this."

Megan made the connection that for students to be prepared for college, they needed to be exposed to concepts and curriculum that would ease the transition into college-level coursework. Because her students were being instructed by teachers who themselves had never experienced certain aspects of science that were required college preparatory courses, she was concerned about their ability to be successful in college courses. In the K–12 environment, school was described as space filled with many interconnected relationships, and individuals working to create progress and change within schools.

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MVCC

MVCC serves two predominately rural counties through three campuses. In the 2021–2022 academic year, 40% of students attended MVCC solely through distance learning, about 25% attended the campus in Lake County, and about 23% attended in River County. As the only community college in the region, MVCC is very spread out, and in some cases provides the only access to higher education for the most remote communities in the region. MVCC also acts as the primary transfer pathway to Northwest University. MVCC is classified as a "rural-serving" institution by the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2021 66% of Mountain View students identified as white, 23% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 2% identified as Asian, and 1% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. In 2021, NCES reported 61% of the students identified as female, 39% identified as male, 67% of students enrolled part-time, and 33% enrolled full-time. Corrine, a campus administrator, summarized the role and purpose of MVCC for students and in the region, stating:

> We're not at all like universities. . . . We're not necessarily a linear pathway to a degree. We are a place that people cycle into pick up what they need, and go and then 2 years later, they may cycle back to us again, and pick up what they need. And go again. We do have people who go the traditional route, but more and more our employers are willing to help with tuition assistance. So we're seeing a greater number of students going into the workplace and getting tuition assistance for the classes that they're taking it here.

MVCC supports a larger population of nontraditional students and students who return to campus due to the incentivization provided by local employers. The incentivization might be for a course, a credential, or a degree.

Student Centeredness

Rural community colleges serve a broad demographic of students, particularly those in rural areas. This service was showcased by Tanya, an admissions counselor at MVCC. Part of Tanya's position is to serve any student interested in attending the college and help them navigate the admissions process and begin classes. In response to being asked about what her position entails, Tanya said, "We want to help you and we want to work with you. And we want to support students however we can." This sentiment was similar to the response shared by counselors and advisors in the K–12 sphere, and because high school students in this region often end up attending MVCC, the staff at MVCC often shared they wore "multiple hats" to support students. Yet, the environment at MVCC is a small, supportive community. Daniel, a STEM department chair and faculty member, also was proud to be raised in a family who also taught at a community college. He noted:

> So as someone who grew up with a mother who taught at community college, and was taking community college classes, and being at a larger college and being at a major university, yeah, major university with 10s of 1000s of students. . . . It was surprising to me when I figured out how intimidating it is for students to show up on campus. It's like, we're all nice people. You know, you get a better paying job somewhere else if this wasn't part of your mission in life. And it's not that big of a place, but it makes a huge difference.

Daniel discussed the small campus environment that MVCC offered, and how it influenced his pedagogy, stating:

> And one of my former students came back and he teased me like, "Daniel you didn't prepare me for the university, you prepared me for a small liberal arts college" because

we're able to offer that expensive, what would be a really expensive experience, you know, at Sarah Lawrence or whatever, because of those small class sizes.

In Daniel's opinion, small class sizes are a quality their institution shares with elite colleges, and are often associated with an expensive college experience. For Kristi, this interconnected nature of the campus was also due to the fact that there were not as many resources or spaces for rural students. According to Kristi:

I think, when I have worked in a more urban kind of environment, which hasn't been a lot, to be honest with you, I think students are used to having the Women's Resource Center, the Queer Resource Center, the Black Student Union, and rural students don't have that. They're like, "Hey, we have the cafeteria, we're all in here to get for better or for worse." You know, and they pitch in and participate.

Kristi went on to describe the community-oriented nature of rural students, even without the formal student support structures she had experienced in nonrural community colleges. Although students found ways to build and create grassroots support systems, Tanya noted several times that her and her coworkers were supporting students in ways that were not captured in her job description, and stated:

I just like have this one student in mind, he is like an ex-convict, and he is trying to go to school. And because MVCC is open enrollment, we will take everybody, everybody gets accepted. He has been trying to like register for classes, he's got, you know, a dog with him. You know, he was formally like, a panhandler and is now trying to come to school . . . he's never done this before. And then you know, I'm pretty sure he's homeless. And he is always in the tutoring center trying his best to like learn and be good at this. He's just trying to get this right.

Being raised in Lake County and identifying as a first-generation college student, Tanya was empathetic to the challenges she witnessed this particular student experiencing. She conveyed a sense of compassion and understanding for this student who she believed was misunderstood by the community college, and explained:

> And he comes to campus one day with like a chainsaw. . . . Just walking around campus with a chainsaw. And the day before he had come in and was like, "I just got released out of jail. I'm trying to figure out if I'm still enrolled in classes, if I still have my financial aid," and we're like, "Okay." So, then the next morning, he's walking around on campus . . . once we stopped him and asked him like, "Hey, good morning, what's the chainsaw for?" He's like, "Oh, this is like my livelihood. Like I trim trees to get you know, money and all this stuff like this my job basically," but he didn't have anywhere to store his chainsaw during class. And so he was walking around campus early morning because that's when the bus dropped him off . . . it's just like creating that like safe spot he can keep coming back to . . . I don't know if he's treated the same throughout in his classes or on campus. I don't know what kind of treatment he's getting but I can only imagine like, the looks he gets or things like that, you know. . . man if we can all just come with the attitude of like, "How can we help this guy?"

For Tanya, this student represented the types of students who attended MVCC who needed access to education the most. What Tanya's experience with this particular student exemplified was a theme of cultural mismatch, which several other participants described as well. Cultural mismatch occurs when institutions do not have embedded social norms of the campus's most underrepresented students.

Hannah, noted her office had a unique role at MVCC. Her office functions as a one-stop center for any student to visit for assistance in the college-going and attendance process. She described how her job (like Tanya's) provides support to students in a way that is not always captured in her job description. One aspect Hannah shared was about how her office and admissions were asked by campus leadership to recruit students to MVCC. She noted:

> So when I first started, we used to do a lot of outreach to pretty much anyone, we would go to every fair . . . if you were in recovery, we'd be at recovery groups or not at groups, but like at their places. We'd be going to churches, we'd be going to any community plays, anything, and . . . then we had a recession and enrollment was through the roof, right? And then they were like, "Oh, not those students . . . because they're not prepared for school. Right now, we need the right kind of student more prepared." And so we stopped going to some of those places. And it just feels a little bit, I don't know, being on both sides of the ebb and flow like, like make up your damn mind. Right? Like what students? Aren't they all know the ones we want? But I think there is something to help a student be prepared, right? We'd refer to them as being underprepared. It feels like we've failed people at some points. Right. If they're underprepared, is it really their fault?

Hannah made sense of how her institution experiences cultural mismatch. On one hand, she was been asked to recruit students, which the college desperately needs due to the large decline in enrollment, yet she felt conflicted because the entire community is the target population of the community college. She also questioned whether blaming "underprepared" students is the correct dialogue rather than questioning the system the students attempt to navigate.

Challenges

Many participants shared the current state of affairs at MVCC, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19, included both constructive and challenging experiences. Participants both at MVCC and those at other institutions and organizations shared the severe enrollment decline at MVCC had brought a number of financial and institutional capacity challenges. Corrine, a MVCC campus administrator described these challenges, noting:

> We are hearing murmurings that there are perceptions that because we got all of this federal funding, from COVID, that we don't need any more money. When in fact, you know, that was one-time funding that kept us from closing our doors. And what we have found is the cost per student to get them to success has actually gone up. Because students are requiring more wraparound services now. We may have fewer students. But the students are requiring more services to be successful. And especially mental health services.

The effects of the pandemic had not subsided, particularly for students at the community college level. Whereas remote learning options were beneficial for some students, they were not accessible and viable options for other students. Marisol exemplified this dilemma. Marisol was a student at MVCC who lived and attended a rural high school in Lake County. She was a first-generation student who wanted to pursue a graphic design degree. However, her experience starting at MVCC was not straightforward, as she discussed:

> I graduated, I went to MVCC for a bit because everyone was going . . . I just stopped going initially because I was like, maybe it's not for me . . . I was kind of having an inner battles myself was like, "Why am I here?" I felt everyone else had like the stuff planned. And I didn't. And I'm like, why can I not wrap my head with what I want to do, like this

is killing me. So I stopped going for like a bit. So I had a break, like in the middle. And then I was like, "Okay, let's give it a shot." And then after I gave it shot, you know, we had the pandemic and then the natural disasters.

Being unsure of her academic plans and goals, caused Marisol to stopout of college. Stopout is a term is defined as when a student stops attending a college or university, and reenrolls at a later date. Marisol attended MVCC the year she graduated from high school, and returned 2 years later before the COVID-19 global pandemic hit, which brought other challenges for her. Similarly, faculty at MVCC also struggled with how they were coping with the pandemic and navigating the transition back to in-person learning environments. Mariah, a STEM faculty member at MVCC who also identified as a first-generation college student, shared what this experience felt like for her and her colleagues, stating:

Most of us are pretty, we're exhausted. And I'm talking faculty, classified, and management, we're exhausted. We need like a month of sleep, and we're not going to get it. We're not going to get it. But we are going to still do the best that we can because at the end of the day, we're all in this because we want our students to succeed. We want our students to get their certificate we want our students to get their transfer degree to graduate.

Despite the hardship that faculty like Mariah had endured over the past 2 years, Mariah shared her and her colleagues recognize they are a pivotal part of accessing and obtaining higher education at MVCC.

Enrollment Declines and Funding

Whereas Marisol was a student who resumed college during the COVID-19 global pandemic, this was not the case for many other students, as the campus experienced not only one

of the largest enrollment declines in the state, but also a severe budget cut. The absence of

financial capital was associated as the foundation for many obstacles that participants in this

study experienced (CCF; Flora et al., 2018). Public capital, or a communities resources, was a

dwindling resource.Kristi, a vice president at MVCC translated what the enrollment decline

meant for the campus budget, explaining:

> So our enrollment is down. Our state has a funding formula that has a growth cap to it. So
>
> we can't grow more than 5%. And we need to grow like 25%. But if we grow more than
>
> our cap, we don't get funded for that growth. So we have recently laid off people,
>
> because our enrollment is down and. . . . And because our FTE is down, our state funding
>
> goes down then. So we kind of take a double whammy.

Because MVCC had an enrollment decline of about 25% during the pandemic, their institution

will only be funded to increase by 5%, and this growth cap will continue for the next few years.

These factors mean even though the number of students who have been enrolling and attending

MVCC has increased at a substantial rate, the budget will not grow to match that increase.

Unfortunately, this means budget cuts are on the horizon for MVCC for the future ahead. Kristi

continued sharing how the college's financial constraints were changing the landscape of how

the institution provides services to students, noting:

> We are in the process of trying to close down one of our Lake County campuses. Because
>
> we can't manage a district our size. We just don't have the people to cover that square
>
> footage, right? So in my division and student affairs division, we have decided to go to a
>
> model called a concierge model, where just like in a hotel, a student will walk into the
>
> Welcome Center at the Lake County campus, and they will say, "I need to talk to an
>
> academic advisor." And we will say, "All of our academic advisors are on other

campuses, we can set you up a Zoom appointment . . . right now, or we can schedule you

an appointment and you can drive to another campus, which would you like?" And then

if the student says I'd like a Zoom, we give them a laptop, we sit them at a table, we log

them into our little student services system. And then the next available advisor picks

them up and Zooms with them. So we just physically can't be on all three of these

campuses.

Although the COVID-19 global pandemic forced institutions like MVCC to provide more hybrid

services to students, the budgetary implications from COVID-19 had forced MVCC to

consolidate physical spaces to afford the cost of student services. Unfortunately, one of the

locations that MVCC had to close down, was the most rural location. Kristi knew this

consolidation meant challenges for students and their pursuit of higher education, and said:

They [students] come to a community college when they're ready. And then we're like,

"Hey, we don't have enough people to serve you. Because our budget isn't big enough."

So now you get to wait longer. Now our ratios go up again. You know, it's just this crazy

budget spiral.

With such a statement, Kristi forecasted the ultimate implications of reductions in staff for

students, including reduced opportunity to attend college through less faculty, less course

offerings, less physical spaces, and less support for students.

Hannah, a TRiO advisor who also worked closely with the admissions office at MVCC

and had been at the college as an employee for quite some time, shared her experience in the

campus's welcome center, which provided insight into how students were navigating this

change. She noted:

I mean, we've got limited staff. . . . Yeah, so I think in some ways, it feels disjointed.

There's not always a person, an in-person person, to come and sit in front of and ask

those questions. So I think that that's one of the big challenges. Tutoring is online. For

the most part, I think that that's kind of a challenge. We don't have an in-person

bookstore anymore. Like everything was transitioned to be virtual. Right. And so that's

just not how everyone prefers to handle their business.

Hannah referred to the fact that students often need more than a website or a Zoom link for

assistance in navigating college, especially for first-generation students. Within the student

services division at MVCC, Tanya discussed the difficulties of meeting the diverse needs of their

students in a post-pandemic world, stating:

It feels like we're relearning our students and what their needs are because it feels so

different. Now that COVID has hit. . . we think that maybe they want online, or we think

that they maybe want in person, but there's just no like, right or wrong answer. It's just,

it's a mixed bag. So it's been really challenging to figure out what types of class classes

to offer . . . we think, "Oh, we should offer them in person," and then they don't fill up or

they get canceled, then we try and do them online. But that doesn't also work for

everybody.

