12-2022

Understanding Perceptions of Graduating Seniors from Rural Schools on Higher Education: A Preregistered Study

Desiree Denise Brake
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Understanding Perceptions of Graduating Seniors from Rural Schools on Higher Education: A Preregistered Study

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Adult and Lifelong Learning

by

Desiree Brake
John Brown University
Bachelor of Science in Organizational Management, 1998
University of Arkansas
Master of Science in Operations Management, 2001

December 2022
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

_____
Kevin M. Roessger, Ph. D.
Dissertation Director

_____
Michael S. Hevel, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Michael T. Miller, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case (preregistered) study is to interview rural young Americans, deeply explore how they think about higher education as they prepare for life beyond high school, and analyze how those views and perceptions translate into barriers or motivators to its pursuit. Rural Americans feel less optimistic about their financial futures, find it more difficult to find a job in their communities, and believe their children will have a lower standard of living than their parents when they reach their parents' age (Morin, 2016). Rural students are more likely to graduate from high school than their urban counterparts but are less likely to attend and graduate from college (USDA, 2017). Prior studies postulate the reasons behind these trends, but few seek to more deeply understand why this occurs from student perspectives. This study's methodology offers participants the opportunity to share whether they see further education as helpful to their job prospects or career aspirations; their perceived barriers to obtaining that additional education, if so; whether they would choose between remaining in their communities over leaving for school, if that choice had to be made; and how they feel about their job prospects if they remain in their rural communities. Without understanding the perceptions of the emerging rural workforce around further education, it will be challenging to bring to bear any policy or practical change to specifically address their needs. The COVID pandemic has potentially enabled more distance learning and remote career opportunities. Now is the time for community, academic, and corporate joint efforts to tap into motivations of the emerging rural workforce to pursue new skills and knowledge beyond high school and remove perceived barriers to that pursuit; else it will remain difficult to halt or reverse outmigration and brain drain impacts to rural economies.

Keywords: rural education, barriers to college, perceptions of college

Acknowledgements

To my dissertation committee:

Thank you for your time, patient guidance, and thoughtful feedback. The support of my chair, Dr. Roessger, kept me from accepting ABD status when the pandemic kept delaying this study. I am grateful you did not give up on me.

To Dave, my copy editor:

Thank you for making sure this document told a compelling story for a dissertation. The value of your time and attention when I could no longer see my own errors cannot be overstated, especially considering you were hooked up to a dialysis machine at the time.

To Brendan, my tenacious cheerleader:

Thank you for practicing a real interview with me and easily jumping in and out of interview subject and wise sage modes for more than an hour. I cannot stress enough how much your nonstop support kept me going when the pandemic kept getting in the way. I appreciate you!

To my ADLL cohort:

Thank you for being on this journey with me and supporting each other as, one-by-one, we each crossed the finish line of this monumental undertaking.

To Brice and Elizabeth:

Thank you for inspiring me to look more closely at how students in rural areas experience college, first through the expectations of others, then as you paved your own path to your goals.

& To my husband and daughter:

This study would have been impossible without your support these last few years while I pursued this doctorate and all that entails. Weekends away for on campus classes, evenings and weekends spent writing and rewriting. And all the hugs when it became hard. I love you both.

Dedication

To the late Dr. Bonnie Roach, it was you, so many years ago, who encouraged me to go after my doctorate. I recall many conversations on cruise ships in various places in the world around qualitative vs quantitative, statistics models, committee feedback, and the overall stress of everyone else telling you what your study and writing should be. You were so excited the day I was accepted into the ADLL doctoral program. You were supposed to be on my dissertation committee. You had promised to be the first person to call me *Doctor Brake*. But life turns on a dime and you were so unexpectedly taken from us before I could complete this adventure. Wherever you are, I hope you know that I am here because your nudging and encouragement put me on the path to it. I succeeded because I had you as an example and beacon showing the way. I miss you.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Context of the Study 5

Statement of Purpose 9

Statement of Research Problem 12

Definition of Terms 13

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study 15

Chapter 1 Summary 16

Chapter 2: Literature Review 17

Key Concepts in Literature 18

Pursuit of Higher Education 18

Motivation 20

SES 22

Parental College Achievement and Expectations 23

Education Deserts 25

Community of Residence 26

Political Party Affiliation 28

Chapter 2 Summary 30

Chapter 3: Methodology 32

Introduction and Research Question 32

Rationale for Research Procedure 32

Qualitative Research 32

Case Study Design 33

Researcher Positionality 35

Researcher Background and Experience 35

Researcher Professional and Educational Experience 36

Study Method Details 36

Study Setting: Population and Sampling for Participants 37

Data Collection: Pilot Interview 40

Data Collection: Semi-structured Interviews 40

Data Analysis Approach 42

Trustworthiness 42

Credibility 43

Transferability 44

Dependability 44

Ethical Issues 45

Chapter 3 Summary 45

References 46

Chapter 1: Introduction

Miller and Poston (2020) argued that perception is a key to the processes of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information which helps us assign meaning to our experiences. These processes, in turn, affect our behavior. If we perceive organic whole food as nutritious and healthy, we might decide to purchase organic food and shop at stores that sell it. If we perceive vaccinations to be helpful, we might decide to receive the COVID-19 vaccine during the recent global pandemic. How someone views the value of a college education, too, affects their decision to attend college. I went to high school in a very rural part of Illinois and recall how I thought about higher education at that time. Many things have changed in rural communities and the country as a whole since the 1980s. Accordingly, one perception I find increasingly important in the changing U.S. economy is how rural young people perceive college. Rural students are more likely to graduate from high school than their urban counterparts but are less likely to attend and graduate from college (USDA, 2017). Is college seen as a viable path toward economic prosperity today by rural young people? Are its values and customs seen as being aligned with those of communities often considered rural?

There are numerous views of what is meant by rural, a concept sometimes called small town or nonmetropolitan. Both Ratcliffe (2015) in his review of the changing definition of urban and rural in U.S. Census data, and Van Dam (2019) in his *Washington Post* article on the decline of rural America, noted how rural was simply what remained once you marked off all cities and their satellites. While the concept of rural has many definitions, its opposite, metropolitan, has been clearly defined. U.S. Census data classifies metropolitan counties as those with an urban core of 50,000 or more people and adjacent counties that are highly integrated through measured commuting patterns (Johnson, 2012). In 2006, the National Center for Educational Statistics

(NCES) released a 12-point classification method based on location relative to an urban area or cluster and categorized small towns and rural areas as being between 10-35 miles from the nearest urban area or cluster. The NCES method has been used consistently by the Rural School and Community Trust Program's annual *Why Rural Matters* reports, with Showalter et al. (2017) using the NCES method to show that 20 percent of America's student population is rural.

For generations, industries like farming and agriculture, coal mining, and textile manufacturing supported small town (or rural) America. Once plentiful, low-skill jobs in these trades are increasingly no longer available as traditional industries decline. Comparing employment changes in rural areas between 1990-2000, Gibbs (2005) showed how low-skill jobs in farming, fishing, and forestry declined from 7.3 percent to 5.6 percent while high-skill managerial and professional jobs increased from 19.3 percent to 25.2 percent. On average, low-skill jobs were associated with 42 percent less earnings than high-skill jobs. Although Gibbs (2005) noted that not all rural areas share these trends, overall declines in low-skill jobs in rural areas have been associated with an increased need for computer and technology skills across industries.

Those trends continued over the next 15 years, with agriculture and mining providing less than 5 percent of rural wage and salaried jobs and manufacturing, still a larger share of rural wages, declining from 19 percent in 2001 to 15 percent in 2015 (USDA, 2017). Also continuing was the increasing trend towards professional and business services with 56,000 more of these jobs than expected in rural areas (USDA, 2017). Porter (2018) stated, as of 2017, places like Perry County, Kentucky in the Appalachian Mountains still have no replacement for the lost coal industry that supported its nearly 30,000 people. Porter went on to note that although one in eight people in the 704 entirely rural American counties is employed in manufacturing, robots and

international workers assemble most of the manufactured goods Americans buy. For example, rural Lake County, Tennessee reported only 250 manufacturing jobs between 2013-2017, which is less than half of what they had in just 2000 alone.

Much like the last decade of the 20th century, the first two decades of the 21st century marked an increasing shift from low-skill jobs in rural areas to those that require computer, technological, and managerial skills (Gibbs, 2005; USDA, 2017). Porter (2018) observed the high-tech industries driving today's economy "mostly need highly educated workers," and "find those most easily in big cities, not small towns" (p. 2). Accordingly, the need for education beyond high school has increased. Acemoglu and Angrist (2000) believe higher education is a path to better jobs and greater financial success. U.S. Census data support their conclusion showing that the average lifetime earnings of a four-year degree holder were 75 percent more than high school graduates in 1999 and 84 percent more than high school graduates in 2010 (Carnevale et al., 2011). But it is not clear whether those in rural areas perceive education beyond high school to be a necessary or viable path for them.

Perceptions are closely related to motivation, with perception being our view of our current state and motivation being our appetite to change our current state (Henriques, 2013). Consequently, our perception of barriers or hurdles between ourselves and a goal will guide and influence our motivation toward that goal. McCulloh (2020) noted "students' rural culture may influence their upbringing, exposure to educational experiences, and contribute to the challenges faced in college" (p. 2). Several factors may contribute to the unique way rural Americans perceive higher education, and much research has been conducted to confirm common narratives and preconceived notions behind those perceptions.

The lack of parental education attainment is just one example of a common narrative as to why rural students do not pursue higher education. Many graduating seniors from rural high schools may be first-generation college students or have parents who did not obtain a college degree. Byun et al. (2012) found only 37 percent of rural college students had at least one parent with a bachelor′s degree compared to 50 percent of nonrural college students. Rural first-generation college students are 20 percent less likely to attend college after they complete high school compared to nonrural students (Pierson & Hanson, 2015), and those who do enroll experience challenges, sometimes leading them to drop out, saddled with debt but no degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). My parents did not have college degrees when I made the decision to attend college following graduation from my rural high school. I remember it sometimes being a challenge to navigate the application and enrollment process, but I do not recall the fact my parents did not go to college influencing my decision to go or coloring how I viewed college itself. Does being a first-generation college student influence how rural young people perceive a college education today; and, more importantly, why?

Perhaps further complicating the perception of higher education in rural areas, the 2016 U.S. elections underscored a conservative political narrative that demonized intellectuals and equated college education with liberalism (Degani, 2016). Speaking at a rally in 2017, Donald Trump, Jr. argued that colleges teach kids to hate their country while silencing conservative voices (Caplan, 2017). The message was that if you send your kids to college, they will be indoctrinated with liberal ideas and never return. What is not clear is if this narrative has influenced whether today′s rural young people are motivated to attend college. Do rural young people consider recently accentuated political views around education when they ponder whether higher education is right for them?

