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Rural Students on College Enrollment: Perceptions of Influence Surrounding College Choice

Lucas M. Simmons
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Rural Students on College Enrollment: Perceptions of Influence Surrounding College Choice

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

Lucas M. Simmons
University of Central Arkansas
Bachelor of Science in Education, 2007
University of Arkansas
Master of Education in Higher Education, 2014

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University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Michael T. Miller, Ed.D.
Dissertation Director

Michael S. Hevel, Ph.D.
Committee Member

G. David Gearhart, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the community, personal experiences, and life events of individuals from rural Arkansas communities in developing their decisions to attend college and how the community impacted their successful enrollment at the University of Arkansas. Specifically, the study set out to explore how rural communities were perceived to influence college enrollment decisions and choices in degree selection. Although situated at one case study institution, the University of Arkansas, the findings have importance for all rural students and communities, and ultimately public policy and institutional behaviors. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to describe how students from rural Arkansas communities developed their decisions to attend college.

A case study research approach was utilized through qualitative methodology and grounded in the conceptualization of community expectancy incorporating social, cultural, and human capital lenses. The Model of Community Expectancy was utilized to explore how the 7 rural interview participants' individual community interacted with and influenced college enrollment decisions through learned behaviors, personal identity, beliefs, and actions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to explore how rural student enrollment decisions are shaped by the communities from which they come.

Study findings identified a number of variables influencing rural student decisions in seeking college enrollment, including the role of family, community motivations, interactions within the high school setting, and through formal and informal community interactions.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. Without your love, sacrifice, and support, I would not be the person, father, husband, and son that I am today. I am indebted to you for bringing my light into the world, tolerating my persistent desire to be everywhere, involved in everything, and instilling an unwavering persistence. The challenges we have overcome together are lessons that cannot be taught in a schoolhouse and better reserved to be used as examples from the pulpit. Often overwhelming, I know I will never be given less in life than what is deserved, and never more than I can overcome.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Andrea L. Williams, for playing the role of mother and father as a single parent. You fostered in me my faith, a passion for life, my work ethic, the love of education, to question the world we live in, and have fostered in me a ceaseless desire to help those in need however I can. You provided a humbleness that let me know it is ok to ask for help when needed and instilled in me what it means to have enough. Without you as my teacher and guide, I would have failed to see the opportunity in the world beyond the pasture and dirt road. You deserve more love than I can provide, but know my heart overflows.

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Candice Ray Simmons. You are my best friend, the mother of our children, and a shining example of the power of persistence. Without you I would be nothing, but together I know we can do anything. I love you beyond measure and would not have become the man I am today without your understanding and endless support of whatever endeavor I pursue. Your love fuels my everything and I know that with you by my side I have no opportunity to be empty of support, life, or love.

I dedicate this to my sons, Jack Flanigan and Leighton Finn. Your love is more than I could ever desire and only compares to the warmth on my shoulders on a sunny day. Without

you I would be empty. Your existence fills a void and fosters a love that is immeasurable. I promise to always be a father that is present, challenges your thoughts, constantly teaches, and that provides an example of what it means to overcome adversity in the face of any obstacle. Please know that I am your number one advocate. You have the ability to be as successful in life as you choose to be, but it is not an option. You are the narrator and artist of what your life will become. Use your voice to lead and your individual uniqueness to paint the canvas of your life to be. I challenge you to always overdeliver and never make a promise that cannot be kept. Whatever you become, be a good one. I love you.

I dedicate this dissertation to you my children, my family, my friends, and to those that choose to empower the world for the better instead of tear down. I dedicate this to my grandmother who exemplified the importance of always looking up to others and the value in seeing around a problem. I dedicate this to my grandfather who instilled grit, taught me the power of words, the value of work, and that our mind is the most powerful tool we can possess. To those that doubted my ability, know that your condescension further proves my worth and confirms the value you hold within my existence.

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Chapter I: Introduction of the Study

A. Context of the Problem

Rural students face a litany of obstacles that can influence their pursuit of an education past secondary school. Despite obstacles that might stand in their paths, rural students tend to graduate high school at a higher rate than those from suburban or urban areas of the United States, but choose to pursue college at rates well lower than their peers (Lumina Foundation Focus, 2019). Research has identified barriers hindering college entrance for rural students including the possibility of having been provided weak academic preparation in secondary school, being geographically isolated, and having lessened educational aspirations about college opportunities (Guiffrida, 2008; NCES, 2014).

As poverty is more widespread in rural areas, students who are geographically isolated are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and less likely to attend a college further from home due to financial issues (Irvin et al., 2011; Hillman, 2016). Cultural traits, learned value systems, local economies, connections to college campuses and parental influence are all barriers that can negatively affect rural student college thinking, including aspiration, enrollment, and ultimately, completion (Hektner, 1995; Turley, 2009; Agger et al. 2018; Hillman, 2016; Pascarella et al; 2004; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Byun et al., 2012b). Rural youth also have a higher possibility of being a first-generation college student, and this, in turn, can lead to a lack of understanding about how post-secondary education works and what opportunities might be possible (Byun, et al., 2012). And despite the need to support rural students entry to higher education, governmental policies have increasingly neglected rural school districts, students, and their families (Tieken, 2014).

Generalized misunderstanding of rural youth and student need has created an inequality of opportunity that ties students to the places from which they come and can shape their

understanding of the college going process (Morton et al., 2018). Rural local communities can play an exceptional role in shaping thoughts about attending college, possibly even more so than personal achievement or family expectations (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). This power of a local community emphasizes the need for scholars and policy makers to understand rural identity influence on college pursuit (Goldman, 2019). As many higher education institutions have not identified the rural student as a group needing special attention, there is a need to explore and better identify who these students are and what influenced those who successfully enrolled in college (Gettinger, 2019; Guiffrida, 2008). In Arkansas, educational attainment lags behind the national average in terms of high school and college completion. US News and World Report (2018) placed Arkansas 47th out of 50 in college readiness and 49th in educational attainment in higher education. Since 2011, Arkansas rural school enrollments have declined by 7%, with the Arkansas Delta region experiencing a 15% overall loss in student enrollment (Miller & Wheeler, 2021). These statistics illustrate the college entrance and attainment levels in Arkansas and are reflected in the state's record of only having 23% of adults in rural counties having an associate's, bachelor's or graduate or professional degree (Miller & Wheeler, 2021). These staggering deficits highlight the need to understand what hinders the rural student to move forward and why they might choose to not pursue higher education.

Therefore, the study will seek to describe how students from rural Arkansas communities developed their decisions to attend college.

B. Statement of the Purpose

The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the community and cultural experiences and elements of individuals from rural Arkansas that were perceived to have impacted their successful enrollment at the University of Arkansas. Specifically, the study set out

to explore how rural communities were perceived to influence college enrollment decisions and choices in degree selection. Although situated at one case study institution, the University of Arkansas, and in one mid-southern predominantly rural state, Arkansas, the findings have importance for all rural students and communities, and ultimately, public policy and institutional behaviors.

Ruiz and Perna (2017) stressed that research about college going needs to include the experiences of rural students. Conversations and research about rural America must include consideration of community, and rural student interactions with community must be considered in future research about this population.

C. Statement of Research Questions

1. How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their personal experiences that prompted their enrollment at the University of Arkansas?
2. How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their interactions, relationships, and experiences with immediate and extended family in making the decision to enroll at the University of Arkansas?
3. How did college students from rural Arkansas describe the influence of their communities on their decision to attend college generally, and the University of Arkansas specifically?
4. What recommendations did college students from rural Arkansas have for the better recruitment of rural college students to the University of Arkansas?

D. Definition of Terms

Barrier: Anything that impedes the path to enrollment, during the pursuit of a degree, or that negates access to opportunity to obtain a college degree (Miller et al., p.1, 2015).

College: The terms “college,” “post-secondary education,” and “institutions of higher education” are all used interchangeably throughout the study to highlight the differences between the secondary setting and postsecondary setting.

College Access: College Access refers to the ways in which students are provided equitable opportunity in pursuit of a post-secondary education. Specifically, it refers to the ability of students to enroll in a post-secondary educational institution (Tierney & Cloyar, 2006)

College Choice: The process a student experiences in making the decision to attend college, including decisions regarding attending college as well as the decision of where to attend college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

First-Generation College Student: An undergraduate student whose parents have never enrolled or completed post-secondary education, including either a two- or four-year institution (Byun et al., 2012).

Rural: According to the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS), rural is defined as any county in the United States that is not considered metropolitan in nature. This means that no urban or suburban areas exist within an individual county that contains a population of more than 49,999 residents (USDA, 2012). For the purpose of this study, Arkansas counties with populations under 15,000 will be the targeted home regions for the study.

E. Assumptions of the Study

1. Students from rural Arkansas have unique experiences that are noticeably different from those individuals from urban or suburban areas. These differences might relate to the quality of formal education, exposure to individuals from different backgrounds, and cohesiveness of a community.

2. In a rural context, there is the possibility of more direct contact between individuals and a possible stronger sense of community.
3. Students from rural backgrounds who participate in the study were able to differentiate their unique experiences in a distinct way, recognizing that these experiences may have set them apart from other students.
4. Qualitative research was an effective way to obtain perceptions of students from rural backgrounds, and these perceptions and memories can be accurately recalled during data collection.

F. Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

1. The study was limited to one institution, the University of Arkansas, which is a research intensive institution classified as Research 1 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Therefore, study results were limited to the case study institution and should not be generalized to other institutions.
2. Due to the study following a descriptive process of narrative inquiry, the qualitative research explored was not generalizable to an overall population of rural students.
3. Potential biases may have been introduced by the researcher without knowledge of the incident.
4. Community expectancy can be measured by numerous variables within the study. The term community was used through the study to provide a lens in which to view rural life. Due to the study focusing on rural areas specific to the State of Arkansas, further research would be needed to pinpoint specific issues within each rural community for more accurate context.

G. Importance of the Study

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), “Educational attainment is highly correlated with measures of regional economic prosperity. Rural counties with the lowest levels of educational attainment face higher poverty, child poverty, unemployment, and population loss than other rural counties” (USDA, p.5, 2012). Without a comprehensive understanding that an education beyond the secondary system is an attainable choice, students in rural areas will continue to be placed in a system that does not seem to acknowledge them as an underserved demographic in the college setting. This is particularly true for students from rural areas in the State of Arkansas.

In 2013, only 51.4% of students who graduated high school in Arkansas chose to enter some form of postsecondary education, compared to the US average of 66% (Miller & Moon, 2017). Institutions of higher education need to develop a better understanding of how rural Arkansas students perceive and navigate the possibility of entering post-secondary education. The lived experience of being rural suggests that an underlying barrier entangles students in a complexity of issues that negatively influence college aspiration, entrance, and completion. In 2014, only 81% of rural Arkansan’s had a high school diploma and only 20.7% had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher (Miller & Moon, 2017). In the same year, Arkansas ranked in the top five states with the highest average poverty rates at 19.2% and 27.7% for children under the age of 18 (Moon & Miller, 2017). These statistics paint a picture of the inequitable foundation that rural students face when forming the decision to pursue college opportunity. These statistics also prompt a needed discussion of policy initiatives and highlights the need to explore rural student experiences in Arkansas that promote or hinder college enrollment.

In 2015, the State of Arkansas indicated that 42% of the total population of the state is considered to live within a rural county compared to 15% of the rest of the United States (Miller & Moon, 2017). Students who live in rural Arkansas counties are surrounded by the dominant industries focused in forestry, manufacturing, and agriculture; all industries with different types of training and educational needs, and often practiced in remote environments that do not illustrate the immediate value of further education. Young people in rural places often do not have the ability to see the value of education on a daily basis simply because work is spread out over vast geographic areas.

Without often understanding the need for further education, rural students often have a lowered educational aspiration, a possible contributing factor to Arkansas' 17.5% drop in manufacturing employment between 2007-2015 and why the average earnings in rural areas average 85% of what their urban counterparts averaged in 2014 (Miller & Moon, 2017).

For Arkansas, falling birthrates indicate the possibility for a future decrease in a skilled labor force, but also a projected further drop in college going rates. The decline in birthrates projection is that in 2022 Arkansas will have 4,000 fewer students enrolled in Kindergarten classes than 10th grade (Gates, 2019). To further incentivize encouraging the need to reach rural students to help fill these gaps, it is projected that by 2031 Arkansas will only graduate 29,500 high school students, a drop from 32,600 seniors projected to graduate in 2025 (Knocking at the College Door, 2019).

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that in the fall 2018 semester the overall US college enrollment rates from 2-year and 4-year institutions decreased from the previous year. In Arkansas the college enrollment rates dropped by more than 9,000 students from fall 2016-fall 2018 semesters (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

These numbers reflect an unmet opportunity for students and the nation, but also the need to address specific areas of oversight for those leaving the secondary education system without college going aspirations or the knowledge of how to move forward. To increase post-secondary access and economic prosperity in Arkansas, new State level policies should focus on prioritizing rural student initiatives to help shape and guide college going decisions. Creation of such programs would enable institutions of higher education to better prepare for helping rural students transition to the college setting, and help to better understand how rural student decisions are influenced by the places from which they come. Without an increased focus in promoting college opportunities to rural Arkansas youth, State and Federal entities might miss future growth and economic opportunity while allowing college going rates further decline.

H. Conceptual Framework of the Study

The proposed study was grounded in the conceptualization of community expectancy, which incorporates social, cultural, and human capital lenses. The Model of Community Expectancy utilizes key aspects of the social capital lens to help explore how a student's individual environment interacts with and influences their learned behaviors, personal identity, beliefs, and actions (Miller & Deggs, 2012). The model brings to the forefront the importance of how internal and external influences that surround social and cultural capital help shape an individual's environment and guides personal aspiration toward college enrollment, as concluded by Derden (2011). The model argues that all actions of involved community agents, such as family, friends, teachers, neighbors, religious affiliations, community associations, and any other interacting elements within their community meld to form individual outlooks of the world, while binding them to the overall group (Miller & Deggs, 2012). Common educational attainment levels of the community and parents also influence community expectancy, as these

learned levels of education play a key role in guiding thought (Derden, 2011). Through this model, social, cultural, and economic capital lenses are highlighted to help explore the role that one's individual community plays in influencing the behavior of its members to help provide an overall lens in which to better understand rural student perceptions and overall expectations of college going processes.

Coleman (1988) discussed social capital as an intersection of how expectations of the family, unspoken expectations, personal obligations, and learned community norms influence and shape college going decisions. Cultural capital refers to the skills and knowledge that students gain from their individual environment and personal network that influences those decisions. Bourdieu (1986) characterized cultural capital as things that influence an individual's culture and learned values, such as, access to and ownership of educational resources, books, knowing others with college degrees and/or qualifications, access to musical instruments, technological products, and art. Bourdieu (1986) emphasized that family is a key tenant in promoting academic success for students and is a direct reflection of the level of social and cultural capital within a student's home environment. For the purpose of this study, the description of home environment extends to that which exists in the rural community and the rural school, and is consistent with other researchers, such as Tolliver (2020).

For rural students, the model of community expectancy helps to explore how social, cultural, and economic capital influences rural student decisions. The model helps to bring to attention the ways in which students consider what options might be available to them in choosing to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities. Community expectancy assumes that local community values and norms are known formally and informally by all members of the area. The norms and values of the given area guide thought and have been created

generationally, then passed throughout the community through family and community socialization in settings, such as; Church, school, local cafés, community programs (Deggs & Miller, 2011). These learned norms guide the expectations and value that each student places on education (e.g. the overall value of a high school diploma, college degree, or vocational certificate), employment (e.g. continue running the family farm or pursue a degree that influences its future), financial need (e.g. immediate income compared to future potential earnings), acceptance of diversity (e.g. acceptance of other races, ethnicity, homosexuality), political stance, religious beliefs, and otherwise. Swidler (1986) discussed these norms as an individual's cultural toolkit in which they can pull personal stories, rituals, and understanding from. The toolkit enables students to better move forward, but also may hinder their growth toward college opportunity if an unknown obstacle is presented in, or outside of the community. This reflects Coleman's (1988) findings that suggested an individual's move to another community may affect their social capital and understanding of how to navigate individual situations based on new learned skills and changes in expectation. The toolkit represents cultural understandings and the value that community plays in guiding thought. Understanding how individual communities guide student expectations is exceptionally important within the rural setting and can provide a host of information for researchers within higher education and beyond.

College going decisions are a choice of the individual student, but through the lens of community expectancy researchers can better understand how individual decisions are influenced by their community. The decision to pursue college as an option does not necessarily mean that success will be granted through completion. Success to the individual student may be defined differently and success simply meaning applying entering, or participating, not

necessarily graduating with a degree or other credential. Community expectancy could also influence the type of education sought. As many rural students are encouraged to work in their local areas by families, they may seek vocational training that prepares them to continue a trade within the community instead of the traditional four-year degree.

Questions that surround social, cultural, economic, and human capital influences could refer to questions that might influence individual thoughts of how and when to apply for college, how individual students view financial aid opportunities, and reasons connecting to faculty and staff on college campuses. With many rural students coming from first-generation college families, it is easy to understand why they may have smaller amounts of social and human capital, and why community expectations play such an important role in helping shape college aspiration and choice (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007).

Understanding that both social and cultural capital rely on some foundation of economic capital, it is important to consider the expectation of value and cost that a community might place on a college degree. This also means that the benefits surrounding a return on initial investment when choosing to pursue an education past the secondary setting are considered within the context of real and opportunity costs (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). These influences reflect community values and can help or hinder the rural student's decision to pursue college. Realizing that rural students often come from low-socioeconomic and underserved areas helps to highlight why many rural students tend to enter college with low social and cultural capital, and at a disadvantage, compared to other groups of students (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Due to these circumstances it is exceptionally important for those working with college students to take into account the learned expectations of the students' home community and how new norms may need to be created in order to help move the student forward.

As social, cultural, and human capital connect as a guide in community expectancy theory (Deggs & Miller, 2018), the study allowed the researcher to distinguish between various influences that guide rural student experiences and allows for context specific collection of information and a deeper exploration of rural student experiences in Arkansas. The researcher hopes to better understand how students lived experiences and rural backgrounds foster college going decisions and support individual student success, as well as, the role of the rural community in shaping college as an opportunity to further educational endeavors.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Through an exploration of social and cultural constructs, the chapter provides an overview of research surrounding rural student decision-making about attending college, and the social and human capitals that might influence that decision. The chapter begins with an overview of the literature on rural students, and then covers the areas of college decision-making, the influence of rural identity and parental support, predictors of influence, and rural perceptions of college opportunities. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

The review of literature sought to include historical understandings of college going models from the past 70 years. The review of literature began with interests surrounding college access barriers for students attempting college enrollment. As a result, the exploration led into literature that focused on rural underserved student populations and factors that often help or hinder the pursuit of a college degree. Literature for the study was primarily reviewed from online resources, referred journal articles, and through subscriptions provided through the University of Arkansas Mullins Library. ProQuest, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar were mostly used in helping to identify and access literature throughout the process. Focused search terms to locate scholarly literature consisted of cultural capital, social capital, college choice, college access, higher education, retention, attrition, student success, and rural students. Recognizing prior research by Tolliver (2020) and Derden (2011), searches also focused on community expectancy, college going influences and multiple combinations of these terms throughout the exploratory phase starting in Fall 2020 throughout 2021.