Because MVCC experienced massive budgetary cuts, offering courses that students will enroll in

and complete was vital; however, the pandemic has forced higher education institutions to create

online learning spaces in a much greater capacity then many were prepared to provide. Mariah

shared her perspective on who is successful in remote learning environments, noting:

I think that online teaching in general, is for the highly disciplined right. And most of our

community college students don't match that description. We admit everyone at the

community college. So the freshman community college student is different from the

university . . . student, and it's not lesser than, it's just different and many of them are

missing those study skills.

Mariah portrayed that her students were not lesser in value than students who pursue a university

first, but that it was important to be aware of their differences and needs to be successful.

Supporting students, both in-person and remotely, has brought changes as well. Hannah

conveyed, "We're handling more questions that aren't . . . our purview, because we're here."

Because not all of the MVCC campus staff have returned to work in-person, students have

gravitated to those employees who are back working in person, such as Hannah and her office.

Mariah shared what providing both in-person and online formats to students was like, recalling:

It's been really challenging, because now we're offering kind of a lot of choices, right?

So student can sign up to take a strictly online course where they maybe never see the

instructor unless they seek them out, or ask for a Zoom meeting... Or they can sign up for

a Zoom class . . . [a] class where they're meeting like they would in the classroom, but

via Zoom, so they're in their home or at the library or wherever they are, with the internet

and the computer, hooking up into class, seeing the instruction here.

Navigating the diversity of choices being offered to students was difficult for Mariah and other

faculty participants. Faculty had to be prepared to offer learning in a variety of environments,

which required high levels of technical skills and additional preparation time. Budget cuts were

affecting all aspects of campus life at MVCC, yet some programs and departments had

experienced a greater decrease in funds. Kristi discussed how programs experienced budget cuts

or reductions in force at MVCC. She noted:

Now instruction has kind of a different scenario, right? They are what everybody sees. So they oftentimes don't get cut. So everybody wants to have a welding program because we need welding in the community. Everybody wants to have an ECE [early childhood education] program because we need people to provide childcare and teach our kindergartens. So all of their programs have something that's easy for people to understand. And so instruction rarely gets cut. And the business office rarely gets cut because everybody understands you have to pass an audit. You have to pay your bills.

Kristi's position primarily supports student affairs; this academic year, her budget was reduced by almost 1 million dollars. In a department responsible for supporting students, Kristi shared, "So when you have to cut your budget, you're just cutting people who are helping students." Because 22% of students at MVCC are first-generation college students, and the majority are nontraditional students, these budget cuts directly affect the students who need the most support. However, Mariah, who is also immersed in faculty bargaining, shared she had witnessed the effects of budget cuts in instruction as well, stating:

And so the budget for part-time faculty has been reduced by more than a million dollars. And as a result, right we have, we used to have like 600 part-time faculty. Now I don't know if we have more than 200.

Part-time faculty make up the majority of faculty at community colleges. Without adjunct or part-time faculty, it becomes difficult to offer enough courses to meet the demands of both the students and the college. The decrease in part-time faculty also puts pressure and more responsibilities onto the plates of full-time faculty and even staff. Hannah shared her experience as the college communicated the severity of the budget cuts. According to Hannah:

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They are unfilling positions and cutting positions. They're blending management . . . it's

just Round 1. And they've been very frank with like, if things don't really turn around.

This is just Round 1. Right? So I think there's that side of things, right, like maybe not

feeling exactly secure in your own job, in your own work.

Hannah communicated she and others were feeling insecure about the stability of their positions.

Daniel echoed this concern even as a full-time employee who had been with the college for quite

some time, stating:

I was really concerned about my job. . . . So even though I'm the highest . . . seniority of

any faculty in the college, I'm also the lowest ranking seniority of STEM professor, and

this particular year, it's like I've had 12 students for the 200-level physics.

Daniel had been with the community college for a very long time, and losing his position due to

budgetary cuts and low course enrollment was a fear he discussed. However, Daniel found an

innovative solution to address the fears he had about low course enrollment, and explained:

One of the seemingly impossible things to do, but it really isn't that bad . . . I have my

algebra base sequence students and calculus base sequence students in the same class and

same labs. And that sounds really unfair to the algebra base students, but it's . . . actually

pretty okay. And you know, they have different questions on the test and different

questions on the homework and sometimes, lab reports. And so that allows me to, for that

class, not to get cancelled, historically. . . . It's like, "Hey, there's only five people in

algebra-based physics and certain people in calculus based physics, but when you put

them together and have 12 people in class, they let it run." But if you're making data

driven decisions, and only taking that data into account . . . I would have been one of the

ones that was cut.

Daniel found a creative way to continue to offer two courses that were necessary for student persistence and major requirements, as well as protect his position from being cut; however, it did not entirely irradicate his fears about the stability of his position.

Disconnection

Kristi (i.e., a community college administrator at MVCC), when asked about the community college's role in the community, shared she felt community colleges were for every student in the community. She noted:

> I guess this is my personal philosophy, right, I think community colleges exist in communities that need them. They're not like a university that crops up for maybe job training or terminal degree opportunities for people, community colleges are there for a variety of resources, right, the people that need to update their Excel training, or they want to start with you [the community college], because you're cheaper before they transfer, or they're emotionally unprepared, and they need to get in smaller classes where they can talk to their instructors before they build their confidence. But community colleges in my opinion, above and beyond are places of transition.

Hannah and Kristi's sentiments showcased an example of internal institutional disconnection. Several other participants at MVCC felt this disconnection in other areas across campus. Tanya noticed this disconnection at a broad campus level, stating:

> I feel like there's a big disconnect between the . . . students services, and the faculty side of things. I think we are very siloed. In the work that we do, even though we're all promoting towards the same goal to like increase enrollment, I think there's a big divide, people just don't know who works at the college on the other side of the house, and we don't know what efforts they're doing. And when we find out that, like, they're trying to

host some kind of an event that admissions could have easily helped with or tagged along, and you know, or even held or hosted it for them. Like, "We're doing something the same thing the next week." You know, it's like, we can't even get our own sides of the houses to work together. And so I think it's confusing for the community, like, "Who do we talk to? Like, are we talking to the faculty? Are we talking to the admissions people?" Can we just all work together and host one thing, but that's been a big area of weakness . . . the faculty versus the student services staff.

Tanya's statement demonstrated that this internal disconnect has not only shaped interactions and relationships within MVCC, but has also caused a disconnect between the college and the community as well. Participants at other educational institutions and organizations within the region echoed Tanya's perception of disconnection. Megan shared this disconnect at the high school level, stating, "We probably have a better relationship with the community college 2 hours away than the one, you know, 20 minutes away." This claim was echoed by Timothy and his perspective situated at the other school district when he noted:

I would say probably stronger with Northwest University. We try with MVCC, they've had some staff turnover. And there's probably a laundry list of things that I can't talk about that are probably the reasons behind that. But we do have a good relationship with them not as strong as we'd like it to be. And we keep at it, we're gonna keep trying.

This disconnection was communicated in a tone of a disappointment for Timothy and was also shared by Rebecca, who works in a leadership role in the university's pre-college office. According to Rebecca:

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We used to have a closer alignment with MVCC. And that's another area where I think

that's been affected by the pandemic, but also turnover. They've had a lot of turnover,

we've had some turnover. But I would like to see that getting reestablished again.

For participants like Timothy and Rebecca, both in K–12 and at the university level, they understood the importance of a good connection between all three organizations, including the community college. Their sentiments were grounded in the belief that for students to access and obtain postsecondary education, a strong connection with MVCC was critical. There was even disconnect at the micro level; Tanya described how many students at MVCC, particularly low-income students, were navigating the college remotely via their cell phones, which were not compatible with learning websites. Tanya stated:

And they try to use their phones. And a lot of our web pages are not phone friendly. And

so they can't successfully navigate . . . like, Blackboard, on the phone is a nightmare, like

trying to access and submit assignments on your phone through Blackboard. I had

students coming in and they were showing me how to do it. I'm like, "Do you want to

just do it on the computer?" They're like, "Well, I've only ever done it on my phone. So

this is how I know how to do it." I'm like, "Well, no wonder you're in here. Because you

can't get where you need to go from your phone." And so they're like, so frustrated.

They're like, "It's not working for me. My teacher said they didn't get my assignment."

I'm like, "Can you imagine typing a 500 word essay on your phone?" What?! No! So,

yeah, phones have been like the thing that students use, but . . . it's not a learning device.

Although cell phones have provided many opportunities for student to engage in education than ever before, there is a disconnect between what technological tools students can access off-campus, and the compatibility of those devices with learning platforms like Blackboard.

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At large, participants at MVCC were connected to the mission and purpose of a community college: to serve their community. Although the last 2 years had brought obstacles and challenges, participants felt strongly about their roles in helping the community and the region move forward.

Northwest University

Northwest University is a public RCU with one main campus in Lake County. As defined by the Carnegie Classification (n.d.) system, Northwest University is classified as a "Master's College or University: Larger Programs," meaning the university offers at least 200 types of degrees. Northwest is also a broad access institution that accepts over 90% of applicants. The university is geographically located in a nonrural area; however, it serves three predominantly rural counties within the region, along with two predominately rural counties in the adjacent state, classifying it as a "rural-serving institution" (ARRC, 2022). According to data provided from participants at Northwest, about 55% of students in the region attend Northwest (including both undergraduate and graduate students), and those students make up about 25% of the total enrollment. In another report, the majority of regional students were admitted to Northwest from high schools in Lake County. It's interesting to note that the remote high school where Meredith is a TRiO advisor did not make this list, and her high school is over an hour drive from Northwest in River County. Northwest also is a primary point of transfer for students at MVCC. According to NCES, in 2021, 58% of Northwest's students identified as white, 14% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 3% identified as Asian, and 1% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.

Students

Two participants in this study were students at Northwest: Andres and Adelina. Adelina, at the time of her interview, was a recent high school graduate who had been accepted to Northwest and planned to attend in the fall as an early childhood education major. She would be starting college as a first-generation student who lived and attended high school in a rural part of Lake County. When asked about how she felt about starting college in the fall, she shared a host of emotions, noting:

> I'm so excited about the people that I'm going to meet, and I'm going to meet so many
> people, and like, the classes that I'm gonna take, I'm so excited to learn new things. I am
> worried about failing my classes, which is like everybody worries about that. And like,
> I'm scared of like, not, like, graduating or like dropping out. Like, I really don't want that
> to happen. But like, other family members of mine, they went to Northwest, and they
> ended up dropping out because, you know, it was too much on their mental health or it
> was like they, they just couldn't keep up with the homework or, you know, certain things
> that just didn't work for them. So I'm scared of that happening to me.

Adelina was acutely aware of the challenges faced in not just being accepted to college, but in persisting to obtain her degree. Even though Andres was aware not many of his peers were on the same pursuit as him, he shared what he enjoyed about Northwest was similar to what he enjoyed most about his small, remote high school. He stated:

> It's just very nice, because the professors know you, on a personal level, because the
> class sizes are smaller, especially like in the upper division classes, like one of my classes
> class, I think only have like, 12 people right now.

As a STEM major, Andres appreciated the access to faculty that Northwest provides, and also shared due to small class and department sizes, he had many opportunities to build connection with other peers as well. This connection was particularly important for him because Andres was deeply connected with his college and career aspirations. As he shared, "I know for a fact that I'm going to become a doctor. I don't know how am I going to do it." Therefore, Andres knew the importance of his performance and experiences in his pre-med courses. Because these courses were very important, Andres described what he valued in his STEM courses, stating, "We kind of share our experiences and our cultures with each other. And, everyone's very accepting and encouraging. We're all there to help each other." As Andres discussed his decision to attend Northwest, he shared one primary reason for his decision was the proximity of Northwest to his home and family in River County. After attending Northwest for some time, Andres also came to realize that staying close to home was not necessarily a negative thing as some of his peers had felt it would be. He noted:

> I think some of the high schoolers sometimes don't realize that these professors aren't from here. Like they're from other places. So like the idea of, "Oh, I don't want to go to a local school, because, you know, everyone's saying, like, everyone's from here, like, I want to go somewhere new." Well, I mean, all my professors, per se, are not from here. You do get a lot of new things. And going back to like the research, and you get a lot of hands on experiments, and you get to work with cool gadgets.

Andres seemed to know that if he had attended a larger research institution in the state, he might not have had the same kind of access to professors and use of technology or research instruments as an undergraduate student. For Maggie in her position in admissions at Northwest, she felt

coming to Northwest for both her undergraduate and graduate education was the right decision

for her. As she described:

> I thought that was a really good fit, because a larger institution would have been pretty
> hard for me as a person, not that that wouldn't have been a great option for other students
> for my situation. But I just knew that I'd be kind of lost metaphorically and physically, in
> some of those larger environments, and great schools in the state. Really wonderful. But
> for me, I was looking for a smaller environment.

Maggie also attended high school in a remote part of River County, and due to her small school

environment, she knew wanted a similar environment in her college experience. This

environment was also an element of Northwest University valued by Hessa. Hessa was a STEM

department chair and faculty at Northwest who was not originally from the region, but described

what attracted her to the environment, which was what Northwest University offered. As Hessa

stated:

> And when I came to Northwest, when I walked in, a faculty offices were open, they were
> in their offices, and students were coming in and out of the offices. I mean, some
> teaching institutions never even had me meet with the students. . . . But I was seeking that
> interaction with the students. Because I knew I believed that that's what made a
> difference.