In this chapter, I introduce the context of this study by outlining how a growing number of rural Americans, especially those without college degrees, are less optimistic about their financial future. I introduce factors highlighted by studies and mainstream journalism that seem to confirm common narratives as to why higher education is not pursued more strongly in rural areas but leave unexplored the possibility of other factors. This discussion then leads to the significance of the study and the resulting research problem which aims to avoid confirming my own past prior views as a rural high school graduate or common research narratives by deeply exploring what rural high school seniors really think when it comes to higher education. I define common concepts suggested by literature to affect the attainment of higher education in rural America, such as socioeconomic status (SES), community of residence, parental college achievement, education deserts, and political party affiliation. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the proposed qualitative case study's limitations including the availability of, or ability to, obtain qualitative data from graduating seniors of rural high schools.

Context of the Study

Rural education is a complex and large part of the country's educational landscape; it cannot be ignored if we are to narrow achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Mahaffey, 2012). Fishman (2015) identified that Texas, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, Louisiana, and Alabama include 66 of the nation's 100 poorest counties; that historically poor regions, such as Appalachia and the Deep South, tend to remain poor with little stimulation towards meaningful economic growth; and that our current education systems are not fitted to local economic needs. Tekniepe (2015) suggested that rural school districts have an integral role in the economic livelihood of the communities they serve, and many researchers suggested the

survival of rural communities will depend on sustained partnerships with schools (Bailey et al., 1990; Hobbs, 1991; Miller, 1993).

Previous studies have found that rural research around education was critical because rural schools often face serious economic and community resource constraints that perpetuate poor economies and low achievement cycles (D'Amico et al., 1996; Gándara et al., 2001; Hardré & Reeve, 2003). However, DeYoung (1987) noted that studies of education in rural areas were scarce and uneven, while Logan and Burdick-Will (2017) found previous studies of school segregation and educational inequality did not even include rural areas. Fishman (2015) observed that many rural Americans are struggling to teach their children how to economically improve their communities. This has created a brain drain, whereby the highest achievers leave and never return. As rural education levels go up, people tend to migrate to urban areas to reach goals and make use of their knowledge (Huang et al., 2002).

Rural communities are further challenged by changing demographics with sharp increases in English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, and minority students (Johnson et al., 2018). Reed (2010) identified the need for multicultural education as a "hot topic" as rural areas experienced rapid increases in racial and ethnic diversity in student populations, especially in areas once considered rural and homogeneous. In many of these districts, there may be a lack of financial, human, and logistical resources to meet the changing demand from this diversity (Johnson, 2014; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016). McCray et al. (2004) noted some strong opposition to multicultural education and diversity in education from principals, specifically that it distracts from "relevant" school subjects and promotes liberal ideologies over conservative values, calling out how traditional political views could also be a barrier to improving education in rural areas. Even with these observations, it is not clear that

increasing diversity in rural areas has any real impact on how students perceive education and the value of attending college. Do students really believe they will be indoctrinated if they attend college? Would such a concern outweigh the potential positive impacts on their future financial success?

Carnevale et al. (2013) projected that two-thirds of the 54.8 million jobs the U.S. economy creates by 2020 will require a workforce with a least some college or post-secondary education. Prior to the COVID pandemic, the U.S. was on track to meet this projection with more employers requiring post-secondary education for jobs that traditionally did not require a college education, particularly in the areas of healthcare, social assistance, finance, insurance, manufacturing, and IT—where more than 60 percent of employers agreed they routinely reject applicants who may have skills and experience but do not have a college degree (Fuller & Raman, 2017; Khine, 2019). Reder (2010) noted that following the 2008 U.S. recession, the need for adults to be prepared for sustaining careers is critical. However, Patterson (2018) reported that 90 percent of adults (older than 20 years) considered to be the least educated, did not participate in any formal or informal education beyond high school. She noted key situational deterrents like parental education, low income, and work/family responsibilities; dispositional deterrents like health, disability challenges, low social trust, and difficulties relating new ideas to real life; and institutional deterrents such as education costs and work schedule flexibility (Patterson, 2018).

Rural youth may have unique aspirations that impact their decision to attend higher education. Howley (2006) found rural youth may be driven to maintain their connections to family, community, and rural lifestyle over more materialistic goals of making more money. Another study found that rural students obtained bachelor's degrees at lower rates than their

nonrural peers and attributed that disparity mostly to lower SES (Byun et al., 2012). In contrast, Schmitt-Wilson (2013) found that increased parental expectations positively affected student expectations at various SES levels and that children and adolescents express desire for careers similar to those of their parents—implying that perhaps our parents have a stronger impact on our pursuit of higher education than our SES in contrast to studies that found SES was a significant predictor of occupational aspiration (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Schoon & Parsons, 2002) and expectations (Haller & Virkler, 1993; Rojewski & Kim, 2003). Yet other studies indicate that access or proximity to higher education resources is a significant impact on the decision to attend college, at least for adult students; more so than even cost of tuition (Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009; Roessger et al., 2022).

In her examinations of rural Floridians, McNeill (2018) identified numerous factors that contribute to people's decisions not to pursue higher education despite the future financial impacts. This included cost of education versus the perceived value of it, lack of preparation for college by their K-12 schools, the perception that college is only for the elite, the overwhelming effects of the admissions process and adjustments to campus life, and a growing conservative view that universities teach unchecked liberalism and have had a negative effect on the country. Clearly, there are views that attempt to explain why rural Americans do not pursue higher education to the same degree as their nonrural counterparts. There are arguments as to why they should. What is not clear is how today's rural emerging workforce thinks about college as a path to future financial success, especially with the changing landscape from recent elections to the impact COVID has had on remote working and remote learning. Accordingly, this study looks to explore those perceptions directly from rural youth as they consider their next steps after high school graduation.

Statement of Purpose

Rural Americans feel less optimistic about their financial futures. A Pew Research study found that 69 percent of white rural Americans indicated it was difficult to find a job in their communities and one-third of rural white Americans believed their children would have a lower standard of living than their parents when they reach their parents' age (Morin, 2016). As noted earlier, rural students are more likely to graduate from high school than their urban counterparts but are less likely to attend and graduate from college (USDA, 2017). We need to more deeply understand why this occurs. Do those preparing to begin their adult lives in rural areas see further education as helpful to their job prospects or career aspirations? If so, do they perceive barriers to obtaining that additional education? Would they choose between remaining in their communities over leaving for school, if that choice had to be made? How do they feel about their job prospects if they remain?

Without understanding the perceptions of the emerging rural workforce around further education, it will be challenging to bring to bear any policy or practical change to specifically address their needs. Community, academic, and corporate joint efforts need to tap into motivations of the emerging rural workforce to pursue new skills and knowledge beyond high school and remove perceived barriers to that pursuit; else it will remain difficult to halt or reverse outmigration and brain drain impacts to rural economies. Accordingly, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to interview rural young Americans, deeply explore how they think about higher education as they prepare for life beyond high school and analyze how those views and perceptions translate into barriers or motivators to its pursuit.

Rural areas have unique challenges that may be improved through greater educational attainment. McDowell (1992), in his agriculture-based study, noted that infrastructure serving

rural communities was in disrepair and was not adequately serving the needs of modern agriculture or the economic requirements needed to maintain viable and competitive communities in the future. Although focused on agriculture, his study aligns with other studies previously mentioned above. He noted that most of the nation's economic growth is moving to urban and nearby suburban areas—a condition that continues in more recent times, especially with increasing international competition (Klein et al., 2002). Jim Joss, speaking at a 1984 conference, stated, "Rural is a pervading condition existing in American education, and it must be addressed by specific plans from teachers, trainers, federal legislators, and all educational planners" (Martin, 2010). Even more than 35 years ago, it was recognized that education must fill the gaps if we are to improve the rural condition. However, as Lavalley (2018) noted, rural schools are often left out of research and policy discussions and "the unique needs of rural education are often obscured by their urban and suburban counterparts" (p. 1).

Rural educational systems, including the path to higher education, need to consider and address the unique challenges of rural students and communities. Fishman (2015) saw the need for educational systems that are custom-made for rural communities to ensure both those who want to stay in their communities and those who wish to return to their home rural communities after venturing out have access to relevant career education. He indicated that schools and federal/state policies would need to support robust career and technical options; and that educators, employers, and donors would have to contribute to the efforts as well. High unemployment rates in rural areas encourage people to migrate to urban areas (Marré, 2009). One could argue that this is a "chicken or egg" scenario where it is unclear if jobs must come first, then stronger post-secondary education to enable the local workforce to fill them, or if the local workforce must first be educated, then the jobs can be created to leverage the available

workforce. It is clear corporations are having difficulty recruiting skilled workers, especially in the increasingly global market (Morey, 2004).

Rural areas may be influenced by politics when it comes to higher education. Education policy and investment are platform topics for election campaigns and political speeches (Jakobi, 2011). A Pew research study found there is a higher concentration of Republicans in rural areas while there is a higher concentration of Democrats in urbans areas—and that those patterns have become more pronounced in recent times (Parker et al., 2018). Another Pew research study found that most Republicans or lean-Republicans have a negative view of college professors and the impact of colleges and universities (Fingerhut, 2017). Literature suggests that partisan identities are highly durable over an individual's lifetime (Bartels, 2010) and that such behaviors are thought to be primarily developed at home from a young age (Jennings et al., 2009) or as a young adult (Meredith, 2009; Stoker & Bass, 2011). If political narratives emerge as a theme around perceptions of higher education in rural areas which tend to be more predominantly conservative, future policy or practice changes designed to increase the motivation of young adults in rural areas to seek higher education will have to address the influence of long-held views on education.

Rural students receive little attention in either policy or academia (Lavalley, 2018). To design educational systems around unique needs of rural students, especially ones that understand perceived barriers to higher educational attainment for rural students, more rural research is needed that will, in turn, inform policy. Policy will drive support and investment. Coladarci (2007) found that many studies on rural education did not make it clear whether the researcher had uncovered a rural phenomenon or, instead, identified a phenomenon observed incidentally in a rural setting. So, how are we to know if we are solving for problems unique to

rural areas or not? Patterson (2018) believed we should focus on the backgrounds of those who chose not to participate in formal or informal education after high school and understand what deterrents they faced so that we can more effectively solve for broader, ambiguous concepts like motivation to reengage in education. That approach may ignore important concerns and views of rural Americans who do choose to participate in education after high school.

Additionally, most rural-relevant studies on education have focused on K-12—which is logical when trying to identify proactive, early interventions through policy and practices. Some studies noted rural K-12 students have significantly lower curriculum intensity (Byun et al., 2012) and often lack advanced studies required by selective colleges (Gibbs, 2005). There is an opportunity to fill gaps in prior studies in rural areas by focusing a study on the emerging workforce, specifically those about to graduate from a rural high school. Such a study could validate the most current college and career preparation in K-12, and how that preparation does or does not get reflected in their perceptions about further education. Without accumulation of knowledge in this area, we will not be able to credibly inform educational practices or policies to make a difference (Coladarci, 2007). Accordingly, this study will attempt to do that.