A. An Overview of Rural America

Rural America is often described through a deficit lens by lacking the best qualities of a more urban or suburban society. Urbanormativity suggests that society sees the world through

the lens of an urban-centric mindset. This means that urban ways of life or its citizens are seen as normal while rural lifestyles and citizens are often seen as backward, deviant, or wrong (Crain & Newlin, 2021). Rural society has been described as unchanging, lacking innovation, and lacking creativity to move forward. Rural society has been described as desolate. The thought of a rural community might paint a picture in the minds of many as small town, a white church house, small rural schools, tractors, pickup trucks, and heard vernacular slang popularized from television or the popular media. Due to the connotations of being ‘less than,’ rural community needs seem to be an invisible prerogative to those that have not directly come into contact with its challenges or the reality that rural communities make up such a substantial portion of the US. In order to understand how rural communities, it is important to remember and use the voices and cultural viewpoints of people from these areas.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS), rural is defined as any county in the United States that is not considered metropolitan in nature (USDA, 2012). This means that no urban or suburban areas exist within an individual county that contains a population of more than 49,999 residents (USDA, 2012). According to the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, the rural definition is further explained as residential areas with less than 2,500 residents. Additionally, it provides a rural classification of three groups: Fringe (less than 5 miles from urbanized area), distant (5 to 25 miles from urbanized area), and remote (over 25 miles from urbanized area) (NCES, 2014). In the year 2000, the United States Census reported that out of every 10 Americans, 8 lived in urban or suburban areas, though this still left 56 million Americans residing in rural areas of the country. These numbers exceed “the total population of all but twenty-two of the world’s two hundred nation-states,” (pp. 21-23) essentially defining rural citizens as an underserved minority in the

United States (Brown et al., 2013). Subsequently, there are approximately 10 million rural American youth attending public schools (Showalter et al., 2014). These students are served by over 8,000 designated rural public-school districts (Provasnik et al., 2007). These numbers highlight rural communities and shows that there are more students in rural school districts than in the 85 largest US school districts combined (Showalter et al., 2019).

Despite the statistical reference of a population size, the definition of a rural community also has connotations for learned value systems and cultural traits that make individual communities unique. These shared community values guide thought and can help or hinder life goals, marriage, college aspirations, choice, and completion of a college degree, meaning that it is important to understand what the ‘rural’ mindset means (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Rural culture often consists of people living in small communities that have tight-knit social networks, learned value systems, deep seeded religious connections, and strong historical family ties to an area (Irvin, et al., 2010). These shared ties bind rural citizens to their home communities and often serves as an insulator from the outside world, including attending college and thinking differently about life outside of the community (Wright, 2012).

In the US it is estimated that 41 million adults live 25 miles or further away from any type of institution of higher education and that an estimated 3 million of these individuals have no access to internet (Hillman, 2016). These statistics paint a clear picture of unknown opportunity for rural community members and creates a barrier of isolation from the outside world. Further, it can foster a skepticism of value within rural communities that surrounds the importance of pursuing life, employment, or a college education outside of their rural community. The Lumina Foundation (2019) highlighted this by explaining that rural communities have higher rates of high school graduation than the national average. However,

rural students seek post-secondary education opportunities less often, attend college at lower rates, and are more likely to drop out compared to their urban counterparts due to a lack of financial understanding and access to college going information from outside of the home community (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018; Provasnik et. al., 2007). To better understand why such differences continue to set urban and rural life apart, a more in-depth understanding of the divide must take place.

Rural community members often make decisions about what their futures hold based on the knowledge learned from within their communities. Rural America can be a culture of itself and can carry common characteristics that place rural community members and students at a disadvantage. Rural community citizens are composed of higher average ages and lowered life expectancies compared to other areas often country. An example can be seen in Arkansas, where the average age of rural communities members are those 65 and older (Miller & Wheeler, 2021). This highlights the importance of older generations' uniqueness in rural communities as gatekeepers of knowledge and shared values conveyed to younger generations, but can also perpetuate marginalized feelings of the outside world for younger members of these rural communities (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Additionally, almost 80% of rural America is composed of very little variation in ethnic diversity and is made up of almost 80% White people alone (Lumina, 2019). This lack of difference highlights an inequity of cultural understanding and further defines rural communities, while also isolating community understanding of the outside world and further highlighting the rural urban divide. Rural community inequity also includes lower employment rates, higher poverty rates, higher rates of health related issues, higher infant mortality rates, declining populations, as well as weaker economies compared to urban or suburban areas (Cromartie et al., 2020). These concepts highlight life in rural America

and bring to the forefront a lack of inclusion in providing equitable and quality resources to a large majority of the population. To better understand the complexity of rural life it is imperative to understand how members of rural society view their circumstance and the role of the individual community in guiding aspirations for life of its citizens.

B. Research into College Going Decision-Making

During the first half of the 1900s, the United States placed a strong focus on educating rural Americans, yet barriers to high quality education and pathways to postsecondary education both varied and were inconsistent when looking at rural demographics (USDA, 2017). Prior to the 1950's, only 20% of American high school graduates made the decision to pursue higher education due to a variety of constraints (Kenzie et al., 2004). The introduction of the GI Bill during World War II provided an impetus to change college going rates and began to influence the perception of who, where, and how one could choose to attend college (Mettler, 2005). As the introduction of funding options became available to rural students the notion of pursuing advanced education was now an opportunity that previously seemed unattainable. College going attendance grew from 3.5 million to 11.5 million students between 1960 and 1979 (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). With the increase in student numbers choosing to pursue education past the secondary level came opportunity and a need to focus attention on how and why students decide to attend college, as well as, barriers that might hinder their ability to do so.

Focused research surrounding college access, barriers to entrance, and the decision to attend college for rural students began taking shape in the 1950's. Survey research conducted by Lipsett and Smith (1952) at the Rochester Institute of Technology focused on exploring how and when students begin to formulate decisions to attend college and what guides them in their thinking. Their study provided the groundwork in identifying parents as the primary source of

information for student decisions to pursue postsecondary education (Lipsett & Smith, 1952). Additionally, Lipsett and Smith's findings provided a further rationale to explore varying student demographic backgrounds influencing decisions to pursue postsecondary education.

As enrollments in the 1960's continued to increase, college going motivators and barriers of potential students encountered began to be further explored. Kerr (1962) focused on influences that guided college going decisions among seniors in rural Iowa high schools. His study included 1,000 youth and findings supported Lipsett and Smith's conclusion that parents were the primary guide for secondary students who decided to go to college. His findings identified almost 80% of high school seniors had already decided to further their education past high school prior to their senior year, and concluded that beyond parental influences factors that influenced the decision to attend college were advice from high school counselors, the prestige of an institution, practicality of attending, specific degree emphasis, the social atmosphere of the institution, and discussions with those who had already attended college (Kerr, 1962).

Growing enrollments across the United States prompted federal government intervention to help increase college access opportunities and encourage the pursuit of a college degree. The need for reliable and consistent information about college attendance requirements had become a priority. Research by Kerr (1962) had pinpointed inaccuracies of information unknowingly being shared by word of mouth. The misinformation did not provide a consistent strategy to guide perspective student and family decision-making when considering to pursue higher education. Because of this, decisions continued to be influenced by unregulated and uneducated thoughts about college. These findings would be later be a key piece in the creation of college choice theory that was incorporated into Perna's (2006) conceptual model.

Acknowledging that the cost of attendance was a motivating factor in college going decisions, the US Congress passed the 1965 Higher Education Act. This legislation provided some of the first overarching financial aid programs available to students to help eliminate the enrollment barrier of cost (Kinzie et al., 2004). The Act provided the foundation to better understand the historical framing of how issues surrounding college choice and access have historically been viewed. Without the legislation, equal access options to college opportunities for low income students might not have been offered and the groundwork for the Pell Grant program to be initiated would not have happened (Heller, 2002). Despite the financial incentive provided by the Act, many students were still not convinced that they were able to afford, value, and take part in the pursuit of higher education. Because of this, researchers sought alternative understandings of what influences guide student thought and action.

Bayer (1968) found that students who graduated from low income rural high schools had higher expectations of what life beyond high school had to offer them and the more likely decision to pursue college and complete a degree (Bayer, 1968). The survey data of 8,867 students found that the individual student's environment guide the decision to choose college attendance, but also in guiding the decision to complete a college degree. Using 38 psychological and demographic variables, the exploration highlighted how the individual characteristics helped to predict student direction in choosing to attend and complete college (Bayer, 1968). The study compared male and female student abilities and what personal characteristics influenced their decision to enter, persist, and complete a college degree. Implications from the study provided an increased motivation to further explore independent variables of students coming from different regions of the country, as well as school sizes, size of student hometowns, student and family mobility, and socioeconomic status (Bayer, 1968).

As college enrollments continued to grow, researchers sought to predict how the trend would affect future growth and how colleges might seek new types of students to attract. This thinking contributed to the development of the need to better understand how students' decisions in choosing a college influences their ability to be retained on a college campus through graduation. Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) explored freshmen students from rural community's retention rates at the University of Colorado. The research aim was to better understand what factors influenced the decision to complete a college degree at a four-year institution. Their findings revealed that despite rural students completing the high school credential, their individual student ability, and maneuvering through the college options, students from rural areas were found to be more overwhelmed and intimidated with the overall size and cost of four-year institutions compared to students from more urban areas (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Because of this, the authors speculated, many chose to either not continue to attend college at the end of the freshmen year or to not consider the larger institution as a benefit to their future growth. This was identified in their findings and showed consistently higher attrition rates for rural students compared to students from more populated or urban areas (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). Despite the higher attrition rates of rural students, the study found that students from rural areas were less likely to completely leave higher education compared to urban students and more likely to transfer to an institution that might fit them better (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). The findings provided researchers additional reasons to focus on studying motivating factors of what guides students in choosing the type of college to pursue and what other challenges might play a role in influencing college entrance and completion.

To better understand student decisions about going to college, researchers sought to identify the motivation and thought processes of potential students. Through a national sample of

ACT score data from 1,200 colleges and universities Munday (1976) found that students often aspired to attend colleges that were above and beyond their price range, such as private and Ivy League institutions. Despite student desire or ability, the study found that the overall cost of college attendance was the largest barrier to influence a student's decision in attempting to attend. His findings were consistent with Aylesworth and Bloom's (1972) findings of rural student attrition, revealing that the greatest influence of entrance was based on the ability to pay. His research concluded that students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds chose to attend lower cost schools based on cost alone and those from wealthier families were more likely to attend the institution of their liking, and for it to be more expensive, despite aspiration, desire, or educational ability (Munday, 1976). These findings provided the realization that student decisions to pursue higher education were not viewed as the same opportunity for all students and that barriers to access and completion were still present based on personal background and community characteristics.

Barriers surrounding college entrance became even more apparent in the 1980's as financial supports from the federal government were being outpaced by the rise in increased college costs, including tuition (Kinzie et al., 2004). As a result, the tuition increases created a further inability for many students to see college as an option, the ability to stay in school for those already attending, and also further limited prospective students' ability to choose the type of college and location that they would like to attend. This trend led to colleges experiencing lower enrollments of traditional aged students and the rise of the non-traditional student on their campuses (Chapman, 1981). This shift resulted in an increased need to further explore barriers that impeded the college decision making process and how to help students overcome these issues.

To help alleviate issues surrounding college enrollment, researchers began to further focus on better understanding how and when college aspiration is formed and how students make meaning of the overall college going process. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a model of college choice that explored the educational aspirations of students based on three distinct stages: predisposition, search and choice. The predisposition stage helped to explain how students' individual family backgrounds, activities pursued in high school, and interaction with peers influenced how they decided to pursue employment after high school or college. If a student decided to pursue college after high school they entered the search stage to explore their potential college options. Once the student decided to enter an institution, the choice stage would begin and students would decide what institutions meet their individual needs. These needs would be based on a variety of factors that surrounded financial aid, distance from home, type of program, services offered, etc. Knowing that students come from many differing types of backgrounds, their personal predispositions towards college influences their ability to choose and to succeed in college (Astin, 2010). The first stage could be of the most importance for rural students, as lessened amounts of community resources are thought to be provided to support students and families in rural high schools (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001).

Building on the works of Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) found that the most important factor in a student's decision to pursue college was the amount of support from their parents, followed by the parents level of education and their own level of high school achievement. High school achievement was found to be correlated with the amount and types of extracurricular activities students participated in and outside of the home community and a higher likelihood of college aspiration (Hossler et al, 1999). Through participation in extracurricular events students gained high amounts of cultural and social capital

that was believed to strengthen their knowledge of their community and support their understanding of the outside world (Deggs & Miller, 2011). Findings from the study suggested that students should be introduced to college going information in 8th-9th grades to help foster the predisposition stage proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) as an intervention to help guide college going decisions.

Understanding that student decisions to pursue higher education are not viewed as the same opportunity for all, and that barriers to access are reflected by individual students background characteristics, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) expanded the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model to include underserved and low SES students. Their study found that student background characteristics alone do not dictate decisions to pursue college. Findings from the study focused on connecting students to and improving college access opportunities early in a student's high school career, as well as, involving parents in the college planning process to better explain what it means for a student to be college ready. Through these practices parents and students would be better able to see the potential benefit of the college degree, help foster college aspiration at younger ages, and better understand the social and financial benefits that a college degree provides (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

Building on the work of Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), Rowan-Kenyon (2007) sought to further explore how college going decisions are made by students through an examination of how social and cultural capital affect college entry decisions. Her study added to college choice literature by recognizing differences in how nontraditional and traditional students explore their options in considering to pursue college as an option. Additionally, her findings showed that students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to delay college entrance that could hinder students from underserved areas to be provided the same types of cultural and social capital

needed in order to be successful outside of their home community. Her research concluded with a recommendation that more research was needed to develop “more complete proxies of social and cultural capital” (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007, p. 212).

Consistent with Rowan-Kenyon (2007), Perna (2006) found that students college going aspirations were influenced by the context of the area in which they lived. Perna (2006) proposed a conceptual model of student college going decisions that blended prior models of sociological, human capital, and economic theories. Through the theoretical lenses of human capital, social capital, cultural capital, habitus, and organizational context, Perna’s (2006) model enabled researchers to see an overarching picture of what influences college going as a layered progression. As students have varying perspectives that influence their decision to attend college, the model allows for exploration of how individual personal beliefs, family, community and culture influence college decisions. Through this perspective, Perna’s (2006) model incorporated small pieces of Chapman’s (1981) and Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) models to better provide a holistic lens in which to view how students formulate college going decisions.

Despite the attention provided to better understanding the influences of college going decisions, no one model was found to specifically serve rural students and address their unique perspectives in the decision to pursue college as an post high school option.

C. Influence of Rural Identity and Parental Support

Rural students can have exceptionally strong feelings tied to their rural identity and community that influences their decision when considering leaving their family and home area to pursue college (Agger et al., 2018). With 45% of public-school students in the US coming from moderate to high poverty level school districts, and with rural students having the characteristics of often being geographically isolated, it is important to look at how parental and community

support influences student aspirations, enrollment decisions, and choice (Alliance for Excellence, 2010).

Recent literature has explored how family and place influence rural youths' aspiration to pursue college enrollment (Agger et al., 2018). The Agger study focused on student perceptions of family and where they are from, and how this might influence aspirational decisions in choosing to attend college. The study's findings focused on exploring how family and rural community structures influence college enrollment. The study found that rural student's college going aspirations were influenced by their rural home location and family connections, as well as their gender (Agger et al., 2018). The study allowed researchers to explore the choice perspective of Perna's (2006) model, and highlighted the importance of habitus and the role of community in a student's decision to pursue college.

Grounded in social capital theory, the study highlighted how rural identity shaped college going aspirations differently for men and women based on perceived parental expectations (Agger et al. 2018). The findings were that female college going aspirations were driven by educational expectations of family to expand their educational abilities beyond their location. The finding was important because they revealed that males were more likely to not seek college enrollment if readily available employment opportunities were in their home regions, despite parental expectations. The findings provided a need to develop a clearer view of how parents and geographic location combined to influence rural students experience in pursuing college.

Roscigno and Crowley (2001) explored how the rural identity of "place" shaped opportunity in receiving college going resources for families and schools. Using the National Education Longitudinal Survey and Common Core Data Sets, their study found that rural areas often receive lessened amounts of resources to support students and families compared to urban

areas (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Their findings revealed that rural districts often provide students and families a disadvantage in academic resources and preparation for college enrollment by not explaining financial aid opportunities or by not sharing college opportunities. In turn, the missed opportunity shapes rural student college going perspective and can negatively influence student and family experiences in making the decision to attend college (Hektner, 1995).

Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) found that parental involvement is important for helping to shape college going aspirations, but this involvement differed across socioeconomic status in how it impacts rural student college going decisions. Their research used case studies to explore the relationship between parental involvement and eventual student enrollment in college. Using case studies from 15 different high schools, their findings showed that parents across all socioeconomic levels discussed the possibility of attending college and educational attainment past high school with their student (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Despite showing support for college enrollment, the study found that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds did not always have the necessary college going background information to help guide their student through selection, enrollment, and financial aid processes (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Without an understanding of potential ways to fund a college degree, rural students and families may be further disadvantaged by not knowing who or where to turn for help.

Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) also indicated that parental involvement was found to be a key influence in fostering college going aspiration, institutional choice, and completion for rural students. The study identified that students from lower socioeconomic areas, with lower resourced schools, were found to be more likely to share in the projected and actual cost of attendance with their parents as well as having more financial burden compared to their peers

from more affluent and better resourced districts (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Parents from lower resourced areas were often less likely to attend academic and extracurricular events, leading to lowered college going knowledge and student support (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). These findings highlighted the importance of parental support for rural students in helping to shape college going aspirations and choice. Further research should be conducted to explore how misinformation from rural parents affect student experiences in their pursuit of higher education.

Many families are weary of letting their children leave their home communities due to the thoughts of changing a family's dynamic. The idea of encouraging their best and brightest students to leave an area with the potential to not return (out-migration) is sometimes discussed in social science literature and called 'brain drain' (Carr & Kefalas, 2000). Without a better understanding of rural student experiences and expectations, barriers such as parental fear of not returning 'home' after college may well continue to present a challenge for rural students.