Hessa's attraction and commitment to an institution that fostered a close connection between

students and faculty showcased the strengths of institutions like Northwest. Yet, her value of

close relationships with students translated into a belief that schools like Northwest also prepared

students for graduate and professional schools. Hessa continued:

But if I told you right now . . . we have chemistry graduates at graduate and professional

schools at Brown and Yale, and we have someone heading to UCLA, and I mean, you

name it, and you know, [University of] Vermont . . . so it's a whole range . . . I mean, we

have Stanford and Berkeley and Cal Tech grads, I mean, you name it. It's such a

misconception, that going into a regional school will not get you to that top level . . . our

students not only make it there, they often excel beyond their peers, because I think

they've just had such a positive and supportive environment.

Hessa believed in the strength of her department and her institution as more than just a "small

school." In her eyes, the teaching environment supports students and prepares them for difficult

academic spaces beyond Northwest.

Challenges

Similar to other participants, Northwest University had experienced its share of

challenges over the past 2 years. Sarah, an administrator at Northwest, discussed the state of the

campus climate due to navigating the COVID-19 global pandemic, noting:

I'll be honest, it's been it's been highly stressful in many ways for all of us to be adapting

to this pandemic and the students have been great. They've carried the day in many ways,

and they motivate the faculty to kind of continue going. Yeah, but the faculty are

exhausted. And the students are, too.

As the academic year came to an end, Sarah shared everyone was ready for summer to take a

step back from the challenges the entire campus had been navigating. Connor, a TRiO advisor at

Northwest University, described housing as one of the challenges that students in his TRiO

program have continued to struggle with. He explained:

I wish that there was more positivity. But when you have students that are constantly facing housing crises, constantly food, you know, insecurities. Mental health is a big thing. Just like when you got all these things combined with the pandemic, a loss of income, an increase in inflation. It's . . . it's ugly. It's really raw and ugly right now and students are hurting, they're struggling, and they're doing the best that they can, despite all these circumstances.

TRiO supports students who are predominantly first-generation and low-income, and from Connor's perception, were the students who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and local natural disasters. Connor felt deeply connected to his work supporting first-generation and low-income students at Northwest University and shared that part of his passion derived from his own experiences as a first-generation nontraditional student. Supporting students both in and out of the classroom was something that troubled many participants, and they were burning out in trying to remedy these challenges.

In the STEM department, Hessa had experienced teaching students in multiple formats, including completely remote, hybrid, and in person. She noticed a difference in her students' performances depending on the format of the learning experience, and noted:

I can tell you, because I taught my all of my lectures in person on my labs, everything I could, of course, both, you know, hybrid, all of my students who were in person perform significantly better. And then those who were remote, and I think a huge part of that was that connection to one another, like, "Hey, did you do the homework yet?" It was so critical to be in person with whoever it was. I think it's that peer camaraderie and that connectivity.

In admissions, Maggie stated, "Me being there is so much different than just emailing these students from afar or calling them," and she felt success in being able to connect in person with her rural communities she served. As Northwest continued to make the transition back to on-campus learning and operations, the campus continued to need to address decisions that impacted options for students. Sarah experienced these decisions from an administrative standpoint, stating:

> But I think that, that, especially now, after 2 years with the pandemic, and sort of coming out of that, as we're getting back to normal, whatever that is, now that we're all kind of through that period, which was very challenging, very, very challenging for students and faculty, and I would say administrators too, now that we're surfacing or resurfacing, really trying to figure out what do we want to retain from the pandemic? That is to say, do we want to do more remote, more hybrid, you know, that we're primarily a face to face institution, your experience would tell you right, that your, your time in the classroom with the faculty was really kind of a hallmark of our institution, we, we talk about how we have small classes and our students experience senior faculty members in their very first freshman classes.

As with the case at MVCC, access to student affairs services (e.g., counseling) has continued to bring challenges. Connor, a TRiO advisor at Northwest, described this challenge, stating:

> I want to say about between two to three counselors there, they're so overwhelmed and backlogged where it's almost as if it's been kind of shuffled outside of the school, and to the community counseling world. And, and there's just like, the huge rotation of counselors for whatever reason, we can't do a good job of keeping our counselors here. It's almost like we hire them, they're here for a couple of months, or maybe a year or

two, and then they disappear again. So we have this like revolving door with counseling.

So it's very unstable right now.

The pandemic increased the need to for academic and personal counseling services, and Connor seems to believe the campus environment partially explained this difficulty. Adelina felt nervous about taking care of her mental health in college, and stated:

I feel like a big thing is mental health. Like if they struggle in high school. Like just mentally with like the pressure of assignments, especially with AP [advanced placement] classes, if they're in AP classes, and they get a little taste of what the college courses will be like, maybe that discourages them a little bit of going to college, and having more of those classes. And, yeah, in high school, you have counselors and, you know, your advisors to like, let you know what you're missing and that you're falling behind. In college you don't have that I've heard and that it's all on you. So yeah, like even like thinking of that makes me a little nervous.

When Adelina was asked what people who support students should know to better support students she shared she was concerned about the isolation that college might bring, particularly for first-generation students like her.

Disconnection

Similar sentiments to the challenges of internal disconnection communicated by participants at MVCC were held by some participants at Northwest. Connor, a TRiO advisor, described his ideal format for cross-campus communication, explaining:

Like actually having a forum where there's this talk, this communication, between students support services, and our faculty. Like some universities I worked for, actually had that. Where you would have a day where, where you were introduced to your faculty,

all the students support services and say, "Listen, if your students [are] having a problem, these are all the different types of options, you have to like, support that student."

As a TRiO program, Connor felt there was no institutionalized way for him and his program to communicate with other student affairs as well as faculty to create a community among them all. Kristi felt the university was not always as connected to the region and regional needs as it could be, noting:

> I think the university has seen itself as kind of an institute . . . an academic institution, right . . . they have faculty that maybe aren't super connected to the practical side of an education, which is doing something with it, not just getting an education for an education sake.

Kristi did not portray Northwest in a negative light; rather, she described two major differences between MVCC and Northwest, and how those differences shaped their connections with the region.

Faculty

A theme of difficulty recruiting and retaining staff and faculty also emerged from participants at Northwest University. Sarah, from an administrative perspective, felt optimistic about recruitment for the upcoming academic year, and stated:

> We have 20 new faculty members joining us in the fall. So this year has been kind of a bumper crop. In terms of recruiting, people like to come here, it's a gorgeous campus. We have smart people working here and smart students who attend here, and it's a pretty good situation to be in with, with respect to being a faculty member. And I can say that as a person who did that for 25 years.

Sarah acknowledged that in previous years, it had been difficult to recruit new faculty members; however, she believed that the campus and campus climate is one of the reason why she herself had remained both a faculty member and administrator for such a long time. From a faculty perspective, Hessa—who previously had shared why she values being a faculty member at Northwest—noted the problems with a shortage of faculty.

I think the one of the problems is, is that a key problem is the staffing has been narrowed and decreased so much. And so we have many fewer faculty today than when I started. And that was even like a few years ago, when our enrollments were higher than ever before, right? And so and the faculty are being asked to do way more than they ever were being asked to do, you know, advances in technology end up taking a lot more time from faculty, they're not timesavers and so, when you spread your faculty so thin, there is very little time for all of those extras.

Funding

Challenges in funding were echoed by participants at Northwest. These challenges were attributed to the COVID-19 global pandemic, decreases in enrollment, and state funding policies. Connor shared as a staff, "We learned that there's a lot of budget concerns where there might be cuts coming up on the horizon." Although participants at Northwest were not as explicit about what the budget concerns might look like, they were aware that they were a reality.

Unlike K–12 and community colleges, universities in this state operate under a different funding model, and do not use funding like property taxes. Sarah related the budgetary constraints felt at Northwest to regional institutions as a whole, stating:

It's challenging being in higher education generally right now. If you read the *Chronicle* or *Inside Higher Ed*, you know, that we're all facing all of the regional institutions are

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facing lots of challenges with state funding. We try not to . . . we try not to pay the bills

on students' backs, we don't want to raise tuition to make up for state funding that we're

not receiving. So that's a challenge as well.

Regional institutions, like Northwest, have experienced difficulties in addressing budget cuts or

declines in external funding without raising tuition. Declines in state funding of higher education

is a national phenomenon, one deeply felt by RCUs who depend on state funding. Sarah

recognized many public sectors were experiencing severe budget crises, and noted education was

not also viewed as a priority by legislators with the statement, "I think they think we're

important, it being education. But we're not the first, we're not at the top of their list, usually.

And we do have to fight pretty hard for resources."

Sarah knew that higher education was a tough sell at the state level, and felt it was a

competition between sectors like public health, senior services, housing, etc. Hessa similarly felt

raising tuition was often the solution regional institutions applied when their scarce options were

exhausted, and stated:

So it's very hard, because every time we want to we make a decision to invest . . . it's just

on the backs of our students, tuition dollars. So if the state isn't supporting it more, then

you're in these situations.

Maggie shared a deep understanding of this funding model and provided context for the changes

that occurred in how the funding model now operates. As she explained:

And so now kind of all the colleges like, you kind of have to vie for yourself, which is

really hard. So the state system of funding is based on like, obviously, getting in-state

students, getting rural students, first-gen, low income, all of those affect your funding

model. So if you get more of those students, your funding goes up, like per person. So for

schools the more urban, larger, research universities, they don't have to rely on it as much

from the state funding wise, because they have a lot more international students, a lot

more out-of-state students.

Previously, the public institutions in the state all operated as one unit; a few years prior, there

was a vote for each institution to become their own entity. For the smaller, regional institutions,

Maggie elaborated this shift provided a great deal of financial uncertainty, particularly for those

who supported more liberal arts students. According to Maggie:

However, for the regional schools that are not technical, they get different funding

because they have more STEM majors. So another regional university in the state and us,

we get less funding overall from the state just because we serve a smaller amount of

students. And we serve less rural students than for example, another very rural university

across the state. So actually, if you're looking at per person cost, they [the rural

university] get the most amount of funding from the state, because they serve the highest

number of rural, lower income students.

Even though Maggie knew her college was a rural-serving institution, because Northwest did not

have as many STEM students nor as many rural students comparatively, she communicated the

competitive nature of the state funding formula. This sentiment was sustained by Pierce, who

previously had a longstanding appointment in the state legislature and noted:

The formula they developed for funding punishes the liberal arts education. I mean,

literally does . . . the priority for the formula is engineering and computer science. So if

you are an institution that prioritizes engineering and computer science, you get a higher

rate per student, Northwest doesn't prioritize engineering, computer science, so it gets a

lower rate.

Though Pierce spoke broadly about the formula that affected all public institutions in the state, he went on to share the perspective held about Northwest University at the state level, noting:

> And there was attitude amongst some of my colleagues from the metro area, who thought Northwest University was like a glorified high school that was revealed it just you know, as one board member, this is on the higher ed board said, "if Northwest wants to be taken seriously they have to teach something more than music and dance." And I was like, that was the attitude? Really, really disdainful of liberal arts education, really disdainful of it.

Even Hessa, a faculty member in STEM, felt Northwest correspondingly did not receive the same support as the other regional institutions in the state. She argued:

> And what came out after they did quite a bit of analysis, as Northwest was getting less funding than even the other regional schools, for years and years. And so it's just, it's, there's a lack of understanding of what we do.

Hessa correlated the lack of state support with a long trajectory of inadequate funding, rather than just the student funding model. Rebecca also shared this trajectory of underfunding in regional higher education was challenging, and said:

> I think how higher ed has a difficult challenge in this region because there is under investment at the state level. So we are not as robust an institution as the research universities, we're chronically underfunded . . . our tuition is higher than it should be. And that trickles down, you know, when you've got an institution that is dealing with retrenchments, and different budgetary issues. It makes it harder, I think, to have a big footprint in the region and a lot of different ways. But I think we do a pretty good job of trying to be a lot of things to a lot of people.

Rebecca worked in a position that partners with many regional educational stakeholders, and she recalled witnessing the importance of her institution in providing access to education. Like school counselors at high schools, she felt Northwest wore many different hats—the institution was not without challenges, but said they did well for working under such constrained conditions. It seemed difficult for Maggie as she shared how conflicting it was in her work in admissions to be correlated to increase her institution's funding and how that conflicted with her values. As she discussed:

> I'm going into rural schools for, you know, multiple reasons, but it does help our funding model, but I just want that to be more college access for the students. But, you know, it's hard when you know, another regional school and us get smaller amount of funding each year, so then you have to compensate with higher fees, higher tuition costs. Whereas, you know, the big research universities don't have to rely on it as much. So they're seen less in rural environments in the state, like, you're not going to see one of them at a lot of these smaller schools, just, you know, their time and energies [are] spent elsewhere, I feel like . . . that's nothing bad. That's just, you know, their model. And so it's just interesting when it comes down to it. So I think those policies are kind of hard.

Because the state funding model rewards universities for recruiting more rural students, Maggie felt this only incentivized the universities who needed this funding, and was not attractive to the larger public research institutions in the state. Therefore, in admissions, she has seen those universities show up less and less in rural schools in the region. Destiny also knew state funding challenges were an issue when she said, "Another challenge in the state and really everywhere, but our funding for higher education is pretty poor."