Statement of Research Problem

As noted, a growing number of rural Americans, especially those without college degrees, are less optimistic about their financial futures (Morin, 2016); and college enrollment remains lower in rural areas compared to non-rural areas (Byun et al., 2012). Exploring young rural American's perceptions of higher education may provide key insights useful to policy makers and higher education institutions to enable and motivate rural Americans to pursue higher education, thereby improving their financial futures. This study seeks to understand the perceptions of those preparing to enter the workforce and any additional factors that influence

their motivation to pursue higher education. Accordingly, this study will be guided by two research questions:

1. What themes emerge as perceived barriers to the pursuit of higher education in rural areas by the generation preparing to enter the workforce?
2. What themes emerge as motivators to the pursuit of higher education in rural areas by the generation preparing to enter the workforce?

Definition of Terms

In this study, I will discuss several key concepts starting with the overarching factor of *motivation*. Motivation has been touted as one of the most powerful determinants of student success or failure in school (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Motivation may be defined as an individual's desire to behave in particular ways that fuels the choice to engage in activities (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Reeve, 1996). It is a complex, internal characteristic that presents difficulty in measurement (Hardré et al., 2007).

Higher education has been defined as those enrolled in, or who have completed, an education program or course beyond secondary level, especially provided by a college or university (Merriam-Webster, 2020). As this study does not intend to rule out other post-secondary education, including vocational education, the terms *higher education* and *post-secondary education* will be used interchangeably and in their broadest sense.

SES is theoretically defined as the current social standing or economic situation of an individual or group (Jones & Vagle, 2013). As this is a qualitative case study, we will not look at SES as an independent variable but will categorize basic household income as high or low SES when describing participant demographics.

Community of residence will help differentiate rural and nonrural (urban and suburban/commuter) areas. Studies have not provided a consistent definition of developed community types that can be leveraged for this study. Therefore, a simpler extrapolation of city/town of residence will be compared to the NCES 12-point classification method, with focus on small town and rural relative to urban areas or cluster when identifying the rural high school(s) for participants.

Parental college achievement is a classification that indicates the highest achievement of at least one parent of a study participant. Douglas (1964) thought of *parental expectations* in terms of academic expectations the parent has as to how far their child will go in school and the level of grades they will earn; and that definition has not changed significantly in 50 years. Studies have identified themes suggesting parental college achievement or parental expectations may affect whether a young adult pursues a college education. This study will attempt to understand if these themes are variables contributing to perceptions of higher education.

Education deserts relate to access or proximity to higher education resources and has been defined as geographical areas more than an hour from the closest public college or university (Myers, 2018), or, in other cases, served by a single, isolated community college (Hillman & Weichman, 2016). Rosenboom and Blagg (2018) further defined *complete education deserts* as geographical areas that lack both physical higher education campuses and high-speed internet, estimating between 6-7 percent of Americans live in such areas, with populations older, poorer, and less educated.

Political party affiliation may need to be understood if political or value-based narratives emerge as influencing perceptions of participants when it comes to their pursuit of higher education. The two major political parties in the U.S. are commonly known and will not be

redefined by this study. Independents and other third parties will not be the focus. Literature will be reviewed to outline current views of education held by the majority of Republican or Republican-leaning people as a basis for understanding that context, should political influences emerge during this study.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

In my attempt to fulfill the purpose of the study, I propose a qualitative case study where I conduct semi-structured in person or video-based interviews with rural high school students. To focus the study but still provide sufficient qualitative data within a similar geographical location within the U.S., the sample population will be drawn from a rural high school within Washington state, which happens to be my state of residence and provides convenience for the study. To keep the study relevant to the perceptions of the generation about to enter the workforce, I will limit participation to rural high school seniors who are expected to graduate in 2022. Initial conversations with high school counselors will be held to identify and contact potential participants as well as provide access to materials that may be used for college or career preparation in the school.

There are several limitations to the study that should be noted. Motivation is challenging to define and measure, and this study will not attempt to do that. Post-analysis, conclusions will be drawn as to whether certain themes may influence motivation of participants. The method of study may influence responses, especially when conversation involves parents or belief systems. It is possible respondents may not be completely truthful around such topics, thereby affecting the trustworthiness of the research. Steps will be taken when planning interview questions to minimize defensive or guarded reactions that may reduce the richness of responses. Lastly, the participants are expected to be minors, and concerns around exploitation may limit the pool of

possible participants. Institutional review board (IRB) approval will be obtained in hopes of alleviating any ethical concerns of participants, their parents, and school administrators who are expected to help identify possible participants.

Chapter 1 Summary

In this overview, I have outlined how a growing number of rural Americans, especially those without college degrees, are less optimistic about their financial future. I briefly reviewed literature focused on rural education and explored the factors presented by studies and mainstream journalism that appear to explain why higher education is not pursued more strongly where it is arguably needed most. The research problem and purpose have been reviewed with two research questions identified around understanding the themes that emerge as perceived barriers and motivators to the pursuit of higher education in rural areas by the generation preparing to enter the workforce. Possible limitations of the proposed qualitative case study have been called out. In the next chapter, I will review literature in this area in more granularity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A growing number of rural Americans, especially those without college degrees, are less optimistic about their financial futures (Morin, 2016); and college enrollment remains lower in rural areas compared to non-rural areas (Byun et al., 2012). Marcus and Krupnick (2017) reported, "When it comes to college enrollment, students in Middle America—many of them white—face an uphill battle against economic and cultural deterrents" (p.1). They concluded that addressing this situation was critical for the future and not just for workforce employment, but also for social discourse and the need for those in rural areas to feel they have a path to contribution and achievement; not a feeling of being left behind and lost (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017).

Before reviewing literature on factors seen as underlying the gap between rural and non-rural areas, it is important to understand the size of the educational attainment gap. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 42 percent of young adults, ages 18 to 24, are enrolled in higher education; but only 29 percent of those come from rural areas compared to 48 percent from cities (2013). The National Student Clearinghouse (2016) reported data indicating only 61 percent of the highest income white students from rural areas go to college directly from high school compared to 72 percent from urban schools and 74 percent from suburban schools. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service reported that fewer than 20 percent of rural adults aged 25 and older have college degrees (Marré, 2017), which is well below the national average of 48 percent reported by the Lumina Foundation (2019).

However, rural students have academic performance that is on par with or better than their non-rural counterparts. According to the NCES (2013), on average, public school students

in rural areas perform better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than their urban peers and, roughly, on par with their suburban peers. Additionally, they experienced higher graduation rates (average 80 percent) than their peers in cities (68 percent) and towns (79 percent)—and, again, roughly on par with suburban (81 percent) areas. Studies tell us fewer rural students pursue higher education, but it is likely not due to poor academic performance.

As this study seeks to understand the perceptions of the emerging workforce on higher education, it is important to have a solid foundation of knowledge on key concepts and factors seen as relating to higher education in rural areas. This chapter will first look at the pursuit of higher education as a concept, then explore factors and deterrents in greater detail through an examination of literature on motivation, community of residence with a focus on rural communities, socioeconomic status (SES), parental college achievement and expectations, educational deserts, and political party affiliation and party views of higher education.

Key Concepts in Literature

Pursuit of Higher Education

Higher education has been defined as those enrolled in or who have completed an education program or course beyond the secondary level, especially when provided by a college or university (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Hardner et al., (2018) simply defined higher education attainment as the highest level of education completed, whereas Hillman and Orians (2013) focused their studies on college completion which they defined as earning postsecondary degrees and certificates. Beyond its definition, it is important to understand how higher education is viewed as a path to future financial success.

Over the last 40 years, higher education has been connected to economic well-being. Sher and Dunne (1977) noted that “education already represented the road to status and money”

(p. 41) while former U.S. Commissioner of Education Sidney Marland (1974) believed that without conventional credentials from college institutions, young people will not be "equipped to enter our economic system with salable skills" (p. 21). A broader study established the relationship between higher education and future financial outcomes using data from the 1960-1980 Censuses and ordinary least-square estimates that showed a large positive relationship: for every one-year increase in average schooling, there is about a 7 percent increase in average wages (Acemoglu & Angrist, 2000). A more recent study reinforced that relationship using U.S. Census data to show the average lifetime earnings of a four-year degree holder were 75 percent more than high school graduates in 1999 and 84 percent more than high school graduates in 2010 (Carnevale et al., 2011).

Over the last 20 years, there has been an increasing shift from low-skill jobs in rural areas to those that require computer, technological, and managerial skills (Gibbs, 2005; USDA, 2017). Agriculture and mining represent less than 5 percent of rural jobs, while manufacturing has declined from 19 percent in 2001 to 15 percent in 2015 (USDA, 2017). Low-skill jobs in farming, fishing, and forestry declined from 7.3 percent to 5.6 percent (Gibbs, 2005). Over the same time period, professional and business services jobs increased from 19.3 percent to 25.2 percent in rural areas (Gibbs, 2005) with 56,000 more of these jobs than expected in rural areas (USDS, 2017). On average, low-skill jobs that do not require higher education were associated with 42 percent less earnings than high-skill jobs. Although Gibbs (2005) noted that not all rural areas share these trends, overall, declines in low-skill jobs in rural areas have been associated with an increased need for computer and technology skills across industries.

Rural school districts have an integral role in the economic livelihood of the communities they serve (Tekniepe, 2015). However, many rural Americans are struggling to teach their

children how to economically improve their communities with education systems not fitted to local economic needs (Fishman, 2015). Studies have found that rural schools often face serious economic and community resource constraints that perpetuate poor economies and low achievement cycles (D'Amico et al., 1996; Gándara et al., 2001; Hardré & Reeve, 2003). Other studies have suggested the survival of rural communities depends on sustained partnerships with schools (Bailey et al., 1990; Hobbs, 1991; Miller, 1993). However, Patterson (2018) reported that 90 percent of adults older than 20 years and considered to be the least educated did not participate in any formal or informal education beyond high school. These studies all suggest it is commonly accepted that higher education is a path to financial stability and opportunities for individuals and their communities, yet many in rural areas do not pursue it. Literature has explored possible reasons for that, with motivation as one of the broadest factors when it comes to the pursuit of higher education.

Motivation

A common understanding of motivation is that it is a desire to do something. Pintrich and Schunk (1996) more specifically defined motivation as an individual's desire to behave in particular ways that fuels the choice to engage in activities. It has been found to be a complex, internal characteristic that is difficult to measure (Hardré et al., 2007) and one of the most powerful determinants of student success or failure in school (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Motivation is closely related to perception, with perception being our view of our current state and motivation being our appetite to change our current state (Henriques, 2013). Consequently, our perception of barriers or hurdles between ourselves and a goal will guide and influence our motivation toward the goal.

Literature suggests several factors that impact the motivation to pursue higher education in rural areas, starting with family connections, influences, and responsibilities. Carr and Kefalas (2009) found that rural parents are more likely to encourage their children to get full-time jobs, consider trade schools, or enter the military rather than go to college. Schmitt-Wilson (2013) found that children and adolescents express desire for careers like those of their parents. However, in rural areas, many of the traditional industries that employed past generations are declining (Gibbs, 2005; USDA, 2017). Marcus and Krupnick (2017) suggested the lack of motivation to attend college comes from a historically induced sense of hopelessness stemming from gradually decreasing choices and opportunities. Despite the potential opportunities one may have for going to college, students from rural areas express concerns about losing family connections (McWhirter et al., 2007).