Estes et al. (2016) suggested that families and communities in rural areas worry about student decisions to pursue college and are concerned that they might not return. The quantitative exploration of a Mid-West Land Grant College explored 1,659 attendance patterns of undergraduate students in a college of agricultural, food, and life sciences to see if students from rural areas returned to their home communities after college. Additionally, the study sought to see if their college major and home community impacted their decisions (Estes et al., 2016). The study's finding indicated that only 40% of students returned to rural areas 6 to 7 years following college graduation (Estes, et al., 2016). The study's findings highlighted that rural parents have a valid reason to think that their children might not return to their home communities. The study provided recommendations for future research to better explore the influences of students who choose to return to their home communities for career opportunities, family commitments, or

related reasons. The study concluded that, “without availability of sufficient high-skill jobs, rural communities will most likely continue to export their most academically-talented students to metropolitan areas, while failing to attract significant numbers of metropolitan graduates” (p. 12). The study added to college going research by highlighting the importance of rural places and by acknowledging the need for targeted communications to rural areas surrounding college options that reflect the industry and employment opportunities in rural areas.

D. Influence of Financial Understanding and Additional Support

Regardless of status and type of parental support, family and cultural values influence rural students’ identity and their decision to pursue college. Apparent in this relationship is that rural identity can influence college going based on an inequality of opportunity. This disadvantage perpetuates college going decisions and highlights reasons for policy creation aimed toward raising rural student’s college aspirations. Despite the inequality, rural student support and lack of cultural capital has been perpetuated beyond that of just the family (Hillman, 2016; Turley, 2009). In the 2011-2012 academic year, more than 1.75 million students who qualified for federal Pell Grant funding did not file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (Miller et.al., pp. 14, 2014). As a policy created with the intent of leveling the access gap, this statistic provides reasons to further explore how college going information is shared with students and how it can contribute to aiding rural student college aspirations.

Lichter and Roscigno (2003) explained that rural students who have the financial opportunity to consider college as an option often have lower participation rates once admitted. Socioeconomic status was found to have a larger negative effect on college enrollment for rural students compared to their urban and suburban peers (Lichter & Roscigno, 2003). The inability to pay for additional extracurricular events, lack of college going resources, unknown

expectations, and financial understanding helps to highlight the rural disadvantage and to further explain why students from rural areas are more likely to pursue attendance at a community college instead of a four-year college based on cost alone (Koicich, 2014). As rural communities are less likely to have four-year colleges nearby, students in these rural communities are less likely or apt to have casual or formal interactions with higher education, leading to a lessened ability to understand them or their processes (Hillman, 2016).

Perna (2005) found that disadvantaged students used more cultural capital in aspiring to attend and complete the college process, and found students did not always receive complete or accurate firsthand information. Her study found that students from underserved demographics who choose to attend college often do so without a full understanding of the resources available to them (Perna, 2005). These findings were further reflected in Provasnik et al.'s (2007) conclusion that rural students are disadvantaged when pursuing college as an option, due to lack of financial understanding and access of current college resources. Additionally, the findings revealed that only 27% of students from rural areas in the Southern US were provided college going resources in preparation to attend college, compared to 37% of their urban and suburban peers (Provasnik et al., 2007). These numbers reflect a barrier that influences opportunity to attend college for rural students and further highlights a difference for Southern rural student's college going decision-making processes that should be further explored.

Financial concerns can be a daunting task for rural students and their families who have little experience with the overall life value of obtaining a college education. Many low-income and first-generation college student families eliminate the option of specific colleges based on cost alone, before applying, or considering possible financial aid opportunities that could influence college going aspirations (Koicich, 2014; Provasnik, 2007). For low income and rural

students and families, the lack of personal understanding surrounding funding options is one of the greatest barriers influencing college aspiration for rural families (Lichter & Roscigno, 2003).

Perna (2006b) applied her (2006a) conceptual model to better understand how financial aid and the overall price of college influences student's college related behaviors. Her study's findings highlighted the ways in which different socioeconomic groups sought and utilized information when considering college opportunities. She concluded that a disconnect exists between the availability of college information surrounding financial aid opportunity and the actual cost of attendance for underrepresented groups (Perna, 2006a). Through the lens of economic theory and human capital, she explored how her models differing layers helped to influence student thoughts surrounding financial aid and the overall effect on enrollment. Her conclusion for policy makers and colleges admissions teams was to continue finding ways to inform students and families about the availability of financial aid resources (Perna, 2006a). The study's conclusion highlighted the accessibility gap and that must be met for students where they are in relation to the contextual model to ensure that differing groups receive information in a manner that is appropriate and necessary to guiding college aspiration, choice, as well as, college completion (Perna, 2006a). She found that, although information is available online, at schools, and through college information nights, "making information available is inadequate," (p. 1632) especially those from underserved, low socioeconomic, and first-generation college student backgrounds (Perna, 2006a).

Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna (2009) found that students primarily receive information about college opportunity from high school counselors and teachers in their school districts in 9th-11th grade. Through utilization of a conceptual case study methodology, the study sought to better understand what 9th-11th grade students know about college opportunities and how they

learned about it (Bell et al., 2009). The study highlighted the differences in age of the students, variation in financial backgrounds of the school district, and the state in which the students resided. The study found that students learned about college processes and financial aid opportunities through the internet, posters, advertisements, family, and friends (Bell et al., 2009). The findings highlighted that inconsistent messaging for students was often shared unknowingly and the information was not known to be specifically useful in accessing college opportunity for rural students. Although the intentions were sincere, the resulting communications were often “unfiltered, variable, and in some cases unreliable” (Bell et al., 2009, p. 678). Their findings further indicated that students were unaware of the actual price to attend college or how to fill out and submit applications for financial aid on their own (Bell et al., 2009). Their findings left researchers with recommendations to not treat all students and classes as the same when creating activities geared toward college going and to include parents in the preparation process (Bell et al., 2009; Perna, 2006b). Although these findings add to rural student and college going literature, they also highlight why it is crucial for researchers to develop a better understanding of how policies created to promote college access influence rural student’s college aspirations and their parent’s involvement in the process.

E. Predictors of Influence

Research has documented that rural students have multiple disadvantages surrounding college enrollment, and this research has begun to frame predictors of college enrollment and completion for underrepresented rural students (Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2015). Byun et al. (2012) explored the ability to predict college completion of rural students by using the National Educational Longitudinal Study. Their findings revealed that parental expectations to attend, a rigorous high school curriculum, and family structure influence college access and four-

year graduation rates. Prior to the study, few examples existed to explain how individual traits of rural students might influence college entrance (Byun et al., 2012). The study highlighted how pre-and post-college influences affect aspiration and enrollment, but also degree completion for rural students. Their study built on prior research (Adelman, 2006) surrounding student background characteristics of different demographic groups and highlighted their influence on college enrollment.

Byun et al. (2012b) found that students from rural areas were supported by families who more often earned annual incomes of less than \$50,000, suggesting lowered educational attainment of the parents. Despite a financial constraint, the study positively concluded that parental education, structure of the family, and institutional selectivity were not significant predictors of entrance and completion (Byun et al., 2012b). Consistent with previous research, the study provided that rural students were more likely to be first-generation college students, were more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and were less likely to have rigorous academic backgrounds (Byun et al., 2012b; Provasnik, 2007).

Using a large national sample of over 2,000 rural high school students in the United States, Byun et al. (2017) researched attendance patterns of rural students leaving high school and how their family and schools influenced decisions to attend college. Knowing that families guide educational outcomes through parental support, financial support, expectations, and through parental educational levels (Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2015), enabled the researchers to better examine rural student pathways to college and predictors of enrollment.

As a predictor, the study looked at individual rural school characteristics using data from the Rural High School Aspirations Study administered by the National Research Center on Rural

Education Support at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The characteristics included students receiving free school lunches, school size, and proximity to a college. School experiences were defined by college preparation programs, activities, aspirations, expectations, and grades. The study found that rural high school student aspirations were not necessarily tied to college attendance (Byun et al., 2017). Rural students who attended smaller high schools were more likely to attend a two-year community college prior to transferring to a four-year college, consistent with findings from (Hillman, 2016). High school preparation courses and activities were positive predictors influencing the decision of students to pursue college, providing increased odds not only attending college, but attending a four-year institution instead of a community college (Byun et al., 2017). Their findings left researchers with recommendations for future research on how rural student experiences are influenced by the students' home geographic region and how rurality shapes those influences in the college going process (Byun et al., 2017).

F. Rural Perceived Influences of College Opportunity

Rural students face anxiety and stress when considering the overall cost of leaving their families for possible limited or competitive job opportunities in their areas (Byun et al., 2012b). Miscommunication and complications in financial understanding from families often provide resistance to their children leaving home, as they are afraid of accruing student debt (Tieken, 2016). This is especially true of first-generation college students whose parents might not have attended college. These students are “often encouraged to go directly into the workforce to earn money, as parents may have less direct understanding of the social and economic benefits of a college degree” (CIRP, 2016, p. 11). Regardless of their background differences, rurality influences student thought processes that sometimes help or hinder their ability to move forward.

Students from first-generation college families tend to have less knowledge of the many steps needed to understand how to navigate college entrance and are often identified by lower retention rates and the likelihood of needing developmental coursework once they enter college (Crisp & Delgado, 2014). Prior research has suggested that rural and first-generation students experience less academic success than their non-rural peers and are less likely to enter college with an understanding of higher education policies, vocabulary, and procedures putting them at a further disadvantage in navigating college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Byun et al., 2012).

As shown in the literature, rural students have many challenges in their pursuit of postsecondary education, including low academic preparation, generally lower socioeconomic conditions, and experience in geographically isolated areas without exposure to higher education institutions or the people who populate them (Byun et al., 2012). To help overcome these barriers, Morton et al., (2018) explored the perceived barriers, anxieties, and fears that prospective college students from rural high schools encountered in their journey to college. Prior work primarily focused in quantitative methods and the transition to college (Byun et al, 2012; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010), weak academic preparation (Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2012b; Provasnik, 2007), and why students from rural areas often lag behind non-rural students in college attendance (Byun et al., 2015). Using group, semi-structured interviews with 10 rural high school students (with parental permission) in a pre-college program at a large university in the Southeastern United States, the researchers explored student anxieties surrounding their personal abilities to access college information that would allow them to be successful in college (Morton et al., 2018).

Using social capital as a framework, Morton et al. (2018) sought to examine student perceptions of their rural community, understand student perspectives in considering attending

college, and what social capital was utilized in helping rural students prepare for college. This research was part of a larger study that sought to explore rural college access, matriculation, and retention for male students of color, Native American Indians, first-generation students, and transfer students from community colleges (Morton et al., 2018). The findings from the study helped to broaden the research perspective and suggested an expanded need for study of other areas surrounding how college choice influences rural student persistence in college.

The findings from Morton et al., (2018) suggested that rural students often perceive pre-college educational opportunities as limited due to the physical location and distance from their home communities, access to technology, and the opportunity to participate in academic preparation classes. The perspective of the student was being ‘tied’ geographically to ‘place’ (Hillman & Weichman, 2016), particularly as they defined themselves as being rural (Morton et al., 2018). The study found rurality shapes students understanding of college going process surrounding academic achievement, social integration, and financial concerns when discussing access issues, academic preparation, and overall achievement (Morton et al., 2018). The study findings highlighted that students perceived social integration and family as a barrier to college going, and this dynamic provided a dilemma for rural students, resulting in the need for further research and exploration.

The study concluded that transition programs are needed specifically for rural youth who consider college attendance (Morton et al., 2018). The study suggested that rural students should stop being looked at through a deficit lens of need, but as an opportunity to add strength to new courses, programs, and the collegiate community (Morton et al., 2018). These suggestions highlighted generations of missed opportunity for higher education institutions and further need to include rural students in policy creation to enhance college going rates. Further, the study’s

findings also provided researchers with recommendations for future exploration to examine how other intersecting identities of rural students might influence student experiences in the decision to attend college (Morton et al., 2018).

To better understand how rural students evaluate college opportunities, Goldman (2019) explored rural student perspectives at a flagship university through student stories in accessing higher education. Her focus surrounded a qualitative description of the barrier's students perceived entering a four-year institution, their cultural values, and how these influences affected decisions to pursue college access and completion (Goldman, 2019).

Using grounded theory, the study made use of digital storytelling in a TRIO freshmen transition and learning strategies class to describe student experiences and their individual pathways to college (Goldman, 2019). Forty-nine students in the class submitted stories, but only 11 were considered rural (NCES, 2014). Through the development of digital stories, the participants were provided an opportunity to use video, photo, and written dialogue to express their college journey. The digital stories were the main method of data collection and provided insight on how students rural identity was perceived to have influenced college choice and the overall decision to attend college (Goldman, 2019).

Despite identifying as rural, additional themes highlighted an overlap of varying student identities that helped or hindered the path to college; first generation college student, Native American Indian, non-traditional student, and financially in need (Goldman, 2019). These identities added to the complexity in the understanding of what influences rural student decisions to pursue college, as barriers and supports often emerged simultaneously. The study identified that rural students exhibited traits of self-efficacy, self-motivation, and resiliency that led them to seek on campus supports more often than non-rural counterparts (Goldman, 2019).

Goldman (2019) concluded that student pathways to college were largely influenced by their experiences with or without college preparation programs, family support, college support systems, financial understanding and support, and being a first-generation college student. Implications for future research expressed the need to better prepare first-generation rural students and families for college expectations and to ease transition process, and highlighted the importance of overlapping layers of influence that rural students experience (Goldman, 2019; Perna 2006).

McCulloch (2020) used a social constructivist lens to explore rural first-generation college student perceptions of parental support when entering college. The case study consisted of individual, semi-structured interviews, with 12 students selected for the study based on rural zip code, residential county, first-generation college student status, and other marked variables (McCulloch, 2020).

Through one on one interviews, McCulloch (2020) found additional social capital supports in extended family and community support surrounding how rural students formulate college going decisions and perceptions of how their personal networks influenced college enrollment (McCulloch, 2020). The interviews data that aided the researcher in developing themes of understanding specifically supporting rural first-generation college students. The themes allowed the researcher to see the strong family and community connections that rural students have and led to suggestions for further research on the influence of extended family's role in forming rural student college aspirations and entrance (McCulloch, 2020). The study findings also included perceptions of college preparation, how students minimized anxiety, and the role of financial support in their endeavors (McCulloch, 2020). The study supported the idea that rural students have a larger connection to community social capital compared to students in

non-rural areas (Byun et al., 2015), aligned with prior research surrounding rural student college going decisions (Guiffrida, 2008), and adds to continued research supporting rural college students (Byun et al., 2012; Tieken, 2014; Wright, 2012).

G. Chapter Summary

For the United States, a better skilled and educated rural population provides for a stronger economy and increased opportunity. For the rural student, the completion of a college degree provides a significant increase in lifetime earnings with each earned level of postsecondary qualification (Carnevale & Cheah, 2018). Research has shown that post-secondary credentials provide greater opportunity and likelihood for the individual being employed, being a homeowner, healthier overall, more likely to have children that achieve at higher academic levels, and less likely to depend on governmental assistance programs (Baum & Payea, 2005). The benefits of a college degree prompt a societal desire to increase college entrance and degree completion as a priority for multiple stakeholders, including students and parents, alumni, policy makers, citizens, business leaders, legislators, and university faculty and administrators (Adelman, 2006).

The literature reviewed in the current chapter highlights the unique attributes that can positively or negatively impact a student's decision to attend college. The majority of these findings stressed the role of social and human capital in understanding and creating value around attending college, and negotiating the dilemma of leaving a rural homelife with the possibility of never returning. These studies all stressed the need to understand the rural college student better, particularly understanding the role of social and human capital in forming the opinions and values that lead to the decision to attend college.

Chapter III: Research Methodology

There is a need to continue and expand the body of literature that focuses on rural youth, particularly as it relates to decisions about life after secondary school. And within the framework of postsecondary education, there is a strong need to develop a better understanding of the elements that might be controlled in the future that can increase the number of rural youth who decide to attend postsecondary education. Seeking higher education as an option and overcoming barriers to entrance will enable rural students to explore a life beyond their community and reap the rewards that a college degree can provide. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to describe the community and cultural experiences and elements of individuals from rural Arkansas that were perceived to have impacted their successful enrollment at the University of Arkansas. The study sought to explore the lived experience of rural students in their first year of college to better understand the barriers that they face as an underrepresented group in the higher education setting through narrative inquiry.

A. Philosophical Assumptions

To better explore the experiences of rural students, an interpretative epistemology was used to help piece together knowledge from various participants to help overcome biases that individuals might have about their individual life experiences and the unknown (Neuman, 2003). Through qualitative exploration, it was hoped that the participants would make meaning within their journey toward college enrollment and construct their own interpretation of how their rural communities expectations of them helped or hindered their journey toward college enrollment. As individuals create their own personal viewpoint toward events in their own lives, it is important to explore individual interpretations of rural experiences to help highlight trends that might emerge as differing perspectives are brought together (Neuman, 2003).

Epistemology is guided by the understanding of the world through those things that are justifiable and relevant to a given situation. Through epistemological research, I aim to gain a better understanding of rural student experiences through individual stories and time spent with participants. These efforts allowed the design of the study to explore the lived experiences of students and help to bridge a gap in contextual understanding between myself and participants in the study.

B. Interpretive Framework

Social constructivism is an educational philosophy that enables a researcher to seek a greater understanding and make meaning of the world in which they live and work, as well as interpret the individual viewpoints of participants to find greater meaning within their overall experience (Creswell, 2014). Social Constructivism frameworks were utilized in the study to help highlight the rural student experiences being observed. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), social constructivism seeks to explore the world through multiple perspectives to develop patterns and meanings of individuals lived experiences. Constructivism highlights the importance of the participants personal viewpoints within the overall research process (Creswell, 2014). To ensure that participant views were appropriately understood, I enabled the participants to construct their own interpretations of their experiences and incorporate the findings into the results (Creswell, 2014). Through these processes, knowledge was co-created by myself and the student participants to bring forward the experiences of rural students and highlight individual student stories.

As I understand that the participants and personal perceptions of their rural life experiences could potentially influence the outcomes of the study, it was my role as the researcher to analyze the findings, find common themes woven within student stories, and

attempt to find meaning in the participants personal experiences. Additionally, I took into account the personal values, biases, and beliefs that might hinder or bias the outcome of the findings. In order to further develop the researchers understanding of rural student experiences, I only utilized the participants descriptions of the events discussed, regardless of subjectivity. Through this method, I hoped to produce descriptive, complex, and rich findings, as noted in social constructivist research (Creswell, 2014).