Even with challenges pervading many aspects of life at Northwest, this institution still remains a key part of the fabric in the region. Sarah stood behind the idea that Northwest had long-reaching benefits to students and the community, and even the economy. She noted:

> A lot of the reason why employers come to this region, there are many reasons, but one of the reasons they do settle here is because we have a 4-year institution with several graduate programs that are appealing to employers, when you're an employer and you move to an area and start a new business, your employees are benefit from having, you know, postsecondary education opportunities, whether it's training at MVCC or, you know, something at Northwest at a higher level. So, I think that's been important, from the regional economic development standpoint.

Rural-serving regional institutions like Northwest play a large role in driving the economy in rural areas such as this one. As the only in-person option locally to pursue graduate school, Sarah described her role on community boards and workforce development and how she experienced the value that employers and other organizations gleaned from Northwest University by offering opportunities for individuals to acquire graduate degrees needed for employment opportunities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how participants within the studied counties demonstrated a community-minded and invested approach to improving access and opportunity. Next, I contextualized K–12 education by sharing how participants unpacked the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, how college-going culture shaped student aspirations, and the effects of challenges in recruiting and retaining faculty and staff. Then, I provided a portrait of MVCC and Northwest University by describing the aspects shaping the campus environments, such as enrollment declines and budget cuts. Further, I shared the relationships, both internally and

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externally, the institutions had with their uniquely rural region. The findings in Chapter 5 expand

on those presented in this chapter by illuminating the factors across the college-going pipeline

that shaped access and educational opportunity.

Chapter 5: Findings on the Factors That Shaped The College-Going Pipeline

In the previous chapter, I illuminated the dynamics of the organizations in this unique field of rural higher education. In this chapter, I share the dynamics of the relationships, including successes and challenges experienced in the region as it relates to college access and attainment. From the community, to K–12, to Mountain View Community College (MVCC), and Northwest University there is an inter-organizational and regional commitment to access and attainment of higher education. Outside of each of these environments, several factors emerged around factors shaping college access and opportunities in the region for participants at all levels.

The Duality of Opportunity

A large recurring theme among participants was the idea although some things (e.g., technology and the internet) do present a host of opportunities for rural areas, they also bring many challenges and barriers. In many cases, participants shared instances where an opportunity might present more challenges than benefits. In line with the Community Capitals Framework (CCF; Flora et al., 2018), participants shared that using their community's capitals, including natural capital and social capital, to acquire or obtain new forms of capital was complicated and provided unique challenges, such as a financial capital.

STEM

At many levels, STEM majors, programs, and careers were discussed as lucrative opportunities to increase not only persistence in higher education, but as a valued field. Participants also knew the value of STEM majors at a local level, because those majors are tied with more funding in the state. In the private sector, STEM at large does have many opportunities for institutions and faculty to apply for funding to support research and provide scholarships for students, yet they aren't always an option for faculty like Hessa. She shared, "So

at the regional institutions, if we don't have those supports, we can't even compete for those grant funds, right? . . . So it's like, at every turn, there is a roadblock." One example of this type of support includes the National Science Foundation Scholarships in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (S-STEM, n.d.) Program, which "supports institutions of higher education to fund scholarships for academically talented low-income students and to study and implement a program of activities that support their recruitment, retention, and graduation in STEM" (para. 1). These grants can be multiple million-dollar grants. Two faculty members, one at MVCC and at Northwest University, shared even though they were invited by the National Science Foundation to apply, they were unable to submit an application because each of their institutional grants offices does not have the capacity to manage such a grant. Hessa shared her perspective of the importance of securing external funding for not only her institution, but for the region as well from an email from a colleague. She stated:

> I got an email back in December or something saying, "Oh, chemistry faculty member was just awarded a $1.5 million S-STEM grant." Okay, so our enrollments are low, and our finances are tight, [and] she got $1.5 million, it's going to pay for 30 students or so to go, underrepresented students, to go to college for 4 years at a private institution, right? I mean, even if like, their rate is our rate, say 25%, just 25% of a million dollars is $250,000 to go straight to the institution. So do you see, it's like if you invest a little bit in the grants office, that would just be one grant . . . and it would bring you students and it would bring you money, and would support the region that will do great things for the students. 20 years from now, they might be doing awesome things and wanting to donate back.

Hessa shared, ultimately, she had not been able to even apply for an S-STEM grant because her institutional grants office does not have the capacity to manage such a large grant. This opportunity was valuable to Hessa, because it would mean she would be able to provide financial assistance to more students, specifically underrepresented students, so they might have more access to STEM majors. Both faculty members were frustrated and disappointed to lose out on what they felt was a valuable opportunity. As a student in a STEM major, Andres also hoped to see more students of color in STEM majors at Northwest, noting:

> I had this one freshman, that he was kind of one that I met him this year. And he was like, "Oh, that's so cool. You're, like a science major, you don't really see that many Hispanic students in STEM here." I'm like, "Yes, because I'm the only one."

In other parts of the conversation with Andres, he described being the only student of color was not a new experience, nor one that he enjoyed, but was one he had come to accept. For Daniel, he struggled with recruiting and retaining students in STEM programs at MVCC, along with exposing them to available opportunities. Daniel stated:

> So I think we do a terrible job at marketing STEM. And I think my feedback with every new administrator, I try again, but it's like, there's less and less control of what I can put on my webpage. It's like, okay, marketing wants it to look like this. So when you get an email from a student, and interest is like, "Oh, I can just go to my page and hey, look at us having fun in lab." Because marketing wants to have, you know, people sitting on the lawn talking to each other playing hacky sack or things like that, because that's the college experience. Well, that is an important aspect of learning to socialize with people that you wouldn't otherwise. . . . That's a big thing. But our students, students aren't

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coming to MVCC to party, right? They're here to get something out of it that's going to change their lives.

Daniel believed the mission and purpose of MVCC is not necessarily marketing a "college" experience, because in his experience, most students come to MVCC for education and training that leads to employment. Daniel described wanting to expose students to what he loves and enjoys about STEM, similar to Hessa, and stated:

> There's a couple of challenges, I think, our low income or underrepresented groups or rural students, right, this lack of exposure to different areas and fields and opportunities. And it's just exposure because you know, what gets you through really tough science courses is the end in sight.

An exposure or passion for STEM is what Hessa knew helped students persist through STEM coursework before eventually matriculating and hopefully securing employment in the field. Daniel shared several lucrative positions that could lead to gainful employment through his programs, and even created an engineering track for students. He felt frustrated that even as a department chair, he had little control of showcasing the strengths of the STEM department. According to Daniel:

> But that pathway for those students who are currently stuck in minimum-wage, low-wage jobs, and for students to be able to not find housing, super expensive on campus, or not have that expensive tuition, I've been able to do that for half their degree makes a difference as to whether they could get that degree or not. So I mean, that's meaningful to me. And, you know, if even if I wasn't, I should do it anyway. Because, you know, it's engineers bring in more tax dollars to the state. Then someone stuck in a dead end job, but it's um yeah, I really identify with those students in particular.

Daniel felt that STEM does not need to be an expensive endeavor and could be made affordable

by beginning at a community college, just like he did. Yet at both institutions, enrollment

declines affected opportunities in STEM majors, and several participants shared their STEM

faculty were being cut in several areas.

Technology: Bridge and Barrier

At least half of participants articulated technology as a duality of opportunity; although

technology helped increase access and attainment for higher education, it disproportionally was a

barrier for underrepresented students. This theme also pointed to the importance of relationships

in rural areas and the importance in college access and success, which cannot always be reduced

to interactions on the internet. Technology is not always a bridge to accessing higher education

for rural communities, but it can also be a barrier in many ways. In particular, technology and

high speed internet access are a large component of built capital, which facilitates both

individual connection and community interactions (CCF; Flora et al., 2018). Participants

struggled to strengthen technology, particularly as the COVID-19 global pandemic forced rural

communities to unearth strategies to provide this form of capital, when it was scarce resource to

begin with.

Internet is an expensive cost, particularly for rural regions without access to high speed

internet. As Robert described, "Even if you live within the city limits, you could still not have

internet because well, it's expensive**.**" Faith noted the COVID-19 global pandemic forced

education to shift to an online format, but she was concerned about those who could not afford

the necessary items to participate in online classes, noting:

> And then if you put internet on top of it, it's a very expensive proposition to try to get
>
> educated even in elementary, middle and high school in a rural community, never mind

find out all about all the other resources that are available to you for higher education at the community college level.

As a faculty member, Mariah conveyed the opportunity cost of technology was not a binary problem, stating:

And oh, the option is, you know, well, they could just take it online. . . . Okay, but they live in this very remote town, and they don't have, you know, the internet capabilities out there. I mean, the infrastructure is much harder in some of these rural communities and socioeconomics, and that region also is generally not full of a bunch of rich people, right? The socioeconomic status in that region makes it even more difficult for many of our students.

Even if students were interested in participating in college remotely, many challenges created a barrier for them to access higher education. Tanya witnessed this challenge at MVCC, and noted:

That's a big problem is they . . . they can't take these online classes that we think that students want because they don't have internet. And so . . . they have to drive to campus and use our computer labs to attend these online classes. So it's like, "Is there a computer lab open right now at this time?" You know, they have to navigate all these different hoops. And, "Do I have a webcam that I can borrow to attend this class?" And it's just those things where it's like, yeah, online classes can be so convenient for some, but they can be so burdensome for other students. Like, if you don't have internet, and you don't have a webcam, and you don't have a laptop at home or a computer at home to attend the class, you now have to go access all these other resources and see if they are, you know, available for you at that time.

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Although it seems easy to just need internet and a computer to attend courses online, Tanya described when students did not have access to those tools at home, they then have to come to campus to use the tools they needed. Hannah described her experience as a TRiO advisor working with students and hearing them describe the barriers to accessing internet and technology. As Hannah recalled:

> I think some of my rural students lately . . . they'll say, "I don't have internet or I don't have cell phone service where I live, or I don't have some of those things," which would definitely make it a challenge, right. And then . . . transportation, right, like some of these are childcare. Those are all issues that have come up lately . . . I know I keep saying it, but like how COVID impacted things and not that they weren't issues before. I mean, they were but I think in some ways, it exacerbated what we're experiencing right now.

Transportation costs increasing rapidly, coupled with access to childcare, further complicated the challenge. Maggie described feeling conflicted because she intimately knew the struggles accessing technology in rural areas, as she had personally experienced this herself. Maggie recalled:

> So I know it's a big drive to like online degrees. It's like, "Hey, that doesn't work for a lot of these people at all." Or it's like, "I have internet or, but it's unstable, or it's very expensive, or I have to travel into town to get that broadband or whatever." It just it's not realistic. And . . . it's definitely been the divide with the pandemic of who hasn't doesn't. And so I think, yeah, just bringing the onus on the schools to go out there and the community to be there.

Like other participants, Maggie questioned the institutional integrity of higher education, and the need to facilitate better, tangible access to higher education in their rural region. Corrine

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questioned the divide of which students had access to technology, and those who had been left behind without access:

> The students that are remaining, and I think you know that that speaks to their access to internet. They have access and bandwidth. What it doesn't speak to is the students who aren't with us, and why aren't they there?

As upper administrators like Corrine questioned what might have happened to these students, other participants shared stories of "bridges" community members had constructed to alleviate access to technology. For example, Carl shared how his school district worked to level the divide in access to internet and technology, stating:

> We've got a lot of students that live in areas where there is no Wi-Fi, there is no internet. And so we took mobile hotspots out into the, you know, the corners of our county so that kids could meet up and work on their Chromebooks . . . in a parking lot somewhere, whatever it might be, but we had to take technology to them, and Wi-Fi access to them, or they weren't gonna be able to learn over the last three years.

The reality that Carl expressed suggested without the school district providing assistance to students, they would not have been able to participate in remote learning environments at the K–12 level. Kristi also shared this sentiment at the community college level, stating:

> The technology have and have nots is the new divide in a rural community and not having access to internet is, you know, it's a deal breaker. So we're trying to figure out how to give hotspots to students. How to make them aware every McDonald's has a you know, a parking lot you can go sit in if you have a car. That's helpful. If you don't have a car. That's not super helpful. So yeah, access to technology is a big deal for those students.

Outside of providing hotspots, Kristi reflected dismay in how to alleviate challenges in accessing the internet, other than supporting students directly. Faith echoed a similar experience when she shared an experience she had with a community member working to bridge the technological divide for students. She described:

> I mean, we're in a very rural area. And I know that we had a service person at our house, who had just told us that because he lives in another rural town, and he happens to attend a community church there, he took it upon himself to go and install Wi Fi in the parking lot. So the kids could sit in the parking lot in order to do their homework.

This phenomenon was shared in the media during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many rural students flocked to parking lots to access internet. Similar to this concept, Faith highlighted the creative and responsive ways that rural life has responded to the demands of accessing the world via the internet.

Actualizing Rural Potential

Several participants identified the strengths and challenges of their rural area and ways in which they focus on rurality at an individual or organizational level, yet there seemed to be a disconnect in explicit programming and initiatives focused on rurality. One participant, Destiny, mentioned explicitly that her organization solely focuses on rural, and her organization is a philanthropic organization. She noted:

> I feel like there's a real opportunity for us to lean into this conversation and perception of rural and really start trying to shift the course of that to raise up the positives in rural and you know, just the exceptional creative people who live in those spaces. I don't know. So I think I think that's another thing is just the perception of rural and the perception of

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postsecondary and rural is another area where I think we will likely start spending a little

bit more time because we've seen a shift in the last few years.