The connections one has to their community and its culture is also a motivational factor unique to rural areas when it comes to higher education. Friesen and Purc-Stephenson (2016) found students from rural areas voice concerns about losing their rural identity. Similarly, Marcus and Krupnick (2017) felt the motivation of rural students to attend college was impacted by their strong sense of connection to their communities and fear of stepping too far away from those community norms. Higher education was sometimes viewed as conflicting with the values held dear in rural communities. There is a perception that college is only for the elite, with a growing conservative view that universities teach unchecked liberalism and have had a negative effect on the country (McNeill, 2018). There is low social trust and difficulties relating new ideas to real life (Patterson, 2018). The is a fear of culture shock on large college campuses where disdain towards rural people as well as overwhelming student population and diversity would result in lack of support systems for rural students (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Motivation may be the

overarching factor; but there are other factors explored in the literature when it comes to the pursuit of higher education by those in rural areas, starting with cost relative to SES.

SES

There are many studies that define the concept of SES. Jones and Vagle (2013) defined SES as the current social standing or economic situation of an individual or group. McLoyd (1998) said it was a multidimensional construct, combining objective factors such as an individual's (or parent's) education, occupation, and income. Brito and Noble (2014) referred to SES as an individual's access to economic and social resources, as well as the benefits and social standing that come from these resources, as most often measured by educational attainment, income, or occupation.

The high cost of education was noted in several studies as one of several contributing factors influencing whether rural students attended college. Patterson (2018) noted low income and work responsibilities as situational deterrents for rural students, and cost of education and the need for work schedule flexibility to be institutional deterrents. In a study on why rural students in Florida are not pursuing higher education despite knowing it will negatively affect their future financial prospects, McNeill (2018) found the high cost of education, versus the perceived value of it, was a recurring theme.

Other studies more sharply addressed SES as a primary factor when it comes to rural educational attainment. Schmitt-Wilson (2013) posited that the relationship between SES and educational expectations had to be foundational when studying rural education. One study found that rural students obtained bachelor's degrees at lower rates than their nonrural peers and attributed that disparity mostly to lower SES (Byun et al., 2012). Multiple studies found that SES was a significant predictor of occupational aspiration and expectations (Haller & Virkler, 1993;

Mau & Bikos, 2000; Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Schoon & Parson, 2002). However, Schmitt-Wilson (2013) found that parents have a stronger impact on the pursuit of higher education than SES, leading me to explore literature on how parental college achievement and expectations influence the decision of rural Americans to attend college.

Parental College Achievement and Expectations

Parental college achievement is a classification that indicates the highest achievement of at least one parent (Lauderdale & Heckman, 2017). Related to that, higher education students can be thought of as belonging to one of two groups: continuing-generation college students who have at least one parent with higher education experience (Redford & Hoyer, 2017) or first-generation college students whose parents have no higher education experience (Petty, 2014). Douglas (1964) thought of parental expectations in terms of academic expectations a parent has, how far their child will go in school, and the level of grades they will earn. That definition has not changed significantly in 50 years (Lazarides et al., 2016). What is clear is that parents, particularly mothers, shape students' futures (Tenebaum & Leaper, 2003; Simpkins et al., 2012) and are an important influence on students' long term education plans (Lazarides et al., 2016).

There have also been studies that have concluded parental expectation and support play an important role in how their children develop college and career aspirations (Bryan et al., 2009; Griffith, 1996; Simons-Morton, & Crump, 2003). Heinisch (2016) found that many rural students went to college because their parents had always expected them to attend, believing college provided more opportunities than they had themselves; concluding that although first-generation students' parents did not have experience with academia, their support was vital to their college-bound children, nonetheless. McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found evidence that

suggests constructive parental involvement helps students navigate the higher education process and overcome the culture shock of college life—as well as boosting their aspirations.

Studies have identified factors suggesting parental college attainment may affect the motivation of a young adult to pursue higher education. Assari (2108) found that high parental educational attainment was related to better well-being of college students, independent of race, age, and gender. Jassal (2007) identified that parental education attainment was significantly associated with college drop-out rates, with first-generation college students less likely to return to college after their first year than continuing-generation college students. Some studies found that first-generation college students did not excel nor obtain degrees as well as continuing-generation students (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Ramoz-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Gillock (1999) found that first-generation college students were not as concerned with academic achievement but attributed that to the lack of parental guidance based on their own college experience.

Similarly, there are studies that indicate first-generation college students have impactful disadvantages from the lack of their parents' experience with higher education. Collier and Morgan (2004) concluded first-generation students disproportionately lacked information that limited their awareness of how to be successful in the college student role. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) believed first-generation college students do not enter college believing they will succeed and that having parents familiar with the college experience may lead to greater academic achievement and self-efficacy. They also found that first-generation college students take fewer classes, work more hours, and study significantly less—and had significantly lower grade point averages (GPAs) than continuing-generation students (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

First-generation college students fair more poorly and attain lesser academic standing than their peers who have an academic familiar history. We know from studies cited above that higher education attainment is lower in rural areas than nonrural areas. We know that rural areas tend to be in what is referred to as education deserts where access or proximity to higher education resources is limited. Therefore, we need to understand literature around the concept of education deserts.

Education Deserts

Education deserts relate to access or proximity to higher education resources and has been defined as geographical areas more than an hour from the closest public college or university (Myers, 2018), or, in other cases, served by a single, isolated community college (Hillman & Weichman, 2016). Rosenboom and Blagg (2018) further defined *complete education deserts* as geographical areas that lack both physical higher education campuses and high-speed internet, estimating between 6-7 percent of Americans live in such areas, with populations older, poorer, and less educated. Most relevant to this study, 82 percent of people living in education deserts are in rural areas (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018).

Studies have found proximity is an important factor in students' decisions to attend higher education, especially for more non-traditional adult students who may have work and family obligations (Alm & Winters, 2009; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009; Myers, 2018; and Roessger et al., 2022). Several studies surmised that geographic isolation and the lack of access to educational resources was a primary and unique challenge associated with rural schools; proposing that online studies might be a potential solution (Hannum et al., 2009; Mellon & Kester, 2004; Sileo & Sileo, 2008). However, 35 percent of rural America remains without

broadband internet access (The White House, 2021), making online distance learning unrealistic for people living in those areas (Strover, 2014; Pick et al., 2015; Krupnick, 2018).

Some states have begun to address the lack of access to higher education due to proximity to public colleges and universities. Arkansas, California, and Massachusetts have announced plans to invest in distance learning programs targeting non-traditional adult students (Lieberman, 2019; Roessger et al., 2022), but it is not clear if these programs and investments can or will expand to include traditional (18-22 years of age) college students. Arkansas is also aiming to reduce the digital divide with a proposal to deploy broadband to all communities with more than 500 residents by 2022 (Arkansas Governor, 2019) and President Joe Biden's American Jobs Plan has funding allocated specifically to address lack of broadband access in rural areas of the country (The White House, 2021). With factors such as access currently more of an impact to rural areas, we need to understand the concept of community of residence and how rural gets defined in literature.

Community of Residence

Studies have not provided a consistent definition of developed community types that can be leverage for this study. Both Ratcliffe (2015), in his review of the changing definition of urban and rural in U.S. Census data, and Van Dam (2019), in his *Washington Post* article on the decline of rural America, noted how rural was simply what remained once you marked off all cities and their satellites. While the concept of rural has many definitions, its opposite, metropolitan, has been clearly defined. U.S. Census data classifies metropolitan counties as those with an urban core of 50,000 or more people and adjacent counties that are highly integrated through measured commuting patterns (Johnson, 2012). In 2006, the NCES released a 12-point classification method based on location relative to an urban area or cluster and categorized small

towns and rural areas as being between 10-35 miles from the nearest urban area or cluster. The NCES method has been used consistently by the Rural School and Community Trust Program's annual *Why Rural Matters* reports, with Showalter, Klein, Johnson, and Hartman (2017) using the NCES method to show that 20 percent of America's student population is rural.

Rural communities are often poor and disadvantaged communities. Texas, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, Louisiana, and Alabama include 66 of the 100 poorest counties in the U.S.; and historically poor regions, such as Appalachia and the Deep South, tend to remain poor with very little stimulation towards meaningful economic growth (Fishman, 2015). Tekniepe (2015) found in his study on school superintendents that rural school districts have an integral role in the economic livelihood of the communities they serve, and previous studies found that rural research was critical because rural schools often face serious economic and community resource constraints that perpetuates their poor economies and low achievement cycles (D'Amico et al., 1996; Gándara et al., 2001; Hardré & Reeve, 2003). Fishman (2015) observed that many rural Americans are struggling to teach their children how to economically improve their communities.

Rural communities are often hit hardest by declining industries. Farming and agriculture, coal mining, and textile manufacturing have been on the decline for decades in rural areas (Gibbs, 2005; USDA, 2017; Porter, 2018). Johnson and Fuguitt (2009) noted that decline in rural job opportunities was due in large part to replacing labor with mechanization in agriculture and other industries, as well as increased competition from global trade. This is prevalent in Washington state, the population source for this study. Kosterlitz (1997) found many of the industries that had previously provided jobs and income to rural Washington state residents have cut back operations or have left the area. Daniels and Lapping (1996) called for more rural

planning in both rural-urban fringe and remote rural areas, both represented in Washington state. Tovar and Murphy found in their 2019 *Roadmap to Washington's Future* report that many Washington rural residents expressed a need for more employment opportunities in their rural communities.

Rural versus nonrural communities of residence is an important concept for the purposes of this study. McCulloh (2020) noted that rural culture has a strong impact on students, including how small-town values influence their upbringing and their exposure to educational experiences. Marcus and Krupnick (2017) believed higher education was sometimes viewed as conflicting with those deeply held values in rural communities. Morin (2016) suggested that the "broad economic concerns of rural white Americans align to a striking degree with several key issues that were among the cornerstones of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign: jobs, immigrants, and fears about an eroding standing of living" (p. 1). As previously discussed, eroding standard of living correlates to education or the lack of it. Accordingly, it is important to review literature around the concept of political party affiliation, how the two major political parties view higher education, and how those views influence perceptions of higher education, in general.

Political Party Affiliation

We can think of political party affiliation as sharing the same views as a government political party. It could also be looked at as how someone thinks of themselves in relation to known political parties, such as Republican, Democrat, Independent, or other; or the political views one might hold, such as liberal/left, conservative/right, or moderate (Pabayo et al., 2015). Political party affiliation may become important when studying rural areas in the U.S. with higher concentrations of Republicans in rural areas and, conversely, higher concentrations of Democrats in urban areas—with those patterns becoming more pronounced in recent times

(Parker et al., 2018). Literature suggests that partisan identities are durable over an individual's lifetime and that such behaviors are thought to be primarily developed at home from a young age (Bartels, 2010; Jennings et al., 2009). Accordingly, we need to explore how certain political parties view education to better understand how those views could influence the motivation of those in rural areas to pursue higher education.