C. Research Approach

The study used qualitative methodological approach in exploring the lived experiences of rural students. Qualitative approaches to research are thought to be used best when issues that might need a deeper understanding or when complex contexts need to be further explored (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative exploration allowed the researcher to utilize narrative inquiry to better collect the personalized stories of rural students and establish patterns surrounding their lived experiences. Creswell (2014) described narrative inquiry as a way to allow a researcher to describe an individual's life, collect and tell stories about people's lives, and write a narrative story of each individual's experiences. Intentionally chosen, narrative inquiry focuses on aspects surrounding sociality and place, as described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). Sociality describes the way in which individuals tell their stories and the contextualization of time within it. Because the study focuses on community influences, the context of place includes the rural communities that the participants are from. This context also includes the researcher and participant relationship as well as the students' institution in which they are enrolled. Place is exceptionally important in the research questions and methods, as the participants must frame their experiences as they transitioned from the rural community to the college setting. Through discussions surrounding the rural community and the transition to college, participants reflected

on their individual journey. Qualitative research enabled the participants to share their individual stories of their communities and permit them to expound on information that might help themes or additional variables to emerge in the data analysis. A qualitative approach was appropriate for the study to better explore the meaning that rural students attribute to their communities in helping them build college going aspirations.

An approach of narrative inquiry was utilized to allow myself to find common meanings in the individual student experiences and allowed their individual story to be told (Creswell, 2014). This method of exploration provides an opportunity to dive into the “what” and “how” of student experiences. Through this inquiry, I hoped that the “why” would emerge as well, to better determine what role rural communities play in enabling rural students to move through the college choice process and overcome obstacles in their path. Through this model of inquiry, I hope to connect the participants previous life experiences, the transition to college, and their individual stories to better understand the influence of community on guiding students thought. Additionally, the study sought to explore the meaning between the lines of what it means to be a rural student by investigating how the rural community influences cultural and social perceptions, abilities, and ambitions of its students. Through this mode of exploration, I hoped to provide insight into how the rural students experiences the college going process and the transition process from leaving their rural community to better inform policy makers and higher education practitioners of how they might better help this underserved population.

D. Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting the study I reviewed the University of Arkansas academic integrity policies, sought guidance from the University of Arkansas Office of Research Compliance, as well as, sought the approval from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board.

To ensure confidentiality of the participants, I previously completed a course for certified training to conduct research on human subjects through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). Additionally, I completed several graduate level research methods courses, has taught bachelors level courses, and is extremely knowledgeable of research ethics.

Implementation of the research study has planned for the protection of the participants anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent (Creswell, 2014). To protect confidentiality, participant names were assigned pseudonyms and used in all documentation to protect anonymity after consenting to participate. Actual names, email addresses, or other identifiers were only used in the initial recruitment process. All data were stored in a locked office on a password protected computer, only accessible to myself. Information will be kept for a time not to exceed three years after the completion of the initial study. The initial request for Bumpers College student participation was requested by the Dean of the College and the request approval can be found in Appendix A. Approval of the research protocol from the Institutional Review Board is presented in Appendix B.

Although the study was not intended to directly benefit the participants, students from rural Arkansas were given a voice to assist other rural students in navigating their college journeys. I hoped that the participants felt empowered in the study to further develop as a college student and share their personal experiences with others in their home communities.

E. Researcher Background

As a White American male, first generation college student, raised in rural Arkansas, and who has completed an undergraduate and master's degree, I acknowledge that my personal upbringing and college going experiences might have been similar to the participants, and that personal feelings and emotions may have influenced the study's research procedures identified for use. As a researcher I set aside any biases and work with the participants to co-construct understanding of their rural experiences through narrative inquiry and when telling their story. Within narrative inquiry it is important to keep the past experiences and the personal background of myself in mind so that reflection can take place surrounding the participants experiences as well as those of the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

As an individual from a small rural community of less than 1,000 and a rural county of less than 10,000, I have personally experienced the influences that guide thought toward college entrance. My interest in the study focused around how rural communities values help or hinder college entrance. My personal interest in the topic was spurred by my own personal experiences as a student and by working with rural students as an academic advisor at a large, Land Grant, public institution. Often, I have met with students who seem to not have a purpose, a desire, or reason for pursuing a specific degree plan. My observations have made me consider that students have not found their 'fit' and are unaware of what options might exist. I have observed that sometimes their intent is to enter college, but not necessarily succeed in finishing a degree. Success seems to be defined by a different mechanism for each student and learned expectations guide their thoughts in how each student maneuvers the college going process. These observations influence who I am, who I want to be as a practitioner of higher education, as a researcher, and further fuel my desire to advocate for students from underserved areas.

My personal lived experiences of rural life provide me a distinctive lens in which to better situate myself in the research process. I believe that my personal experiences enabled me to better analyze the data and utilize existing literature to boost my interactions with the research participants in order to provide rich and descriptive stories. Through this process I hoped to better give meaning to rural student experiences and highlight the need to better serve this specific population of student. As some discussions may surround topics of sensitive nature, I hoped to provide some insight to my own experiences to better give meaning to data and to help alleviate any potential embarrassing or harmful subjects that the participants may have experienced.

F. Role of the Researcher

All participants were provided a consent form (Appendix B) that was required for participation in the study. Information provided in the form included my name as the researcher, name of the institution where the study took place, explanation surrounding the purpose of the study, potential benefits of participating in the study, explanation of the type of participants involved in the study, an explanation of risks to the participant, a guarantee of confidentiality to the participants, a guarantee that the participants can withdraw from the study at any point, and contact information of the researcher, the researcher's advisor, and the institutional IRB representative if questions should come about at any time (Sarantakos, 2013)

As the primary researcher in the study I understand that I have personal biases toward this topic that require me to better understand the population of students I am working with and to set aside my own thoughts from what the findings reveal. Throughout the study I will deploy "theoretical sensitivity" to better situate myself within the study, but allow me to view the participants experiences through their stories instead of my own (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This

process has also been referred to as “reflexivity,” meaning that qualitative researchers place themselves in their study by discussing their personal backgrounds and how it guides their interpretations of the data being collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

G. Case Study Setting

The University of Arkansas-Fayetteville was chosen as the host site for the case study because of its dedication to the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 mission, dedication to research and service, and size of less than 30,000 students. The (2021) mission of the University of Arkansas states that their overarching goal is, “determined to build a better world by providing transformational opportunities and skills, promoting an inclusive and diverse culture, nurturing creativity, and solving problems through research and discovery, all in service to Arkansas.”

One of the 10 schools and colleges within the University of Arkansas is the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences. Bumpers College houses 14 majors that surround broad focuses in preparing students to take on careers within the food and fiber industry, but also to improve the quality of life for Arkansas by conducting undergraduate research, sharing knowledge, improving viable food systems, sustainable environments, healthy families, and encouraging the growth of vibrant communities. Composed of an undergraduate student population of less than 2,000 students, Bumpers College is the second smallest college on the University of Arkansas campus and attracts many rural students from across the State of Arkansas and bordering states. Although small, the diversity within the offered majors encompass a wide variety of opportunity that enables students to pursue majors that reflect needs within their home communities as well as exposing them to unknown career trajectories and lifestyles different than their home community.

H. Research Procedures

Research procedures followed appropriate methods of collection as suggested for narrative inquiry by Creswell (2014). Techniques utilized followed narrative inquiry models to ensure ethical standards, participant selection, and trustworthiness reflected intent and effectiveness of qualitative design.

The study used purposeful sampling to select participants who were identified at the time as: (a) a currently enrolled full-time undergraduate student at the University of Arkansas in good standing, (b) have a declared major within the school of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences, (c) be an Arkansas resident from a county of less than 15,000, (d) graduated from an Arkansas public school, and (e) agrees to participate within the research study. Through the selection of participants with similar backgrounds, information gathered provided descriptive data that highlighted the experiences of rural students in choosing to attend college.

Identified participants for the study were essential in determining if students were indeed from rural backgrounds. Within this research study, rural was defined by the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) as any county that contained a population of less than 49,999 residents (USDA, 2012). To further insure validity I only selected participants from Arkansas counties that consisted of populations of less than 15,000. Additionally, only students who graduated from Arkansas public schools were included in the study, due to this specific population being identified as more at-risk for not attending college (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Participants from the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, within the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences were specifically sought based on convenience and the willingness of participants to participate within the study. Participants were further selected based on their home county consisting of populations of less than 15,000. A goal of 5-10

students were planned to be recruited and was determined that it was an appropriate number of participants to appropriately gather and analyze the student's experiences. This selection was based on best practices within qualitative research and knowing that previous studies have generated positive results with participants ranging from 1-365, as discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). Additionally, it was thought that choosing participants from similar backgrounds would help to better provide insight into how rural students make the decision to pursue college and their overall experiences.

Once a list of eligible participants was finalized by the University of Arkansas Office of Student Success and Bumpers College Dean's Office, an email was be sent requesting their participation. A copy of the email request can be found in (Appendix A). The email provides the purpose of the study, how students could participate, and the possible time involved. Once participants responded that they are willing to participate, an email was sent to them confirming the acceptance and that they met eligibility criteria for the study. Those meeting eligibility criteria to be interviewed by the researcher were sent the interview protocol questionnaire utilized to collect information for use in the interview, as seen in (Appendix D). The follow-up email was the same communication as seen in (Appendix C) with the addition of (Appendix D). One week after the original recruitment email an additional message (Appendix C) was resent to those who had not responded. Stratified sampling was planned to be utilized to better gain individual voices from differing Arkansas rural counties, but was not needed due to low participation.

I. Data Collection

Narrative inquiry begins with discussions surrounding the lived experiences of individuals, told by them (Creswell, 2014). To gather these stories, one on one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the study's participants, as is most narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Through this method of qualitative research, a rich description of rural student experiences in pursuing college entrance was recorded in their own words. Questions asked by myself were created to intentionally help answer the research questions of the study.

Additionally, I used the information collected in the initial interview protocol questionnaire, modified from Tolliver's (2020) exploration of community expectancy, to guide the semi-structured questioning. The researcher documented non-verbal communication displayed by the participants by journaling field notes and added the findings to the final analysis, after transcription and coding described by Creswell (2014). Transcription took place utilizing Otter AI transcription software with the researcher editing the final transcript for clarity. The researcher collaborated actively with the study's participants throughout the process to ensure that the story provided is the same as the story reported (Creswell, 2014). This process required transcription of the audiotaped interview, re-transcription by the researcher, and re-storying by the researcher. Restorying allowed myself to gather the information into a chronological order before validating the accuracy of the experience being described with the participant. This enabled validity and accuracy of the narrative to be confirmed by the participant (Creswell, 2014).

Interviews

Interviews were expected to last 30-60 minutes in total with each participant choosing the time and date that is most convenient for their individual interview on the University of Arkansas

campus. Prior to each interview the researcher provided an overview of participant rights, as explained in the consent form. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point during the interview and none chose to withdraw. Throughout the interviews I utilized field notes to document context specific comments, items that were stressed by participants, and non-verbal behaviors. Immediately after the interview I added any observations to the field notes that might have indicated additional non-verbal or overarching impressions communicated by the participants. After transcribing the interview and restorying, the researcher provided a copy of the transcription to each participant for member-checking to ensure that the researcher has understood the individual experience appropriately, which added to the trustworthiness of the study's intent (Creswell, 2014).

J. Data Analysis

Data analysis is used to make sense of the information provided by the participants within a study. Analysis consists of “taking the data apart to determine individual responses and putting it together to summarize it” (Creswell, 2014, pp. 10). This process allowed me to make meaning from the data to better answer the study's initial research questions. In order to analyze the information collected from participants, the interviews were transcribed from recordings and typed in electronic format by the researcher. This process allowed me to better understand the individual story of the participants. Each transcription was read numerous times to allow the researcher to see emergent themes and how the individual experiences might be similarly related.

Coding

Through a thorough reading of each transcription I was able to see themes emerge from the data that connected the individual participant stories. This process allowed the formation of coding to be initially started. Coding is when the researcher starts to makes sense of the data and

when qualitative research actually begins. Although no specific set of guidelines is required for coding data, the process allows for a researcher to segment, label, and form descriptions to better explore themes within the information gathered (Creswell, 2014). Open coding was utilized to note areas of interest, key words, and thoughts within the margins of the electronic transcriptions. This method of coding is in line with the Corbin and Strauss (2008) process of axial coding and is intended to help the researcher connect the overarching themes to prior research, highlight rural student experiences, and to see how students from rural Arkansas communities developed their decisions to attend college. This study did not fully complete axial coding of all documents, but utilized the thematic understanding to help uncover commonalities within the data. The initial protocol document, interview data, and coding were utilized to answer the overall research questions of the study. In creating codes, themes, or categories to better analyze the data I made sure to provide details within the final analysis to ensure an audit trail and strengthen trustworthiness of the study.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, member checks will be utilized throughout the process with transcriptions and story interpretations being shared with the participants for triangulation and member-checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

K. Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of how qualitative research methodology will be utilized to better understand how rural students develop decisions to pursue college as an option. Through a constructivist lens, narrative inquiry will be utilized to highlight the lived experiences of underrepresented rural students in their transition to college from their rural communities, as

well as, the role of the community in this pursuit. Through this, rural student experiences will be utilized to better highlight rural student needs.

Chapter IV. Results

Rural Arkansas college student decisions are shaped by the communities that they come from. The educational and life experiences that students take part in throughout their lives in rural Arkansas influence their decisions to seek college enrollment, as well as the needs they have once they are in college. Student experiences and personal interactions in their communities play an integral role in shaping enrollment decisions and degree selection. The current study was designed to describe the community, personal experiences, and life events of individuals from rural Arkansas communities in developing their decisions to attend college and how the community impacted their successful enrollment at the University of Arkansas. Specifically, the study set out to explore how rural communities were perceived to influence college enrollment decisions of rural students.

The current chapter begins with a summary of the study, results from the interviews, and an overview of data analysis. The initial summary provides the purpose of the study and the methodology used throughout the research process. The results of the interviews, descriptions of the research study participants, and research procedures utilized to capture and explore the participants' responses are provided.

A. Summary of the Study

The study explored how rural student college going decisions are shaped by the rural communities in which they have come from. Rural communities, for a variety of reasons, have fewer resources, possibly fewer opportunities associated with formal education, and even community-level values that might place rural youth at a disadvantage when thinking about postsecondary education. These missed opportunities and community expectations can shape rural students' understanding of the college going process in a way that negatively influence the

decision to pursue specific degrees, colleges, and other postsecondary opportunities. Rural local communities play an important role in shaping rural student thoughts and values surrounding college attendance. The study highlights the importance of including rural student groups in research, with special attention being given to better identifying these students and the influences that led them to pursue and successfully enroll in college.

Elements surrounding decisions to enroll in college for rural students are highlighted by the role of the community in which they come from as well as their family. Research has shown that community and family provide emotional support for rural students, but often cause conflict for students when considering the option to leave their home area or through an inability to provide adequate college going knowledge. The study attempted to describe any underlying uniqueness of rural students and their communities that may have prompted the pursuit of college enrollment.

The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the community and cultural experiences and elements of individuals from rural Arkansas that were perceived to have impacted their successful enrollment at the University of Arkansas and how rural communities were perceived to influence college enrollment decisions and choices in degree selection. Specifically, the research adds to the body of higher education literature surrounding college access and choice by discovering answers to four main questions:

- How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their personal experiences that prompted their enrollment at the University of Arkansas?
- How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their interactions, relationships, and experiences with immediate and extended family in making the decision to enroll at the University of Arkansas?

- How did college students from rural Arkansas describe the influence of their communities on their decision to attend college generally, and the University of Arkansas specifically?
- What recommendations did college students from rural Arkansas have for the better recruitment of rural college students to the University of Arkansas?

B. Results of the Interviews

Once the research protocol was submitted and approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B), 1,692 Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences undergraduates were identified as having good academic standing. Using the University of Arkansas's residency data, 31 students were identified to be from one of the 25 Arkansas counties, that according to the 2020 census, have fewer than 15,000 residents. Of these, 22 initial students were identified as meeting the remainder of the sample selection criteria and they were emailed the research protocol (see Appendix C) asking for their participation in the study.

A total of 7 students agreed to participate in the study, and each were sent the interview protocol prior to scheduling interviews. All interviews took place in the Bumpers College-Waldrip Student Center on the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville campus. Interviews were planned to be approximately 30 minutes. Interview participant characteristics have been presented in Table 1. After all interviews were completed, transcriptions of the interviews were completed and shared with the participants for approval and for them to confirm that their comments were indeed an accurate representation of their intentions. After approval by the participants, data analysis began to better understand and explore any themes and commonalities across the student comments (Creswell, 2014). Initial exploration of the data included review of

the protocol form, written field notes from each interview, and the transcriptions themselves. This allowed for further coding to take place and better highlighted how students from rural Arkansas communities developed decisions toward college enrollment.

Table 1.
Characteristics of Interview Participants

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F	Participant G
Gender	Male	Male African	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female
Ethnicity	White	American	White	White	White	White	White
Academic Status	Junior	Senior	Sophomore	Freshman	Senior	Sophomore	Freshman
Major	Animal Science	Agricultural Leadership	Agricultural Business	Hospitality Management	Animal Science and Agricultural Leadership	Agricultural Education	Apparel Merchandising & Product Development
Participant GPA	3.45	3.47	4	3.75	3.98	4	3.81
Distance from Home Community	100 miles	235 miles	145 miles	143 miles	128 miles	145 miles	158 miles
Parental College Education	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
H.S. Dual Enrollment/AP Coursework Completed	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Interview Date	11/29/2021	12/1/2021	12/3/2021	12/6/2021	12/6/2021	12/6/2021	12/7/2021
Interview time	11:30am	1:00pm	1:00pm	9:30am	12:00pm	3:00pm	10:00am
Length of Interview	28.20 minutes	28.59 minutes	22.57 minutes	29.49 minutes	33.39 minutes	30.38 minutes	39.25 minutes

Participant Descriptions

The seven interviews consisted of the following participant descriptions:

Participant A enrolled in concurrent college courses in high school through a local community college and first enrolled in college as a full-time student in the fall semester of 2019. He transferred to the University of Arkansas his second year of college to pursue a degree

in Animal Science. His current standing at the time of the interview was a junior and he described himself as a first-generation college student. He was raised in an extended family household by his grandparents in rural, middle western Arkansas. His description of his hometown was, “a place people pass through going to Texas” and as a “small pasture town that, like no one really lives there.” He completed high school with good grades and was one of the few from his graduating class who sought to go to college. He described his school and hometown as “politically conservative” and alluded that if you came from the right family you had little to worry about in the present time or in the future if you stayed in the community as a lifelong resident. He suggested that he was not as prepared for college as he would have liked to have been, and that he received little help in guiding him toward how to prepare for college. He found it unfortunate that he had not been recruited to the University of Arkansas in high school and that he did not know about supporting programs that the University offered. He did not plan to return to his home community after graduation.