Such a lack of centering rurality does not allow rural places to actualize their identity and unlock

their full potential. This lack of societal discourse and national focus on rurality has translated

into the inner workings of rural spaces, and into everyday interactions. Rural communities find it

difficult to address challenges in their regions due to feeling invisible and lack of explicit focus

on rural needs.

As rural communities work to attract qualified candidates to their region, participants also

described grappling with how to have more local students attend regional institutions, as well as

how to attract local students to return to their communities. With two regional institutions of

higher education, participants knew these options were the ones local students would choose to

attend if they chose to attend college. Robert felt having access to higher education regionally

helped more students access and obtain higher education, as well as be retained in the

community after graduation. According to Robert:

> You know, I think that kids having access to an opportunity to be able to go to MVCC or
>
> Northwest, and stay local provides a number of benefits. One of which is that it helps
>
> with having strong institutions locally that kids would want to attend. I think the other
>
> thing is, I think I'm guessing that kids who attend community college or college close to
>
> their home are more likely to come back home.

These phenomenon (i.e., rural brain drain and rural brain gain) have been longstanding

components on scholarship examining rurality. With two regional institutions of higher

education, participants knew these options would likely be the ones local students pursued, and

continued to share the benefits of attending these institutions. Maggie connected the benefits of

brain gain to higher education and community development, stating:, "So if you are in a community, and you attend a school in that community, it's furthering your community because you're more educated, you can contribute financially, and, you know, with your thoughts and ideas."

From a liberal arts perspective, Maggie was aware that higher education provides an opportunity for individuals to grow as democratic members of society. From a philanthropic perspective, Destiny shared her perspective on rural brain gain, noting:

And you know, what it takes for rural students to come back. And it's kind of interesting, because we see with the scholarship, that was one of the findings that we had with the scholarship for rural students, is they do tend to go back to rural communities, because they don't have that debt incurred. So they're able to take a job that maybe pays a little bit less, because they don't have huge student loans. So we've actually seen anecdotally, some of our students able to go back to their communities because they want to be there.

I mean, I wanted to go back to my rural community, and I couldn't afford to.

Destiny shared she was raised in another rural community in the state, and she valued returning to her community after she completed college. She conveyed a sense of optimism that returning home for rural students was a feasible option, not a closed door, as she had experienced. Like Destiny, other participants shared experiences of rural students who wanted to return home after college, and they shared success stories. Meredith shared multiple stories of students who had returned to their community with hopes of bettering their communities, stating, "I have a former student that teaches at the high school now. And her reason for coming back or being here is very different. I mean, she wanted to come back and make a change in her community."

Meredith felt that students able to obtain postsecondary education connecting them to

career opportunities locally is an amazing opportunity for both the community and the student.

However, amid severe declines in enrollment over the past few years, Carl looked to regional

institutions as key points of access to higher education, stating:

> We found you know, less and less kids leaving the nest per se to head off to college. So
>
> we're hoping that those kids reenroll or enroll now that you know that colleges are
>
> beginning to open back up and get kids back on campus.

In this new frontier of higher education, Carl remained hopeful that as campuses return to more

in-person learning environments, students from his district would opt for the feasibility of

attending local institutions.

Centering Rurality in Local, Regional, and State Policies

When participants were asked about the state of rurality in their region and in the state

from their perspectives and in their positions, several participants pointed out there was a lack of

explicit focus on rurality throughout. Participants battled with acquiring political capital (CCF;

Flora et al., 2018). Political capital is needed for a community to determine resource-distribution

locally, and participants felt that it was difficult to acquire much needed resources to support

education. This sentiment was the case for Brad, a leader in higher education at the state level,

who noted:

> This issue of rural student access, and success and higher education is one that I don't
>
> think we've paid, as a state or agency, even institutions have paid a lot of attention to as a
>
> unique problem, or challenge or opportunity.

At a state level, Brad shared there has not been an explicit focus on rurality. He went on to

mention there was not a staff person in his office with duties or responsibilities centered on rural

student and higher education needs. When Charlotte responded to the same question based on her experience in secondary education at the state level, she provided a similar response, saying, "I have to say, no, there's not when I was working at that level, there's not a specific individual or individuals that that focus just on small, rural and remote."

Both in secondary and postsecondary education in the state, participants did not indicate a position nor person focused on rural needs and issues within the state. Grappling with how to support rurality in the region was something Destiny and her philanthropic organization were considering how to address. According to Destiny:

> I guess the only other thing that we've been thinking a lot about is the narrative around rural and the narrative around postsecondary and the intersection of those two things, and how can we have a role in supporting those conversations and making sure they're informed conversations?

In her philanthropy's unique role, Destiny felt their longstanding commitment to supporting higher education in the region was an opportunity to influence decision making and conversations about what higher education means for rural students. Brad also felt although his staff did not have an explicit rural focus, supporting rural students and rural-serving institutions was important. He stated:

> As its own sort of problem and opportunity, the rural urban one is not that one that we've explicitly and kind of on its own terms really tried to tackle. That said, it comes up a lot, right, we support we work with and support predominantly rural serving institutions.

These participants seemed to be conflicted with the best approach to serving rural regions and rural higher education, and this challenge was also felt within the region. In Carl's position, he

described grappling with the best way to approach the intersection of rural and social identities, a conversation that has been largely overlooked when it comes to rural places. Carl noted:

> Our rural region is, is different than a lot of the more populated areas of the state, and our challenges of equity. And the equity work that we're trying to engage in is different. And, we're not necessarily talking about different as in our BIPOC population, but as much with our poverty, students of poverty, and trying to get them the same opportunities that other students across our state get. And sometimes that gets lost in the in the work because it's not widely seen, you know, by those that are making policy and at the state level.

At the community college level, Hannah felt the challenges her institution faced affected the way they were able to support their rural region, noting:

> Because I mean, we certainly do serve a rural community. And I feel like we don't, this is me talking. . . . But it feels like we don't do the best job with connecting with our rural partners. And I think partly because it's a revolving door sometimes here. And one person is just getting up to speed and then we have changes or we don't have a staff, right, to really do the job that's needed to be done

The difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff made Hannah feel like her institution struggled to support their rural area, and she knew the institutions valued those connections where faculty traveled to those places to have that class maybe once or twice a week. Maggie also shared she struggled with the progress of relationships with rural communities, noting:

> So I think . . . putting the onus on the colleges and really going out into the communities rather than expecting all those people to come here, especially when folks have lived generationally in an area that doesn't have access to that [the college].

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Given the geographical diversity of the region, Maggie was not sure the colleges prioritized meeting rural students and communities where they were at, and surmised that if they offered more classes and programs near these communities, college enrollment would increase. When participants were asked about initiatives or successes they were experiencing in their roles, there seemed to be a disconnect between who was aware of initiatives and efforts to support rural students. Corrine, the MVCC president, discussed a rural effort she had been championing in a remote part of the county, stating:

> I was just gonna say, you know, it's specific to rural communities. I created a task force that is basically, you know, leaders from our most remote area. There's a group of about 20 of them that meet with me quarterly to identify their needs, and how . . . how we can serve them better.

Yet, Corrine was the only participant at MVCC to discuss this incredible effort, and there was a clear disconnection between upper administration and on the ground staff. At Northwest University, several high school partnership programs for underrepresented students offered incentives to students upon graduating and committing to attend Northwest. This program offered many benefits, according to Sarah, who stated:

> We reach out to students, Latinx students and their families in seventh grade. And we work with them all the way through high school completion. And then hopefully, they start at Northwest following graduation, or, in some cases, they go to MVCC, which is just fine, we are okay with that. And then if they continue through their undergraduate degree, they actually get a very good deal in our MAT program and some of our education, master's programs. It's almost free tuition. So it's a pipeline program, we now

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have three of them. And we feel that those that it's very high touch, it does rely on a lot

of resources, but we feel that it's very worth it in our community.

When asked about the three pipeline programs, participants shared those programs only exist in

the school districts located the closest to Northwest, which does not include the most rural and

remote schools with lower percentages of students who attend Northwest. This disconnection

was also felt from policy lens as well when Timothy discussed his relationship with elected

officials, noting:

> I would say, we, to my knowledge, have never had any elected official come to our
>
> school district office to say, "Hey, let's check in with seeing how you're doing. You
>
> know, what can we do to help support you?" That doesn't happen.

Timothy referred to elected officials visiting his school district to get an emic perspective of their

needs and strengths.

Competition and Institutional Isomorphism

At all three types of education, participants shared stories or initiatives of students who

were the focus of their work. What became apparent through many participants' stories was that

the COVID-19 global pandemic and other institutional challenges locally and at the state level

had created an environment where students had become a scarce resource. Essentially, the

institutions were competing for human capital, or the potential to educate individuals (CCF;

Flora et al., 2018). The institutional isomorphism driven by state policies and funding models

was causing tension and friction among regional educational stakeholders. Due to the COVID-19

global pandemic, all school personnel now felt they had to offer online options or students would

go elsewhere, causing a scarcity approach to recruiting students in public education that Carl

experienced. Carl noted:

I would say that technology has given us a lot of different views on what school should

look like. And for us, as a district, we've got to figure out how to provide that to every

kid. And we know that there's a lot, there's a lot more avenues for kids to learn nowadays

than there ever has been before. And so we have to adapt to that. And we can't tell kids,

"No, this is what we offered you need to take advantage of this, because this is all we've

got." We got to give them the, you know, the full buffet, because that's what they're

looking for. And if we don't give it to them, they'll go somewhere else where they where

they can.

Carl's district had opened an new alternative school, and had major increases in enrollment.

These increases in enrollment had helped Carl's district to offer more options for students to

complete high school, therefore retaining more students within the districts and securing more

per-student funding from the state. Between the institutions of higher education, competition

over a scarcity of students was prevalent. Both participants at the community college and

university shared their recruitment efforts now included a large focus on recruiting nontraditional

students. Kristi had experienced this shift in her position at MVCC and had witnessed Northwest

begin to also recruit nontraditional students, stating:

I've watched Northwest, their marketing has changed a lot. They are now going after

adult learners. So they're kind of trying to fish in the same pond that can that we fish in.

They're starting to do little badging certificates, which are pretty much what community

colleges do.

However, Kristi did not communicating this awareness in a negative way. Although she believed

community colleges traditionally served nontraditional students, she recognized nontraditional

students make up a large population of the students overall in the region. What she desired was

more communication and partnership around how both institutions could support nontraditional students. As Kristi noted:

> So I think Northwest and MVCC are gonna really come together, because we're starting to see, oh, my gosh, we serve a rural community who actually wants to work, maybe we should like get down in this and start collaborating a little more. Mission wise, you know, our people get along great. Our registrars have great relationships with each other, we share data back and forth. Our athletic departments get along great. We share athletes that need to be remediated or didn't make the team, they get referred to us, we train them up and send them back. So those kinds of partnerships at the person to person level are good. And I think if we could maybe start collaborating more together, just admission wise as we seek to help people in this region, get an education, so they can go to work.

Rather than stealing students from each other, Kristi felt there was an intentional way for both institutions to work together without creating tension about whose students were whose. She continued:

> Like how about if we stopped doing this? And you keep doing that? And how about have you stopped doing some of the remediation that we do, and we'll give them to you when we're done. . . . If we could get on the same page academically, and make some agreements with each other, that we're not going to duplicate or compete. I actually think we do a better job. And then we may not have to spend so much money if we could partner with Northwest in a meaningful way.

Despite both institutions providing opportunities for a similar pool of students, participants felt many opportunities existed for collaboration and expansion of academic offerings.

The Role of Higher Education

Based off participants' experiences and opinions, college-going rates have declined. Steeped in this decline is the value proposition of attending college for this rural region. Several participants felt postsecondary education and training was essential for individuals to have access to living wage careers, and to increase social determinants of health. The state policy arena had several initiatives around increasing college-going rates, which Brad discussed, noting:

> And that's the same message that we share everywhere, which is, you know, this is where the future is. It's in education and training for career. Again, it can take a lot of different forms, it doesn't mean you all have to get 4-year degrees and graduate degrees, etc. But that [education and training] is a necessity and for our rural regions.

Similar to other participants, Brad noted access and obtainment of higher education was important for the students and their career trajectories, and also an important component to improve the economy in rural regions. However, Sarah felt there was a tension in the state legislature about the role and value of higher education, and stated:

> And the legislature, I will say, are struggling with the value proposition of, of attending college. There's a little bit of cynicism out there. Dare I say? A lot, in some ways, in some places, that going to college is not necessarily important. Certainly it's not for everybody, I've always believed that that is the case. But for many people, I believe it can be life changing. And having taught for 25 years, I can tell you that students have told me over the years, many times that it was a life changing experience to go to college, get the degree and especially be the first in your family to do so. So we're butting up against some perceptions that college is expensive. And it doesn't deliver the outcomes

that perhaps 10 or 20 years ago, people valued more. And that's a hard perception to erase for people.