Existing studies on partisan conflicts in higher education center on the socioeconomic or redistributive aspects. Republicans or conservatives support a restrictive higher education system with high personal costs for attending, limited access, and low public costs, whereas the Democrats or liberals support an expansive higher education system with low personal costs for attending, wide access, and often high public costs through government funding (Ansell, 2010; Jungblut, 2015; Wolf & Zohlnhofer, 2009). The differences in personal costs can have more negative impact on those in rural areas due to higher poverty levels (Fishman, 2015; Tekniepe, 2015).

Other studies have noted the influence conservative views have had on the overall perception of higher education and its conflict with traditional conservative values. McCray et al., (2004) found strong opposition to multicultural education and diversity in education by principals, specifically that it distracts from relevant school subjects and promotes liberal ideologies over conservative values. McNeill (2018), as noted earlier, summarized the various themes surrounding why rural Florida students are not pursuing higher education despite knowing it will negatively affect their future financial success—and that included a growing conservative view that universities teach unchecked liberalism and have had a negative effect on the country. Fingerhut (2017) found most Republicans or those who lean towards Republican views have a more negative view of college professors and the impact of colleges and

universities. These studies suggest, if colleges and universities are seen as liberal, it could create a sense of disaffection for rural students from conservative communities who have been taught to mistrust the liberal education agenda.

Chapter 2 Summary

Literature shows the educational attainment gap between rural and nonrural in America persists but is not likely due to poor academic performance. Literature shows rural areas have unique, or at least more impactful situational deterrents to the pursuit of higher education such as lower SES, higher percentages of first-generation college students, and limited access. Literature shows rural areas also have unique cultural factors such as how strongly identity is associated with the rural community and how deeply held values may conflict with how education is viewed by groups who share those values. Literature also reflects the economic impacts felt in rural areas as traditional industries decline, higher skilled jobs increase, and communities struggle to avoid the effects of brain drain and outmigration when their best and brightest leave for education and jobs in urban and suburban areas.

These factors influence perceptions. Perceptions influence motivation to pursue and attain a goal, such as going to college to improve one's financial future. Perceptions can change over time. As the next generation prepares to enter the workforce, it is the goal of this study to explore the perceptions of that emerging rural workforce toward higher education. If we hope to bring solutions to bear that address the unique needs and economic survival of today's rural communities, we must understand what past research has postulated as motivators and barriers to the pursuit of higher education.

This chapter looked at the pursuit of higher education as a concept. I explored, in greater detail, themes related to the pursuit of higher education in rural areas through an examination of

literature on motivation, SES, education deserts, rural communities, parental college attainment and the disadvantages of first-generation college students, parental expectations, and political ideology around higher education. The next chapter will outline the research, data collection, and data analysis methodologies as well as steps to ensure trustworthiness and address ethical issues.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction and Research Question

To recap the purpose of this study, rural students face an uphill battle against economic and cultural deterrents when it comes to college attainment. Due to vanishing industries as well as more jobs requiring at least some college, some form of post-secondary education is a growing necessity. (Gibbs, 2005; USDA, 2017). Exploring young rural American's perceptions of higher education may provide key insights useful to policy makers and education institutions (Coladarci, 2007) to enable and motivate rural Americans to pursue higher education, thereby improving their financial futures. Given that literature indicates higher education enables and empowers better financial outcomes, this study will be guided by two research questions:

1. What themes emerge as perceived barriers to the pursuit of higher education in rural areas by the generation preparing to enter the workforce?
2. What themes emerge as motivators to the pursuit of higher education in rural areas by the generation preparing to enter the workforce?

In this chapter, I outline the methodology and approach for this study, including the rationale for my research design and procedures, population and participant selection, data collection and analysis, and steps taken to address trustworthiness and ethical concerns.

Rationale for Research Procedure

Qualitative Research

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), "Research designs are types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in a research study" (p. 11) and that the "choice of methods turns on whether the intent is to specify the type of information to be collected in advance of the study or to allow it to

emerge from participants in the project" (p.16). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) indicated qualitative research is the "world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect culture" (p. 2). The research question guiding this study seeks to understand the perceptions of higher education by those preparing to enter the workforce in rural areas and what has influenced those perceptions. Using a qualitative research approach will allow me to more deeply explore perceptions of seniors expected to graduate in 2022 and analyze how those perceptions relate to their motivation and enablement to pursue higher education.

Qualitative research is interpretive (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and the researcher is the primary research tool, interacting with participants to collect data within the scope of the study (Merriam, 1998). Accordingly, it is important for the researcher to be aware of biases and assumptions they have, identify them, and regularly monitor for how those biases may be impacting the study. More on this subject will be discussed later in this chapter. But first I will review the rationale behind the specific type of qualitative study: *case study*.

Case Study Design

There are three primary approaches to case study design and methods. Yin (2018) said, "the distinctive need for case studies arise out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena" (p. 5). Yin provides a structured approach to case studies that tends to focus on exploring and/or understanding the "how" and "why" of the experience inside a bounded system. In comparison, Stake (2005) has a flexible and holistic approach to case studies that views the subject as an integrated system with a boundary and moving parts and puts heavy focus on researcher intuition and research-participant interaction. The third primary approach to case studies is in between Yin's highly structured approach and Stake's highly flexible approach. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) allow the researcher to define the boundaries of a particular

phenomenon of interest, with an outcome of thick description of context and the researcher's understanding of it.

Merriam's approach to case studies will be the primary design for this study. The study seeks to understand the perceptions that rural graduating seniors have when it comes to higher education. In other words, it seeks to understand "how" those rural seniors view college or other post-secondary education—and "why" they view it the way they do. As the study aims to focus on the rural Washington State generation preparing to enter the workforce, this is naturally a bounded system, constrained by participant age and school status, geographical location, and contemporary (present) time. It could also be viewed as an integrated system where the experiences and perceptions of participants, their families, and their community are all moving parts that color it. The pilot and interviews protocols for this study will have some structure while remaining flexible to explore more deeply the context behind responses. The outcome is expected to be a thick description of that real-world context as I understand it.

It is important to understand that case studies represent a single case, not the world (Stake, 2005) and are typically not generalizable through statistical methods. However, the findings can contribute to the collective knowledge in a specific field (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It is intended for this case study to provide valuable insight into the perceptions of rural graduating seniors when it comes to higher education. Such insight can contribute to decision-making around future policy and practices to better motivate and enable rural young adults to pursue college and better their future earning potential. Before proceeding into the details of the methods such as how participants will be selected and data collected, it is important to understand the potential biases I have as the researcher.

Researcher Positionality

Researcher Background and Experience

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggest researcher bias can have an impact on qualitative studies. They recognize how challenging it is to eliminate those biases completely. Instead, they believe researcher bias should be identified and monitored to make clear how the researcher's biases may shape the collection and interpretation of the data. As the researcher, I recognize that I have viewpoints born from my own background and experience that readers should consider when reading my interpretation and findings.

My parents grew up in rural areas, my father from the Texarkana, Texas area and my mother from the coal-mining areas of Huntington, West Virginia. My father was career Navy and was active duty until my teen years. Although we moved regularly between stateside submarine bases, we were raised with small town values and culture that often showed up in base housing for military families. Once my father retired, we moved to a rural farming community in Illinois with a population of less than 3,000. I attended a rural high school with heavy emphasis on home economics and agriculture, although some computer science and business courses were being introduced my senior year. My parents and most of my siblings continue to live in rural areas, mostly East Texas.

This upbringing influences my views on the overall rural experience and what it means to have a sense of community. Having similar experiences as the participants in this study pre-disposes me to see myself in the participants' world and construct a reality that more closely resembles my own than theirs. For example, the cost of college was a primary factor when I was considering my plans beyond high school. My parents made a low-to-modest income for the time but had seven children—of which I was the oldest. They had not put aside money to pay

for college—something they saw value in but simply could not afford. Accordingly, I may view a study participant's concern about cost as being related to low income versus what might be more of a view about the value of college in relation to the cost. I need to monitor this during interviews by asking why when it is not clear. Also, during my analysis and interpretation of data collected, I need to challenge any assumption I make and call out a missed opportunity for the participant to further define the basis for their responses.

Researcher Professional and Educational Experience

In addition to family, I have interacted with who live in rural areas, I have been an adjunct professor for nearly 15 years, interacting with many rural students who experienced the challenges that literature often associated with pursuit of higher education by those in rural areas. This included difficulty navigating admissions and financial aid processes, concerns with college debt when overall income opportunities were scarce in their rural areas, and challenges adjusting to diversity of thought and experience with many classmates being from urban or suburban areas. Having been a first-generation college student and struggled with many of the same issues, I empathized with my students and am very motivated to study the rural emerging workforce as a means to find ways to help make that path easier for those who need higher education in order to enable better opportunities, whether they stay in their rural areas or not. I will have a natural proclivity to want to solve for the problems as an educator and will need to put that desire aside while conducting the research so that I remain focused on understanding the underlying perceptions that exist today in these participants.

Study Method Details

Now that the methodological approach and the positionality of the researcher have been reviewed, I will outline the details of how the study will be executed. This will include an

explanation of the study's setting, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. Additionally, I will outline steps to ensure overall trustworthiness and address ethical concerns.

Study Setting: Population and Sampling for Participants

The Rural Alliance for College Success (referred to as the Alliance going forward) was founded in 2010 in Spokane, Washington (The Rural Alliance, 2020). It brought together small, isolated rural school districts to ensure geography did not determine students' post-secondary opportunities and success. The 35 districts represented in the Alliance partner with community colleges, universities, and a range of non-profit and community organizations to mitigate challenges that come with ensuring success for rural students and their families.

In its response to a request for information from the Gates Foundation (The Rural Alliance, 2017), the Alliance indicated rural school districts in Washington are as small as 69 students (La Crosse) to nearly 2,400 students (in Wahluke). These school districts are often isolated, impoverished and far from services (such as college prep and professional development) that most urban students experience. The response continued noting many Washington districts and communities are getting smaller, giving examples such as the Colfax school district whose enrollment has declined from 732 to 599, Chewelah dropping from 1122 to 809, and Republic shifting from 459 to 333—all between 2007-2017. Additionally, they noted some rural school districts are shifting in their ethnic makeup, noting one example, Manson school district going from 56.1 percent white to 68.1 percent Hispanic. Nearly all the Alliance districts have gotten economically poorer.