Participant B enrolled in concurrent coursework in high school at a local community college and completed an associate’s degree with the original intent of pursuing a vocational trade. He began college as a full-time, first semester student at the University of Arkansas in the summer of 2019 to pursue a major concentration in Agricultural Leadership as a first-generation college student. His standing at the time of the interview was a senior, and he was raised in a nuclear and multicultural home in rural southern Arkansas. His description of his hometown was one that was poor, economically depressed, extremely small, agriculturally focused with a lot of poultry production and forestry. “There’s not a stoplight. There’s one gas station and two stop signs...if you blink, you pass through it.” Participant B was the only person from an ethnically underrepresented population in the sample. He spoke highly of his parents and extended family

pushing him to be the first in his family to attend the University of Arkansas. He felt that due to his school's low funding and the community being economically-disadvantaged led to an inadequate opportunity to experience more things outside of his home community. He shared that there were few opportunities for students to learn about college options outside of his hometown in school, and that it was not an area recruited for college enrollment. He shared that he was the only one he knew of in a six-year span to attend the University of Arkansas and that educators in his community did not recommend it as an option for students to pursue. He spoke positively of his participation in the National FFA Organization (FFA), his FFA mentor, and the impact of the community college promoting options past the secondary setting. Participant B was conflicted with the idea of returning to his home community after graduation but did plan to return. Out of all of the participants in the study, he seemed to have the deepest connection to his home community.

Participant C enrolled as a full-time, first semester student at the University of Arkansas in the fall semester of 2020 to pursue a major in Agricultural Business. She entered college with no Advanced Placement or concurrent college coursework completed. Her standing at the time of the study was as a sophomore. She was raised in a nuclear family as the oldest sibling in rural, middle western Arkansas with both parents having college degrees. She described her hometown as, "very small, with like 1000 people." Her description provided that the small community consisted of small farms and church related activities, but not many opportunities otherwise. She shared that her high school was not one highly recruited by colleges and that if a community college had not hosted a college fair, she might not have known of many options beyond what she learned from discussions with her parents. She discussed that there was not an opportunity to complete Advanced Placement or concurrent courses and that most school activities focused

more on extracurricular opportunities such as, sports, FFA, Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), and National Beta Club (Beta). These organizations did allow her to learn about career options, but not specifically college opportunities. Although her parent's both had college degrees, neither supported her desire to attend the University of Arkansas before or after entrance. She did not feel that she will return to her community after college due to the limited employment opportunities.

Participant D enrolled as full-time, first semester student at the University of Arkansas in the fall semester of 2021 to pursue a major in Hospitality Management as a first-generation college student. She entered college with no Advanced Placement or concurrent college coursework completed. Her standing was as a freshman and she was raised in a nuclear family as the oldest sibling in rural, northcentral Arkansas. She described her home community as “a very small, tight knit community” that was held together by the school and extracurricular options. She described her teachers as very supportive of students and them helping find ways to discuss college opportunities with students. Her school was not one that was heavily recruited by colleges and she did not recall the University of Arkansas ever coming to speak with students. She was active in FFA and as a member of the band while in high school. These organizations allowed her to travel some and exposed her to potential careers and a life outside of her hometown. She described the local economy as being exceptionally small and that the area was more of a go between for tourists looking for outdoor experiences, such as hiking, camping, and fishing. She spoke of her reasons for pursuing college entrance as a “destination” after high school and an opportunity to “see the world” beyond her community. She reflected a strong connection to her family and the desire “to make them proud,” but also discussed internal conflict with them not wanting her to leave the community for college. She was unsure of her

future career and was uneasy when discussing the possibility of permanently returning to her home community.

Participant E began her college career at a community college with the intention of transferring to a 4-year program. She began college as a full-time, first semester student at the University of Arkansas in the fall semester of 2019 to pursue double majors in Animal Science and Agricultural Leadership. Her current standing at the time of the study was as a senior. She was raised in single parent household in rural, northcentral Arkansas with her parental guardian having some college education, but she described herself as a first-generation college student. She described the place she calls home as a “typical small town, ag based community,” between towns, and right outside another. Her descriptors suggested that it was a regular occurrence for people to not know where she was from. Of all of the participants, she was the most driven to excel prior to and in the college setting of all participants. She explained in detail the support role that her parents and extended family played in all of her educational endeavors. Her high school experiences were highlighted by participation in FFA, 4-H, and personal connection to county extension services. She discussed that these opportunities provided many educational opportunities, but very little college prep or career discussions were provided official through her high school. Her experiences in these organizations provided mentorship and connection to resources that she suggested were not provided to all students in her same school. Her community college experiences further encouraged her to seek opportunity at the University of Arkansas and is what solidified her decision to transfer. Participant E did not plan to return to her home community after graduation and is unsure of the specific path she will pursue past college at the current time.

Participant F enrolled as a full-time, first semester student at the University of Arkansas in the fall semester of 2020 to pursue a major in Agricultural Education. He entered college with no Advanced Placement or concurrent college credit completed. His academic standing at the time of the study was as a sophomore. He was raised in a nuclear family as the youngest sibling with both parents having earned college degrees and an older sibling having a four-year degree as well. He is from rural, middle western Arkansas, and described his home community as, “very small...agriculturally focused...no stop lights with a lot of backroads.” His high school educational experiences primarily focused around extracurricular athletic activities and participation in FFA. These experiences allowed him to travel outside of his home community, but only his FFA participation seemed to help explore career options past high school. His description in high school suggested that his school was not one that often saw recruiters looking for potential students. He did not remember the University of Arkansas ever coming to speak with students, but he was aware of majors and careers offered through FFA programming. His description of his pre-college opportunity was limited to a career fair in a neighboring county, hosted by a community college, and his parents also provided some opportunities. He did not place teachers or counselors in a role of being helpful, preparing for a future, or helping to explore potential opportunity past high school. Out of all participants, he provided a description of his experiences that suggested that he wants to return to his hometown to share his experiences with others.

Participant G enrolled as full-time, first semester at student at the University of Arkansas in the fall semester of 2021 to pursue a major in Apparel Merchandising and Product Development. She entered college with already completed concurrent college credit earned in high school. Her current standing at the time of the study was as a sophomore. She was raised in

rural, central, Arkansas in a nuclear family with both parents having college degrees and as the oldest sibling. She described the place she calls home as a, “big family where everybody knows everybody.” Her description was the only one by any participant that did not include a discussion about the physical size of the community (although small). Additionally, she was the only participant who discussed noticing that family dynamics in her community were not that same as hers. She discussed low parental participation in her school was common and that “everyone knew that only a few of us would go to college.” Her high school experiences consisted of involvement within Gifted and Talented (GT), FBLA, Future, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), and Student Council. These experiences offered opportunity to leave the home community and explore potential careers, but few opportunities to discuss or explore college options from the high school level existed from teachers or counselors. She highlighted that the University of Arkansas was the only option for her specific degree interest, but that no recruiters specifically came to her school to discuss potential career paths. She discussed the pursuit of college enrollment as “always going to happen” and that “it feels like a whole different world than where I am from.” She discussed that her family support was the main motivator toward helping her “break the cycle” of staying in her hometown. Participant G did not plan to return to her home community upon completing a college degree, but she did feel a close bond to the people who live there.

All 7 participants in the study had a variety of similarities in discussing their rural communities and pre-college experiences. Their individual stories helped to highlight their perceived experiences as rural students pursuing college. Participant anonymity was protected by the decision to not create alternative pseudonyms for the participants prior to data analysis. In order to ensure the participants voices to be presented clearly around the structured questions and

to strengthen the interview structure, participant responses were interwoven within the overall analysis. This process allowed for the additional semi-structured questions in the interviews to be utilized in the overall analysis. This framework led to a deeper exploration of the interview questions and helped to highlight rural student voices, as told by the participants.

C. Data Analysis

All participants in the study faced specific challenges within their rural communities that prompted adverse reason or opportunity to pursue college entrance at the University of Arkansas, although coming from differing locations across the State of Arkansas. Within participant discussions common topics were shared that focused on the distance from their home community to the University of Arkansas as a barrier to exploring options while in high school.

Personal opinions were shared by the participants that described their high schools as places that were underfunded, lacked resources, provided little opportunity to learn about career opportunities, and that high school staff lacked the knowledge needed about financial aid, career opportunities, and admissions requirements to help students move past the secondary school setting. Students discussed that there were often more students in their same grade who were not planning to attend college than those who planned to pursue a four-year degree. Resources were often aimed more at helping those who were not planning to attend college instead of all students being provided the same opportunity to explore options past high school. Students discussed their lack of ability to take advanced placement classes in high school compared to non-rural peers. Knowledge of community organizations that might encourage students to move forward were not highlighted by students often but were discussed by several as motivators or encouragers.

The participants in the study also highlighted personal experiences in their rural communities that helped move them forward. All participants spoke highly of extracurricular engagement in various activities at their high schools. These consisted of being members of FBLA, Band, Beta, FFA, 4-H, Student Council, etc. These experiences enabled the participants to interact with people in their communities and experience opportunities outside of their home communities related to college entrance, potential careers, and simply other ways of living. The participants discussed the importance of mentoring in their communities as a leading factor toward college enrollment in and outside of their high schools. Parental participation played a key role in the participants seeking college opportunities for every participant in the study in some form. Through the study it became apparent that all participants expressed a persistent desire to tackle any obstacle they might encounter through the use of their personal networks and a desire to overcome their individual situations.

Research Question 1: How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their personal experiences that prompted their enrollment at the University of Arkansas?

Throughout the interview process, participants were asked to describe their personal history and life experiences that ultimately helped lead them toward their decision to pursue college enrollment. From these conversations, themes emerged from the data that helped to answer the research questions. The first research question sought to describe how rural student personal experiences helped formulate decisions to enroll at the University of Arkansas. To help answer this question the researcher read the interview transcriptions several times and engaged in open coding to better highlight the overall experiences of the participants. Four main themes emerged from the findings that prompted the pursuit of enrollment at the University of Arkansas:

desire for circumstantial change, sense of personal empowerment, academic and organizational involvement, and influence of educational support.

Theme #1: Desire for Circumstantial Change

Perna (2006) explained that students choose to attend college because they feel that a postsecondary education will offer a greater opportunity and higher pay than a high school degree provides. Her work suggested that college going aspirations are influenced by the home communities that students come from. Because of this, it is important to understand how students view their home communities' value in building their personal foundations of their future self. Participants in the study described their home communities from both a deficit lens and as adequate, depending on the subject at hand. These participants described their rural communities as being, "very small, extremely small, little, conservative, poor, and nose-y." These words brought to mind a negative reflection and an existing deficit in their communities. The potential idea of lacking a certain level of quality or opportunity that a larger area might offer was a prevalent voice across all participant descriptions of the places they called home. In the same manner, they described their home communities as, "tight knit, one big family, and a place where everybody knows everybody." These words brought to mind an ideal of solitude and contentment. However, these conflicting descriptions of value helped to form the foundation of how these rural students viewed their communities and underlying reasons for why they ultimately chose to leave in the pursuit of college.

A desire to change their rural circumstance was identified in the study as participants described their personal experiences that opened their eyes to opportunity that exceeded what their home communities could immediately offer. Although the conversation varied for each

participant, common was the sense of needing to leave the places they called home for a continued education and life beyond their rural community.

Participant G discussed knowing that her home life was different than a lot of the other people she grew up with. She had two parents at home who both had college degrees and who pushed her to seek college enrollment somewhere that others were not going. She stated,

[they] really wanted me to go off, because this feels like a whole different world than where I am from, even though it's in the same state. They really wanted me to meet people from all over and to go to a school with more opportunity than the schools that were around where I'm from. That's probably the biggest reason why I came here and why I'm, going to college.

Participant E described her home community as having few options for employment after high school. She discussed remembering her single mother working in the same factory that her grandmother had since she was a teenager. She exclaimed, “no way, this is not for me. I felt like I had to get out and experience something else, see the world and find myself away from community eyes.” She explained that the biggest opportunity from choosing to go to college was to get out of her hometown.

Although not exactly the same, Participant A had similar experiences in his home community and expressed an overwhelming fear of getting “sucked back into the system” of what he saw as a community expectation to stay in the local area after high school. He explained that his home community was a “conservative place stuck in time” and one that “a bunch of people just pass through going to Texas.” He described his personal experiences in a way that suggested he felt that he would be forced to return to the community to live a dissatisfied life working at the chicken plant if he was not able to positively perform once in college.

Participants discussed their personal experiences and desire to ‘get out’ of, or away from, the places they called home for a variety of reasons. Participant F described his hometown as, “economically disadvantaged...extremely small, rural and agriculturally focused.” Through these discussions the participants helped shed light on their personal circumstance and underlying perceptions of how their home community served as a motivator to leave. Almost all of the participants discussed their lack of future opportunity in their home communities and lack of desire to return, but more importantly, as an experience that ultimately led to the pursuit of college enrollment. These findings were consistent with research surrounding the rural brain drain and could lead to a further migration of the most capable students from rural areas. Although good for institutions of higher education in attracting new students, rural students not returning to their home communities after completion of a college degree could further lead to a continued economic decline in these areas.

Theme #2 Sense of Personal Empowerment

In the interviews, the rural participants identified that another key motivator in their decision to attend college was understanding how their rural communities provided sense of personal empowerment. Participant F discussed his decision to pursue college entrance as knowing it was an opportunity to better himself. He explained that he was not sure how he would ‘stack up’ to the other students at the University of Arkansas because he came from a rural area, but knew that he had always been at the top of his class and wanted to continue to excel academically. He stated, “I wanted the opportunity to better myself. I knew if I went to school, got an education, and went on to do something else, that I would make something of myself.” He went on to explain that “my family always taught me to go to church, learn right from wrong, and to always be working toward something bigger. I learned in school that everyone plays a role

and everyone needs to make something of their life.” These lessons seemed to empower him to want to go above and beyond what the other students in his graduating class aspired to be and reflect why only another student and he were the only ones who went on to the University of Arkansas.

Participant C described a learned sense of empowerment through her personal relationship with her parents. She described both parents as having college degrees and knowing that she wanted to further her education past high school. Despite her parent’s education they did not support her desire to attend the University of Arkansas or pursue an agriculturally related major. Additionally, they did not understand the funding process or provide financial help in her pursuit of college. These issues forced her to find out things for herself, empowering her, ultimately led to her pursuing a college tour and initial admittance.

Participant A described his decision to attend college based on his personal knowledge that a large majority of the students in his graduating class would not be pursuing any college after high school. The lack of desire by others motivated him to seek options to escape his rural area and pursue a lifestyle beyond his community. Through this desire he sought answers to his personal questions about career opportunities and degree options, and this led him to college.

Participant B seemed to face an internal crisis in knowing that he had originally aspired to attend college and then law school, but did not understand options for career outcomes that specific majors provided. He stated, “from 7th-10th grade, I wanted to go to law school. I wanted to be a lawyer, that was my focus.” He explained that, “I think my overall interest was government and I found that out later through conversations about future career paths”. He discussed knowing that he would have to leave his community to do this, but he also had a desire to return to have a positive impact on his community. He said, “I want to increase and help more

minority students to get involved with Ag, specifically at the U of A.” The discussion suggested that his personal choice in choosing to attend college was motivated by his learned community values. These values empowered Participant B to seek enrollment at the University of Arkansas and also ways that he could give back to his home community through earning a college degree.

Participant F discussed the pride he had as a student from a small town in seeking “the most prestigious” school in Arkansas. Being raised on a cattle farm provided him a hands-on opportunity to learn about the agriculture industry from a young age as he showed cattle and pigs at local and state fairs. He discussed understanding the importance of playing his role in selling the family’s animals and how they would all benefit from it at an early age. He said, “it was my opportunity to represent the farm and the livestock we were raising. I enjoyed it a lot and it opened my eyes to what I wanted in life.” These experiences allowed the participant to be self-empowered to navigate his path and a key factor in his decision to seek enrollment at the University of Arkansas.

The participants discussed their individual situations in ways that suggested their community influenced and inspired their decisions to enroll in college in both positive and negative ways. A type of interdependency of the rural community seemed to exist in empowering the participants to enroll in college, but at the same time cause an internal conflict that potentially pushed them away from their home communities. All participants in the study suggested an underlying satisfaction in making the decision to pursue enrollment at the University of Arkansas. Their choice in enrollment brought with it a sense of pride that they each had the ability to overcome obstacles in front of them. The participants all expressed challenges and motivators in pursuing college enrollment and expressed in their interviews an internal

ability to navigate college entrance by using their personal experiences gained in their home communities.

Theme #3 Academic and Organizational Involvement

All participants in the study discussed the ways in which they learned about college going options and how their access to this information played a role in their ultimate decisions.

College going knowledge can be described as information being shared by community connections and educational experiences that can influence the pursuit of a college degree.

Participants discussed their organizational involvement prior to college entrance and personal experiences that helped inspire, encourage, or support them in their pursuit of college enrollment.

In the conversations, peer, parental, and teacher support emerged as influences that helped prompt college enrollment through access to college going information.

Participant B discussed his personal experience of growing up on a farm, working with his parents, and gaining an understanding of the foundation of the agriculture industry. He said

agriculture played a key role in my development. I think that the combination of seeing the production side of things from the farm, then the organized agriculture understanding about careers from my FFA leadership experiences is what went on to make be pursue a degree in Bumpers.

Participant A discussed the few options that were available in his rural school and local community to connect students to college opportunities. Although he participated in advanced placement classes, he did not acknowledge them as an engaging event that fostered his decision to seek college enrollment. However, he did discuss a positive experience from his senior year of high school in a summer bridge program. He explained that he had an interest in pursuing medical school and learned of a program called Medical Applications of Science for Health

(M.A.S.H.). He explained that he “got to shadow in the hospital and got to interview students from the medical school in Fort Smith.” The experience provided him insight into the profession and is what is what he suggested ultimately shaped his academic choice.

Participant E was a self-described “overachiever” who sought educational experiences in and outside of her community through involvement in FFA and 4-H. She grew up on her family farm raising and showing Angus cattle for over 14 years. She explained that involvement in these experiences provided her opportunities to develop life skills, expand her talent, and gain friendships from around Arkansas. Through these opportunities she was exposed to a variety of college going options and possible careers offered beyond her home community. She explained that “I was in 4-H from like, 5-19, until I aged out. So, I had plenty of educational opportunities.” She talked about getting to travel to conferences, attending the National 4-H Congress in Atlanta, and completing her 4-H State Record Book. These experiences helped formulate college aspiration and her motivation to proactively seek knowledge when it was not available. She acknowledged that although participation in 4-H and FFA was available to all students, she knew that her personal experiences did not necessarily reflect all students from the same community. She said “I was pretty much the only kid from my county that participated in upper level 4-H things.”