As a first-generation college student herself, Sarah had personally and professionally experienced the expansive benefits of higher education; however, Sarah felt the value proposition of attending college had pervaded mindsets about higher education at every level. Diana, who identified as a first-generation student and worked as a faculty member and in a leadership role in a support program for underrepresented students at Northwest, felt, "That's one of the downsides is that I'm sure you know, it's quickly moving to the point where the bachelor's is the new high school diploma." At the high school level, Megan came from a family of educators and from an area that valued education, and she felt a disconnect between her beliefs and the community's beliefs about education. As Megan described:

> But there's a disconnect of what I think education can be and can get you . . . I would say my community sees education as, especially higher education, or anything past maybe high school, most people value high school now because they're supposed to, but past that I've not seen a strong value in what I've seen it in my own life. Which makes sense, because the barriers that exist that didn't exist for me because of how I grew up in my privilege.

Megan recognized the importance of familial support in pursuit of education, and for her, this support was not something she experienced in her own personal educational trajectory. Still, she described challenges in motivating students to even finish high school, which translated into, "They don't see the motivation to finish college and then it again, then that perpetrates this idea that education is a waste." Tanya felt higher education had many misconceptions that she heard

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often from students who wanted to attend MVCC, and felt these misconceptions kept them from pursuing their college aspirations. Tanya stated"

> I would say that's one of the deterrence is just like those rumors. I know, a lot of people have family and friends that help them, maybe get to the college point, or they tell them that they can't get to that college point. They have someone in their life who's telling them that, "No, you could never do it." So we are the people to encourage them and advocate like, "No, you could totally do it." But they have people who are telling them the wrong information like "Oh, it's too expensive. You don't qualify for FAFSA." You know . . . they just tell them all these things. And I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, you don't even know if you don't try."

Tanya's position required her to provide accurate information to students, but often she felt she needed to walk students through their beliefs for them to see the realities about accessing higher education.

Though all participants agreed pursuing higher education was a worthwhile goal, they shared that challenges around the cost of pursuing a degree would provide greater returns on investment, battling perceptions and beliefs about higher education, and working to educate students about the realities of higher education all complicated students achieving that goal.

Equity and Representation

Many aspects of conversations with participants included discussions regarding the progress and status of underrepresented and marginalized populations. At all levels, participants recognized that representation was a challenge their institutions were experiencing. Participants also conveyed many of these students were missing from higher education in the region, and this issue had been exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic. When Adelina was asked why

more Latinx students do not attend college in this area, she felt college was an opportunity that would provide her with more than just a career later down the road. According to Adelina:

> I feel like not many Hispanic kids go to college because of just how their family like, learns, like their parents didn't go to college. "Oh, I'm not gonna go to college. I'm just gonna go straight to working." And that's fine. You know, like a lot of people do that. But they don't get the realization that going to college is going to give me more experience, is gonna give you more job opportunities further down the road, and it's going to give me Yeah, bigger paycheck, but I get to meet new people, I get to expand my you know, like, opportunities for better jobs and everything.

Adelina felt higher education was a doorway into a world in which she wanted to participate. Kristi was acutely aware of these declines as she stated, "Our most vulnerable populations have seen the biggest decline in enrollment and retention." For these participants, students included rural students, first-generation college students, students of color, low-income students, and LGBTQ+ students. From a state-level perspective, Brad discussed how rural was shaping equity-driven conversations, noting:

> I think our data, I mean . . . we've spent some time looking at the data. And it is clear that geography, rural-urban matters, in terms of college access, and that urban and suburban students are more likely to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. So it is one of the dimensions of equity that we are concerned about and ought to be working on.

Brad seemed to understand that rural students, particularly underrepresented rural students, were an important focus in his organization; however it seemed there were no specific efforts occurring. Connor, who described relying on public transportation to commute to campus for his

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job, felt immersed in the lack of representation of the community on Northwest campus, and stated:

> Talking to our diverse, protected classes here locally at the community level, again, I ride the bus every day. I see all these people as I ride the bus and I see this wonderful, diverse community that would be really great if they had some, you know, maybe some education so that way they can elevate their life.

As a TRiO advisor, Connor discussed focusing on the experiences of underrepresented students at Northwest, and was knowledgeable about the communities from which these students come. He noted wanting to see more of those students accessing the benefits of higher education. Hessa also recognized a lack of diversity within the faculty at Northwest, stating:

> I think, if you don't have students, faculty or staff, sharing some type of an identity similar to your own. I think that's very hard. Right? That's, I mean, that's well known in all areas. So. Yeah, I think that's a real challenge.

For students to be successful in college, Hessa believed it was important for the faculty to share identities with the students to create an authentic sense of belonging. Daniel shared it was important for students of color to see faculty who looked like them on campus, particularly in person. He stated:

> Our chemistry instructor on this campus she's Latina, and she's in the outreach . . . students come into her. And so that helps that a short Latina is has a doctorate in chemistry and is here for you. But for that to happen, they still need to get on campus and see the person.

Representation was a priority for Brandon as well. Brandon, an Indigenous faculty member and admissions specialist, had a deep connection with his Native identity, and it had been a core

component of his values in providing access to higher education for other Native and Indigenous students. According to Brandon:

> I didn't have opportunity to get a masters or a PhD, because I had my foot in the door, trying to keep the door open, for access for Native students have access to education, and at the same time, developing Native American studies to teach to the public as a whole about who we are as a person. And if I didn't do that, we wouldn't have a Native studies here.

Brandon felt a sense of sacrifice in his own educational direction as he worked to increase tangible access and opportunities for Native students on campus. Although Brandon had dedicated over 2 decades to advocating and supporting Native students, combined with this personal experience, he felt his educational knowledge was not valued in the same way that graduate degrees were at Northwest. He felt all of his experiences equated to more knowledge than a degree provided, and legitimized the knowledge he brought to the campus; however, he felt his experience was not considered legitimate to other staff and administrators. Brandon also experienced feeling illegitimate as he strived to implement recruiting tactics that made sense in Native communities. Noting:

> And university says, "Well, that's not recruiting." And, "What you're spending money on that?" I said, "You know what? I planted that seed and those kids are gonna go home and talk to their Grandma. And when they get big, they're going to come here, because they remember me. And then I came from Northwest University. It's that idea.

As an insider into Native communities, it was difficult for Brandon to feel his expertise was not valued or supported financially by his institution.

Underrepresented faculty shared many themes of working tirelessly to advocate and

support marginalized students across the campus and the region. Hessa recalled working to

support early career underrepresented faculty on her campus, and witnessed firsthand the

commitment of these faculty members. She stated, "I lead a faculty group here on campus that

focuses on advancing in the careers of our of underrepresented faculty, and when we polled

them, you know, they are working 70–80 hours a week, that's a lot of sacrifice."

Because Northwest is a teaching institution, faculty members do spend a significant

amount of time supporting students; however, Hessa noticed the underrepresented faculty

seemed to work a disproportionate amount compared to other faculty. Researchers have found

this discrepance to be a widespread phenomenon (e.g., Baez, 2000; O'Meara et al., 2017). At the

secondary education level, Bianca, who previously was a teacher before transitioning to college

access, described many instances going beyond the duties of her position to advocate for

underrepresented students. Bianca stated:

> One time we went, I invited all the principals, the district office, and I lined up all my
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> parents, and they all went up and said, things that were going on in the school that they
>
> already knew, or, you know, to a point where, you know, "You guys have this beautiful
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> big school, and I walk in, and you do not have one Spanish speaker in the office?" . . .
>
> Like, what are you saying, you know, like, just little things, they don't translate
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> paperwork and all that. Well, now they do. But you know, back then they didn't.

Bianca said for a school to foster a sense of belonging—not just for students, but for their

families as well—representation begins when one enters the building, even if it is merely having

materials available in other languages for students and families. This idea influenced Marisol's

belief that MVCC would not provide tailored support or services to Latinx students, and she stated:

> And I guess, like, when I came to MVCC, like I didn't really expect, I guess like where they help like Latinos or Latina or Latinx people to like, settle in college and everything with them. But it was like a big deal for me.

Having intentionally tailored support services and representation for Latinx students was crucial to Marisol as she navigated her college experience. Daniel also shared his experience as a faculty member supporting Latinx students, noting:

> So one of my best students in chemistry, Maria, So the chemistry books in English, so she needs to study in English. And her place to study was in the kitchen table. And her mom and her aunt would intentionally go into her space and talk in Spanish, because it's, it's not her duty to get a job. It's her duty to get married and give them grandchildren. And so studying chemistry is hard enough, studying chemistry when there's people telling you suck for doing that in a whole different language.

Daniel knew it was important to understand the family dynamics his students experienced as they pursued higher education, as those dynamics shaped their experiences in his classroom. He wanted to be intentional about supporting these students. For Hessa, Daniel's approach was one she valued as well, and she said, "I think the only way we can best support our students is to try to have a better understanding of their lives." Mariah, best summarized how an understanding of underrepresented students, paired with an understanding of rurality and higher education, could be transformative at a policy and funding level. She said:

> So we need more folks with an understanding of how education works, and funding for education needs to be to get involved in the legislature. Because when that happens, we

have higher success rates. We have more funding, they vote to fund education. And that

funding includes those wraparound support services so that we can have a higher

percentage of Hispanics and BIPOC students and low-income students and first

generation students graduating. The TRiO program is federally funded. . . . That's a grant

that came from [federal and state] legislators, who understand the struggles that those

students face.

To better support students, the first step for many participants was to understand the experiences

of the most marginalized and underrepresented students, staff, and faculty at all levels, and then

to use that knowledge to increase access and obtainment of higher education.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I built an explanation of the field of rural higher education from

four vantage points: (a) the community, (b) K–12 and secondary education, (c) community

college, and (d) regional university. Next, I shared the factors shaping the internal dynamics of

the college-going pipeline in this region. Although the COVID-19 global pandemic and other

natural disasters have transformed operations within the region, these experiences also

exacerbated previous challenges while creating new challenges. As a field of higher education,

participants valued the impacts of their participation in regional collaborative efforts, which

contributed to positive improvements within the field. However, the field of higher education in

this region was constrained by external forces including federal and state policies, funding, and

staffing. External constraints forced institutions to implement initiatives to recruit more students,

resulting in these institutions recruiting similar types of students.

Throughout the chapter, an overarching theme was the notion that capacity in rural areas

is different than capacity in nonrural areas, from recruiting staff or students to the effects of

policies and funding. Another theme presented was the lack of clear focus on rurality and higher education, even within rural spaces. Although participants shared many opportunities and successes in this study, those opportunities came with costs, particularly for rural areas, and sometimes the costs outweighed the benefits for this region.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications

In the previous chapter, I portrayed a rural region of the Pacific Northwest, and how that region—including the region's communities, stakeholders, and students—navigate accessing and obtaining higher education. I shared participants' insights and perspectives who make up the region's college-going pipeline, and the successes and challenges they faced as they work to increase college-going. As a reminder, the purpose of this study was to explore the field of rural higher education and identify the ways that stakeholders and external and internal forces shaped and defined the field, and how the field addressed inequities. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do educational actors and organizations in a field of rural higher education describe the field?

    a. What is the complex web of interactions that they have with each other, including the patterns, strengths, and weaknesses they identify?

2. What is the role of higher education in this rural area?

    a. In what ways and to what extent do the actors and organizations identify and address regional educational and economic needs?

In this chapter, I discuss how this study's findings connect to the theory and literature, which I discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, and then I offer implications through a rural-centered lens for research, policy, and practice.

Summary of Findings

From an overarching perspective, this study found that rurality was not institutionalized nor centered explicitly in practice or policy; however, all participants shared implicit foci . Arguably, this rural region has been operating in an environment that historically and currently

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does not have policies or initiatives directly focused on understanding and supporting rural college success; therefore, this region has struggled to actualize their full, rural-potential. As such, the prospects offered by technology and STEM initiatives are complicated and yet present a duality of opportunity. This study found the COVID-19 global pandemic has changed the landscape for rural-higher education. The challenges rural underrepresented students have faced in accessing and obtaining higher education have been exacerbated by the pandemic and natural disasters, and rural-serving higher education institutions have worked tirelessly to address these challenges with decreasing financial support.

All sectors of education institutions in this study experienced difficulties in recruiting and retaining faculty and staff, affecting their organizational capacities as these institutions fought their way out of survival mode resulting from the pandemic and state funding formulas. Findings also shed light on the role of higher education within the region. Postsecondary education was viewed as a worthwhile and necessary pursuit; however, regional poverty and challenges faced by rural underrepresented students complicated the value of higher education.

Contributions to Theory

This study provides several theoretical contributions to existing literature on rurality and higher education. First, the role of higher education in rural spaces from an organizational lens has been largely unexplored. After completing an extant review of the literature on rurality and higher education, I discovered no study had yet employed Bourdieiuan, neo-institutional organizational fields theories in conjunction with spatial theory to better understand the complexities of rurality and higher education. By employing this theoretical framework, I identified the dynamic relationships and environmental factors in rural spaces left unaccounted. The findings pointed to the necessity of implementing theories that examine structures of

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isolation and oppression pervading rural life, a finding that was prevalent in this investigation. Further, by answering the call of scholars to employ field-level theoretical approaches and methodologies (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1994; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017; Wooten & Sacco, 2017), this study's use of Bourdieuian and neo-institutional organizational fields grappled with the relationship between geography and higher education, and the how undercurrent of the struggle for survival shaped the field.