Daniels and Lapping (1996) called for more rural planning in both rural-urban fringe and remote rural areas, both prevalent in, but somewhat unique to, Washington State due to protections for open, low-density spaces. Tovar and Murphy of the William D. Ruckelhaus

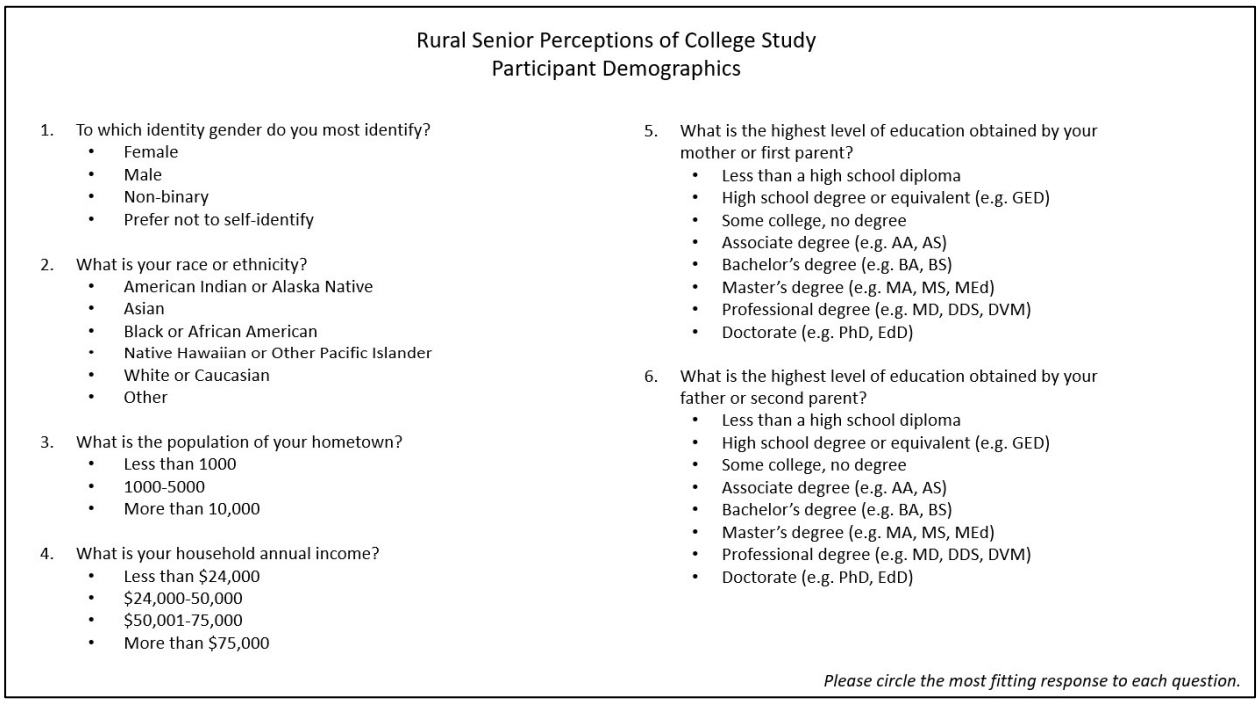
Center (2019) found in their *Roadmap to Washington's Future* report that many Washington rural residents expressed a need for more employment opportunities in their rural areas, but education was only peripherally mentioned in the primary calls to action to improve economic development in these areas. Accordingly, there appears to be a gap when it comes to understanding how a focus on education, particularly post-secondary education for those in rural Washington areas, may positively contribute to the desire to bolster rural communities. Understanding how the emerging workforce in those areas view post-secondary education would be vital to the success of such programs or policies.

Given their research and charter, I will leverage the Alliance to help identify an appropriate rural high school, with a mix of size, demographics, and median incomes, that would be willing to allow graduating seniors to participate in the study. Additionally, there should be a balanced mix of seniors who plan to pursue higher education after graduation, those who do not intend to pursue higher education, and those who remain undecided. A brief explanation of the study's goals and the researcher's background will be provided to the Alliance as well as potential schools. For purposes of convenience, the selected school should be located within 100 miles of my home in Snoqualmie, Washington.

The initial discussion with the potential rural high schools will be with school counselors and administration to understand any concerns and constraints that need to be considered as the study is planned and executed. It is not the intent to understand school counselor or administration stories as part of this research. But it could be beneficial to review any material, reports, or other artifacts from the school regarding college prep, college recruiting efforts, admissions support, and the types of challenges the staff encounters when helping seniors

prepare for life beyond high school graduation. This information may also inform the semi-structured interview questions.

As required by the University of Arkansas and any of the potential rural Washington high schools, I will contact respective Institution Review Boards (IRBs) to understand the required information, format, and timeline to request their approval for the study. After submission, I will work with each IRB to resolve open questions or concerns, and make necessary adjustments, per their guidance. Only upon receiving approval from all required institutions involved in the study will I move forward with the research.



Rural Senior Perceptions of College Study
Participant Demographics

1. To which identity gender do you most identify?
   - Female
   - Male
   - Non-binary
   - Prefer not to self-identify
2. What is your race or ethnicity?
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - White or Caucasian
   - Other
3. What is the population of your hometown?
   - Less than 1000
   - 1000-5000
   - More than 10,000
4. What is your household annual income?
   - Less than $24,000
   - $24,000-50,000
   - $50,001-75,000
   - More than $75,000
5. What is the highest level of education obtained by your mother or first parent?
   - Less than a high school diploma
   - High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)
   - Some college, no degree
   - Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)
   - Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)
   - Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)
   - Professional degree (e.g. MD, DDS, DVM)
   - Doctorate (e.g. PhD, EdD)
6. What is the highest level of education obtained by your father or second parent?
   - Less than a high school diploma
   - High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)
   - Some college, no degree
   - Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)
   - Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)
   - Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)
   - Professional degree (e.g. MD, DDS, DVM)
   - Doctorate (e.g. PhD, EdD)

Please circle the most fitting response to each question.

Figure 1: Participant Demographic Survey

Once there is an agreement with the school staff to help coordinate the communication of the study to potential students, it is expected the school counselors will help identify and contact potential student participants and their parents. As many seniors will not yet be of legal adult age, it will be important to seek parental permission for the students to participate in the program. For all students with parental permission, a brief questionnaire, shown in Figure 1, will be completed

prior to individual interviews to capture current demographic information, including family income, parental college attainment, gender, and age of participants. Responses will only be used for descriptive statistics. Student and parent consent forms will be stored in a secure location. This approach will be adjusted based on any further guidance from the IRB of the University of Arkansas as well as the high school, if required by them.

The initial target number of participants is at least two or three in each subgroup representing 1) seniors who intend to pursue higher education, 2) seniors who do not intend to pursue higher education, and 3) those undecided. If more than three in each subgroup are willing to participate in each of the chosen schools, I will randomly select participants for a maximum of nine, with all remaining willing participants kept in a pool to be leveraged in the event a participant chooses to discontinue or new themes continue to emerge indicating there is not saturation of findings. Some rural schools may not have an even distribution of genders, and should that occur, it will be noted accordingly.

Data Collection: Pilot Interview

Using a randomly selected participant from one of the chosen schools, a pilot interview will be conducted to assess the timing, flow, and value of the initial semi-structured interview question as well as identify any logistics issues with conducting and recording the interviews. Adjustments will be made to the interview protocol and collection steps based on learnings from the pilot.

Data Collection: Semi-structured Interviews

One-on-one interviews will be conducted with each participant, either in person or via video call, as appropriate and based on mutually agreeable scheduling. Face-to-face or video conferencing will enable me to read non-verbal indicators that might add meaning to responses.

The preference will be to conduct all interviews on the high school premises. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing and other restrictions may dictate video conferencing or some other format that adheres to social distancing or local restrictions. To make the participants feel at ease, a brief overview of the study's purpose will be reviewed prior to starting the interview and the participants will be reminded that they can opt out at any time.

Semi-structured interviews are an appropriate means of data collection when the phenomena under study cannot be observed directly (Creswell, 2003). This is preferred over structured interviews where rigid questions may limit the sharing of perceptions or would limit the researcher's ability to prompt the participant to expound on a response. It is also preferred over completely open interviews that may not provide enough structure to promote consistency across participants and schools.

Semi-structured interviews are best when there is enough rapport established to support in-depth conversations leading to insights often missed through quantitative data research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Accordingly, I will mention my connection with them as a rural high school graduate and talk briefly prior to formally starting the questions to establish such rapport taking care not to mention personal history of barriers or motivators regarding academic achievement which might bias responses.

Research Question	Category	Interview Protocol
What themes emerge as perceived barriers and motivators to the pursuit of higher education in rural areas by the generation preparing to enter the workforce?	Perceptions of College	• What are your perceptions of college? • Follow up: Tell me more about.... • Follow up: What led you to feel this way?
	Rural Community Culture	• How does your community generally view college? • Follow up: Why do you think that is? • Follow up: Can you be more specific about...?
	Barriers and Concerns	• How do you feel college fits into your career plans? • Follow up: Tell me more about.... • What might concern you about or prevent you from going to college? • Follow up: What might help overcome those concerns/barriers?

Figure 2: Interview Protocol

Figure 2 outlines the interview protocol and questions as they relate to the research question and general categories. Care will be taken to explain "college" could mean any formal education beyond high school and avoid limiting participant responses based on a narrow view of "college" as a traditional four-year, brick-and-mortar institution. Audio will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Once transcribed, text will be sent to each participant for review and approval. All recordings and transcriptions will be kept secured on a password-locked OneDrive.

Data Analysis Approach

Transcripts will be analyzed for emergent themes. The web application MaxQDA will be used for transcription, coding, analysis, and storage. Initial codes will be created based on thoughts that come quickly or key phrases that stand out in participant responses. The intent will be for this first pass to happen freely without simultaneous attempt to categorize the themes. It is expected that slight variations or refinement of themes will naturally occur during the first pass. So, once the first pass is complete, all codes will be reviewed, refined, and categorized based on the research question; and a second coding pass will be performed using the final codes. Chapter 4 will reflect those findings.

Trustworthiness

Research validity, reliability, and generalization are important in quantitative research (Kvale, 1995). The intent is for the research to be easily replicated with similar outcomes, with results generalizable across the population. However, qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable nor is it expected a qualitative case study could be replicated with the same results. There are still steps to be taken to ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability.

Credibility

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) identify several ways to accomplish credibility within a qualitative study, including: *triangulation*, *member checking*, and *peer examination*. All of these will be performed in this study. Triangulation involves using and analyzing several types of data to ensure a richer understanding of the topic under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and increase the validity of a study by ensuring results are similar (Terrell, 2016). For this study, both a pilot and semi-structured interview will be used to collect data. Additionally, document and policy reviews will be done as previously discussed.

Credibility can also be strengthened by having others review the analysis and preliminary findings. Member checking is having research participants review the researcher's writing to verify the researcher's interpretation is accurate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As previously mentioned, each participant will be asked to review and approve transcripts and the initial themes (or codes) to ensure accuracy. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe peer examinations or reviews as having another person review the study's findings and determine if they come to similar conclusions. The dissertation committee functions as a form of peer examination. I intend to have at least one member of my doctoral cohort review my findings and conclusion to ensure clarity and reliability of the data. I will engage an editor skilled in dissertation editing to ensure flow and readability and call out any issues to be addressed. Lastly, I expect to have my husband read the final manuscript in hopes a non-academic reviewer will identify anything that is not clearly explained or that does not make sense. These multiple and varied reviewers should help strengthen the writing and increase credibility of the final report.

Transferability

As previously mentioned, case study research results are not intended to be generalizable in the same manner as quantitative research. However, extrapolations or speculations can be made on the applicability or transferability of findings to other similar, but not identical, situations and conditions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To boost the possibility the results of a qualitative case study can be transferred to another setting, a thick or detailed description of the setting and participant context will be provided (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This will include evidence such as interview quotes, field notes, and documentation.

Dependability

"Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 250). Reliability is problematic for social science studies as the researcher's goal is to describe the phenomenon as those in the phenomenon experience it. Human behavior is dynamic and highly contextual, what many people experience is no more or less reliable that what one person experiences, and there can be many interpretations of the same qualitative data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Accordingly, a better validity check for a social science qualitative study is dependability that the results are consistent with the data collected.

In addition to the credibility strategies already defined in the previous section, dependability can be strengthened by an audit trail of processes and steps taken throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, for this study, I will keep a log that describes in detail how I made key decisions around participants, collected data, and derived categories for the emerging themes so that the history of the study can be clearly understood and its results viewed as dependable.

Ethical Issues

Aside from the previously discussed researcher's positionality, it is important to protect the identity of participants and ensure no harm comes to them from their participation in the study. Consent forms will be used, and approval and guidance will be solicited from each IRB involved in the study to ensure additional steps are taken to reduce any risk of participant harm. This will likely include anonymizing participants through the use of pseudonyms. Full transparency will be employed for all processes and all recordings, transcripts, and participant pseudonyms will be secured.

Chapter 3 Summary

In this chapter, I have reiterated the purpose of this study and the research question driving it. A rationale was given for a qualitative study along with an explanation for why a case study is an appropriate method. I considered my positionality as a researcher including my rural background and my experience as an educator. The data collection and analysis method were outlined in detail. And, lastly, strategies were discussed around steps to promote trustworthiness and address any ethical concerns.

References

Acemoglu, D., & Angrist, J. (2000). How large are human-capital externalities? Evidence from compulsory schooling laws. *NBER macroeconomics annual, 15*, 9-59.

Akers, R. (2017). *Social learning and social structure: A general theory of crime and deviance*. New York: Routledge.

Alm, J. & Winters, J. (2009). Distance and intrastate college student migration. *Economics of Education Review, 28*, 728-738.

Ansell, B. W. (2010). *From the ballot to the blackboard: The redistribution political economy of education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson. (2019, May 15). *Press Release: Governor Hutchinson releases Arkansas state broadband plan, goal for rural connectivity in four years*. https://governor.arkansas.gov/news-media/press-releases/governor-hutchinson-releases-arkansas-state-broadband-plan-goal/

Assari, S. (2018). Parental educational attainment and mental well-being of college students; diminished returns of blacks. *Brain Sciences, 8*(11), 193. doi:10.3390/brainsci8110193

Bailey, G., Spears, J. D., & Combs, L. R. (1990). *Accommodating change and diversity: linking rural schools to communities: a report of the Ford Western Taskforce*. Kansas State University.

Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1977). *Social learning theory* (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-hall.

Bartels, L. M. (2010). The study of electoral behavior. *The Oxford handbook of American elections and political behavior*, 239-261.

Brito, N. H., & Noble, K. G. (2014). Socioeconomic status and structural brain development. *Frontiers in Neuroscience, 8*, 276. doi:10.3389/fnins.2014.00276

Bryan, J., Moore-Thomas, C., Day-Vines, N. L., Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Mitchell, N. (2009). Characteristics of students who receive school counseling services: Implications for practice and research. *Journal of School Counseling, 7*(21)

Byun, S. Y., Meece, J. L., & Irvin, M. J. (2012). Rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary educational attainment revisited. *American Educational Research Journal, 49*(3), 412-437.

Caplan, J. (2017). Trump jr. scolds universities during UNT speech, a fundraiser for scholarships. *Fort Worth Star - Telegram*

Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., & Rose, S. J. (2011). *The college pay off: Education, occupations, lifetime earnings*. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013). *Recovery: projections of jobs and education requirements through 2020*. Georgetown Public Policy Institute.

Coladarci, T. (2007). Improving the yield of rural education research: An editor's swan song. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(3), 1-9.

Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education, 55*(4), 425-446. doi:10.1007/s10734-007-9065-5

Cook, D. A., & Artino Jr, A. R. (2016). Motivation to learn: an overview of contemporary theories. *Medical education, 50*(10), 997-1014.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage publications.

Daniels, T. L., & Lapping, M. B. (1996). The two rural americas need more, not less planning. Journal of the American Planning Association, 62(3), 285-288. doi:10.1080/01944369608975694

D'Amico, J., Matthes, W., Sankar, A., Merchant, B., & Zurita, M. (1996). Young voices from the rural Midwest. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 12*, 142-149.

Degani, M. (2016). Endangered intellect: a case study of Clinton vs Trump campaign discourse. *Rivista semestrale ISSN, 2281*, 4582.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

DeYoung, A. J. (1987). The status of American rural education research: An integrated review and commentary. *Review of Educational Research, 57*(2), 148;123;-148. doi:10.2307/1170233

Douglas, J. (1964). *The home and the school*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.

Engle, J., Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students.* The Pell Institute. http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications Moving_Beyond_Access_2008.pdf

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance* (Vol. 2). Stanford university press.

Fingerhut, H. (2017). Republicans much 'colder' than Democrats in views of professors. *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers.*

Fishman, D. (2015). School reform for rural America: innovate with charters, expand career and technical education. *Education Next, 15*(3), 8-17.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative inquiry, 12*(2), 219-245.

Friesen, L., & Purc-Stephenson, R. J. (2016). Should I stay or should I go? perceived barriers to pursuing a university education for persons in rural areas. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 46*(1), 138.

Fuller, J. B., & Raman, M. (2017). *Dismissed by degrees: How degree inflation is undermining US competitiveness and hurting America's middle class*. Published by Accenture, Grads of Life, Harvard Business School.

Gándara, P., Gutiérrez, D., & O'Hara, S. (2001). Planning for the future in rural and urban high schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At-Risk, 6*(1), 73-93.

Gibbs, R. M. (2005). *Low-skill employment and the changing economy of rural America* (Vol. 10). US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Gillock, K.L (1999). Factors affecting students' adjustment and attrition during the transition to college. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering, 60*, 2941.

Greenwald, A. G., & Ronis, D. L. (1978). Twenty years of cognitive dissonance: Case study of the evolution of a theory. *Psychological Review, 85*(1), 53.

Griffith, J. (1996). Relation of parental involvement, empowerment, and school traits to student academic performance. *The Journal of Educational Research, 90*(1), 33-41. doi:10.1080/00220671.1996.9944441

Haller, E. J., & Virkler, S. J. (1993). Another look at rural-nonrural differences in students' educational aspirations. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 9*, 170-178.

Hannum, W. H., Irvin, M. J., Banks, J. B., & Farmer, T. W. (2009). Distance education use in rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(3), 1.

Hardner, K., Wolf, M. R., & Rinfrette, E. S. (2018). Examining the relationship between higher educational attainment, trauma symptoms, and internalizing behaviors in child sexual abuse survivors. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 86*, 375-383. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.10.007

Hardré, P. L., Crowson, H. M., Debacker, T. K., & White, D. (2007). Predicting the academic motivation of rural high school students. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 75*(4), 247-269.

Hardré, P. L., & Reeve, J. (2003). A motivational model of rural students' intentions to persist in, versus drop out of, high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*, 347-356.

Heinisch, B. P. (2017). Small fish out of water. *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention, 24*(1).

Henriques, G. (2013). Perceptions, motives, and emotions: A control theory model. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/theory-knowledge/201306/perceptions-motives-and-emotions-control-theory-model

Hidi, S., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2000). Motivating the academically unmotivated: A critical issue for the 21st century. *Review of Educational Research, 70*, 151-179.

Higher education. (2020). In *Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/higher%20education

Hillman, N., & Orians, E. (2013). The role of financial aid in meeting state college completion goals. *Education Finance and Policy, 8*(3), 249-363.

Hillman, N. & Weichman, T. (2016). Education deserts: The continued significance of "place" in the twenty-first century. *Viewpoints: Voices from the Field. American Council on Education*. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Education-Deserts-The-Continued-Significance-of-Place-in-the-Twenty-First-Century.pdf

Hobbs, D. (1991, June). *Exemplary rural school programs in support of rural development*. Symposium presentation at the National Conference on Rural Adult Education Initiatives, hosted by Rural Clearinghouse for Lifelong Education and Development, Kansas City, MO

Howley, C. W. (2006). Remote possibilities: Rural children's educational aspirations. *Peabody Journal of Education, 81*(2), 62-80. doi:10.1207/S15327930pje8102_4

Huang, T. L., Orazem, P. F., & Wohlgemuth, D. (2002). Rural population growth, 1950–1990: the roles of human capital, industry structure, and government policy. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 84*(3), 615-627.

Jakobi, A. P. (2011). Political parties and the institutionalization of education: A comparative analysis of party manifestos. *Comparative Education Review, 55*(2), 189-209. doi:10.1086/657931

Jassal, P.K. (2007). First-generation college student success: The impact of parental educational attainment on student retention after first year of college and four-year graduation rate at institution of matriculation. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences, 68*, 1747.

Jennings, M. K., Stoker, L., & Bowers, J. (2009). Politics across generations: Family transmission reexamined. *The Journal of Politics, 71*(3), 782-799.

Jepson, C. & Montgomery, M. (2009). Miles to before I learn: The effect of travel distance on the mature person's choice of a community college. *Journal of Urban Economics, 65*, 64-73.

Johnson, J. (2014). Durable issues in rural education. *Dynamics of social class, race, and place in rural education*, 325-349.

Johnson, J., Ohlson, M. A., & Shope, S. (2018). Demographic changes in rural America and the implications for special education programming: A descriptive and comparative analysis. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 37*(3), 140-149. doi:10.1177/8756870518771381

Johnson, J. D., & Zoellner, B. P. (2016). School funding and rural districts. Educational opportunity in rural contexts: *The rural politics of place*, 107-122.

Johnson, K. (2012). Rural demographic change in the new century: Slower growth, increase diversity. *Carsey Institute, 44*. Retrieved from https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1158&context=carsey

Johnson, K. M., & Fuguitt, G. V. (2000). Continuity and change in rural migration patterns, 1950–1995. *Rural Sociology, 65*(1), 27-49. doi:10.1111/j.1549-0831.2000.tb00341.x

Jones, S., & Vagle, M. D. (2013). Living contradictions and working for change toward a theory of social class-sensitive pedagogy. *Educational Researcher, 42*, 129-141. doi: 10.3102/0013189X13481381

Jungblut, J. (2015). Bringing political parties into the picture: A two-dimensional analytical framework for higher education policy. *Higher Education, 69*(5), 867-882. doi:10.1007/s10734-014-9810-5

Khine, K. (2019). *A greater number of jobs require more education, leaving middle-skill workers with fewer opportunities*. Stat Ch@ t, University of Virginia, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. http://statchatva.org/2019/05/10/a-greater-number-of-jobs-require-more-education-leaving-middle-skill-workers-with-fewer-opportunities/

Klein, M. W., Schuh, S., & Triest, R. K. (2002). *Job creation, job destruction, and international competition: Job flows and trade—the case of NAFTA* (No. 02-8). Boston: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

Kosterlitz, A. (1997). *Avoiding sprawl in rural areas*. http://mrsc.org/getmedia/49832ADA-A029-408B-9499-3E3C7EF3768E/avoidingsprawl.aspx

Krueger, R., & Casey, M. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Krupnick, M. (2018, April 6). Millions of U.S. adults live in education deserts, far from colleges and fast internet. *PBS News Hour*. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/millions-of-u-s-adults-live-in-education-deserts-far-from-colleges-and-fast-internet

Kvale, S, (1995). The social construct of validity. *Qualitative Inquiry, 1*(1). 19-40.

Lavalley, M. (2018). *Out of the loop: Rural schools are largely left out of the research and policy discussions, exacerbating poverty, inequality, and isolation*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association Center for Public Education.

Lieberman, M. (2019). Steady, slow growth for a state online university. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/03/20/eversity-forges-ahead-amid-challenges-reaching-adults-arkansas

Logan, J. R., & Burdick-Will, J. (2017). School segregation and disparities in urban, suburban, and rural areas. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 674*(1), 199-216. doi:10.1177/0002716217733936

Loudenback, T., & Gould, S. (2017). How much you have to earn to be considered middle class in every US state. *Business Insider*. https://www.businessinsider.com/middle-class-income-us-state-2017-9

Lumina Foundation. (2019). *A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*. http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#nation

Mahaffey, R. (2012). Upsurge in rural student poverty rates, diversity, enrollment. *PR Newswire* http://0-search.proquest.com.library.uark.edu/docview/914945665?accountid=8361

Marcus, J., & Krupnick, M. (2017). The rural higher-education crisis. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/09/the-rural-higher-education-crisis/541188/

Marland, S. (1974). *Career education: A proposal for reform*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Marré, A. (2017). *Rural education at a glance*. [EIB-171]. U.S. Department of Agriculture. https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=83077

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Martin, S. (2010). General conference summary, building partnerships for quality education in rural America. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 29*(1), 10-12.

Mau, W., & Bikos, L. H. (2000). Educational and vocational aspirations of minority and female students: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 78*,186-194.

McCarron, G. P., & Inkelas, K. K. (2006). The gap between educational aspirations and attainment for first-generation college students and the role of parental involvement. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*(5), 534-549. doi:10.1353/csd.2006.0059

McCray, C. R., Wright, J. V., & Beachum, F. D. (2004). An analysis of secondary school principals' perceptions of multicultural education. *Education, 125*(1), 111-121.

McCulloh, E. (2020). An Exploration of Parental Support in the Retention of Rural First-Generation College Students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. doi.org/10.1177/1521025120907889

McDowell, G. R. (1992). The new political economy of extension education for agriculture and rural America. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 74*(5), 1249-1255. doi:10.2307/1242797

McLoyd, V. C. (1998). Socioeconomic disadvantage and child development. *American Psychology. 53*:185. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.53.2.185

McNeill, C. (2018). *Rural students put off by perceived weaknesses of college*. AP News. https://apnews.com/article/b85d516e91964d37a93c0109d86626b3

McWhirter, E. H., Torres, D. M., Salgado, S., & Valdez, M. (2007). Perceived barriers and postsecondary plans in Mexican American and White adolescents. *Journal of Career Assessment, 15*(1), 119-138.

Mellon, C., & Kester, D. (2004). Online Library Education Programs: Implications for Rural Students. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science, 45*(3), 210-220. doi:10.2307/40323888

Meredith, M. (2009). Persistence in political participation. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 4*(3), 187-209.

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study application in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Meyers, B. (2018, July 17). Who lives in educational deserts? More people than you think. The Chronicle of Higher Education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-lives-in-education-deserts

Miller, B. A. (1993). Rural distress and survival: The school and the importance of community. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 9*(2), 84-103.

Miller, C., & Poston, M. (2020). *Perception process*. Exploring Communication in the Real World. https://cod.pressbooks.pub/communication/chapter/2-1-perception-process/

Miller, P. H. (1993). *Theories of developmental psychology* (Third ed.). New York: W.H. Freeman.

Morey, A. I. (2004). Globalization and the emergence of for-profit higher education. *Higher Education, 48*(1), 131-150. doi:10.1023/B:HIGH.0000033768.76084.a0

Morin, R. (2016). *Behind Trump's win in rural white America: Women joined men in backing him*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/17/behind-trumps-win-in-rural-white-america-women-joined-men-in-backing-him/

Mullainathan, S., & Washington, E. (2009). Sticking with your vote: Cognitive dissonance and political attitudes. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 1*(1), 86-111.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2013). *The status of rural education*. NCES.gov. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_tla.asp

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2016). *High school benchmarks*. MSC Research Center. https://nscresearchcenter.org/hsbenchmarks2016/

Pabayo, R., Kawachi, I., & Muennig, P. (2015). Political party affiliation, political ideology and mortality. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979-), 69*(5), 423-431. doi:10.1136/jech-2014-204803

Parker, K., Horowitz, J., Brown, A., Fry, R., & D'Vera Cohn. (2018). *What unites and divides urban, suburban and rural communities*. Pew Research Center. https://apo.org.au/node/173886

Patterson, M. B. (2018). The forgotten 90%: Adult nonparticipation in education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 68*(1), 41-62.

Pick, J., Sarkar, A., & Johnson, J. (2015). United States digital divide: State level analysis of spatial clustering and multivariate determinants of ICT utilization. *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences, 49*, 16-32/

Pierson, A., & Hanson, H. (2015, May). *Comparing postsecondary enrollment and persistence among rural and nonrural students in Oregon*. US Department of Education.

Pintrich, P. R., & Schunk, D. H. (1996). *Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Porter, E. (2018, Dec 16). *Abandoned America: News analysis*. New York Times. https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/abandoned-america/docview/2156744716/se-2?accountid=8361

Prospero, M. & Vohra-Gupta, S. (2007). Gender differences in the relationship between intimate partner violence victimization and the perception of dating situations among college students. *Violence and Victims, 22*, 489-502.

Ramos-Sanchez, L. & Nichols, L. (2007). Self-efficacy of first-generation and non-first-generation college students: The relationship with academic performance and college adjustment. *Journal of College Counseling, 10*, 6-18.

Ratcliffe, M. (2015, November). *A century of delineating a changing landscape: The Census Bureau's urban and rural classification, 1910 to 2010*. In Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Ratcliffe-2/publication/283903870_A_Century_of_Delineating_a_Changing_Landscape_The_Census_Bureau%27s_Urban_and_Rural_Classification_1910_to_2010/links/5649d01908aef646e6d30274/A-Century-of-Delineating-a-Changing-Landscape-The-Census-Bureaus-Urban-and-Rural-Classification-1910-to-2010.pdf

Reder, S. (2010). *Adult literacy development and economic growth*. National Institute for Literacy. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512441.pdf

Reed, K. (2010). Multicultural Education for Rural Schools: Creating Relevancy in Rural America. *Rural Educator, 31*(2).

Reeve, J. (1996). *Motivating others*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Roessger, K. M., Weese, J., Parker, D. A., & Hevel, M. S. (2022). Bridging the Distance? How Proximity and Online Learning Shape Communities' Adult Participation in Public Universities. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, ahead-of-print*(ahead-of-print), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2021.2024001

Rojewski, J. W., & Kim, H. (2003). Career choice patterns and behavior of workbound youth during early adolescence. *Journal of Career Development, 30*, 89-108. doi:10.1023/A:1026150427009

Rosenboom, V. & Blagg, K. (2018, January). Disconnected from higher education: How geography and internet speed limit access to higher education. *Urban Institute*. https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/89125/Disconnectedfromhighereducation.pdf?sequence=1

Schmitt-Wilson, S. (2013). Social class and expectations of rural adolescents: The role of parental expectations. *The Career Development Quarterly, 61*(3), 226-239.

Schoon, I., & Parsons, S. (2002). Teenage aspirations for future careers and occupational outcomes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 60*, 262-288.

Sears, R. R. (1951). A theoretical framework for personality and social behavior. *American Psychologist, 6*(9), 476.

Sher, J. P., & Dunne, F. (1977). *Education in rural America: A reassessment of conventional wisdom*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

Showalter, D., Klein, R., Johnson, J., & Hartman, S. L. (2017). *Why rural matters 2015-2016: Understanding the changing landscape*. The Rural School and Community Trust. Rural School and Community Trust. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED590169.pdf

Sileo, J. M., & Sileo, T. W. (2008). Academic dishonesty and online classes: A rural education perspective. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 27*(1), 55-60.

Simons-Morton, B. G., & Crump, A. D. (2003). Association of parental involvement and social competence with school adjustment and engagement among sixth graders. *Journal of School Health, 73*(3), 121-126. doi:10.1111/j.1746-1561.2003.tb03586.x

Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative Case Studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (p. 443–466). Sage Publications Ltd.

Stoker, L., & Bass, J. (2011). Political socialization. In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media.*

Strover, S. (2014). The U.S. digital divide: A call for a new philosophy. *Critical Studies in Media Communications, 31*(2), 114-122.

Tekniepe, R. J. (2015). Identifying the factors that contribute to involuntary departures of school superintendents in rural America. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 30*(1), 1.

Terrell, S. R. (2016). *Writing a proposal for your dissertation: Guidelines and examples*. London: Guilford Publications.

The Rural Alliance. (2017). *Response to Gates Foundation networks for school improvement: request for information*. Spokane, WA: The Rural Alliance

The Rural Alliance. (n.d.). Retrieved March 22, 2020, from https://www.theruralalliance.org/

The White House. (2021). Fact sheet: The American jobs plan. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan/

United States Department of Agriculture. (2017). *Rural education at a glance*, 2017 edition. Washington, DC: U.S Department of Agriculture.

Van Dam, A. (2019, May 24). *The real (surprisingly comforting) reason rural America is doomed to decline*. The Washington Post.

https://aede.osu.edu/sites/aede/files/imce/images/Washington%20Post%205.24.19%20Rural%20Classification.pdf

Victoria. (2011). *Difference between rural and suburban and urban*. DifferenceBetween.net. http://www.differencebetween.net/language/difference-between-rural-and-suburban-and-urban

Wolf, F., & Zohlnhöfer, R. (2009). Investing in human capital? the determinants of private education expenditure in 26 OECD countries. *Journal of European Social Policy, 19*(3), 230. doi:10.1177/0958928709104738

William D. Ruckelhaus Center. (2019). Roadmap to Washington's future: Final report. https://ruckelshauscenter.wsu.edu/a-roadmap-to-washingtons-future/

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage publications.