Participant C discussed having the opportunity to go on a lot of out of school experiences with FFA. She discussed that in high school she had an interest in the possibility of pursuing a business related major. Through FFA she was introduced to potential careers that eventually led to her decision to pursue college enrollment, and explained that through FFA she was able to help form the Farm Business Management Team at her high school. Through that opportunity she was able to learn more about herself and possible career trajectories that involved the pursuit

of a college degree. She stated “I did a lot of those competitions and I saw that I was really good at numbers. I thought, I could do this in the future.”

Participant D spoke highly of her involvement in the high school band and the impact that her FFA Chapter had on building community in her hometown through fish-fry’s and annual traditions surrounding the first home football game of the season

Participant F described the influence of his FFA experiences on connecting him to knowledge about career options that only a college degree could provide. Serving as President of his FFA Chapter, Participant F was able to attend Career and Leadership Development Events, known as C.D.E.’s. He explained “I learned a lot from these events about what I wanted to do, that I wanted to start teaching, and that I enjoyed spreading that knowledge.”

Participant G discussed her involvement within GT, FBLA, FCCLA, and Student Council as opportunities to learn about potential career and college options. She discussed an awareness that larger high schools were able to participate in more events and provide opportunities that her district could not afford. The opportunities that were presented provided her access to tour the University of Arkansas and picture herself as a student. She said that after the tour “I started looking into it, watching videos on it, talking to people if they knew anybody that did the major and stuff.” This event solidified her choice in attending the University of Arkansas and empowered her to take ownership of her future direction.

Most participants discussed the importance of high school sports in their community and the ways that involvement in these fostered community in their home towns. However, no one discussed their experiences in high school sports or events surrounding them that provided any type of college going influence except Participant D. Her personal experiences were not necessarily playing sports but supporting them by being a member of the high school band. Her

participation enabled her to be a highlight in her rural community every Friday night, travel to colleges, and across the State for marching events and provided her funding that helped influence her decision to pursue a degree at the University of Arkansas.

All participants in the study positively expressed how their personal experiences in their community and organizations influenced their decisions to pursue college. Each individual participant discussed how involvement helped construct the idea that college entrance was an option and how they could better achieve their personal goals.

Theme #4 Influence of Educational Support

Several participants discussed positively receiving college going information from supports in their schools, as coming from mentors, teachers, and other officials who positively influenced their decision to pursue college enrollment. These participants shared that their high school teachers often spoke of the colleges and personal experiences that they each had while enrolled in college. Commonalities emerged in the participant conversations to reveal that most of their rural educators graduated from Arkansas Tech University (ATU) and Southern Arkansas University (SAU). Of interest, those identified as mentors or community leaders by participants were graduates of other colleges, including the University of Arkansas.

Participant B discussed his high school Agriculture Teacher as playing “a big part” in his decision to enroll in college, but specifically at the University of Arkansas. He explained that “I consider him a mentor to me. He was one of the only African American Ag teachers in the State.” He discussed that Agricultural Education was one of original thoughts in choosing a major and his mentor helped to make the decision to pursue college specifically at the University of Arkansas “an easy decision” because he valued him as a positive influence in both high school and the local community.

Participant C discussed viewing her high school history teacher as a mentor. She discussed that because her high school and community was so small that she often did not know who to ask for help. She explained that she connected with her history teacher because she encouraged her to “jump out of her comfort zone.” This teacher encouraged open communication and had a willingness to discuss questions about going to college. Participant C explained that she viewed the teacher as a mentor because she would not have known what was needed to pursue enrollment. She said “She helped me fill out all of my scholarships, apply, and make sure I had everything done my senior year.” She explained that without the help of her teacher explaining the step by step process, she was not sure if she would have been able to attend the University of Arkansas.

Participant A discussed the importance of his high school chemistry teacher in encouraging him to pursue college enrollment at the University of Arkansas and how he personally viewed their conversations. He said “He went to the University of Arkansas and got his degrees in chemistry. He hyped me up, telling me, don’t stay here, get out, and that I was too good for this town.” He explained that he viewed this as positive support and it empowered him seek college enrollment, even though his first year began at Arkansas State University. This influence by his chemistry teacher encouraged him to better find his ‘fit’ and why he attributed enrolling at the University of Arkansas to him.

Participant experiences that prompted college enrollment at the University of Arkansas was described as a desire for a change in lifestyle from their rural surrounding. Participants described their rural communities as an insulator from the world, lacking opportunity. The descriptions suggested that the participants rural communities foster inside of them a sense of personal empowerment. This inner passion suggested that the rural participants had developed

from interactions in their communities a grit that enabled them to pursue college entrance. Participants described that their academic and organizational involvement had also empowered them to better learn about opportunities outside of their home communities. These opportunities provided positive experiences that helped connect college going knowledge directly to participants and ultimately helped influence their academic choices and decision to pursue college enrollment. Many of these descriptions involved the positive influence of underlying educational support found in the participant schools and community. The added support of caring teachers and mentors provided social and emotional motivation that influenced the decision to pursue college enrollment at the University of Arkansas.

Research Question 2: How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their interactions, relationships, and experiences with immediate and extended family in making the decision to enroll at the University of Arkansas?

The interview protocol contained several questions that prompted participants to describe their interactions with family members who might have influenced their decision to pursue college enrollment, specifically at the University of Arkansas. The interview protocol questions were intentionally created to help explore the personal backgrounds of the participants and create rapport during the interview. These questions required the participants to describe any underlying reasons why they decided to pursue college and any possible influences that their families might have played in making those decisions. Participants provided a wide variety of information that surrounded childhood influences, individual conversations with their families about college enrollment and the future, and disagreements that might have existed with the parents related to college enrollment. Participants discussed that their parents often asked about what they would like to do after high school or potential opportunities that might exist beyond

their communities, but not necessarily specific majors or colleges that could support those efforts. Through these conversations, participants revealed information related to how their families influenced their personal pursuit of college. Three main themes emerged from the interview question response that helped answer research question number two: parental support as motivator for college enrollment, interactions with extended family as encouragement, and family as a barrier to enrollment.

Theme #1 Parental Support as Motivator for College Enrollment

Participant B discussed the role of his family in his life as a support network evident throughout his life and how they influenced his aspiration for college enrollment. He said “They were going to support me no matter what decision I made. My parents were very supportive in everything that I’ve ever done.” He spoke of ongoing discussions between his parents and himself starting in the 7th grade that surrounded his interests and the type of career he wanted to pursue, but not necessarily a major or institution. He explained that both parents supported his curiosity and emotional needs in ways that reflected one another in what he described as “counter balancing roles.” He said “My dad was always the one who thought logically about finances and logistics, things like that. And, then my mom was a shoot for the stars, big dream, type of person.” He discussed that as he got closer to his senior year in high school the conversations with his parents shifted toward helping him make choices about his choice of major and finding funding opportunities. He said “talking to mom about what I wanted to do and talking to my dad about what was logical, I think helped me kind of find a middle ground and find a path to go down.” The significance of the emotional support for Participant B was a primary factor in his decision to enroll in college at the University of Arkansas.

Participant F discussed the importance of his parents in helping guide him toward college. He explained that both parents have college degrees, hold jobs that reflect the agricultural industry, and that his older brother has an Agricultural degree from the University of Arkansas. These examples led him to formulate an idea that the University of Arkansas was where he belonged. He said “my father attended here and we would come up for FFA contests and got to experience getting to see his name in the concrete. I really want mine there.” He explained that his decision to pursue college was influenced by the examples his parents had provided and their positive influence on his life. When prompted to discuss the underlying motivations for his college enrollment, he discussed knowing that his parents were supportive in whatever decision he made as long as he was doing something productive with his life. Although he knew that a college education was his ultimate goal, he unshakably stated that “if it wasn’t for their push, I probably would just kind of withered.”

Participant C discussed that she was influenced to pursue college enrollment by the examples her parents had set in pursuing their own degrees. She said

Both of my parents went to college and mom got her Master’s. So, growing up it was always like, they pushed me to do good in school, pushed me to think about what I wanted to do in the future, and how like, going to college could help me get into different places.

Participant A explained that he was raised by his grandparents and viewed them as his parental figures and main influencers of support in pursuing college entrance. He explained that they had open conversations about going to college throughout his life and that “it was a very common dinner table theme for us.” His grandparents had not attended college and often used their life experiences as examples of what not to do in life and why college entrance was

important. He said “my grandmother never had a formal education. She dropped out in ninth grade to work and support her family.” He named her as his main encourager in seeking college opportunities and cited his grandparents’ lessons as motivators toward enrollment. He explained that “they were supportive of me overall” in pursuing college entrance. He recalled a time when they told him “whatever you want to do, we’ll do it. We’ll support you financially and we’ll make sure you are taken care of.”

Theme #2 Interactions with Extended Family as Encouragement

Emphasizing extended family involvement was a common theme throughout the study and described by participants as providing emotional encouragement and points of pride in their pursuit of college enrollment.

Participant D discussed the importance of her grandfather acknowledging she was leaving the community to pursue a degree and the support she felt from her siblings in her decision to attend college. She explained that although her grandfather did not necessarily understand what her goals were, his support helped her make the decision to enroll at the University of Arkansas. She said “I remember my grandpa, whenever he figured out I was going to college. He’s like, ‘yeah, that’s a good one. Stick with it. That’s good.’” She acknowledged that her parents did not really want her to leave her community, but were supportive of her overall intent and desire to better herself.

Participant B discussed the added value of having his extended family support him in his decision to pursue a college degree at the University of Arkansas. He said “My grandparents were super supportive, financially and otherwise.” He explained that even if he would not have been provided scholarships to attend the University of Arkansas that he knew his grandparents would have found a way to help pay the expenses. His experiences highlighted a comprehensive

support system in his family that empowered him to pursue college. He said “I’m a first-generation college student. Everybody was always so proud that I was going elsewhere.”

Participant C explained that she had older cousins and extended family that had gone to or were attending college. She discussed that seeing them do well was an “inspiration to see that I could do that too.” Participant E discussed her extended family conversations surrounding their verbal support of her choosing to enroll in college. She explained that it was always a preconceived idea by her extended family that she would attend college and that when it was time to make a choice and that “their support meant a lot.” She discussed that she did not feel pressured to attend college and that she did not have negative ideas about college from her family like some of her rural peers. She said “it was never like, oh really, you’re gonna move off. You don’t think this area is good enough for you, type thing. I never had that. They were definitely always supportive.”

Participant F discussed that his extended family supported his desire to attend college, but that no one really understood what it meant to go to college or the benefits that might come with it. Although his parent’s both had college degrees, they still lived in the same hometown where they were raised and lived a lifestyle that reflected the same values of the extended family. He described the emotional support that they provided fostered a motivation in him “to make them proud.” He discussed the support of his defined extended family as including his girlfriend. He explained that she was a motivating factor in his reason to attend the University of Arkansas. He said “she was a big influence on me to do something and I knew I would have her full support with us both choosing here.”

Theme #3 Family as a Barrier to Enrollment

All of the students in study the discussed positive parental support in pursuing college enrollment at some point in the decision-making process. Some participants discussed the emotional support from their parents and families playing a larger role in helping them pursue entrance than others, while some discussed facing an internal conflict in deciding to leave their rural communities. Although some participants parents had attended college or had college degrees, not all of them had the needed college going knowledge to fully support the needs of the participants.

Participant F discussed touring Southern Arkansas University (SAU) with his parents his senior year of high school and it he said that it felt like an extension of his hometown. He explained that although he loved his home community and that SAU was closer to home, he knew that the tour was ultimately pointed him toward “something bigger” at the University of Arkansas. He said “it was the culture here (University of Arkansas) that was something different. The old-style buildings and being able to walk around campus, I could feel it, just everything felt right.” He explained that he experienced an internal conflict making his decision to pursue college further away from home, saying “my biggest obstacle was leaving my family to deal with the farm...I had to help a lot. I was relied on”.

Participant B said that his community and supportive relationship with his family often provided an obstacle for him when considering his college opportunities away from home, noting that “being away from home [is a] a big obstacle.” He knew that his parents needed a lot of help on the farm and that the idea of his mom and younger sister having to take his place doing work did not sit well with him. He explained that his choice in leaving his hometown to attend college was hard and that he knew his family would be burdened without him staying closer to home.

Participant C discussed the anxiety and rift in the relationship that the pursuit of college entrance caused between her and her parents. She explained that although they had always provided academic encouragement toward college throughout high school, her parents did not support her desire to attend the University of Arkansas specifically. Despite their pressure, she pursued UA without their support. She was left to figure out the college process on her own, how to secure funding to support her enrollment, and received no emotional support.

Participant D described the influence of her parents in providing emotional support for her choice to go to college. She explained “they kind of said it, like, if that’s what you want to do, go do it. Good for you.” She discussed that neither parent had a college degree and that her father had a limited knowledge of college through a brief enrollment. She explained that while her parents supported her efforts to pursue college, they were not in a situation to help pay for it or how to advise seeking assistance.

Participant E explained that she did not always have the type of help needed at home to support her enrollment in college. Although her mother had some college experience and encouraged her to seek college enrollment, she did not have the full understanding of the college going process to guide her. She explained that she could count on her family’s presence in her life and knew she was supported, but the lack of college going knowledge hindered their ability to provide the specific support she needed. She explained that her extended family had an understanding that “the world is changing” outside of their community and that a college degree is beneficial in pursuing a career. However, she stated

they were very supportive. They just didn’t know how to support or what to do to support me. It was like, yeah, go to college. It’s good. But, never like, you need to be applying for scholarships or, like those specific things to support me.

Participant A discussed a difference of opinion between different sides of his family. Although his grandparents supported his educational decisions and pursuit of a college education, his extended family did not. He explained that the majority of his family lived in the same small town, and said “my maternal side of the family was very ingrained in the culture of, “why would you want to leave? We are all here. Why would you want anything else?”.

The participants in the study described their immediate and extended families in positive and negative ways when discussing their decisions to enroll in college. The importance of parental and extended family support was a highlighted theme throughout the study as participants discussed the ways in which they received financial, academic, and emotional support, as well as, barriers they experienced throughout the process. Participants discussed being encouraged to attend college and the influence of that support in their ultimate decision to pursue college enrollment. However, some participants did express obstacles faced when speaking with their parents and family due to unfamiliarity with the processes required to explore options in seeking college enrollment and that they would leave their homes, face those adjustments of being someplace unfamiliar, and possibly not returning to their hometowns.

Research Question 3: How did college students from rural Arkansas describe the influence of their communities on their decision to attend college generally, and the University of Arkansas specifically?

Participants in the study shared their personal experiences in their rural communities and highlighted descriptors of influence surrounding their decision to pursue college enrollment. Participants were asked several questions that prompted responses surrounding their community culture, religious affiliations and involvement, civic agencies, and informal associations in the places they called home. These questions were asked to better understand how rural communities

might be perceived to have influenced rural student college going aspirations and college enrollment decisions. From these conversations, two themes emerged that helped answer question number three: perceived negative influence of high school educators and student perception of community as personal and emotional support.

Theme #1 Perceived Negative Influence of High School Educators

Participants discussed feeling that their local teachers and counselors had a lack of college going knowledge and did not share information supporting a variety of college going opportunities as often as they should have. Participants discussed that educators had little knowledge of college going opportunities that were different than where their individual educators had attended college. Participant's discussed that teachers would commonly talk negatively about college options that were not the same route in which they had taken in earning their college degrees. These conversations projected negative views surrounding financial aid opportunities, the possibility of affordability, major selection, and future career opportunity at UA. Although many educators were individually viewed as mentors or encouragers in helping guide student thoughts, a common theme emerged that suggested high school teachers and counselors were not equipped with enough knowledge and time to connect students to appropriate amounts of college going resources. Participants shared that they often perceived their community educators as a negative influence when considering college opportunities and their decision to pursue college enrollment.

Participant B discussed that one of his greatest challenges seeking college enrollment at the UA was defending his desire to leave his community to his local teachers. He described his educators as, "haters." He stated, "I mean, I would say 90% of the educators in my school were SAU educated people, so they were big Mule Rider fans. They very much pushed their alma

mater.” He explained that he had applied to several school and looked at his options, but when he received his acceptance to UA the feedback he received from the teachers he looked up to was negative. He commented that they would say “I am proud of you. It was more of how are you going to pay for it? Is it really where you want to go? It was always negative.”

Participant F discussed that his high school teachers and guidance counselor were too busy to help answer student questions about college. His perception was that “Teachers were there to do their jobs, you know, teaching the students in their classroom.” He went on “there wasn’t real support for higher education.” He explained that he had received little help in navigating his college choices at the high school level and the help he did receive was perceived as a barrier that caused frustration, not support. He said “the counselor would send weekly scholarship lists that half of them were scams, repeats, and stuff that was past due. I think I we spoke to the counselor a couple of times, just at an assembly.”

Participant E described that one of her main challenges in pursuing college enrollment was a lack of college going support in her community from her guidance counselors. She said “I was very underwhelmed by the information given out about college.” She explained that information was provided, but not individualized for students based on their interests or financial needs. She stated “our counselor did just enough to make parents think that she was giving everyone all the information they needed.” She remembered that the counselor, “took all of us to the cafeteria as seniors, in like March, and had us all apply for the Challenge Scholarship. That’s the only thing she did college-wise for us.” She discussed that her high school had an additional college preparation counselor who was supposed to connect students to college opportunities and set up recruitment events. She explained that when opportunities were presented that the events were poorly run. She stated “I know a couple colleges came to the high school and talked,

nobody went, just because it wasn't advertised, it wasn't promoted." She described these events as seeming spontaneous and without purpose. She continued

they would just come in and set up. It would be like one college on a random day and they would just set up in the library. They never attended classes to say, like, 'Hey, I'm here.' They set up in the library during lunch and that was it.

Participant E also discussed the overall administration and high school teachers not promoting a supportive environment to help students explore a variety of college going options. She described an environment that fostered contention from teachers if students were not planning to attend Arkansas Tech. She said "a lot of them graduated from there and that their alma mater passion, I guess." She explained that when she would talk about her choice to attend a community college and then transfer to the University of Arkansas she had teachers question her choices. She recalled teachers repeatedly telling her "Hey, you know Arkansas Tech is so much cheaper. Why don't you go there?" She remembered another teacher condescendingly say, "Oh, you're not going to Arkansas Tech? Like, why?"

Participant D recalled having to figure things out on her own because her high school guidance counselor was too busy. She explained that she constantly felt confused about college choices and the application process being a challenge, commenting "I had to go through it all by myself basically. I tried to talk to my counselor as much as I could, but she had everybody else that she had to talk to also, so I didn't get many chances." She explained that the lack of help and support was one of her largest obstacles in deciding where to attend college and how to pay for it.