Organizational fields shed light on the regional-centeredness exhibited by the participants and the organizations they represented in this study. Bourdieu's (1975) conceptualization of fields of struggle was shaped by scarcity and power acquisition, which was congruent with the findings of this study. In this particular field, most participants shared both students and funding were the scarce resources for which every institution competed. Students, both by paying tuition and by being sources of additional state funding, were implicitly tied to tension between the rural higher education institutions in this study. The biproduct of environmental constraints and demands, including decreases in state funding, was that both institutions began implementing recruiting initiatives focused at similar types of students, such as nontraditional students. The more external funding and policies constrained these institutions, the more they were forced to act more similar to each other, a phenomenon known as institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, the participants at Mountain View Community College (MVCC) and Northwest University used their individual voices and action (Bourdieu, 1975) to compose creative and imaginative solutions to address the affects that scarcity brings to their mission-driven institutions within the field. The collection of individual voice and action is recognized by Bourdieu's theory of fields of struggle, where actors play an important role in securing resources.

Conceptually applying the community capitals framework (CCF; Flora et al., 2018) to this investigation shed light on the dynamic ways that capital can be both an asset and a barricade for rural spaces. Filled with natural and human capital, this region struggled to acquire forms of built and financial capital to sustain even basic operations. The CCF centers the experiences of rurality and recognizes that rural spaces have unique forms of capital have often been missed (Flora et al., 2018). A central component of CCF is that capitals are the driving force behind rural community change, and the COVID-19 global pandemic coupled with regional natural disasters exacerbated the difficulties in this region's ability to acquire new forms of capital. Arguably, one of the most important theoretical contributions of this study was the findings underscored that rurality is not a monolithic identity, nor is it able to be examined through a one-dimensional theoretical lens. Such a contribution calls for a diversity of theoretical approaches to capture the essence of the complexities present in rural spaces.

Contributions to Literature

The findings of this study present several key contributions to literature. A principal contribution made by this study was the focus on a geographic region in the Pacific Northwest, an expansive area of the United States that has been largely understudied and underexamined in empirical studies of education. By focusing on a geographic region in the Pacific Northwest, this study contributes to the geographic diversity of research on rurality and higher education. This study also adds to existing literature by considering that public higher education should work in tandem with communities. Students experience higher education through a unique lens that is shaped by geography, and researchers have often told this story through a midwestern or Appalachian geographic lenses.

Poverty

  Poverty is a prevalent factor shaping life in this region. Participants were acutely aware of how poverty had shaped their community, college-going, and the economy. Participants largely associated the obtainment of postsecondary education or training as a strategy to improve poverty, both at the individual and community levels. Poverty was a battle, the effects with which participants grappled, particularly for the most remote and most rural communities. This finding affirmed the work of Hillman (2016), as the most remote communities in this region were both the most isolated from both MVCC and Northwest University and also were the poorest communities in the region. The COVID-19 global pandemic and regional natural disasters had exacerbated regional poverty, yet many participants felt hopeful education was still the great equalizer for their community.

  This study contributes to previous work demonstrating that higher education plays a crucial role in alleviating regional poverty (Koricich et al., 2018; Orphan & McClure, 2019). Further, previous studies have pointed to the importance of the perception of the value of higher education held by institutional agents in creating a college-going culture (Holland, 2015; McDonough, 1997; Nelson, 2016; Poynton & Lapan, 2017; Robinson & Roksa, 2016), which was a belief also predominantly held by participants in this study. Poverty and higher education were implicitly and explicitly associated by participants in this study; however, perceptions about higher education in this study were complex. All participants conveyed strongly that postsecondary education was important, yet felt conflicted when they considered the many barriers in obtaining a degree or credential. Notably, participants in this study were educational stakeholders all holding a postsecondary degree. In contrast in the region, participants shared the value of return on investment of a postsecondary degree or credential was widely shared by

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parents and all community members. Participants felt higher education was valuable, but questioned how obtainable higher education actually was, particularly when their educational constituents questioned its value.

School Environment

Overtaxed and overworked school workers were pervasive in this study. Expanding on the study completed by McDonough (1997), rurality concretely added an additional layer of nuance and complexity of the job descriptions of school counselors, college access advisors, and other professionals. The experiences of rural school counselors and college access advisors in this study confirmed McDonough's (2010) finding, where participants worked to establish college-going norms and culture both at the district and school levels but struggled to do so fully with high-turnover rates and challenges in recruiting teachers and staff. In a piece of dominate literature on rural schools, Carr and Kefelas (2009) grappled with tension faced by rural schools and their students' aspirations after high school. Findings from this study complicated those findings by Carr and Kefelas (2009, where both students and K–12 staff participants described the tensions surrounding their college aspirations, and discussed how students made the decision to pursue higher education at all due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Participants shared it was difficult to encourage students to pursue a degree or credential when some employers offered $15 to $20 an hour to employees, and those positions did not require education. Further, participants shared due to the pandemic, they witnessed significantly fewer students leaving the region to pursue higher education.

Higher Education

Student participants in this study provided insight into their decision-making process of choosing MVCC or Northwest University. Their stories confirmed that rural students experience

both a desire to be near family and also a desire to explore their social identities in a new environment (McHenry-Sorber & Swisher, 2020). Further, all three student participants articulated reasons for why their regional higher education institutions were not a lesser choice than other schools in the state. The students in this study believed their peers held inaccurate conceptions about their local, regional institutions, and found attending MVCC and Northwest University offered more positive rather than negative benefits. The dynamic of students' beliefs about attending their local postsecondary institutions contributes to literature on college choice and rural brain drain (Carr & Kefelas, 2008).

Low college attendance obtainment pervaded the region at the time of this study, wherein only 18% of the population in Lake County held a 4-year degree; however it was difficult to disentagle the factors associated with these low college obtainment rates due to the vast geographic region, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and natural disasters. Though the most rural areas of the region experienced low college-going rates and were also the poorest, these locales also had the lowest transfer and attendance numbers at Northwest University. These components, despite contributing to previous literature on rurality and low-college-going (Koricich, 2018), do not account for the impacts of the these historic events.

Implications for Research

It is important to situate the implications of this study by introducing a salient, overarching theme. The findings of this study largely pointed to the critical reality that rural spaces cannot actualize their full potential unless rurality is made explicit in research, policy, and practice. Many opportunities exist for research to empirically expand on the intersections of rurality and higher education. Although the scope of this study examined the college-going pipeline in one geographic region through a qualitative lens, future researchers should consider

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focusing on other predominantly rural regions in the United States. These studies should also consider applying mixed-method approaches to better understand the quantitative and qualitative aspects of college-going in rural regions. Still, although quantitative approaches are an important methodological component of rural story-telling, scholars should use caution in determining which methodological approaches are appropriate for rural areas. Rural spaces are ever-evolving and ever-changing spaces, and even though quantitative approaches provide an ease of access into rural-storytelling, qualitative methods are important in providing insight and nuance into the lived experiences of rural people.

A common theme for participants in this study was the relationship between the region's rural-serving community college and rural-serving regional comprehensive university, and how students navigated between the two institutions. Future researchers should examine rural transfer pathways and explore how student outcomes differ based on demographics and degree and credential type. As both MVCC and Northwest University both valued engaging rural, nontraditional students in higher education, it would be important to investigate nontraditional student pathways. Specifically, researchers should qualitatively explore these students' college aspirations and their unique needs to obtain a postsecondary degree.

This study found technology offers many opportunities to engage rural students and communities in higher education than ever before, yet findings from this study shed light on the nuanced challenges technology also brings. Specifically, participants at all education types (i.e., K–12, community college, and university) all noted online learning provided some students the opportunity to be successful, but not all students. Research should explore which aspects of hybrid and online learning environments are conducive or detrimental for both rural student and faculty success. Several participants in this study discussed the challenges in both curating

equitable online learning spaces and supporting a diverse range of student needs in online classrooms. Although this study was not focused on the relationships between college access and technology, future empirical studies should examine the relationship between access to technology and rural college access and success to gain a better understanding of the impacts of technology for low-income and underrepresented students.

Lastly, future research should investigate rural-serving community colleges offering bachelor degrees. As described in Chapter 2, community colleges are often the only point of access to higher education for rural students and communities. Given the large geographic area served by MVCC and Northwest University, offering greater opportunities for students to pursue a 4-year degree locally could have positive implications for increasing educational outcomes, particularly for nontraditional students. However, as participants in this study highlighted, such initiatives should be composed in a way that strategically meet the needs of the region and all of the education institutions present.

Implications for Policy

Access and attainment of higher education is crucial at not just the student level, but has important implications at the community, state, and national policy levels, particularly for those spaces located within education deserts.

Local and Institutional

At the local and institutional level, several recommendations for policy emerged. The first recommendation came at the creative and innovative thinking of a participant in this study. When this participant was asked what could be done to improve college-going rates for rural students, she suggested rural-serving universities reconsider their policies around first-year live-on campus requirements. Although there are benefits for college freshman to live on-campus

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their first year, this policy may hold unique barriers and challenges for rural students. The participant in this study noted that Northwest allowed students who lived within 30 miles of campus to apply for an exemption from the live-on campus requirement, but she felt this requirement was detrimental to the students who lived in the most rural and remote areas of the region, farther than 30 miles from campus. Requiring local rural students to leave their families and communities merely because of geographic location potentially further exacerbates low university college-going rates. Despite many benefits to living on campus in residential life and participating in residential life communities, the costs may outweigh the benefits for rural students. Because higher education institutions do not always prioritize fostering a sense of belonging for rural students, rural students may not always see themselves feeling incorporated on a college campus. Allowing rural students to incorporate their rural ways of life into their higher education journeys is imperative. Institutions should explore strategies to authentically incorporate regions' most rural and remote students into campus life, and consider the impact of first-year residential requirements on rural college access.

Every organization in this study struggled with faculty recruitment and retention, as well as the shortages in students pursuing teacher education programs. One student participant in this study aspired to become a future teacher in elementary school, and two participants discussed some aspects of initiatives aimed at recruiting local students into teacher education programs at Northwest and early childhood education programs at MVCC. To address current and future teacher shortages, there appears to be a unique opportunity to strengthen the connection between teacher education programs and secondary schools. One approach is for school districts and teacher education programs to develop pathways and supports specifically for rural students to pursue teaching degrees and credentials, and then offer incentives for those students to teach in

rural schools upon graduation. They key component of this rural-focused teaching initiative is the explicit focus on rural students and schools, and to incorporate rural-centered best teaching practices into the curriculum.

In the region this study examined, every participant voiced that a major contributing factor to success in student college access involved the region's federally funded college access programs, such as TRiO and GEAR UP. Participants stated these programs provided crucial comprehensive support and mentoring for middle school, high school, and college-level students and argued without TRiO or GEAR UP, programs these students might not have received necessary support. Federally funded college access programs were created to support underrepresented students in accessing and obtaining postsecondary education, and addressing systemic barriers in pursuing higher education. Participants in this study who worked for these programs conveyed that because their respective program's presence in K–12 and higher education was supplemental, the structure sometimes created a relationship where college access programs did not feel valued or incorporated into campus life. The professionals who worked outside of these programs shared federally funded college access programs are essential to the college-going pipeline in this region. Federally funded college access programs can often partner with K–12 schools and colleges in supporting underrepresented students. Local and institutional policymakers should consider the role of federal college access programs and their impact on not only increasing college access at the individual level, but how these programs (with the right support) might help foster regional college-going. During a time where schools are increasingly underfunded and have struggled to recruit and retain faculty and staff, federal college access programs have the potential to innovatively support students, schools, and communities. Campus

environments should work to be intentional about inclusive measures to support college access

programs and the beneficial services these programs provide.

State

It is imperative at the state level that policies explicitly center rural students and higher

education. Without an explicit focus on rurality, it is impossible to expect that rural outcomes

will improve. Further, to establish rural spaces as an essential component of policymaking, state-

level policymakers should design initiatives that address and support rural students and

communities. One way to center rural students and communities at the state level is to create and

allocate funding for positions that focus on rural-inclusive policymaking.

Although not all students aspire to pursue a 4-year degree, regions, communities, and

students must have equitable access to a variety of postsecondary options. Although

incentivizing postsecondary institutions to recruit rural students is important, in this study, such

funding was only valuable to the most regional-serving institutions, and provided an opposite

effect in the eyes of participants. From participants' perspectives, funding provided from the

state to public universities for recruiting more diverse students (e.g., rural students) did not

increase the presence within the region of higher education institutions located outside the

region, because those institutions did not rely as much on that funding source. Essentially, larger

research universities with higher enrollments and diverse sources of external funding were

witnessed less in the region by participants in this study.

The absence of institutional types, such as larger public research universities, contributes

to the narrative that rural students are not valued by higher education as an system, given the

larger public and private institutions within the state were absent from attending rural areas.

These institutions were also located a significant distance from the region in this study, and their

absence contributed to a sense of geographic isolation. Policymakers at the state level should examine the implications of funding models that incentivize rural recruiting, and the implications those models have for expanding access to all public higher education options within the state for rural students—not just the institutions that already value and recruit rural students.

Federal and National

For rural spaces to actualize their unique rural potential, federal policies must explicitly incorporate rurality into policymaking. This study found rurality was not an explicit area of focus in policy or practice, yet was identified as an area warranting attention and exploration. Participants at the local, regional, and state levels shared rural students and rural needs were incredibility important, yet there was a dearth of initiatives and persons appointed to a focus on rurality. Importantly, policymakers at the federal level should consider the impacts that federal policies and initiatives have at the state and local levels for rural spaces, and the implications of a lack of rural-focused policies and initiatives.

One specific challenge in understanding the needs of rural spaces is the lack of a federally accepted definition of rurality and rural-serving. As detailed in Chapter 1, many sources of funding and policies for rural higher education are contingent on how rural or remote an institution is; however, some institutions are located in a nonrural city but serve a predominately rural area. As such, federal policymakers should institutionalize the rural-serving institution framework and definition from the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) to better support colleges and universities such as MVCC and Northwest. A uniform definition of rurality and rural-serving would also guide researchers who explore rurality and encourage more empirical examinations of rurality across all domains. Lastly, there are many challenges in understanding rural college-going and rural student progress from a national

perspective. Rural student outcomes should be an explicitly monitored data point at the federal-level, as these data would offer greatly needed information about rural college-going for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Federal policymakers have an obligation and responsibility to rural communities, and should incorporate geography as an essential lens in policymaking.

Several participants in this study shared that their students grappled with the value proposition of pursuing higher education or entering the workforce due to the cost of higher education. Federal financial aid policymakers should investigate and explore the "rural' cost of attendance. This study found rural students had increased costs in accessing higher education in two particular areas: technology and transportation. First, participants in this study found rural students struggled with the cost of internet with the capacity to use programs such as Zoom. High-speed internet is costly and often hard to access in rural areas. Second, in this region, accessing public transportation was complicated and time-intensive. Particularly for those in the most remote areas of the region, public transportation to Northwest could potentially take 2 to 3 hours each way; for students who work or for parenting students, this may not be a realistic option. Although owning and operating a personal vehicle may provide the most flexibility for rural students, the costs associated with owning a vehicle, including purchasing fuel, may be higher for rural students. Pell Grants should account for the cost of fuel, and the distance many rural students must travel to attend their local higher education institutions. Further, although Pell Grants do consider the cost of materials needed for college (e.g., internet) Pell Grant funding formulas—including cost of attendance—should examine the additional costs that rural and remote students might face in acquiring the high-speed internet needed to attend remote and hybrid college courses. Federal financial aid need analysis calculations should account for the

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rural cost of pursuing higher education, and how financial aid can explicitly address these barriers.

Implications and Suggestions for Practice

Although many structural and systemic changes must be considered in research and in policy, implications for practice hold equal importance in addressing educational outcomes for rural spaces. Predominately rural regions should consider their educational stakeholders, including the strengths, successes, and challenges faced by those stakeholders and their organizations, and develop avenues for these stakeholders to collaborate and interact regularly. Participants in this study referred to the benefits they experienced by participating in several key collaborative spaces that brought together education, workforce, public health, healthcare, and philanthropy. Two participants in this study struggled to find ways to participate in collaborative spaces in their field, such as STEM. These participants who identified as faculty members struggled to acquire institutional resources and support to apply for funding for research and practice that would greatly benefit the college, students, and the community. Departments at the federal level and national serving philanthropic organizations should consider the challenges that might be preventing rural faculty members and rural-serving institutions from successfully being awarded funding and work to revise these processes.

Given the community-embedded nature of the region this study examined, practitioners should consider how higher education can become more embedded in rural spaces, and how rural spaces can become further integrated in higher education. One possibility for practice came from a faculty member at Northwest in this study, who described wanting to go visit local secondary schools more frequently, yet needed greater institutional support in order to do so. Higher education and secondary school leaders finding ways to support faculty visiting rural schools

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could have many positive effects. First, increasing faculty presence at rural schools could provide an avenue for rural students to interact with faculty within the familiar space of their school. University faculty could partner with secondary school faculty and find innovative ways to provide workshops, such as university faculty guest lecturing or offering insights into different majors at the institution. Transversely, high schools should consider strategically coordinating visits to both rural-serving community colleges and universities to provide exposure and insight into higher education. Two student participants in this study felt exposure to higher education during secondary school was particularly important for increasing access to higher education for rural students of color. One idea for partnerships between rural schools and higher education would be to annually hold a coordinated day for rural students to attend their local colleges and experience life for a day on campus. Activities during this day could include those that expose rural students to academic and nonacademic aspects of campus, such as visiting college-level courses, having lunch on campus with college students who identify as coming from a rural area, and having the opportunity to attend office hours with a professor.

Several participants in this study managed transition and support programs at the college level for underrepresented students; however, no solely rural-focused transition nor support programs were identified by participants. Rural-serving institutions are presented with a unique opportunity to lead designs for transition programs for rural students that unite rural students, families, schools, and communities. Findings from this study demonstrate that increasing college partnerships and initiatives with the most remote and rural schools in their regions could not only increase rural college access, but could also be a strategic way to support rural underrepresented students in successfully pursuing and obtaining a postsecondary degree or credential.

This study found participants contended with increasing diversity in both secondary and higher education. These participants also managed heavy workloads and took on strenuous labor to support people of color both in the community and on campus, particularly the women of color in this study. Rural-serving secondary, higher education, and community stakeholders should work to ameliorate campus environments to first identify and recognize the distribution of labor done by staff and students of color on their campuses. Stakeholders should implement assessment tools, such as surveys, to monitor climate and culture from institutional, community, and regional lenses. Importantly, institutions and people in positions of power at all levels should work to engage their diverse communities in a critical approach focused on the intersection of race, rurality, and socioeconomic status.

Regularly collecting information and data about rural marginalized populations is an important first step; however, rural-serving institutions must work to redistribute the labor experienced by people of color on their campuses. Brandon, an Indigenous staff member, offered that to better center Indigenous people and BIPOC communities in higher education, rural-serving institutions should institutionalize educational practices that teach staff and faculty from a culturally relevant lens about resources and supports to assist these students. Essentially, campuses should do more than create statements of inclusivity, and they should actually work to better understand marginalized populations and implement practices and procedures supportive of those populations.

Finally, participants described rural-serving education institutions in this study described as being extremely innovative organizations; although they faced many challenges, their resiliency and strength was something to be admired. In a world that does not center the

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experiences of rural spaces, rural-serving education must continue to push back on structures and systems that contribute to the erasure of rural America.

Conclusion

The late Mike Rose (2014) provided the following reminder: "A good education helps us make sense of the world and find our way in it" (p. 33). Rurality has long not been acknowledged in conversations about what makes a good education in *rural America*. As a researcher whose identity is deeply rooted in rural spaces, this dissertation reminded me how important it is for all of us to more closely acquaint our perspectives with the story of college-going in rural America, and what that means for the future of this country. There is nothing inherently wrong with rural America, rather the challenge exists in the way rurality is perceived and how structures and systems have forced deficit solutions and nonrural approaches on rural educators. In this deep exploration of one area of the United States, this study found many deeply dedicated community members who went above and beyond expectations because they believed rural communities matter and deserve better. Part of deserving better includes allowing rural spaces to make their educational spaces rural focused so they can help their people make sense of *their* world.

Appendix A: Nonstudent Recruitment Script

SUBJECT: Participation in Rural Education Research Study

Dear (Prospective Participant Name),

My name is Sabrina Klein, and I am a graduate student researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles. I am conducting a research study about the rural college-going pipeline, in order to improve educational outcomes for rural students and rural communities. I am seeking participants who identify with at least **one of the following**:

1. Hold a position at an educational organization within the region
2. Serve on an education board or coordinating board as a part of their current position
3. Hold an elected position whose duties include postsecondary access or attainment

I am emailing to ask for one to two hours of your time to participate in a one-on-one interview for this research project. Participation is completely voluntary, and your answers will be confidential. If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email within one week, and an interview date and location will be scheduled.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at xxxxx@ucla.edu

Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Sabrina Klein, MA
PhD Candidate, UCLA

Appendix B: Nonstudent Interview Protocol

Interview Context and Information
Introduction
Discuss purpose of study & interview
Distribute and collect consent form
Ask permission to record interview

Welcoming Comments
First, I'd like to thank you for meeting with me today. My name is Sabrina Klein, and I am a graduate student researcher at UCLA. The purpose of this study is to explore the rural college-going pipeline, including higher education actors and organizations within that field, the internal and external forces that shape and define the college-going pipeline, in order to improve educational outcomes for rural students. Our interview today is to help gain knowledge about your personal and professional experiences related to the college-going process in your region. Please feel free to share whatever you wish during this interview. If you would rather not respond to a particular question, simply say "I pass".

At any time, you may excuse yourself at any time. I previously emailed a consent form that asked for your permission to participate in this study. I will give you a moment to review the information on the form and confirm that you are interested in participating. I also ask for your permission to record the interview and to take notes during our dialogue. In order to protect your real name and identification, I will transcribe the dialogue and removing any identifying information. Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview Questions
Background & Context
What is your name, what organization do you work for, and what is your role within the organization?
Are you from this region?
Did you attend college in this area? What was your experience like?
How long have you been with this organization?
What are the main goals of your position and role?

What is the role of higher education within a geographical region?
How would you describe the experience of going to college in this region?
Step by step, please describe the path to obtaining a 2- or 4-year degree in this region.
What is your role, and your organization's role in the college-going process?
What motivates or deters students from pursuing and obtaining a degree?
What are the educational issues that students face in this region? What issues do underrepresented students face, (i.e., first-generation, Students of Color, working-class and poor, etc.)
In your opinion, what are the main barriers that keep students from pursuing postsecondary education?

In what ways and to what extent do the actors and organizations identify and address regional educational and economic needs?
What challenges do these communities face?
What does the regional economy look like?

How do the actor's goals compare or contrast with their institution's goals or mission?
What is the role of education in your region?
What are your goals? Do you feel like those goals align with your institution's goals?

Who are the key educational actors and organizations within that region?
Who are the key organizations and actors in the local/regional college-going process?
What have been areas of success that you have experienced in your organization and your role?
How does your organization address college access and attainment regionally?
How does work get translated to staff who are on the ground? (ADMIN ONLY)

How often do regional institutions work with other institutions on access issues?
What is your organization's relationship to other organizations that are a part of the college-going process?
In what ways do you/your institution collaborate with other institutions or organizations?
How can your organization and other education organizations regionally overcome these challenges?

What is the relevant history of relationships between these institutions and other institutions in the area?
What successes have you witnessed? What challenges are present?
What are the strengths of the region and its communities?
Describe your organization's relationship with state and federal politicians and law makers.

Is there anything I did not ask about that you want to share regarding your experiences, your work, your organization, the region, and the process or people involved?

After the Interview
Thank them for their time
Turn off the recording
Reassure them of the confidentiality
Ask if they have any questions

Appendix C: Student Recruitment Script

Dear (Prospective Participant Name),

My name is Sabrina Klein, and I am a graduate student researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles. I am conducting a research study about the experience of growing up in a rural area and going to college to help more rural students have the opportunity to attend college in the United States. Participants who participate in the study will be provided with a $25 Amazon gift card for their time.

I am seeking students who meet **all of the following criteria**:
1. Are at least 18 years of age
2. Attended high school in the region
3. Are currently enrolled full-time at either at MVCC or Northwest University.

Eligible participants will be compensated for their time after participating in the study with a $25 Amazon gift card. Participation is completely voluntary, and your answers will be confidential. Participation in this study requires one to two hours of your time to participate in a one-on-one interview via Zoom for this research project. If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email within one week, and an interview date and time will be scheduled.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at xxxxx@ucla.edu

Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Sabrina Klein, MA
PhD Candidate, UCLA

Appendix D: Student Interview Protocol

Interview Context and Information
Introduction
Discuss purpose of study & interview
Distribute and collect consent form
Ask permission to record interview

Welcoming Comments
First, I'd like to thank you for meeting with me today. My name is Sabrina Klein, and I am a graduate student researcher at UCLA. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of going to college in a rural area, particularly for students who are from that area, in order to help more students in rural regions have the opportunity to attend college. Our interview today is to help gain knowledge about your experiences related to the college-going process in this area. Please feel free to share whatever you wish during this interview. If you would rather not respond to a particular question, simply say "I pass".

At any time, you may excuse yourself at any time. I previously emailed a consent form that asked for your permission to participate in this study. I will give you a moment to review the information on the form and confirm that you are interested in participating. I also ask for your permission to record the interview and to take notes during our dialogue. In order to protect your real name and identification, I will transcribe the dialogue and removing any identifying information. Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview Questions
Background & Context
What is your name?
What college do you attend?
What is your major?
Where did you go to high school?

What is the role of higher education within a geographical region?
Describe your journey to college.
What are the educational issues that students like you face in this area?
In your opinion, what are the main barriers that keep students from pursuing postsecondary education?

In what ways and to what extent do the actors and organizations identify and address regional educational and economic needs?
What challenges does your community face?
What does the local economy here look like?

How do the actor's goals compare or contrast with their institution's goals or mission?
What do you think the role of education in this area is?
What are your goals? Do you feel like those goals align the college you attend?

Who are the key educational actors and organizations within that region?
Who would you suggest students reach out to for help navigating the college process?
When you were in high school, did anyone help you navigate your options for higher education?

How often do regional institutions work with other institutions on access issues?
FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ONLY:
Will you transfer to the university? How has that experience been so far?

Is there anything I did not ask about that you want to share regarding your experiences, your community, the region, and the process or people involved?

After the Interview
Thank them for their time
Turn off the recording
Reassure them of the confidentiality
Tell them about the gift card
Ask if they have any questions

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