Theme #2 Student Perception of Community as Personal and Emotional Support

Participants discussed their personal perceptions of support they each received within their home communities beyond their parents and local schools. The additional personal and emotional support that influenced their college going decisions came from a variety of sources that included interactions with local religious affiliations, community colleges, informal networks, and other local community groups.

Participant B discussed the impact of his community church in playing a key role in his character development. He said “at church everybody always asked me how classes are going, what grade I’m in, and just always very supportive.” He explained that the emotional support provided structure that encouraged him to seek the best college he could attend in state, the University of Arkansas. He explained that few students left the community to attend the University of Arkansas due to his community being very small and “people are not extremely well off.” He continued “we had senior Sunday and I think my church family gave me a little under \$1,500 in graduation presents. I was the only senior at my church that year who was even going to college. So, I think that’s just a testament to their support to me.” Participant C explained knowing her church was a source of encouragement in supporting her personal decision to enroll in college. She explained that members of the church were always asking her about college and “like, finding out what I wanted to do.” Participant E described her decision to pursue college enrollment by stating “I feel like, just the community had a huge part in mine.” She described her church affiliations as “very rural,” and as a “religious area” that was “very supportive.” Participant D explained that although the churches did not involve themselves specifically in academics that churches were supportive. Her perception was that they were “proud that we were doing something productive with our lives.”

Participants also discussed the importance of their local community college programs in helping to influence their decisions to attend college. Participant F described not knowing how he would be able to fully afford college. Although his brother had previously attended college, he did not know how the FAFSA worked. He stated “My mom helped a lot on that. She would take it up to the satellite campus...and their scholarship lady would help her fill it out.”

Participant G discussed that although her high school did not provide specific information surrounding the FAFSA that they did allow the local community college to come provide a presentation for those that were considering college enrollment.

Participant B said that “My community college was super, super supportive.” He explained that although his high school did not offer many opportunities to explore college, career choices, or how to seek financial aid, the local community college did. He said

the career coach was super helpful with me finding scholarships, understanding financial aid, and things like that. I knew being a first gen student I couldn't ask my parents, so I kind of went to her for things like that. Extremely helpful lady. Probably one of the guiding reasons why I did so well with scholarship applications and stuff like that.

Participant E discussed that her initial decision to transfer to the University of Arkansas after a community college degree was based on encouragement received from her community connections and the support received while attending the community college. She described her community college as being

very supportive of me going to the U of A. I mean, they have done highlights of me. I did an interview. Just, I guess, student spotlight type things while going

there and about my future at the U of A. So, they were very, very, supportive of me coming to the U of A.

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While at the community college her ideas were further solidified toward enrollment at the University of Arkansas when the “Ag Club” took students on a tour there, saying “we came up there and toured Bumpers College and that made a huge impression on me.” She recalled that not only was the trip impactful for her, but “for other students who maybe didn’t know that next step, that was really helpful for them.”

Participants discussed receiving support and encouragement from a variety of personal connections in their communities outside of their family that helped guide their decision toward college enrollment. These connections came from peer support, peer parental support, and general members of the community. Participant D highlighted the importance of her peers and peer parental support in influencing her decision to go to college. She explained that her friends, “encouraged me to do my best.” She discussed that one of the motivating factors in deciding to pursue the University of Arkansas was her best friend choosing to attend and their decision to room together. She remembered her friend’s parents encouraging them to go to college and to do

something productive. She discussed the importance of knowing that if she attended college with her support network she knew she would be ok. Remembering how she felt making the decision, she stated “If I’m running a low a little bit, I think they will encourage me.”

Participant E discussed the importance of her rural community organizations that influenced her decision to pursue enrollment at the University of Arkansas. She explained that through 4-H she had met a lot of people that she considered mentors and that “the majority of those were graduates of the U of A.” She explained that through 4-H and Extension staff she met she was able to connect with her local Farm Bureau and Rotary Club organizations that further opened her eyes to careers in agriculture and solidified her college enrollment decisions.

Participant F highlighted his girlfriend as a source of support in the decision to pursue entrance at the University of Arkansas. Her emotional support and their decision to attend college together prompted his enrollment.

Participant B discussed the importance of his friends as support networks. Knowing he would have to leave them in the rural community to pursue college was a hard decision for him. He explained that “I’m grateful for my friends. I’ve had the same best friend since I was six or seven years old and nothings really gonna change that.” He explained that his community connection was a bond that he knew could not be broken if he left, and one that he knew would provide encouragement and motivation to be successful. He explained that when he was in high school he had a friend a few years older pursue animal science at the University of Arkansas. Her influence motivated him to find out what the University was like. He said “She was a big push for me to come here. She was always willing to questions and things like that.” He looked up to her knowing that besides her “there was nobody from my high school that came to the U of A for like, six years.”

Participant G discussed feeling support from her friends and their families when considering college as an option. She explained that only three or four students from her class went to college and that she was the only one who pursued entrance at the University of Arkansas. She stated “We went to different schools. So, kind of them wanting to go to college too, really pushed me to want to go.” She explained that she felt a sense of comfort in making her choice to attend the University of Arkansas knowing that her sister would join her in a year after high school graduation and that friends who went to a community college would be transferring.

Participants’ described their high school teachers and guidance counselors as authority figures and upstanding citizens in their communities, but did not rely on them for complete support in the pursuit of college enrollment. Although participants suggested that the majority of educators in the rural communities were supportive of college enrollment, they did not always seem to know about or provide information to students in a way that promoted positive social or emotional support from their community in guiding college going decisions. Participants’ personal experiences with community members outside of the high school setting positively influenced their decision to pursue college enrollment at the University of Arkansas. Personal and emotional support was described by participants coming from peers and mentor support in the community, such as, churches, organizations, peers, and peer family members. The encouragement received from these affiliations influenced their personal decisions and motivations to enroll in college.

Research Question 4: What recommendations did college students from rural Arkansas have for the better recruitment of rural college students to the University of Arkansas?

Throughout the interview process participants described influences that encouraged the pursuit of college enrollment. The fourth research question sought direct recommendations from rural Arkansas students on how to better recruit students like themselves to the University of Arkansas. Two main themes emerged from the study participants that answered question four: provide outreach and presence in rural areas and make financial aid opportunities known.

Theme #1: Provide Outreach and Presence in Rural Areas

All of the participants in the study had home communities at least 100 miles away from the University of Arkansas campus. Participants discussed that the distance to UA from their home communities hindered their opportunity to tour campus and learn about other opportunities when exploring their initial college options. Out of the 7 participants, only 3 had actually set foot on the University of Arkansas campus prior to their initial enrollment, with only one of the participants recalling a University of Arkansas recruiter coming to his high school. Participants described a lack of exposure to college going information in their rural communities through a deficit lens, as lacking opportunity to understand what differing colleges offered, major types, and career trajectories for personal growth past high school graduation. The lack of presence by the University of Arkansas or unknown academic opportunities in Bumpers College was discussed at some level by all of the participants in the study.

Participant A explained that his original major was biology with the intent to pursue medical school and that he had never been made aware of pre-professional programs offered in the Bumpers College. He explained that if he told his rural community friends, “I’m in Bumpers College. They’d be like, what the hell is that?” He explained that there was very little presence of the University of Arkansas in his community and was why students from there did not always see it as a viable college going destination.

Participant G discussed that she did not recall University of Arkansas recruiters ever having a presence at her high school and that very little opportunity to attend was made aware to students. She explained that in her rural community there were a lot of students who did not have anyone pushing them to go to college, especially one that was viewed as expensive. She discussed these students in a way that suggested the feeling of invisibility to the world outside of her community, as if no one cared for them. She stated “a lot of people don’t know that there’s a bigger world out there that you can experience.” She explained that even if students wanted to pursue college enrollment “they don’t know what to do, because their family didn’t do it.” She also said “they just don’t know how or have the resources to go.” Her recommendation for the recruitment of rural students by UA was to “go after that don’t have people at home, like pushing them to go to college.” She explained that the University should “do a better job of just reaching out to those students and letting them know that they really want them here.” Her recommendation of how this could be accomplished was through recruiters going to smaller districts more often. She suggested, sending counselors more presentations, videos, or something that are centered around kids from small areas so that they feel like they are noticed.”

Participant D discussed that she had not toured the University of Arkansas prior to enrollment. She did not recall a time in which a recruiter from the University of Arkansas came to her high school but did remember several other colleges who had a regular presence in her school. She explained that she did not drive and that her family did not have a reliable vehicle useable for long distances. The drive from her rural community to campus would have been a struggle on its own, due to the time away from work for her parents and the overall distance. She stated “Our truck is kind of not the best. So, like, being able to get here was an obstacle.” She

explained that when her family needed to go somewhere it required her parents to ask a neighbor, and they would allow them the use of a vehicle.

Participant B recalled that there was no presence in his community that included the University of Arkansas recruiting students. He did not remember seeing a recruiter from the University of Arkansas ever come to his high school.

I had never seen Bumpers College when I was in high school. I had no idea what it was. Matter of fact, I Googled ag majors in Arkansas and called the Dean's Office...I only got to come here once [because] a four-and half-hour drive is a big deal. I worked throughout high school. I was very involved in like, organizations and school in general. I was senior class president. I would have loved to come and meet faculty and stuff like that as a student.

He explained that in order to recruit students from rural areas like himself that the University must have, "presence within those communities, even if you get one student a year. That one student might be the best student. It might be a life changing opportunity for that student to just talk to a recruiter from the U of A."

Participant C discussed that she was not aware of a University of Arkansas recruiter ever coming to her high school, but she was aware of opportunities at Bumpers College from a family friend and through participation in FFA and through a college fair at community college in the next county. She explained that although she was aware of the types of majors and opportunities provided, her parents and friends were not always on the same page. She said "my friends outside of FFA didn't really understand what I was doing, but my FFA friends did." She explained that because of the face value of attendance and lack of recruitment in the community,

her parents chose to not view the University as desiring her. She said “they didn’t even come to tour with me, so they didn’t get to see what this could do for me.” When prompted to discuss how the University could attract more students like her she explained that in order to recruit students from her community the University must make college opportunities known on the students level, explain the offerings, and view student needs as individuals before their junior year. She explained that “talking about it more in depth, than just saying ‘oh, you need to go to college’ would help.”

Participant E described remembering general U of A recruiters coming to her high school, but that they were not a regular presence in the school or at community events. She explained that when recruiters did come to the high school that students did not view them as approachable. She stated “it was a very awkward encounter, of one person sitting in the library that you had to whisper in, and talking one on one when you are a high school and you don’t know what to ask.” She discussed the presence that the local community college had in the high school and that the opportunities there “were integrated in us.” She expressed that the same presence was felt in the community surrounding student opportunities at Arkansas Tech because that is where “concurrent credit courses were taught.” Her recommendation for attracting students to the University of Arkansas was that the University needed to be integrated in the community to “educate the higher personnel [counselors and principals]” in the schools and highlight college opportunity there. She explained that by “getting out there and participating” in the community would help change minds. She explained that having a stronger presence “is not necessarily going to the county fair and helping with the stalls,” but “educating the teachers, or you know, prominent community members, changing their minds and showing them how affordable the University is, then trickles down to students.”

Theme #2 Make Financial Aid Opportunities Known

Participants' discussed how financial aid understanding and opportunity needed to be better highlighted and offered in rural communities to students, parents, teachers, counselors, and community members.

Participant B explained that financial equity was the biggest obstacle for rural students to attend the University of Arkansas and that opportunities are not always known. He said "I think rural students are just like any other student. I mean, they have to want to do great things, but they may have less resources." These unknown opportunities to resources are what hinders understanding and why many students have not perceived the University to be an option. He said the "U of A is very expensive compared to other state schools. I think me decision truly wasn't made until I got all my final scholarships offers." He explained that to attract students like himself, the University needed to provide

scholarship dollars, specifically in rural communities. Often times, when you look at rural areas it may not be the G.P.A. or A.C.T. score lacks, but it's more the families who are working in plants instead of fortune 500 companies. I think offering those scholarship dollars to the students who need them is what universities needs to shift to. I'm a big supporter of need based over merit-based scholarships. I think everybody should have equal access to quality education.

Participant A expressed that there were often students from his community that considered the University of Arkansas but would dismiss the option without exploring the possibility. He explained that many teachers and students in his home community viewed the University of Arkansas as inaccessible due to cost. He stated "Everyone I went to high school

with either went to like, Tech or UFS, nobody really went to U of A because they thought, I can't afford that. I'm not uppity." He explained that the University needed to work toward making college and financial aid options more available to students "or at least making it appear as accessible" in order to attract students from rural areas. He suggested that the unknown opportunities are hidden from students in the shadow of the "biggest and most renowned public school in Arkansas." His recommendation was to pull away the facade of prestige and explain the individual ways in which the University can be made more financially accessible to students from rural areas.

Participant C explained that although she was able to connect with a recruiter at a community college fair, specific information tailored to her needs was not available. She stated "when I asked the recruiter about scholarships she just kind of like, 'well, it depends on a bunch of stuff,'" and never said like, a number." She explained that not only was the information not provided, she was not provided any way to follow up on where she could find answers to her questions. Her recommendation for recruiting more students from her local area was to make scholarship opportunities better known.

Participant E indicated that the funding opportunities at her rural community college were well known in the community and were highlighted as better options for students than the University of Arkansas. She explained "I know that's where I started hearing it. That, oh my gosh, U of A is so expensive. You can never afford Fayetteville." She went on "It's just this idea that people have in their mind that is never going to change." She expressed her opinion that her local community viewed the University of Arkansas as out of reach and more expensive than other college options.

Everyone in my community, as well as, high school talk about how affordable Arkansas Tech is. But, when you compare them they're really not that much cheaper than the U of A. I never had to take out student loans, but funding was a major deciding factor in choosing the route that I chose.

When prompted to discuss ways to better attract students like her from rural areas, she recommended that "I think just breaking down the financial costs" to everyone involved would help. Additionally, she recommended that "Educating the high schools would make a huge difference in and allow these students to consider U of A, that might not otherwise."

Participant F explained that he did not recall a time when the University of Arkansas came to his high school. When discussing the University of Arkansas he explained that most of his friends did not consider it an option because of cost. He stated

most of my friends, they went to community colleges because they didn't think they can make it here. They didn't know how great Bumpers was at giving out money and that, you know, everything that you can accomplish."

His recommendations for recruiting students from his community was simple, "come talk." He then emphasized that UA should "show them that they can get to this point."

The answer to question four is that participants' personal recommendations for recruiting rural college students to the University of Arkansas surrounded the need for information supporting how to enroll and to better integrate UA into their local communities. Participants expressed that the UA should provide more individualized recruitment in rural areas to improve communication. Additionally, financial aid opportunities should be better explained to school

counselors, teachers, families, and students for individual majors and colleges in the University of Arkansas. Participants expressed their recommendations that teachers, counselors, and community members needed to be provided more information on opportunities at the University of Arkansas that could better connect and influence student college going decisions. Through these endeavors, rural communities and students would better understand college going options in general and at the University of Arkansas in specific.

D. Chapter Summary

The chapter provided a summary of the overall study reflecting semi-structured interviews of 7 students from rural communities in the State of Arkansas. The interviews helped to explore the participants individual stories and answer the four research questions the study sought to answer. Through this exploration, participants identified underlying reasons that they perceived to have influenced their rural communities helping in formulating their decisions to go to college.

Chapter V. Conclusions, Recommendations, and Discussion

The study explored how rural student college going decisions are shaped by the rural communities from which they have come. Missed and unknown opportunities shape rural student understandings of the college going process in ways that can be perceived to influence their decision to pursue specific degrees, colleges, and other post-secondary opportunities. The current study explored the roles that rural communities play in shaping rural student college going decisions and how rural identity is perceived to have influenced decisions surrounding the pursuit of college enrollment. The study highlighted the importance of including rural student groups in research surrounding the influences that guide decisions toward college enrollment.

Rural student college going decisions were highlighted by the role of emotional support from community influences and participant families. The study demonstrated that community and family are described as providing emotional support for rural students, but often cause internal conflict for students when considering the option to leave their home areas. These findings also highlighted a lack of college going knowledge and through the feelings of being a burden to families. The study sought to describe any underlying uniqueness of rural students and their communities that may have prompted the pursuit of college enrollment.

The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the community and cultural experiences that impacted successful college enrollment at the University of Arkansas and how rural communities influenced college enrollment decisions. This final chapter presents a brief overview of the study's focus and the findings of the four research questions. The overall implications for the study has been summarized and discussed in terms of practice. The chapter provides final conclusions, recommendations for practice, a general discussion of the findings,

and recommendations for future researchers, policymakers, and institutions of higher education surrounding rural student's college going decisions.

A. Summary of the Study

The summary of the study discusses the four research questions the study sought to answer. The research questions results came directly from the responses of 7 interview participants. Participants from the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, within the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences were sought based on convenience to the researcher and the willingness to participate within the study. An initial goal of 5-10 students was planned to be recruited and was determined to be an appropriate number of participants to gather and analyze how rural students make the decision to pursue college and their overall experiences as a case study. This selection was based on best practices within qualitative research and knowing that previous studies have generated positive results with participants ranging from 1-365, as discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Participants' for the study were determined to indeed be from rural backgrounds once confirmed for participation. The definition of 'rural' used for the study came from the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) and described as any county that contained a population of less than 49,999 residents (USDA, 2012). The researcher purposefully selected participants from Arkansas counties that consisted of populations of less than 15,000, as well as, only students who graduated from Arkansas public schools in order to provide a stronger sense of validity for the definition of rural and due to this specific population being identified as more at-risk for not attending college (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Participants' were sought using purposeful sampling and identified as: (a) enrolled full-time undergraduate student at the University of Arkansas in good standing, (b) had a declared major within the school of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences, (c) was an Arkansas resident from a county of less than 15,000, (d) graduated from an Arkansas public school, and (e) agreed to participate within the research study. All information gathered provided descriptive data from similar rural settings that highlighted the experiences of rural students in choosing to attend college. Descriptions of rural community influence that impacted the pursuit of college going decisions are discussed throughout the chapter.

Research Question #1 How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their personal experiences that prompted their enrollment at the University of Arkansas?

The interviews resulted in four main themes emerging from the findings that prompted the pursuit of enrollment at the University of Arkansas; desire for circumstantial change, sense of personal empowerment, academic and organizational involvement, and influence of educational support. Participant experiences that prompted college enrollment at the University of Arkansas was described as a desire for a change in lifestyle from their rural surrounding. Participants described their rural communities as an insulator from the world, lacking opportunity. The descriptions suggested that the participants rural communities foster inside of them a sense of personal empowerment. This inner passion suggested that the rural participants had developed from interactions in their communities a grit that enabled them to pursue college entrance. Participants described that their academic and organizational involvement had also empowered them to better learn about opportunities outside of their home communities. These opportunities provided positive experiences that helped connect college going knowledge directly to participants and ultimately helped influence their academic choices and decision to pursue

college enrollment. Many of these descriptions involved the positive influence of underlying educational support found in the participant schools and community. The added support of caring teachers and mentors provided social and emotional motivation that influenced the decision to pursue college enrollment at the University of Arkansas.

Research Question #2 How did college students from rural Arkansas describe their interactions, relationships, and experiences with immediate and extended family in making the decision to enroll at the University of Arkansas?

The interviews resulted in three main themes emerging from the findings that helped answer question number two: parental support as motivator for college enrollment, interactions with extended family as encouragement, and family as a barrier to enrollment. The participants in the study described their immediate and extended families in positive and negative ways when discussing their decisions to enroll in college. The importance of parental and extended family support was a highlighted theme throughout the study as participants discussed the ways in which they received financial, academic, and emotional support, as well as, barriers they experienced throughout the process. Participants discussed being encouraged to attend college and the influence of that support in their ultimate decision to pursue college enrollment. However, some participants did express obstacles faced when speaking with their parents and family due to unfamiliarity with the processes required to explore options in seeking college enrollment and that they would leave their homes, face those adjustments of being someplace unfamiliar, and possibly not returning to their hometowns.

Research Question #3 How did college students from rural Arkansas describe the influence of their communities on their decision to attend college generally, and the University of Arkansas specifically.

The interviews resulted in two themes emerging from the findings that helped answer question number three: perceived negative influence of high school educators and student perception of community as personal and emotional support. Participants' described their high school teachers and guidance counselors as authority figures and upstanding citizens in their communities, but did not rely on them for complete support in the pursuit of college enrollment. Although participants suggested that the majority of educators in the rural communities were supportive of college enrollment, they did not always seem to know about or provide information to students in a way that promoted positive social or emotional support from their community in guiding college going decisions. Participants' personal experiences with community members outside of the high school setting positively influenced their decision to pursue college enrollment at the University of Arkansas. Personal and emotional support was described by participants coming from peers and mentor support in the community, such as, churches, organizations, peers, and peer family members. The encouragement received from these affiliations influenced their personal decisions and motivations to enroll in college.

Research Question #4 What recommendations do college students from rural Arkansas have for the better recruitment of rural college students to the University of Arkansas?

The interviews resulted in two main themes emerging from the findings that helped answer question number four: provide outreach and presence in rural areas and make financial aid opportunities known. The answer to question four is that participants' personal recommendations for recruiting rural college students to the University of Arkansas surrounded the need for information supporting how to enroll and to better integrate UA into their local communities. Participants expressed that the UA should provide more individualized recruitment in rural areas to improve communication. Additionally, financial aid opportunities should be

better explained to school counselors, teachers, families, and students for individual majors and colleges in the University of Arkansas. Participants expressed their recommendations that teachers, counselors, and community members needed to be provided more information on opportunities at the University of Arkansas that could better connect and influence student college going decisions. Through these endeavors, rural communities and students would better understand college going options in general and at the University of Arkansas in specific.

B. Conclusions

1. Rural communities are perceived to influence college going decisions of students from their local area. Through the lens of community expectancy, students were motivated by informal and formal education bodies that connected them to college going resources and beyond. The rural community served as a motivator that influenced students to seek college enrollment through social, cultural, human, and economic capital variables.

2. Interactions with immediate and extended family played a key role in influencing rural student college going decisions in positive and negative ways. Social and cultural capital values served as emotional support that encouraged students to ultimately seek college enrollment. In turn, these motivators influenced personal development that aided students in forming their own identity and future educational path.

3. The more social capital that rural students are emotionally supported by in their communities reflects positively on making decisions that lead toward college enrollment, especially if introduced to college going information at younger ages.

4. Access to college going interactions in rural communities are inequitable and rural students are an underserved demographic. Participants reported that policy measures should be put in place to better provide individualized outreach to rural districts, connect resources to rural

areas that support college going pathways and highlight financial aid opportunities that influence college enrollment decisions.

C. Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

Because the study used a purposeful sample from the State of Arkansas, it is likely that the findings and conclusions made in it are not fully applicable to other states or regions and are not generalizable to other rural student populations or other universities. Through my personal life experiences as a rural student, knowledge of national trends surrounding rural student entrance barriers, and through this study, I am providing six recommendations as an opportunity to better influence rural student experiences and college going decisions. The results of the study provide supporting evidence that rural communities influence rural student college enrollment decisions. Identifying the ways in which rural communities receive, promote, and prompt college enrollment opportunities is important for the development of new policies and programs geared toward improving college going pathways for rural Arkansas students. State, institutional, and college administrations must make it a priority to find better ways to promote college going information and opportunities to rural communities. Specifically, opportunities to embed college going knowledge within secondary classrooms and programs such as; FFA, 4-H, and FCCLA must be made a priority. These connections should be targeted initiatives by college recruiters to embed college going information within the school community and within professional development opportunities for the benefit of educators, students, and families.

1. State and institutional efforts should be undertaken to assess the unequitable distribution of college going resources and information to underserved rural Arkansas counties. Programs funded and designed to implement these criteria should be put into place as a

partnership between the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and the Arkansas Department of Education working with colleges and universities in the state of Arkansas.

2. Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences should conduct an assessment of students in their programs from rural counties compared to school visits completed in the individual community. Intentional efforts to go to rural districts that the College has no students from should be a priority. These visits should include opportunities to meet with students, parents, a discussion with educators within the schools, potential community partners, and local community colleges with related programs to discuss potential partnerships and opportunities at the University of Arkansas that influence college enrollment decisions. Additionally, the College should consider offering first-generation college student specific information when recruiting and at admissions events for students and families that aid in understanding college going processes and future student transitions.

3. Professional development opportunities should be highlighted to high school educators that support college going information to all types of colleges and universities in the state of Arkansas. Programming should include the various types of majors, career outcomes, student support programs, and financial aid opportunities that exist at varying institutions. These efforts would provide the opportunity for colleges and universities to share information directly with educators in school districts and foster rapport between institutions and the secondary setting. In essence, college and universities would be recruiting the educator to help support college going pathways.

4. Colleges, universities, and school districts should work together to develop programming that influences college going decisions at younger ages. Rural districts should be provided opportunities to immerse students in college campus experiences prior to their junior or

senior year of high school that promote college going decisions. Colleges and universities should build pipeline and bridge pre-college programming through partnerships with high schools for underserved areas that provides educational interventions and college readiness preparation. Through these efforts an attempt would be made to increase knowledge, increase enrollment rates, and teach students about financial aid opportunities that influences college enrollment decisions and increase college readiness. Involving parents within an entrance or post program session would influence parental understanding and allow for questions to be ask. These efforts would enhance the overall chance of students seeking college enrollment, applying for financial aid, and in helping better formulate understanding of college enrollment requirements.

5. Parents and students need to be provided intentional opportunities to receive college going information earlier than 11th and 12th grade. Campus tours should be made readily available that connect students and parents to the various types of majors, career outcomes, student support programs, and financial aid opportunities specific to individual college or departmental offerings. Tours should focus on the individual desires, but be intentional in discussing connected or adjacent opportunities that might be unknown through connections with academic advisors and student services offerings within the College.

6. Efforts should be made to connect information that ties recruitment to student success initiatives on campus prior to admission and once students become fully matriculated. Specific to Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences, first-year experience programming would include new student orientation, extended orientation programming within Bumpers College R.O.C.K. Camp, introduction of the Ag Living Learning Community, and resources provided within Student Support Services and TRIO programming. All of these efforts

help to ensure a successful college transition, help foster community within the college setting, and help ensure that underserved students are provided the knowledge necessary for success.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Future research could be completed that includes specific identity influences of rural students. An exploration of high achieving rural students, rural first-generation college students, specific genders, sexual identity, or rural students from differing ethnic backgrounds could further be explored to highlight barriers and influences toward enrollment these students face when considering college opportunities.

2. The study could be extended to include rural populations larger than 15,000 in the State of Arkansas and outside of a case study setting to compare variables that influence college enrollment decisions for rural students. Variables could include the influence of specific community-based organizations, financial backgrounds, single parent households, and religious affiliations. A study of this type could help uncover additional academic capital that may support college going decisions.

3. Future research could include a longitudinal study that examines perceptions and precollege influences on college enrollment and the correlation to college persistence, retention, and graduation for rural students. More research should be conducted surrounding supports in place on college campuses and the role of institutional agents that work with these students.

4. Future research could include exploring how rural parents and educators view their rural communities' relationship and role on influencing college going decisions and how appropriate supports could be provided to them in helping support rural student college enrollment decisions.

5. The study could be extended to include specific majors or targeted career outcomes that may influence college aspirations and enrollment decisions for rural students.

6. Case study research could be completed that compares varying communities to one another to help explore college enrollment influences and barriers to enrollment for rural students from differing regions of Arkansas.

7. As rural communities were found to be motivators of college enrollment, further research could be conducted that explores the resiliency of rural students in pursuit of a college degree from individual communities or other highly rural states to identify similarities and differences.

D. Discussion

The purpose for conducting the study was to describe the community and cultural experiences of individuals from rural Arkansas that were perceived to have impacted their enrollment decisions and degree selection at the University of Arkansas. The findings have importance for all rural students and communities, and ultimately, public policy and institutional behaviors. For myself, the study has reaffirmed my dedication to students and desire to help shape thought and impact change in rural Arkansas communities. Through reflection of my own personal journey I realize that being a first-generation college student never ends and that the uniqueness of each individual is even more important. The study adds to research surrounding college going needs of rural students and rural America by emphasizing the role that individual communities play in influencing college going decisions for this underserved demographic.

Past literature has primarily focused on barriers that rural students face when pursuing college enrollment. Literature supporting rural students in the pursuit of enrollment has not as fully been researched and is an area that needs more attention, as this study highlighted. All 7

participants acknowledged that their rural community provided barriers to enrollment and also varying levels of opportunity that supported students in building college going aspirations. The participants' suggested that they felt marginalized and forgotten about when making decisions to pursue college enrollment and were happy that someone was highlighting the need to focus on helping students from rural areas. Despite the many of the barriers to college enrollment not providing a specific uniqueness of rural students, the rural communities themselves provided reason to consider additional implications that influence college enrollment decisions for underserved rural students.

The qualitative exploration of the study has provided supporting evidence as to why rural Arkansas students entering college at lower rates than their peers. The study touched on subjects that surrounded cultural traits, learned value systems, local economies, connections to college campuses and parental influence as both barriers and influences that affect rural student aspiration and college enrollment decisions. The study suggested that rural youth have a higher possibility of being a first-generation college student and led to a lack of understanding surrounding possible college going opportunities. The study highlighted that rural local communities play an exceptional role in influencing college attendance, possibly even more so than personal achievement or family expectations. Despite this, family interactions and desire to see their children further develop is an exceptionally important influence for rural students in making the decision to pursue college entrance.

There were limitations to the study that included only looking at a small number of students from the case study institution and the results not being generalizable to other institutions. The participants' hometowns, individual counties, our majors being pursued were not compared in anyway as they might be in a quantitative study. Additionally, the participants

were not all from the same classification within the college setting and some were transfer students. Further, some of the participants were from nuclear, single parent, and adopted families that were not explored within the study. Due to the nature of the study not focusing specifically on certain community characteristics, further research is needed to pinpoint specific issues within each rural community for more accurate context.

E. Chapter Summary

This chapter was written for the purpose of providing insight in to better understanding underserved rural student enrollment decisions and in the hopes of promoting further research. This chapter's intent was to assist the University of Arkansas and policy makers at all levels, including high schools, to include underserved rural students as a group needing acknowledgment when formulating policies that support college going pathways, entrance, retention, and graduation. The chapter included individual answers to the research questions within the overall summary of the study. Four conclusions were made from that study that were made through the theoretical lens of community expectancy. These conclusions were applied to look at potential areas of need to better influence underserved rural student college going decisions. These conclusions provide opportunity to pursue future research that will aid in helping highlight the need to further study the influences of rural student college enrollment decisions, as well as, implications for college retention and graduation of the rural demographic. The conclusions were used to make suggestions for better developing policy and programs that influence college going decisions, community engagement, and improving college attendance rates for underserved rural students within the State of Arkansas.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Initial Request for Student Participation

Subject: Research Study on Rural Arkansas Students Within Bumpers College

Dr. Fields,

Good afternoon. I hope this finds you well. I am writing to inform you of my desire to conduct a qualitative research study that seeks to describe how students from rural Arkansas communities developed their decision to pursue college enrollment at the University of Arkansas. The study, "Rural Students on College Enrollment: Perceptions of Influence Surrounding College Choice" and is the title of my dissertation, expected May 2022.

I am requesting your permission to work with the Office of Student Success to identify and request Bumpers College student participation in my study. My research procedures will use purposeful sampling to select participants who are identified as: (a) a currently enrolled full-time undergraduate student at the University of Arkansas in good standing, (b) have a declared major within the school of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences, (c) be an Arkansas resident from a county of less than 15,000, (d) graduated from an Arkansas public school, and (e) agrees to participate within the research study.

With your permission to pursue the study, I will submit my official request for approval to the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board. If you have additional questions, please feel free to discuss.

Signature: _____


Dr. Deacue Fields III

Thank you for your time,

Principal Researcher

Lucas M. Simmons

Doctoral Candidate

Higher Education Administration Ed.D.

Program

University of Arkansas

██████████
lmsimmon@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Michael T. Miller

Professor, Higher Education

Graduate Education Building

College of Education and Health Professions

University of Arkansas

██████████
mtmille@uark.edu

Appendix B

IRB Approval Confirmation



To: Lucas M Simmons
L00011353null

From: Justin R Chimka, Chair
IRB Expedited Review

Date: 11/15/2021

Action: Expedited Approval

Action Date: 11/15/2021

Protocol #: 2110362662

Study Title: "Rural Students on College Enrollment: Perceptions of Influence Surrounding College Choice"

Expiration Date: 11/02/2022

Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Michael T Miller, Investigator

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Rural Students on College Enrollment: Perceptions of Influence Surrounding College Choice

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Lucas M. Simmons, Doctoral Student, Higher Education Administration
Ed.D. Program

Faculty Advisor: Michael T. Miller, Professor, Higher Education, University of Arkansas

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about how rural Arkansas students decide to enroll in college. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as coming to college from a rural Arkansas county of less than 15,000 in population and you are currently an undergraduate student in good academic standing at your institution.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Principal Researcher

Lucas M. Simmons

Doctoral Candidate

Higher Education Administration Ed.D. Program

University of Arkansas

██████████

lmsimmon@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Michael T. Miller

Professor, Higher Education

Graduate Education Building

College of Education and Health Professions

University of Arkansas

██████████

mtmille@uark.edu

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose for conducting the study will be to identify enabling factors that are perceived to encourage rural students to enroll in postsecondary education at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville. An important element in this research will be the role of the family and the students home community. As the accessibility of this population is limited to a specific College, the primary focus will be on the role of the rural community in shaping aspiration.

Who will participate in this study?

Up to 10 rural Arkansas students who are currently enrolled as undergraduates in the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences and are in good academic standing will be interviewed for this study. Students will be identified through the Dale Bumpers College Dean's Office records.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require participating in a 30-60 minute interview, with field notes made of your responses to 6 scripted questions, with additional prompts. Additionally, our conversation will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and later provided to you to assure an accurate identification of your comments.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts identified with your participation in this study. Anonymity will be assured.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

In addition to the ability to better help future rural Arkansas students enroll in college, there are no tangible benefits to you participating in this study.

How long will the study last?

The interview field tests have suggested that the interview should take between 30 and 60 minutes of your time.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?

There are no costs associated with your participation in this study.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your professional status will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.

Participant information is collected on the first page of the interview guide. Following the interview, the first page will be removed from the field note section of the interview guide so that no attribution to individual participants will be possible. All field notes will be collected onto one master document. Following the collection of basic information from the first page, these pages will be shredded. All documents will be kept in a locked, secure faculty office at the University of Arkansas.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the Principal Researcher or his advisor. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or his advisor as listed above for any concerns that you may have.

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
210 Administration
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Signature

Date

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

**Rural Students on College Enrollment:
Perceptions of Influence Surrounding College Choice
University of Arkansas**

Time of interview: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Single parent family: _____

Hometown: _____

Academic major: _____

Approximate overall GPA: _____

Year/semester in school: _____

THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY ABOUT YOUR DECISION TO ENROLL IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THIS STUDY REALLY FOCUSES ON YOU AND HOW YOU ULTIMATELY DECIDED TO ENROLL IN COLLEGE.

I AM PROVIDING YOU WITH AN INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOU TO REVIEW AND SIGN, IF YOU AGREE. AS NOTED, YOUR IDENTITY WILL BE HELD IN STRICTEST CONFIDENCE AND YOUR IDENTITY WILL NOT BE LINKED DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY WITH THE STUDY FINDINGS.

ONLY FIELD NOTES ON THIS INTERVIEW GUIDE WILL BE COLLECTED DURING THIS INTERVIEW, AS WELL AS AUDIO RECORDING OF THE DISCUSSION.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY AND YOU MAINTAIN THE RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME.

BEFORE WE BEGIN, DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION TO BEGIN?

Should you have questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Lucas Simmons (lmsimmon@uark.edu) or his Dissertation Director, Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu), University of Arkansas, [REDACTED].

SECTION I: YOUR PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. Describe for me the place you call home.
2. Describe what your educational experiences were like growing up in your home community. (overall community culture, school, family, field trips)
3. Describe for me your decision to attend the University of Arkansas and pursue a major in Bumpers College. What do you think ultimately led you to decide to go to college?

Other elements to consider:

-Parent/home life

-Extended family

-Formal education bodies

-Civic agencies

-Informal associations

-Religious affiliations

-Citizens/peers

4. When you think about your family as you grew up, what role did they play or not play in your thinking about going to school after high school?

Other elements to consider:

-how strong was your family influence

-was there any one person who encouraged you

-did you have open conversations about going to college

-what kinds of conversations did you have about your future

-did you ever argue about going to college?

5. Once you made the decision to attend Bumpers College, tell me about some of the challenges you experienced?

Other elements to consider:

-friendships/social organizations

-school/teachers

-people at home/family

-community resources (church, community colleges, etc.)

-funding

6. What did you see as your biggest fears, obstacles, and opportunities for coming to college?

7. Would you do it all again?

Other elements to consider:

-do you have any regrets?

-what would you do differently?

-what advice would you give younger students from your community wanting to attend the University?

8. What can the University do to better attract students like you to the University?

9. Is there anything else you want to add that we haven't covered?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY!