

**SOCIALIZATION OF UNDERGRADUATE RURAL STUDENTS IN A LARGE, URBAN  
UNIVERSITY**

by

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Using the theoretical framework of Weidman's Model of Undergraduate Student Socialization (1989), this study investigates the socialization experiences of rural students at a large, urban university. Ten first-year, first-semester students were interviewed at the beginning and the end of the fall 2016 semester to describe their socialization process. Based on the findings, the definition of rural students at the university was challenged. The findings also consider the influence of technology and the importance of physical location. Technology taps into the students' backgrounds; influences parental and non-college references groups; and motivates the normative pressures found both academically and socially at the university. It acts as a driving catalyst to make the collegiate experience positive through the support of friends and encourages interactions with faculty and the urban environment. The frequency rural students return home can affect their interpretation of the collegiate experience and socialization into the institution. The concept of returning home challenges Weidman's Socialization Model to consider a balance between the hometown and collegiate experiences during a rural student's first semester in college. With these implications in mind, recommendations for research and practice are offered for institutions. It is hoped the implications of this study are used to allow rural students to achieve desired academic outcomes, a sense of belonging, and retention rates.

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## 1.0 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Every year thousands of students enter colleges and universities. These students come from diverse backgrounds and experiences that influence how they understand their new environment (Bitz, 2011; Murphy, 1984; Stone, 2014). Although they are sometimes overlooked without manifesting any outward differences, rural students enter universities with distinctive characteristics (Stone, 2014). Undergraduate students from rural backgrounds may experience socialization at large, urban universities differently than their counterparts from urban areas (Stone, 2014; Murphy, 1989; Bitz, 2011; Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida, 2008). In order to better understand socialization of this understudied student population, this study examined socialization of undergraduate rural students into large, urban universities. This understanding is important because socialization can affect desired academic outcomes, sense of belonging, and retention rates (Bitz, 2011; Stone, 2014).

Socialization involves students learning the appropriate or normative modes of social behavior for interacting with their peer groups (Weidman, 1989). Brim (1966) describes socialization as “the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society” (p. 3). Weidman’s Model of Undergraduate Student Socialization (Appendix A) focuses on the “individual’s perceptions of the college environment and less on structural aspects of socialization” (p. 270). As such, this

study collected data from rural students' experiences, rather than the structure of the institution of a large, urban university.

The characteristics of large, urban universities may subject rural students to unique academic and social challenges, which, in turn, could affect their personal understanding and formation of academic ideals and ambitions (Weidman, 1989). These understandings could lead to the way in which they respond to the college environment and how they are socialized. If rural students experience socialization differently than their urban counterparts, they may not reach desired socialization outcomes (career choices, lifestyle preferences, aspirations, and values). As a result, rural students may not contribute to society to the best of their ability.

Literature reveals rural students are likely to be low-income, with parents who did not attend postsecondary education (e.g. first-generation college students) (Beasley, 2011; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Stone, 2014). Few studies, however, address how the backgrounds of rural students may become barriers to student socialization (Stone, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida, 2008). Previous studies have focused on populations defined by distinctive pieces of rural students' backgrounds—namely first-generation and low-income students. Rarely do studies focus on specifically rural students and consider all aspects of their rural identity. Understanding rural students' socialization could aid administrators and faculty in the development of student services that can facilitate rural students' successful transition to adult life as contributing members of society (Weidman, 1989). This study based rurality on population density of Pennsylvanian counties at the time of the United States 2010 Census. The students who participated in this study were all from rural areas in Pennsylvania.

As rurality is an outwardly unrecognizable characteristic, faculty and staff may not provide special attention to this population (Stone, 2014). To best serve rural students at large,

urban institutions, researchers and practitioners should seek to understand the socialization process of rural students to aid in desired academic outcomes, a sense of belonging, and higher retention rates for these students (Stone, 2014). The lack of understanding and investigation into rural students could lead to the exclusion of this group in programming and strategic planning efforts (Stone, 2014).

Rural students are less likely to attend postsecondary institutions and, once there, less likely to persist as compared to their urban counterparts (Ames, Birnie-Lefcovitch, Wintre, Polivy, Pancer, Adams, & Pratt, 2014; Stone 2014), which may be the result of a lack of socialization into the university environment. There is little current empirical research, however, on the socialization rural students face in postsecondary institutions and how student services attempt to aid in this socialization. Guiffrida (2008) claims conversations with rural students who dropped out of large institutions “revealed that they felt lost and out of place at large colleges” (p. 3). Nevertheless, rural students are currently found in urban universities at increased rates—although current economic trends and increased competition of universities may negatively influence these rates (Beasley, 2011). Research is needed to aid colleges and universities in developing programs and structures that provide beneficial academic and social collegiate experiences (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Weidman, 1989).

## **1.1 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE**

Current research reveals rural students’ perception of self (Stone, 2014) as well as stresses and coping behaviors (Murphy, 1984) and examines the role of rurality in college adjustment (Bitz, 2011). Rural student socialization in large, urban institutions remains understudied. Students may

not succeed socially and academically at an institution if they do not experience adequate socialization (Weidman, 1989). Rural students may have lower persistence rates and GPAs, experience a lack of belonging, or feel overwhelmed by their environment (Stone, 2014; Murphy, 1984), which may lead to poor socialization (Weidman, 1989). Research has not established whether these students experience socialization uniquely in large, urban universities.

The study's purpose was to understand the socialization of rural students in a large, urban institution. I used data to describe the experiences of rural students at a large, urban university and their process of gaining socialization. This study focused on a small group of first-year rural students at a large, urban university. I asked participants to share their backgrounds, influences of important people in their lives, and their current experiences at the institution. I used results from the study to describe the socialization process for these students and develop recommendations to inform the practices of faculty, student development staff, and administrators throughout large, urban universities that serve rural students (Appendix H). Informing practice is important for obtaining desired academic outcomes, retention rates, and a greater sense of belonging.

### **1.1.1 Inquiry Questions**

Building upon previous research on rural students' backgrounds, parental socialization, other non-college reference groups, and normative pressures, this problem of practice investigated rural student socialization within the context of a large, urban university. Based on a review of relevant literature, taking into consideration the needs of the stakeholders involved, and using Weidman's (1989) Conceptual Model of Undergraduate Socialization, I addressed the following inquiry questions:

1. How do undergraduate students from rural areas define and describe their socialization experiences during their first year at a large, urban university?
2. How are parents and non-college reference groups involved in the socialization process?
3. What role do students' background characteristics play in the socialization process?

Based on these questions, the study described rural student socialization. I also discuss strategies to engage rural students as a demonstration of scholarly practice (Appendix H) in order to aid in rural student socialization.

## **1.2 RESEARCH SETTING**

I conducted the study at a large, urban university in Pennsylvania: Mid-Atlantic University (MAU; a pseudonym). MAU is responsible for providing quality education for its students, of which, 7.5 percent of the first-year class are identified as coming from a rural area. The problem of practice consequently becomes an instance where a small, yet significant, population of students may feel marginalized at a large, urban university.

Understanding rural students who attend a large, urban university is important because they might find the nature of their social interactions different than what they have experience in a small town. For example, “when rural students arrive on college campuses located in urban settings, they may have a sense that they have lost many of the familiar signs of social interaction” (Bitz, 2011, p. 5). Social interactions could take place in a setting where the student knows far fewer people and with people who have a different set of values and beliefs (Bitz,

2011). In a sense, rural students in the setting of a large, urban university may experience some form of “culture shock” (Bitz, 2011).

### **1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

The research on rural students in college is sparse, at best. This study informs the small, but growing, body of literature on this marginalized group of students. There are several stakeholders who should be interested in better understanding the socialization process of rural students: rural students themselves, institutional faculty, staff, and administrators, and rural communities and families.

#### **1.3.1 Stakeholders**

Based on a review of the literature and the characteristics of large, urban universities, rural students are the primary stakeholders as they are subject to unique academic and social challenges, which affect their socialization and may ultimately affect their retention and success within the institution (Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida, 2008; Weidman, 1989). Faculty members are also stakeholders, as they instruct rural students in their classrooms, mentor them in outside-the-classroom activities, and provide academic and, at times, career direction. Furthermore, university staff who interact with rural students personally and/or and departmental goals and drive strategic initiatives hold a large stake as they interact with rural students outside the classroom. From admissions and career services to student health and activities, staff ensure students’ needs are met while they pursue their academics. Faculty and staff may need to adapt

their delivery method (i.e. through advising, the context of teaching, campus activities, and programs), adapt the way they relate to rural students, and/or maintain a general knowledge of the students' needs and background characteristics in order to reach desired socialization outcomes.

As a goal of faculty is to educate all students and the mission of staff is to provide educational and holistic student growth outside the classroom. Unsocialized rural students may not achieve that desired holistic growth (Weidman, 1989). Additionally, senior administration should be prepared to create new strategic goals encompassing rural students and to offer a budget for new programs (or make adaptations to existing policies and programs) made available to rural students in order to reach desired socialization outcomes.

Rural students come from small towns where their communities and families could have a vested interest in their success (Roschigo & Crowley, 2001). Rural students who fail or are not retained may have a heavy loan debt, live with their parents, and/or experience unsatisfactory socialization outcomes (i.e. undesirable career and lifestyle preferences, unfulfilled aspirations, or a sense of worthlessness) (Roschigo & Crowley, 2001; Calzaferri, 2011; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). If rural students do not achieve desirable socialization in urban universities, rural communities and families may assume the financial and societal repercussions.

#### **1.4 CONCLUSION**

This study addresses the need for research on undergraduate first-year college students from rural areas. It focused on the factors that contribute to or detract from the socialization of first-year students from rural areas in Pennsylvania. Socialization is the way in which individuals gain



the understanding and abilities to function effectively in society and within their peer groups (Weidman, 1989; Brim, 1966). For rural students, however, the environment of a large, urban university may negatively affect their socialization. College rural students are an overlooked population in the existing literature. This study sought to fill that gap by considering the background of rural students. Rural students may have lower persistence rates and GPAs, experience a lack of belonging, or feel overwhelmed by their environment (Stone, 2014; Murphy, 1984). This may lead to or be the effect of poor socialization (Weidman, 1989). This research is essential to give a voice to and understanding of rural students while informing institutional faculty, staff, and administrators about the needs and experiences of these students in the university setting.

## **2.0 CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

Current research attempts to understand the experiences of rural students in postsecondary education. To understand how background characteristics play a role in the rural student socialization, this literature review will first examine and define the rural student population. As this study takes place in a large, urban institution, I will discuss the characteristics of an urban institution. Per the 2010 United States' Census, rural areas in Pennsylvania contain 92.3 percent white individuals (Housing Assistance Council: Rural Research Brief, 2012). As such, the review of literature will primarily be focused on white populations and acknowledges different racial/ethnic populations may have different experiences. Additionally, this research will be placed within the context of traditionally-aged college students (18-22 years old), as it is these students who are progressing through the "pipeline" from rural high schools directly into the college environment. In summary, this literature review will offer a definition of rural students and large, urban universities, express characteristics and backgrounds of rural students, and explore rural student socialization in an urban university setting.

### **2.1 RURALITY DEFINED**

The National Center for Educational Statistics found rural students in the United States accounted for 20% of all public school students during the 2003-04 school year (Provasnik et al.,

2007). Over 31% of public schools are in rural areas (Beeson & Strange, 2000). Rural high schools (grades 9-12) are generally small, with an average of 75 students per grade and a total enrollment of fewer than 300 students (Lawrence, Binger, Diamond, Hill, Hoffman, & Howley, 2002).

The geographic location provides metrics to clearly define rurality. Rurality, however, is a broad term. Rurality can be “thought of a dichotomous variable . . . [or] as lying on a continuum” (Bitz, 2011, p.19). As a dichotomous variable, students’ hometowns were either rural or it was not. An area could also be on a continuum in relation to the nearest city, whereas a student's hometown is either more or less rural (Bitz, 2011; Calzaferri, 2011). Also, measured from the nearest city, a rural town could be thought of as “remote.” The population size of the town (usually 2,500) could also factor into the definition of rural (Bitz, 2011). In addition to its demographic characteristics, rurality should be considered in terms of its distance from an urban center, generally accepted beliefs of the population, and the economics of the area(s) under study (Roschigo & Crowley, 2001; Pike, 1970; Calzaferri, 2011).

For the purposes of defining a rural population in Pennsylvania, this study used the definition employed by The Center for Rural Pennsylvania and the United States Census Bureau. This definition is based on population density and is derived by dividing Pennsylvania's total population (12,702,379) by the number of square miles of Pennsylvania (44,743). As such, the any Pennsylvanian county with a population less than 284 persons per square mile is considered rural (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014). Currently, there are 48 rural counties, and about 27 percent of the state’s 12.7 million people live in a rural county (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014). With 48 of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties defined as rural by the US Census,

approximately 72 percent of Pennsylvanian counties are rural (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2014).

Rurality is more than a place: it is also the ideals and views of the people who live in the area (Roscigno & Crowle, 2001; Pike, 1970; Oakerson, 1988). Pike (1970) argues, “one cannot entirely ignore the argument pursued by some sociologists that a concomitant of the rural and small town environments is a set of values, beliefs, and ways of doing things (i.e., a subculture)” (p. 73). Although hard to quantify, ingrained convictions of the population should be considered when defining rurality. In other words, “rural America is not simply urban America with fewer people per square mile” (Oakerson, 1988). Rural areas cannot be judged solely by demographics, but must be evaluated by ideals and economics as well. These values include hard work, personal responsibility, and self-determination (Stone, 2014). Rural students experiencing socialization during their undergraduate years may identify with a set of these beliefs, which will inform how they approach their collegiate experience.

Limited economic resources and opportunities also define a rural area (Oakerson, 1988; Roscigno & Crowle, 2001). Roscigno and Crowle (2001) claim that “institutional resource disadvantages at family and school levels reflect rural labor market opportunity, and specifically rural areas’ dependence on low-wage, labor-intensive work, and low-wage service sector jobs” (p. 269). The economics of rural areas feeds into the resources available and the types of jobs and expectations of the area. It is important to note that in an age of technology, the definitions may be subject to change. As rural students have access to computers and the ability to engage with more attitudes outside once remote areas, they may adopt additional ideals and beliefs not held in rural areas (Beasley, 2011; Calzaferri, 2011; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014).

The academic collegiate experience could thus be informed by the economics of a rural area and how the student approaches certain academic subjects.

### **2.1.1 Rural Students; Backgrounds and Characteristics**

To gauge an understanding of their socialization into postsecondary institutions, it is important to recognize rural students' backgrounds and characteristics. These can include demographic location, academic aspirations, parental/community support, and available resources. Research illustrates rural students are more likely than urban students to be impoverished and have parents with no more than a high school diploma, making many rural students potential first-generation college students and/or from backgrounds of low socioeconomic status (Beasley, 2011; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Stone, 2014; Provasnik et al., 2007). Although rural students may not be first-generation or low-income, they may contain these backgrounds, which will influence their socialization during college (Weidman, 1989). In order to aid in an understanding of rural students' backgrounds, let us examine research surrounding rural, first-generation, and low-income students.

#### **2.1.1.1 Rural Students**

There is currently only a small amount of literature focusing on the socialization of rural students. This literature states rural students may experience socialization differently in large, urban universities (Stone, 2014; Murphy, 1989; Bitz, 2011; Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida, 2008). Demographically, rural students do not have the benefit of proximity to urban universities or larger populations in a signal area and enter a more heavily populated area when they attend a large, urban university (Calzaferri, 2011; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis, &

Stephanou, 1999). Being located outside the urban environment, rural students may have less access to resources (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). For example, rural students who do not live near an urban area may not have access to computers to gain information about colleges. This may hinder their understanding of an urban environment (Provasnik et al., 2007). Academically, rural students may experience socialization through academics differently as compared to urban and suburban students due to content and curriculum demands and an unfamiliar environment (Beasley, 2011; Calzaferri, 2011; Guiffrida, 2006; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, Crowley, 2006).

Stone (2014) found rural students possess a firm set of beliefs and relate to other rural students because they possess similar strong connections to family, nature, and the community. This finding is in line with previous research done by Howley (2009), who found “rural people have connections to working the land, and to the set of concepts about the place, kinship, and community” (p. 549). The academic preparation and “rural values” among other background characteristics may play a role when rural students experience college and develop socialized outcomes. Stone (2014) demonstrated rural students who are socially integrated within the campus environment through extracurricular activities and peer relationships are more likely to persist. Despite their integration into the university, Stone (2014) found students acknowledged their rural backgrounds as influencing their self-perception and experience in a positive light, rather than as a struggle and an identity to be cast off when integrating within the university.

Linking persistence to the stress rural students experience at large, urban universities Murphy (1984) investigated the coping patterns for rural and urban students. Murphy (1984) found rural and urban students experienced different levels of stress in relation to academic preparedness, the amount of faculty contact, the size of the institution, social and personal

interactions, the size of the city, and the ability to balance work and school. When it came to dealing with stress, rural students were less likely than their urban counterparts to take direct action to solve a problem or issue and were more likely to change themselves versus outside forces to cope with stressful situations (Murphy, 1984). When examining the socialization aspect of rural students, it is important to consider these stressors and coping mechanisms as possible ways in which rural students socialize differently from urban students.

While Murphy (1984) focused on the role stress played in rural students' lives in college, Bitz (2011) explored the role of rurality in the overall adjustment to college. Bitz conducted her research at a large, urban Midwestern university. While Bitz (2011) found there was not a significant difference in the extent to which rural and urban students were adjusted to college, she did find that the predictors of adjustment (i.e. the paths students took towards college adjustment) differed. The main difference is that the social support perceived by rural students diverged from that assumed by urban students, suggesting separate rural and urban cultures (Bitz, 2011). Rural students were also less likely to seek help and had a higher sense of well-being as compared to urban students (Bitz, 2011). Stone (2014), Murphy (1984), and Bitz (2011) each studied rural students at large, urban universities. While each study focused on different elements of rural students' experiences, it is clear from the results that, in general, rural and urban students come to college with a different culture, background, and set of values, and respond to their environment in individual ways (Bitz, 2011; Stone, 2014; Murphy 1984).

In terms of current research into socialization, literature has focused on diverse populations, parental influences during college, civic values, social networking, faculty mentors, and self-knowledge (Weidman, DeAngelo, and Bethea, 2014). Literature discussing socialization, particularly when using Weidman's (1989) model, has touched upon issues

pertaining to underrepresented students in general, as well as first-generation and low-income students. As rural students may be considered an underrepresented population in urban institutions, findings of socialization literature might be relevant. Likewise, rural students may share some characteristics or have backgrounds similar to or the same as first-generation and low-income students.

### **2.1.1.2 First-Generation Students**

As first-generation students are the first in their immediate family to attend college, the role (or lack of role) of parents could influence how they are socialized in college. Parents of rural students may not have attended college themselves and may not have the knowledge to advise their children on the course work needed in high school to be prepared at a postsecondary institution or have a working knowledge of the college and financial aid application processes (Choy, 2001). Parental involvement plays a role in students' willingness and desire to attend postsecondary education (Calzaferri, 2011). This influence carries into college socialization and students' participation on campus. Calzaferri (2011) suggests parental involvement could be as simple as discussing postsecondary education choices, attending and supporting school activities, and saving money for college.

As with rural students, the backgrounds of first-generation students may lead them to experience socialization differently in postsecondary institutions (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Social capital is related to networking and building relationships and the information and resources gained through these interactions (Lin, 2001). For first-generation students, it is not the quantity of people with whom they can incorporate into their educational network, rather, the quality of the information—both academic and emotional (Calzaferri, 2011).



Specifically addressing the needs of first-generation students in terms of socialization, Padgett et al. (2010) analyzed the interplay of socio-economic status, race, and socialization to influence learning. In Padgett et al. (2010) study, the researchers separated first-generation students into a signal category. Unlike in previous studies of underrepresented students (Espinosa, 2011; Cole, 2011; Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013; Antonio, 2001), first-generation students who had faculty interactions scored lower on the need for cognitive growth (Padgett et al., 2010). Further, peer relations seemed to be more beneficial than faculty interactions (Padgett et al., 2010). As such, “it is possible that the college experience of interacting with faculty may actually be an unnerving activity to these students, perhaps causing them to ultimately forgo (abandon) the opportunities to communicate with faculty one on one” (Padgett et al., 2010, p. 109). In reference to this study, Weidman et al. (2014) suggest that while the interactions between faculty/non-first-generation students and faculty/first-generation students may be similar, how first-generation students view that interaction is different. As such, the quality, and not only the quantity, of the interactions between faculty and first-generation students matters (Padgett et al., 2010).

The background and parental influences on a college student lend themselves toward the socialization of the student during the college years (Weidman, 1989). As such, the role of parents is addressed in socialization literature. Two studies that investigate the role of parents are Agliata and Renk (2008) and Fuentes, Ruiz Alvarado, Berdan, and DeAngelo (2014). While these studies do not specifically address first-generation students, they show the importance and influence of parental socialization, which may affect first-generation students differently than non-first-generation students.

Studying college students' adjustment, Agliata and Renk (2008) examine the expected discrepancies and process of communication between parents and students. Although college students seek their own independence, parents still strongly influence their lives. As such, "they still have a strong attachment to their parents, respect them, work for their approval, try to meet their expectations, and feel obligations as part of their family" (Agliate & Renk, 2008). Parents and college students, nevertheless, have different expectations in relation to a student's performance. Overall, students had lower perceptions of self-worth and adjustment difficulties than were perceived by their parents (Agaliate & Renk, 2008). While investigating mentorship and faculty interaction with students, Fuentes et al. (2014) noted the importance of familial support in encouraging students to engage and interact with faculty. In this regard, "students received academic navigational capital from their college-educated parents on the benefits of accessing faculty" (Fuentes et al., 2014, p. 301). It could thus be possible that first-generation students, whose parents do not have the benefit of understanding the interactions with faculty, could experience socialization differently at this level.

### **2.1.1.3 Socioeconomic Status**

Low-income students may have different social and cultural knowledge at their disposal as they experience socialization, compared to students with middle to high socio-economic status (Killian & Beaulieu, 1995; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977). Parents also play a role in the socialization of low-income students. If parents do not provide resources or interest, students will be less likely to be motivated to overcome obstacles they may face during socialization in college (Lin, 2001; Calzaferri, 2011; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001; Choy, 2001). Bourdieu (1977) stated, "economic power lies not in wealth but in the relationship between wealth and a field of economic relations" (p.184). By itself, wealth does not aid in

students' socialization; rather, it is a means of which students create the cultural and social capital during their socialization (Bourdieu, 1977).

Currently, only one study discussing socialization analyzes socio-economic status as a separate category (Padgett et al., 2010). This study produced interesting results for first-generation students concerning faculty and peer interaction. It is important to note, however, that students' socio-economic status also factored into these results. As such, low-income students could receive beneficial faculty socialization in terms of cognition (Padgett et al., 2010).

### **2.1.2 Characteristics of Large, Urban Universities**

Urban universities can be found in areas classified by the United States Census Bureau (2010) as places with a population of at least 1,000 people per square mile and with surrounding areas with an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile. Urban areas consist of 80.7 percent of the total U.S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2010). For the purposes of this study, an urban university is defined as located within an urban Pennsylvanian county (i.e. the non-rural counties as defined by population density).

With rural high schools measuring a total enrollment of less than 300 students (Lawrence et al., 2002), large universities measuring 10,000 students (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2010) could present rural students with a significant change in environment which may influence their socialization process. Socialization may also affect rural students who attend these large universities as they experience certain feelings towards the larger size, diversity, and range of activities offered at the institution (Guiffrida, 2008; Bitz, 2011). Bitz (2011) suggests rural students “may experience something akin to culture shock upon arriving at large university” (p.14). The social structure of rural and urban environments is drastically

different (Bitz, 2011). Rural students may never have had to take public transportation and navigate around a city (Stone, 2014) or may not have had a variety of social outlets (Bitz, 2011). As such, these rural students may feel as if they have lost the familiar ways in which they interact with others and navigate the world (Bitz, 2011). Located outside their experience, large, urban universities create the greatest variance in environment for rural students. The nature of a large, urban university exacerbates the socialization, or lack thereof, rural students experience in college (Bitz, 2011).

## **2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WEIDMAN'S UNDERGRADUATE SOCIALIZATION FRAMEWORK**

College student socialization is the process by which students gain knowledge, skills, and an understanding of themselves and how they contribute to and incorporate themselves into society effectively (Bragg, 1976; Dunn, Rouse, & Seff, 1994; Brim, 1989; Weidman, 1989; Tierney, 1997). During college, “students may adopt the norms of the college groups that affect their values and attitudes, or they may hold firm to old beliefs, rejecting the norms of the socializing groups and remaining unchanged in their beliefs and values” (Padgett et al., 2010, p. 100). For Tierney (1997), the culture of college campuses and student socialization are closely related in that “culture is the sum of activities in the organization, and socialization is the process through which individuals acquire and incorporate an understanding of those activities” (p. 4). A campus culture teaches students how they should behave, what goals they should have, and how best to achieve those goals (Tierney, 1997).

According to Weidman (1989), the experiences students have in college can be explained by “organizational variables,” an “academic environment,” and an “extracurricular environment,” which includes interactions with faculty and peers, time spent studying, and social and academic integration (Weidman, 1989, p. 292). Weidman’s (1989) Model of Undergraduate Socialization takes all these areas into account and offers an explanation of student socialization. While he does not directly reference rural students, Weidman (1989) does address underrepresented and non-traditional students in his framework. Research, however, is relatively new and developing in this area. Tierney (1997), nevertheless, argues research that addresses the socialization experience of marginalized groups is important, stating:

At the minimum, we ought to ask ourselves what the implications are when a man or a woman, an Anglo-American, African-American, or Latino, a physically challenged or able-bodied individual undergoes socialization. Is socialization nothing more than assimilation—organizational “melting pots”—where successful incorporation means all people march to the same institutional drummer? Do the participants in the organization have any obligation to change, or does the onus of socialization reside strictly with the recruit [student]? Do individuals and groups interpret reality differently? (p. 7)

Tierney’s (1997) thoughts should prompt institutions to evaluate themselves and how they are contributing to student socialization. Before this can be done, however, there needs to be a clear understanding of student socialization for underrepresented populations. One of these populations is rural students.

### 2.2.1 Conceptual Model

In order to investigate how rurality plays a role in undergraduate socialization within a large, urban university, this study used Weidman's (1989) Model of Undergraduate Socialization as its framework (Appendix A). Weidman's Model (1989) encompasses and expands upon Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Model of Institutional Departure and Pascarella's (1985) Model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Weidman, like Tinto and Pascarella, believes students enter college with important background characteristics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Weidman (1989), however, develops this concept and hypothesizes, "characteristics and shaping forces constitute predisposing and, to a certain extent, constraining forces on students' choices in the college's structural and organizational settings" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.58). As such, students' backgrounds and characteristics act as a frame through which to examine the socialization of rural students within the context of a university setting.

In his model, Weidman (1989) intends to aid the explanation of the college experience in relation to students' individual development, as well the interpersonal relations developed through socialization. Parental socialization, student background characteristics, non-college reference groups, socialized outcomes, and collegiate experiences contribute to undergraduate socialization as normative pressures are asserted throughout (Weidman, 1989). Through interpersonal and intrapersonal social processes, students' environments influence them and socialization occurs (Weidman, 1989). Rural students may be least familiar with and comfortable in large, urban institutions; as such, their socialization experiences may be most apparent in these settings.

Parent/child relationships, socio-economic status, lifestyle, and parents' college experiences could also affect the student in college (Weidman, 1989). Weidman (1984) found,

however, that parental influences lessen in importance as a student progresses through college. In short, parents of rural students could have different goals for and perceptions of college for their children based on their lifestyle, socio-economic status, and college level. All of these aspects could play a role in parental influence on their child's collegiate experience, especially within his/her first year in college (Weidman, 1989).

As students enter college, they bring with them certain values, assumptions, and beliefs (Weidman, 1989). Although not an extensive list, Weidman (1989) offers several prominent background characteristics that may influence the college experience and students' development of self: social-economic status, aptitude, career preferences, aspirations, and values. Judging from research on low-income and first-generation student populations, rural students may be likely to hold many of the aforementioned strong background characteristics. As Weidman (1989) comments, "preferences, aspirations, and values held by students prior to college enrollment form the perspectives and expectations held by students prior to enrollment and shape their encounters with the higher education institution, especially early in the undergraduate years" (p. 303). Background characteristics, particularly the values held by rural students, contribute to the socialization process.

Parental influences and rural students' characteristics and backgrounds contribute to their socialization (Weidman, 1989). As Weidman (1989) states, "undergraduate socialization can thus be viewed as a process that results from the student's interaction with other members of the college community in groups or other settings characterized by varying degrees of normative pressure" (p. 304). Here, the normative structure of the institution is the agent of socialization. University mission, environment, and faculty/staff expectations play a role in students' socialization. Weidman (1989) incorporates aspects of students', parents', and other non-college

reference groups' backgrounds and college experiences as drivers of socialization outcomes. As demonstrated by a review of the literature, the backgrounds and characteristics of rural students may play an integral role in their socialization once in college. Given the importance placed on the backgrounds of rural students (and their parents) and the context of the large, urban university setting, Weidman's Model (1989) will allow for the relevant framing of this study as it focuses both on background characteristics and student choices within a specific setting.

### **2.3 CONCLUSION**

In order to understand the socialization of rural students, it was important to first define rurality and then examine the backgrounds and characteristics of rural students. Rural students, for the purposes of this study, were defined by geographic location based on the 2010 Census. Rural students may have a certain set of values, come from families with low socioeconomic status, and be the first in their families to attend college. For the purposes of this study, I examined traditionally aged, first-year, undergraduate students in rural areas in Pennsylvania, regardless of generational or income status. The study took place in a large, urban university. The academic and social challenges of MAU affected rural students (Weidman, 1989). To best understand the way in which rural students were socialized in this environment, the study used Weidman's Model of Undergraduate Socialization (1989) as a guide to explore rural students' background, parental socialization, other non-college reference groups, and normative pressures that led to rural student socialization a large, urban university.



### 3.0 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the socialization of rural students in a large, urban institution. I conducted interviews in order to understand this experience. Seidman (2013) explains, "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). As such, interviewing within the context of this study aimed to acknowledge and understand the experiences of rural students in order to translate these experiences into an understanding of rural students' socialization in a large, urban university. Weidman's (1989) Conceptual Model of Undergraduate Socialization guided this study. Beginning with students' backgrounds, parental socialization, and other non-college reference groups applying normative pressures on the rural student, socialization within the context of college can be both social and academic. In order to investigate students' backgrounds and perceptions, I interviewed rural students within their first couple weeks on campus. Later, to examine the socialization pressures, I re-interviewed these same students at the conclusion of the semester. There was a 100 percent retention rate among participants. The following inquiry questions guided this study:

1. How do undergraduate students from rural areas define and describe their socialization experiences during their first-year at a large, urban university?
2. How are parents and non-college reference groups involved in the socialization process?

3. What role do students' background characteristics play in the socialization process?

Based on these inquiry questions, I examined the socialization of rural students at a large, urban university.

### **3.1 RESEARCH SETTING**

According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2016), MAU can be classified as a Doctoral University with the Highest Research Activity. MAU is located in Pennsylvania. MAU was founded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the mission to serve the surrounding community and is a member of the Association of American Universities. Without any financial aid, the cost for an undergraduate student in-state resident to attend the University's main campus is between \$17,000 and \$20,000 per academic year, depending on school (Mid-Atlantic University, 2016).

At MAU, the fall 2016 incoming first-year class consisted of 302 full-time students (roughly 7.5 percent of the total first-year class) from rural counties in Pennsylvania (Mid-Atlantic University's data warehouse, 2016). Rural students at a large, urban university may feel marginalized and may experience socialization in different ways as compared to urban students (Bitz, 2011). Large, urban universities, like MAU, are likely to be the most alien to rural students due to size. As of fall 2015, MAU had about 19,000 undergraduate students and 10,000 graduate students (Mid-Atlantic University, 2015). In comparison, the average size of a rural town is less than 2,500 people (National Agricultural Library, 2015). As such, the undergraduate population of MAU is roughly 7.5 times greater than the average size of a rural town.

Overall university retention numbers could be affected if rural students are not given the opportunity to experience adequate socialization within MAU and this results in their early departure. At a university that prides itself on its current ninety-two percent first-year retention rate, 7.5 percent becomes a significant factor. Rural students may not feel supported by programs that are not specifically designed for their needs.

Additionally, the University's mission statement claims MAU possesses resources to "constitute an invaluable asset for the intellectual, economic, and social enrichment of Pennsylvania" (Mid-Atlantic University Fact Book, 2016). In order to enrich Pennsylvania, MAU must serve its students from each county across the state. MAU has a responsibility to recognize the needs of students from these rural areas in order to fulfill its mission and serve the whole state of Pennsylvania. To best serve the rural population, administrators need to be aware of how rural students are socialized in comparison with their urban peers.

### **3.2 INQUIRY APPROACH**

To better understand the socialization of rural students in a large, urban institution, this study used a basic qualitative approach. Qualitative research allows researchers to "explore how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (Patton, 2015, p. 115). This method of research requires a detailed investigation of an experience (Patton, 2015). In order to delve into the amount of detail necessary, in-depth interviews become the preferred method of inquiry (Patton, 2015). Individual interviews allow for key elements of an experience to emerge as a collective whole where "each person has a unique set of experiences which are treated as truth and which

determine that individual's behavior" (Eichelberger, 1989, p. 6). In order to make meaning of their situation, participants must look at their past and present experiences, as well as the context in which these experiences occurred (Seidman, 2006). The goal of interviews was to "have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study" (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). The purpose of this study was to understand the rural students' experience and the meaning of the experience for the socialization of rural students as a whole at a large, urban institution. Comprehensive interviews with rural students allowed for the ability to make meaning from these shared experiences.

### **3.2.1 Epistemology**

I approached this study with subjective epistemology. This approach allowed me to understand the experiences of rural students in the context of their world (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013). The subjective approach "describes the knower attempting to better understand the world through the experience of those living in the world and understanding that perception is not wrong, just different" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 18). The way in which rural students experience the university allows for a better understanding of their socialization within this context. It is important to remember that the socialization of rural students may be different from their urban peers, but this does not mean rural students are in some way deficient in their socialization into a new environment. A subjective epistemology allowed us to filter the comments of rural students through the lenses in which they experience the college environment.

### 3.3 DATA COLLECTION

This study utilized the basic qualitative research design to guide its design. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with rural, undergraduate first-year students from Pennsylvania. Semi-structured interviews allow for the flexibility to engage in a more natural conversation, while at the same time allowing me to address main themes or questions (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2013). I interviewed students during the first couple weeks of the fall 2016 semester and again at the end of the semester. This longitudinal approach added an additional level of detail and situational comprehension (Seidman, 2013). First-year students entering the university may experience socialization throughout their first semester. I explored the ways in which students experience socialization over this period of time.

I conducted this inquiry through two semi-structured, one-hour interviews with students. I also gave a survey in order to gather rural students' demographic information. Guided by the inquiry questions, the interview questions addressed specific elements and normative pressures rural undergraduate students may experience at MAU. I used these specific questions to gather evidence of the socialization experience of rural undergraduate students. Qualitative research seeks to make meaning from lived experiences (Seidman, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Miles et al (2014) illustrates this concept:

Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's lived experiences, are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and the structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them. (p.11)

Seidman (2013) agrees with the aim of qualitative research and claims one of "the most distinguishing of all its features" is a series of three separate interviews with each participant

focused on “life history,” “details of experience,” and “reflection on the meaning” (p.19-22). While Seidman (2013) recommends that these interviews be conducted in three separate sessions, he also concedes there can be some flexibility to serve the purpose of the research. Given the timing, capacity, and desire to investigate the effect of socialization over the course of the semester, I conducted questions on the relevant background information in the first interview and the details of the rural students’ experience and their reflections on the meaning of that experience combined at the second interview.

### **3.4 SAMPLE AND DATA SOURCES**

The study collected participants through purposeful sampling based on specific criteria. I asked students to participate in the study if they were over eighteen years old and lived and attended high school in an area with a rural Pennsylvanian zip code. In addition, they were traditionally aged first-year students and did not transfer from another institution. They must have attended MAU during the fall after they graduated from high school. Traditionally-aged students allowed for a more accurate understanding of the role background plays in the college environment without taking into account additional experiences either outside of the family/high school environment or in different geographical locations. The study sent an e-mail to 293 full-time, first-year students admitted in the fall 2016 semester to MAU. The response to the e-mail was 25.3 percent. Based on response time, availability, and screening questions (Appendix B), I chose four female students and six male students to participate.

Before beginning the interview process, the study asked participants to complete a basic demographic and background survey. This information included sex/gender, race/ethnicity,

mother's and father's birthplace, academic and work information, the size of high school, and indicators of generational status and socio-economic class (i.e. Pell Grant eligibility) (See Appendix E). As shown through literature, first-generation students and those from a low socio-economic background may experience socialization differently and their background characteristics may become barriers for student socialization (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Stone, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida, 2008; Killian & Beaulieu, 1995; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977). As Tierney (1997) suggests, sex/gender and race/ethnicity should be considered when examining student socialization. Parental birthplace also aided in determining if the student's parents grew up in a rural area, as well as in the same town as their child. This information was expanded upon during the interview process in order to understand if a parent's birthplace plays a role in their child's socialization (Agliata & Renk, 2008; Fuentes et al., 2008). Understanding of a student's academic major could lead to further discussion of how the student was influenced by the rural community (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). A student's work experience may lead to a discussion and better understanding of their socio-economic class (Killian & Beaulieu, 1995; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). I used this information to ensure that the students met all inclusionary criteria; it also provided me with the ability to draw upon any correlations and themes that emerged after the interviews.

The participants' demographic data revealed common background characteristics among the students, as well as a couple of outliers (Appendix E). The students aspired to pursue advanced degrees. Except for one undecided student, the students expressed a desire to achieve beyond a bachelor's degree even though their parents had achieved high school diplomas or bachelor's degrees. Seven students indicated an interest in pursuing a doctorate degree.

All the students in the study self-identified as first-year, rural students. The students' hometowns lie at various locations across the state of Pennsylvania (Appendix F). All but one student attended public school. Eight out of the ten students graduated from a high school with a graduating class of 300 or less. This is higher than the literature suggests for a rural high school. Lawrence et al. (2002) indicates that high schools in rural areas generally average 75 students per grade. Larger high schools could be a result of several towns consolidating schools and busing in students from around the region, as described by one student, Karen, during the interview process.

Through the interview process, I found none of the students worked their first semester of college. This indicates they had savings or another form of financial support. Overall, only three students identified as first-generation college students and two identified as Pell-Grant-eligible, indicating a lower socio-economic background. A single student identified as both first-generation and low-income. As such, many rural students in this study are not first-generation and/or low-income; therefore, their identity as rural students could be examined.

### **3.5 DATA ANALYSIS**

The goal of data analysis is to make sense out of the data (Merriam, 2002). The analysis of interviews consists, in its most basic form, of organizing excerpts from the transcripts into categories (Seidman, 2013). Miles et al. (2014) suggest there are three ways to analyze data, which occur concurrently and systematically over the entire course of the study: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data condensation, the data are filtered, streamlined, and compressed to strengthen the emerging themes. Data display



places the data in an organized format. This allowed me to draw patterns, correlations, and conclusions (Miles et al., 2014).

I recorded and then transcribed each interview. Next, I worked on “connecting threads and patterns” (Seidman, 2013, p. 127) within those interviews to create groupings, or codes, that develop into themes (Miles et al., 2014). As Saldaña suggests (2013), this coding occurred in two major stages: First Cycle and Second Cycle. During the First Cycle, I assigned codes to chunks of data. According to Merriam (2002), these codes can be as “small as a word a participant uses to describe a feeling or phenomenon,” or as large as several pages (p. 176-177).

Next, during the Second Cycle, I took those chunks of data and developed them into themes (Saldaña, 2013). By establishing themes, I recognized meanings and formed thematic connections from the data (Merriam, 2002; Saldaña, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). From these themes and the data collected on the demographic survey, I drew correlations on how rural students are socialized at MAU.

A deductive approach using Weidman’s Model (1989) guided the analysis. Through a deductive approach, codes, or data points are created based on the conceptual framework (Miles et al., 2014). The codes used for analysis focused on the aspects of Weidman’s Socialization Model (1989) influencing the college experience, including student background characteristics, parental socialization, non-college reference groups, and pre-college normative pressures, as well as the academic and social normative contexts and the socialization process of interpersonal interaction, intrapersonal processes, and social and academic integration. I used content analysis to identify keywords, paragraphs, and sets of data to explain rural student socialization at MAU. Deductive coding and content analysis allowed for themes to emerge in these areas, generating a response to the inquiry questions.

### 3.6 RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVITY

Two components of my identity that were particularly relevant within this study were my identity as someone who grew up in a rural area and as a staff member at MAU. Coming from a rural Pennsylvanian town, I attended a small private liberal arts college across the state. Identifying as a rural student, I was not a first-generation student and had a middle socioeconomic status that allowed me (and my parents) to take out loans, which I would repay after school. While I qualified for federal work study, I was not Pell Grant eligible. I also attended a small private school and not a large, urban institution. My positionality is important within the context of this study as it may have affected my ability to remain unbiased while I collected and analyzed data; however, I used a reflexive journal to keep track of my biases throughout the process, which increased trustworthiness of the study. During the study, students mentioned it was nice to be able to talk to someone about their experience. At the end of his interview, Eric asserted: "It was pretty enjoyable talking to somebody. It was just for your benefit, but I feel like it was nice talking about my experience too. So, thank you for that." Students in the study revealed that the simple act of talking about their experiences helped them process their thoughts and emotions. If schools could set up programs for students to do this, rural students may be able to process their role and explore similar experiences.

My other identity was as a staff member at MAU. Students may or may not have felt comfortable telling me about their concerns and experiences with socialization. Being from a rural area and a staff member at MAU, however, I was able to develop a rapport with my participants. Striving to be transparent, I hoped to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. To that end, I continued to consider these identities as I interviewed, took notes, and synthesized my research data. Keeping in mind all rural students may not have had the same experiences as

myself, I needed to make sure I made no assumptions. I desired my participants relate their experience without bias. I also worked to ensure a hierarchical situation did not occur as with a student and staff, and therefore, I adapted the attitude of an educational peer from rural Pennsylvania.

### **3.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD**

Interviews are an in-depth analysis of a particular issue (Seidman, 2013). The time it takes to contact and interview the participants and transcribe, code, and analyze material affects the quality of the study (Seidman, 2013). While it may be time-consuming, the ability to gain an in-depth understanding of rural student socialization will allow researchers to undertake further research overcoming some of these limitations.

As Jones et al. (2013) comments, with qualitative analysis there may be a lack of breadth for the study. Without a large sample size, it might be difficult to generalize the themes for both the intuition being studied and across other students and institutions. Given that the interview conversations differed, despite my general list of research questions, the interviews will be difficult to replicate, making the data less valid (Jones et al., 2013; Seidman, 2013). Nevertheless, while interviews may not generalize the socialization of rural students in large, urban universities across the United States, they do provide insight into the socialization process as defined by Weidman (1989).

Human error must also be considered when discussing the limitations of interviews (Jones et al., 2013). Interviewees could give biased responses—giving answers they think the interviewer wishes to hear. As a researcher, there is also the possibility of inadequately recalling

the interview information and coding it incorrectly (Jones et al., 2013). While the context of the interviews cannot be generalized and there is the possibility of human error, interviews offer an in-depth perspective on the issue of rural students in a large, urban university.

### **3.8 CONCLUSION**

To create desired academic outcomes, a sense of belonging, and higher retention rates, this study examined the socialization of rural students in a large, urban institution using a basic qualitative approach (Bitz, 2011; Stone, 2014). I conducted interviews in order to understand the experiences and backgrounds of rural students at MAU. A sample of ten students from rural backgrounds who are identified as undergraduate, first-year, full-time, traditionally-aged students participated in the study. Subjective epistemology guided the interview questions, and Weidman's Model (1989) and relevant literature formed the base for inquiry questions. These questions addressed specific elements and normative pressures rural undergraduate students may experience, in order to better understand the socialization process of rural students at MAU.

#### **4.0 CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

Chapter four presents the research participants' characterization as rural students using the inquiry questions that guided this study. This study examined and the findings reveal how the students describe their socialization experiences and the involvement of parents and non-college reference groups, along with the role of background characteristics in the socialization process. During their first year at a large, urban university, rural undergraduate students described their socialization experiences in relation to how often they returned home and their use of technology while away at school. Parents and non-college reference groups (high school friends) provided rural students support through their socialization process by listening and offering advice and aiding them in their development of personal responsibility. Even if students indicated their parents did not fully agree with their points of view, the parents and students maintained their relationships and parents supported their children financially. Additionally, non-college reference groups are also defined as past high school teachers as they influenced the background characteristics of the rural students and played a role in developing their career preferences as they experienced socialization. The rural atmosphere of their hometown influenced the students' background characteristics. During the socialization process, students reflected on their small, rural background experiences in terms of friendships and relationships. These experiences led to a sense of isolation within a large, urban university. The themes of returning home; technology's

influence; parental and friend support; high school teachers' influences; and the students' backgrounds allow for an understanding of the rural student socialization at MAU.

## **4.1 DESCRIBING THE SOCIALIZATION EXPERIENCE**

Returning home and the influence of technology were themes that emerged as rural students described and defined their socialization experiences during their first semester. How often the students returned home influenced their perception of the college experience and their socialization process. Another key theme which emerged from the interviews was a focus on technology. While Provasnik et al. (2007) comments rural students may not have access to technology, the students in this study seemed well-equipped with cellphones and laptops. As such, technology is accessible to these rural students and allows for interactions via social media to connect with family and friends, professors, and their new urban environment. While both the themes of returning home and the influence of technology stem from Weidman's Socialization Model (1989) in terms of the socialization experience, they are not considered part of the model itself. Nevertheless, rural students cited these experiences as key when they describe their socialization within an urban campus. The following section explores the findings of the students' experiences and how they relate to Weidman's Socialization Model (1989).

### **4.1.1 The Return Home**

Rural students described their socialization into MAU by comparing, or a lack of comparison, to their hometown and observations of MAU. When asked to relate their experiences returning

home, students who frequently traveled back to their hometown did not see much of a difference between their home and MAU. The students who returned home less frequently—three times or less—throughout the semester found more significant differences. Those who went home incorporated their home environment into their experience at MAU; however, those who did not go home as frequently separated their home life from the collegiate experience. It is clear that the physical return to the students' hometown plays a critical role in their socialization. Weidman (1989) hinted at this concept when he mentions "limited student involvement with on-campus reference groups is likely to reduce the impact of normative pressures exerted by a college" (p. 307). Weidman's Socialization Model (1989), however, does not consider where students spend their time and the effect this may have on their college experience. As such, the less a student is involved on-campus, the less socialization into the college environment will occur. The theme of rural students returning home during their first semester of college expands upon this concept. Not only does the effect of being home lessen their interaction with normative college pressures (Weidman, 1989), but it also plays the role of a catalyst for socialization. Beginning home allows intrapersonal processes to take place in relation to the college experience as students' compare and contrast these experiences with their hometown environment, parents, and non-college reference groups.

#### **4.1.1.1 Frequent Returners**

Students returned home at different intervals during the semester. Their visits ranged from going home every other weekend to a single trip home for Thanksgiving Break. I classified students who returned home more than three times, or more than once a month, during the semester as "frequent returners." Of the ten students involved in this study, four students, male and female, fit into this category. Vincent, for example, returned home every couple of weeks:

I went home a few times. I would say for every test I had I went home once. It was a gradual learning curve because I found it was difficult to study at home. So, every time I got my test done, I would go home that weekend. I thought it was good that I learned that now. I was always really excited to go home and see people from back there.

Back home he would “visit people, cool down, and recalibrate.” When asked if he noticed anything different, Vincent shrugged and answered, “not much seemed to change at home. I did find I had a greater appreciation of what I had growing up and felt much more appreciative at home doing things I used to do.” Vincent spent much of his time at home playing video games and hanging out with parents and some friends. Returning home was a reward for completing his tests and a break from the intense studying. It was his escape and return to a place where he felt comfortable.

Karen still had a boyfriend at home and returned to her hometown about every other week. Like Vincent, she did not compare and contrast her collegiate and hometown experiences in depth. There was “not really” anything different in her hometown from when she had left to when she returned. “My hometown is so small, so not much difference. I maybe appreciate the peacefulness a little more.” While she noticed the size of the town in comparison to her new environment at school, the observations did not go beyond the superficial. Like Karen, Mike was drawn home to visit with friends and enjoy the intimacy of a small town:

That’s like the only thing I miss about home is my friends. It’s nice going home on breaks . . . I kinda miss my hometown because it’s like your hometown and living [here] for however many months makes you miss the little things about being from a small town. It makes you appreciate it more. It still sucks there. . . I like being able to know everybody. It was easier to feel like part of a community going to school in a small town.



Like I said, you know everybody, everybody's family knows everybody and is pretty much friends with everybody. You spend your whole life building up relationships with people and then you come here and you have to start over. . . It was kinda an adjustment getting used to all the different types of people here. Back home it's just homogeneous, but here there's people from all socio-economic backgrounds, all races, and everything. It wasn't bad. It just takes a while to get used to.

Mike did not return home as often as Karen and Vincent and his comparison between his home environment and MAU was a little more in-depth. His views on his hometown were conflicted. He appreciated the sense of community and more intimate relationships he could form there, but at the same time held a disdain for the town. While remaining neutral, Mike did remark on the diversity of the area. Given that urban students are likely to experience more diversity given the make-up of these areas, I suggest that rural students find themselves in a conflict between the familiar and unfamiliar.

In Weidman's Socialization Model (1989), time spent on campus allows for the socialization process to develop. As such, frequently returning home could lead to decreased amounts of social interaction on campus and lessen the interpersonal interactions, intrapersonal processes, and the social integration which are important to students' socialization process (Weidman, 1989). Those who returned home more frequently spent less time on campus gaining the full social collegiate experience. When describing their socialization experience and the differences they noticed within their small towns, students offered few details. Their lack of description in terms of interpersonal interactions, such as in a club or informal peer group activities, and the absence of reflection on intrapersonal realizations could indicate their socialization experience was hindered by their frequent return home.

#### 4.1.1.2 Less Frequent Returners

Students who visited their homes less frequently noticed how their views of the world changed. Six of the ten students were labeled “less frequent returners” as they visited home less than three times a semester, or once a month. When describing their experiences at home and MAU, these students frequently engaged in self-reflection and had a perception of internal growth and maturity. Like those who returned home frequently, Nathan noticed how his town seemed smaller:

I kinda adapted to [MAU]. It wasn't a shock, it was more—you don't realize how small [my hometown] is and how everybody knows each other. Then . . . you realize you have lived somewhere that diverse and big, then you go back and everything seems smaller. In a way, I like [my hometown]. When you go grocery shopping, you only see people that you know. I like the close community feeling of it.

He also related how he was affected by the diversity of MAU as compared to the population of people he has previously interacted with at home. He described his interactions with a Spanish speaker, a person who is transgender, and a Muslim woman. Nathan described his socialization process as one in which he had these interpersonal interactions with marginalized members of the community and accordingly began to develop an intrapersonal process to deal with issues of diversity that he had previously not encountered. Being close to his parents, Nathan related how his parents exert pressures on him and how he is processing their feedback and beginning to think for himself as he departs from the community's views toward marginalized populations. He states this in his second interview:

Here, it's very diverse. I learned so many things and met so many people. Like I wanted a Spanish conversation partner and I found one. But where I'm from, you probably

couldn't find anyone that speaks Spanish. I talked to somebody who was transgender. It was interesting because where I'm from you don't have people that are transgender, or if they are, they are very reclusive about that. They're afraid to admit that I'm this because it's so Christian. In a way, it felt repressive, so one-minded, so single-minded, but in a way, it was nice to still feel a sense of community, but you feel the community in another way.

Like Mike, Nathan liked the feeling of a small town and sense of community. Unlike Mike, however, Nathan realized, as he engaged in self-reflection, that he could still form his own community and create that same sense of engagement with others who are from different backgrounds or who have a different set of beliefs. Still, the views of his community and parents played a large part in how Nathan processed these differences. In Weidman's Model (1989) this would be described as the parental and non-college reference group applying pressures to the collegiate experience. Nathan related two circumstances when he came to find out his roommate is gay and his interactions with a Muslim Women and how he processed this information:

One day my roommate was talking to me and he was like, 'oh, by the way, I'm gay.' And I was like 'what?' He has to be closeted because he's from a small town and his dad's a pastor. He can't say anything or act on that, but now that he's here he feels like he is more free to do that. I called my parents and I was like, 'what am I supposed to do, I don't know if there is anything that has changed.' They were all up-in-arms, and I realized it doesn't make a difference. Like it's different, but it's not something I should be concerned about. My parents were like 'oh, my gosh, you need to get a new roommate' and I was like 'no, I don't.' It was difficult for them. I just wasn't really sure how to react. The conscious part of me wasn't bothered. But the subconscious part of me

that was brought up like that was bothered by it. I realized I can't change that part of me, but I'm slowly changing as my perspective changes. . .

I had to do adjust to the idea of so much diversity. A lot of people in my hometown are deathly afraid of Muslims/Islamic people. You just walk on the street [here] and there is someone wearing a Hijab. It doesn't bother me, but my perspective is changed by it. My perspective coming was shaped by the community. I kinda came in not sure if I could have Muslim friends or talk to Muslim people. Then you just talk to people and it's like, they're the same as you and I are, not any different. It's perspective changing to be like, everyone is so similar despite the differences they have between them. I think it takes a lot to realize that— it took me almost the whole semester. I realized no matter who you are and what you've been through, we all have these commonalities.

Even though Nathan's parents put pressure on him to move because his roommate was gay, Nathan refuses. When comparing his hometown to MAU, Nathan related his feelings:

It felt more closed-minded. It was a negative thing, it just made me realize how much I've grown as a person. I don't look down on my hometown, but I feel like I've grown as an individual being able to experience something new and something so diverse and big.

Through self-reflection, Nathan realized his experiences at college allowed him to formulate his own opinion of the world.

The students who return home infrequently were happy to visit family and friends and relax from the stresses of school; however, they recognized home is no longer part of their college experience and have moved—as Eric stated—“on to the next chapter” of their lives. Maggie expressed, “it's kinda like growing up . . . I feel like there are certain things I disagree

with my parents about.” For these students, their hometown acted as a catalyst and allowed for intrapersonal processing and socialization within the context of the college experience. They were able to voice their socialization experiences.

In describing their socialization experiences, rural students who returned home more frequently did not distinguish their hometown as different from their college environment. Their college experiences were intertwined with their hometown experiences. Students who returned home less than three times a semester saw their hometown with fresh eyes. They separated their hometown experience from their college experience. Their hometown was their past life, while their collegiate experience was their current one. Those that did not return home saw these experiences as separate. In terms of socialization within the campus, these students were able to have more interpersonal interactions with their peers and experienced social integration. They were also better able to describe their intrapersonal process as they identified the differences between their hometown and the college environment. Based on the theme of returning home, rural students described their socialization experiences, or lack thereof, in terms of interpersonal interactions and intrapersonal processes, with their hometown acting as a reference point.

#### **4.1.2 Influence of Technology**

The influence of technology was a central ongoing theme rural students used to describe their socialization. The use of social media and cellphones made it easier for students to integrate socially and academically into MAU by allowing them to communicate back home to family and friends, talk with professors, and navigate around the city. The communication outside of college reference groups is identified as an influence on the college experience. As Weidman (1989) states “parental pressures and expectations may serve to mediate the impact of the college

experience” (p. 301). Given the accessibility of technology, however, the connection to family and friends back home may be enhanced. Technology itself is not mentioned specifically in Weidman’s Model (1989). This is likely due to the time of publication, which was just on the cusp of the technology boom and before e-mail and text messages could be checked on a cell phone while walking across campus. Weidman (1989) does mention the importance of integrating with faculty and need for favorable impressions of the college environment for the student. An analysis of the student interviews shows technology breaking down the barriers in accessing faculty through social media and navigating the urban environment, which leads to a positive impression of the city and the campus.

#### **4.1.2.1 Connection to Home**

Snapchat, Twitter, Skype, texting, calling, and even sharing a Spotify account allowed rural students to connect with family and friends back at home. The accessibility to this technology allowed students to gain support in stressful situations with little to no effort. When asked who she talks to when she is stressed, Maggie replied:

My parents, friends at home, friends here . . . We just had a big physics test yesterday so I talked to my friends here, then I was Snapchatting with one of my friends from back home, and then my dad texted me after, asking how it went.

Maggie was able to use three methods of communication to gain support from three distinct groups of people. Her parents and friends (non-college reference groups) were socialized in knowing and utilizing technology and appreciating the stress she was under, in order to support her as she normalized academic importance and integrated academically within the university. Likewise, her peers provided an informal social peer connection to this integration.

Tim shares a Spotify account with a friend from home. He related a story about how this friend helped to cheer him up:

He saw I was listening to down-in-the-dumps music on my Spotify. He switched the song to "Broccoli" by Chance the Rapper. It's just our song. The one we jam out to when we're cruzin'. Immediately it brings up my mood.

Without saying a word, Tim's friend was able to draw on technology to invoke memories to support Tim. Having a friend who knows him so well, Tim was able to easily gain emotional support from a friend back at home who understood Tim was integrating within the university.

While Maggie and Tim were supported through the use of technology, Nathan's use of Skype to communicate with his friends showed him developing a set of beliefs influenced by the normative contexts of the university. His beliefs, citing politics in particular, change as he experiences MAU. Nathan related that "college is a time to shape your perspective and I think [my high school friends'] perspective is staying the same. It's reinforced by staying in the same place." Nathan's friends continue to live in his hometown and attend a local college. The institutional quality and size and his exposure to a different organization and peer shaped his outlook. He viewed these changes as positive and extended this positive view to the college environment.

#### **4.1.2.2 Engaging with Faculty**

When asked about their connection with their professors, the students' responses varied from attending office hours and enjoying classes to a total disassociation with a class where they did not like the professor or the large lecture hall. There were, however, multiple comments on being intimidated by the size of the class or the professors themselves. Asked if she talked to her professors, Jessica responded "no, it's intimidating, honestly. All my classes are big lectures and

being one kid out of 300 to approach the professor, it's intimidating." If Jessica did have questions, she used e-mail to communicate them to her professors. Here the size of the institution is intimidating and Jessica's rural background plays a role in how she experiences the academic normative contexts and integration into an urban environment. In Jessica's case, the academic normative context is that of a large lecture hall where the expectation is for academic participation in lectures. From an entire senior class of 100-199 students, Jessica is faced with one lecture being 300 students and a majority of fellow students she does not recognize. Personality aspects aside, it is likely an urban student would feel more comfortable in a class this size having had the experience of being from a large school where there were unfamiliar students or strangers encountered in daily life.

Sometimes, however, this engagement over e-mail can be complicated. For example, Maggie was not sure how to address emailing with a professor: "I don't know if this is a good e-mail to send. I don't know how to address this person. Do I call them 'mister' or 'misses?' I don't even know." In Maggie's case, and in the case of other rural students, she had limited to no interactions with college professors or the college atmosphere before attending MAU. Growing up in areas that are not in close proximity to large universities, rural students must socialize into the academic normative contexts and dialogue unfamiliar to them. In this case, Maggie felt lost without guidance and the protocol to follow. Through personal initiative and a drive to do well, Maggie approached her professors and asked questions. The concern, however, is that many rural students may not take initiative and accordingly will fail to ask their questions, which may affect their socialization and ultimately, their academic outcomes.

Some professors, however, have tried meeting students where they are in terms of social media. Tim's professor, for example, uses Facebook to interface with students. Tim stated "when



I have questions about an exam or stuff like that. My Bio teacher has a Facebook page and I'll just message her on that: "Hey, what's up?" The casual platform of Facebook made Tim more comfortable communicating with his professor and allowed Tim a space to ask his questions. He was able to experience the academic integration and socialize within the academic arena since the professor created a familiar context that related back to Tim's background in technology (i.e. Facebook). Overall, the students indicated they felt more of a connection with the faculty members they interacted with outside of class. There was also a general preference towards those classes and subject areas.

#### **4.1.2.3 Navigating an Unfamiliar City**

Rural students within the study found the urban environment an exciting place with “so much going on.” In order to enjoy any off-campus events, however, MAU students generally opted to take buses, especially with the ability to ride for free with a student ID. For rural students, this was generally their first time taking public transportation. Nathan describes his experience as strange and isolating:

I had never ridden, like I had ridden public transportation like on vacation, or like you know, if you go up to New York or anything like that or Philadelphia for a couple days, but I've never, like bona fide ridden a bus by myself before and tried to figure that whole thing out. So, the other day, I got on a bus and I was trying to figure it out and it was like so cramped and crowded, and I was like not used to public transportation like at all. So, um that was a big thing and then everybody on the bus was so quiet, like I'm used to, if you go, if you're in the car with somebody you talk to them. Or like if you're on a school bus, you talk to somebody. So, um, I was trying to strike up conversation with people, but nobody wanted to, you know.

Sarah and her friends wanted to explore their new home and used their cell phones to navigate the city. Even with her phone, Sarah still found the bus system confusing: “we learned how to take the buses into Pittsburgh, but we had no clue what we were doing.” While their phones allowed them to navigate the bus routes, they still did not feel completely comfortable taking the bus. When I asked at the end of the semester how she was finding riding the bus, Sarah stated, “it’s fine . . . I don’t even have to look at my phone anymore to get me where I want to go. And I take the Megabus home, so I’ve done a lot of downtown travel.” From Sarah’s reference to her phone, it’s suggested she used it frequently throughout the semester to guide her in learning the bus system.

When I asked about his experience, Mike reflected, “It’s intimidating at first, just because there is so many and you’re like, what if I get on the wrong bus, or what if I get lost downtown and can’t find the bus station.” Even though students still worried and made mistakes, many used phone apps to navigate their way around the city. Karen relates, “We were kinda scared trying to ride the bus at first, but then we used Google Maps. If I didn’t have Google Maps, I wouldn’t know how to ride the bus at all.” The accessible technology allowing students to navigate the bus system allowed them to integrate within the social structure of the city. While the some admitted the apps were not the easiest to use, students were mostly comfortable riding the buses at the end of the semester.

Rural students used technology to navigate their socialization experiences at MAU. While describing these experiences, students revealed an aspect of the involvement of parental and non-college reference groups in the socialization process. The following section will explore specific parental and non-college reference group involvement in the socialization process; however, it is import to note parents and hometown friends provide a source of support and

influence made easier through the use of technology. They also described technology as bringing about a deeper connection and building relationships between students and faculty. This provided students with the normative academic context they needed while socializing into MAU. Rural students' description of their socialization experiences also included the use of the bus system, where they used technology as a tool to aid in the social integration with the city.

#### **4.2 PARENTAL AND NON-COLLEGE REFERENCE GROUP INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIALIZATION**

Parents and non-college reference groups influence students as they interact with the collegiate experience (Weidman, 1989). For Weidman (1898), "if the susceptibility of students to the socializing influences of the campus environment is to be determined, it is also necessary to assess the importance of parent-child relationships" (p. 301-302). I found parents and hometown friends to be a source of support for students as they were socialized into MAU. Parents allowed students to vent frustrations and ask for advice. They supported their children as they developed a sense of responsibility. Rural students also mentioned non-college reference groups, including their past high school teachers. These teachers played an important role in influencing the students' background characteristics enough to be cited as a playing a driving role in the students' current career preferences. Students referenced parents and high school teachers as a source of support and guidance as well as aiding in the development of career preferences, respectively.

#### **4.2.1 Support and Influence of Parents and Hometown Friends**

The rural students in the study indicated they talked with their parents—and to a lesser extent hometown friends discussed in the previous section— on a regular basis for emotional support. The students asked their parents for advice and received financial support. For Vincent, his parents supported him “just by being there.” He continued, “if I ever had to talk about something, I could call and talk to them. Having raised me to be enthusiastic to learn and pursue a higher level [of education].” Although the financial support from parents varied, for many this did not seem to affect the socialization of the students. Additionally, the students did not need to support their families back home. None of the students worked during the semester and took out loans or were paying for college with savings. For spending money, students would dip into their own savings or ask their parents for support. Many suggested they would get a job next semester to supplement these savings accounts. Without this focus or worry about current finances or sources of monetary support, students could engage academically and socially. They did not have jobs to detract from the time they spent socializing within the campus environment.

The students related that their parents conveyed strong support for their attendance at MAU. When they dropped her off at MAU, Karen’s parents “were like ‘call us if you need anything, we’ll come out, we’ll drive anytime to see you.’ They support me and they’re happy for me.” As demonstrated in the interviews and through the demographic information, the blue-collar jobs and educations of the students’ parents are less than what the students envisioned for themselves. The students generally wanted white-collar jobs and to be educated past the point of their parents. Parents, however, were not holding their children back—in fact, the opposite seems to be true. They wanted their children to succeed and sacrificed time and money to see them succeed. In the cases of students whose parents did hold white-collar jobs, the students did not

want to disappoint their parents. Tim said, “a lot of people in my family are successful right now and I don’t want to let them down.” The motivation for students to do their best can be encouraged by parents who are both well-educated and have well-paying jobs or parents who do not have the education or disposable income. If parents are engaged and supportive, they are a source of reassurance and inspiration to their children.

Relationships among parent and child were generally supportive; several students believed their relationships with their parents had strengthened while at school. When I asked Eric about his current relationship with this parents, he recounted the following:

After the first month, I was like ‘Mom, I guess I really did take advantage of you.’ My relationship with my mom has definitely gotten a lot better. My dad has always been social and we connect on the same scale.

Eric felt the responsibilities of living on this own. The formal social aspect of Weidman’s Socialization Model (1989) comes into play. The structure of the residence halls means that Eric must decide what time to go to bed, do his own laundry, and take responsibility for these actions. If he stays up late playing video games and does not have his mom tell him to go to bed, he is tired and unmotivated the next day. In short, Eric must learn to behave in a manner that will allow him to succeed in college. He realized that his mother was his source of support in high school and he had not recognized it. At MAU, Eric realized he must become the person responsible for his success. He appreciated his mother for teaching him positive behaviors and then relied on her support to engage in this next step of responsibility.

Eric is not the only student who talked about this new sense of responsibility. When he began the semester, Nathan valued hard work above responsibility. It was important for him to be the best and he believed hard work would get him there. At the end of the semester, however,

Nathan's priority to be the best had diminished. During his second interview he described this transition:

I might move responsibility above hard work. I've seen so many people who are stuck in that mindset that I had in high school of wanting to work harder than someone else so I can be the best. But, when it clicked for me, I realized it was more important for me to be responsible in learning, and it's more important for me to be responsible as an individual than it is for me to go heads down and not pay attention to what I'm working for. For my future goals, I'm responsible for getting here. It's not my professors' fault if I don't do well on a test. It's my responsibility to say I screwed up and need to fix it. Especially, for social things, now that my parents aren't there to ground me, I think I'm pretty moral, but there is also a point, I'm responsible for myself and I can't do this thing, even though it looks nice.

By his second semester, Nathan's priority had shifted to one of responsibility and understanding over a desire to be "number one." Nathan sees responsibility as his path to success both academically and socially as he matures into a young adult.

As the students are developing into adults, they are beginning to build a higher level of maturity and deeper connection with their parents. They gain a deeper sense of obligation towards their academic and personal lives. Parental involvement during rural students' socialization experience extends to the support and influence they provide to their children. As such, the normative pressures placed on their children influence the way the students experienced college by enhancing maturity and responsibly, which, in turn, shapes their socialization experience.

#### 4.2.2 High School Teachers Determining Career Decisions

Participants referenced their high school teachers as shaping their majors and career decisions. While teachers were not currently in contact with the students, they played a role in their current career aspirations. Through the influence of high school teachers, students developed their choice of major and career path. These choices influenced their desire to attend MAU and encouraged interactions which lead to the cultivation of self-esteem.

Jessica, a business major concentrating in accounting, had a good relationship with her high school accounting teacher, which would later influence her decision to come to MAU and major in accounting. Jessica narrated her relationship with her high school teachers:

My teachers. I was closer with a lot of my teachers more than other kids—like my business teachers. My accounting teacher—I had him every year since my first-year, and we had a really good relationship. We had talked a lot of different times. He went to S College and B University, so for a while, I wanted to go to B University. Then we started talking and telling him how I found MAU and he was like ‘that’s an awesome school. That’s such a great school. If you can get in there then go for it.’ I told them what I wanted to do and they just sorta nudged me and said do it. So, my teachers were helpful.

Not only did high school teachers influence students' career aspirations, they also provided encouragement as students developed their sense of self and aptitude. Like Jessica, Vincent “had a pretty good relationship with every teacher [he] had.” In particular, he described his relationship with his English teacher: “There was an English teacher my sophomore year which played a pretty big part in my self-confidence. And my creative side. She actually convinced me to start writing the novel that I finished.” Vincent’s credited his teacher with building his self-confidence. In his second interview, Vincent had decided to change his majors from chemistry

and bio to psychology and theater—with an intention of writing plays. His high school teacher influenced his career aspirations, in addition to his sense of self.

Parents and high school teachers play an important role in rural student socialization. By offering their child support throughout their educational experience at a post-secondary institution, parents aid in the intrapersonal processes. Students use their parents to de-stress and puzzle out problems. As the demographic information illustrated, the level of education and level of socio-economic status varied between participants. While most parents could be described as having a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree and a mid-socio-economic status, there were a couple of parents who lay at either end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, for rural students, it did not matter the level of education or socio-economic standing; the import influence was the emotional support given by the parents. High school teachers allowed for the development of career aspirations. Particularly for rural students, who may not have access to or witness a variety of career options in their small towns, the encouragement from teachers aided in broadening their knowledge of education and the educational process. The pre-normative pressures high school teachers exerted on the students demonstrate their involvement in the socialization process through their effect on career decisions.

Overall, it seems apparent parents and high school teachers, as well as hometown friends—as evidenced in their engagement with technology—play an important role in the socialization of rural students. They “become crucial determinants of the student’s susceptibility to institutional influences early in college” (Weidman, 1989, p. 304). As such, they “also influence the patterns of coping that students use to meet the new demands of college . . . and generate normative pressures . . . and responses to their new environment.” (Weidman, 1989, p.



304). The influence of these parental and non-college reference groups leads to the normative pressures students will face while they experience socialization within a large, urban university.

### **4.3     ROLE OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS: UNDERSTANDING AND           OVERCOMING ISOLATION**

The rural atmosphere of a small town influenced the background characteristics for the participants. As such, the students could be characterized by their need to feel a sense of familiarity with everyone they encountered. Without this, they felt a sense of isolation. While Weidman (1989) does not directly mention the location of students' hometowns as an influence, he admits there is flexibility in the model to include other aspects of students' backgrounds. The rural backgrounds of students coming into MAU demonstrate a close-knit community where they interacted with a similar/same population each day. The influence of a small town is their background characteristic that is "held by students prior to enrollment and shapes their encounters with the higher education institution, especially early in the undergraduate years" (Weidman, 1989, p. 303). As such, the circumstances of a small town influenced the students' collegiate experiences in making friends and interacting with their peers in the large, urban campus of MAU.

To participants, the rural town was a place where "everyone was kinda the same. They all knew each other." High school teachers served as sports coaches, club advisors, and mentors. Students saw these teachers outside of school taking their kids to see a movie or a soccer game. Vincent described his town as "really small and close knit. Everyone goes to the homecoming game and there is nowhere to sit, so in that aspect, everyone was really close. Everyone who

grew up there, their parents grew up there. So, everybody knew everybody, so that was cool.” For many students, rural towns were a place of support. They were a place where their parents had grown-up and aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents were only a few minutes’ drive away.

Coming to an urban institution, the students' feelings were, as expected, overwhelming. In fact, when I asked them to describe their first impressions of MAU, seven of the ten students said they thought it was “overwhelming” and “intimidating” when they first walked onto campus and felt “lost in it all.” Vincent relates his experience:

Isn't overwhelming in a bad way. It's just like a positive overwhelming. Like oh my God there is so much stuff to do. It's just so fast paced. I feel a little sleep-deprived, but at the same time I've never felt more alive . . . I feel the need to prove myself.

These initial feelings of surprise at the size, people, and activity going on around them are likely to pertain more to rural students than urban. Coming from a small-town atmosphere where such sheer numbers of people and activities do not exist, rural students do not experience the daily activity of an urban area. For students living in an urban area, a general sense of busyness is more common and may not cause the level of intimidation expressed by the rural students.

For many rural students, however, the feeling began to subside as they established friend groups and navigating around the city. Others, like Jessica, did not view their initial impression of the institution as an obstacle to overcome, but rather, an opportunity. When I asked Jessica about her first impressions of MAU, she responded positively:

I like it so much more than a small community because you can do your own thing, you're not limited to a friend group or limited to anything. 4700 kids in just my class. That's easier than 160. You don't have to know everybody. Nobody is in your business

and nobody is judging you because you can make your own friend group—you don't have to be friends with everybody.

Once over their initial feelings of being overwhelmed, many of the other students shared Jessica's view. Nathen described his transition in feeling:

Well, the very first moment I stepped on campus, I thought it was sprawling and huge and just, like overwhelming. And now that I've been here for a few days, it seems like a lot more condensed than I thought it was. So, I think the campus is more manageable now. It's still a little bit 'city' for me. It's not like, too urban or too diverse. It's a little bit like, too noisy and that kinda thing. I feel like everyone is really nice and everything.

Although it had seemed overwhelming, by the time they had been in the city for a few weeks, students had begun to adjust to the size. The opportunity to choose their friends and friend groups provided excitement for the upcoming semester. While there was some apprehension, involvement in campus clubs and activities and the already-developing friendships with roommates and hallmates eased the anxiety, and students approached the prospect of making friends with eagerness.

During the second interview later in the semester, many students expressed they were not establishing the friendships they envisioned. A large number of students on campus went from seeing an opportunity of endless possibilities to a different and frustrating reality. Coming from small high schools and towns where they had spent their entire lives, a majority of the students had little to no experience making a completely new set of new friends from a sea of individuals unknown to them. Several students expressed their frustration at the difficulty to make friends. Mike, in particular, seemed to find it challenging:

It's a daunting task to try and know 4,000 people in your class . . . I thought it would be a little bit easier to find people to hang out with, but I wasn't expecting it to be impossible.

And it's not impossible, but it takes a little but more effort than I thought it would.

While Stone (2014) suggests students embrace their rurality as a positive feature, some of the students in this study felt a disadvantage when it came to forming friendships. As Mike continued to elaborate his perspective, it is clear he felt that students who are exposed to more people or who have had the experiences within larger social setting are better able to socialize within the University:

There is just so many people, like you're going to school with 53 kids and then you go around and see like 4800. . . I feel like kids who went to bigger high schools, they're a little more used to how the social scene works, I guess, with a bunch of people. Because when I went to high school, it was like you knew everybody, cause you really didn't have a choice and it was accepted that you would know everybody.

Due to the small size of the rural town and the feeling of knowing everyone, it was somewhat of a shock to realize the difficulty in developing new relationships.

Along with the difficulty of making friends, the perceived misconception that the students needed to be friends with everyone also further influenced the socialization of these students. In their rural towns, the students were at least acquaintances with the entire high school. In attending MAU, the students believed they would escape the negative traits of some of their high school classmates and there would be no reason not to be friends with all their new colleagues. Karen captured this idea:

Making friends was different than I thought it would be. In high school, you're just friends with everyone, or you just know everyone, but I don't see the same people. . . I

just thought you would be friends with everyone. That was different. At first, it was weird, but I'm fine with it now.

Maggie further emphasized the perceived pressure to be friends with everyone:

Here it's like, it's weird. It's different. It's like you're still expected to know everybody, but it's just part of being in the city where you're pretty much never going to see the same person twice.

Mike also used the word "weird" to describe his experience "trying to find friends and stuff." He believed that once he was involved with clubs and campus activities, he would be able to make friends. Still, he left the first interview wondering, "who do I make friends with and who don't I make friends with?" In their first interview, Karen and Maggie seemed to realize they, in reality, did not need to be friends with everyone and accepted this as a normative social pressure within the collegiate experience. They were beginning to be socialized through their interpersonal interactions and intrapersonal processes. Mike, however, was still conflicted when it comes to making friends.

In the second interview, Karen and Maggie each identified a particularly close friend at MAU and seemed to have moved past the need to make friends with everyone. Mike was still struggling with the concept at the end of the semester. To deal with the pressure, he had turned to alcohol and parties to relax and meet more people:

I never really partied much in high school, but it's nice to meet people. That's one of the things I like about it. I mean the getting obliterated part—it's not that, it's just an easier way to get to meet people, you're inebriated, and so are they. It's easier to connect with people.

Mike found it overwhelming to become friends with everyone at MAU and used alcohol as a way to take the pressure off and try to relate to more people at one time.

The students' rural backgrounds influenced their ability to socialize within the MAU through the need to decrease isolation. They felt alone in the vast new urban setting surrounded by people they did not know. The informal normative social pressures to form friendships and establish peer groups led to an intrapersonal struggle to conceptualize the ability to make and choose friends. Following Weidman's Model (1989), students have not experienced the socialization processes in this aspect, as they are unable to conceptualize this ability/inability to make friends through an intrapersonal process. For some students, this proved a challenge. Their backgrounds have led to a conceptualization of "friendship" as creating relationships with everyone. As such, their backgrounds may have hindered their ability to socialize. In order to socialize within the large, urban institution and develop meaningful friendships, rural students need to recognize they do not need to be friends with everyone.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

This study used Weidman's Theory of Undergraduate Socialization (1989) to describe how undergraduates experience socialization; the support they receive from parents and non-college reference groups; and their sense of isolation in a large, urban institution. Returning to their hometown and technology largely influenced the way rural students experienced socialization. The return home meant the hometown became integrated within the collegiate experience. Playing a role in the socialization process, technology allowed students to draw on the support of friends and family from back home and acted as an aid to navigating around and familiarizing

themselves with the urban environment. In addition to communicating with their high school friends, rural students also saw their parents as an important form of emotional support. Influencing their career aspirations, high school teachers had supported and encouraged students in a particular field and choice of university. While they were not currently in touch with the students at the time of the study, they played a role in forming their background characteristics.

Another aspect of the students' backgrounds that comes into play is the characteristics of a small, rural town. Rural students feel they need to be friends with their whole class. If these students are not socialized to where they fully understand their choice in meaningful friendships, they may turn to alcohol or may leave the university. For rural students, connections to parents and friends, influences of high school teachers, and the formation of meaningful friendships allow for socialization to occur within the normative contexts of the collegiate experience.

## **5.0 CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Contributing to the existing research on rural students, this study examined the socialization of rural students at MAU. I studied the socialization of undergraduate rural students into a large, urban university. This was done to determine the ways in which rural students are socialized into their new environment during the first semester of college. The study was an important endeavor, as a lack of rural student socialization may affect desired academic outcomes, sense of belonging, and retention rates (Bitz, 2011; Stone, 2014). Unique academic and social challenges arose for rural students in this study. Given their backgrounds as rural students, these same challenges may not have been felt by their urban counterparts. Yet, this study is not focused on comparing these groups, just describing the socialization of rural students in the context under study.

The purpose of the study was to understand the socialization of rural first-year students in a large, urban institution through Weidman's Model of Undergraduate Socialization (1989). The study explored these students' socialization experiences, as well as the influence of parents, non-college reference groups, and the students' backgrounds in the socialization process. Participants shared their backgrounds, influences of important people in their lives, and their current experiences in a large, urban university. Based on these in-depth conversations, several themes emerged. The themes and findings that emerged through student interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of rural students' socialization. I will explain, elaborate on, and connect these



themes to current literature in order to challenge current assumptions and develop the understanding of rural students. I will use the impressions from these key findings to discuss implications for research and practice.

## **5.1 KEY FINDINGS**

In order to describe rural students, they must be redefined as a result of the study's data. The data also illustrate a couple themes worth discussing which comment on Weidman's Socialization Model (1989) and influence the socialization of rural students: technology and a connection to their hometown. Technology extends Weidman's Socialization Model (1989) by adding a method of communication and a deeper connection to the parents and hometown friends of rural students. Technology diminished the barriers to socialization by involving parents and high school friends in the rural students' lives as sources of support and encouragement. It also enhanced students' involvement with faculty members by creating an informal atmosphere in which they felt comfortable. The concept of the rural students' hometown challenges Weidman's Socialization Model (1989) by demonstrating the importance of both a physical return home and the socialization process taking place on campus. Without a balance between home and college, obstacles to socialization can occur and isolation can develop. The key findings allow for an exploration of literature while determining the significance of the study's findings.

### **5.1.1 Altering the Definition of Rural Students**

While research suggests many rural students are first-generation college students and low-income (Beasley, 2011; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Stone, 2014; Provasnik et al., 2007), the majority of students this study sampled were neither. In challenging the definition of rural students, it must be recognized that these students may not represent the population of all rural students. The sample population for this study was chosen from a selective institution whose mission is not to directly serve low-income, diverse, or first-generational students. These were also the students who attended the institution because they wanted a more urban experience. There is a level of sampling bias that must be recognized, as more traditional rural students, as defined in the literature, are not likely to attend the institution under study. Overall, three students identified as first-generation college students, while two indicated they were from a lower socio-economic background by identifying as Pell Grant eligible. There was only one student who was both first-generation and low-income.

The findings suggest that these rural students, in fact, have parents who have gone to college and who have economic capital. As such, students' parents provide emotional support, advice, and monetary support to the students while they are at MAU. Students in this study could ask their parents for funds to participate in formal activities, such a spring break service trip, or non-formal activities, such time spent with friends eating out or seeing a show. While students often had their own savings from previous summer jobs, they did not work during the semester and were free from the constraints of spending time supporting themselves or families. Instead, they could spend their time focusing on their academics and participating in the social life of the campus.

According to Weidman (1989), it is important to ask: “how do aspects of the collegiate experience and parental socialization interact with one another in influencing the student during college?” (p. 302). In redefining the characteristics of a rural student at MAU, parental socialization takes on a different meaning. Students identified their parents, many of whom also attended college, as willing sympathizers and/or offering advice as they adjusted to their new environment. The students benefited from the social capital of their parents with regards to how to process the dynamics of college (Killian & Beaulieu, 1995; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Bourdieu, 1977). This allowed the rural students an additional pillar of support and influence as they were socialized within MAU. Students appreciated their parents for raising them with a desire to learn and the encouragement to attend and succeed in college. Also, in the case of these students, their parents provided resources or interest, and students were motivated to overcome problems they may face during socialization in college. This aligns with research that links parent interest with student motivation (Lin, 2001; Calzaferri, 2011; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001; Choy, 2001).

As demonstrated in the findings, I have identified parents as a key source of support both emotionally and financially. Technology made the students’ access to their parents easier and therefore made the parents a source of direct support. Within the redefining and description of rural students, parents play a role in the collegiate experience for rural students. With parents who attended college and have some financial means, rural students receive support, emotionally and monetarily, and guidance.

### **5.1.2 Extending Weidman's Socialization Model: Technology's Role**

From the student interviews, it is clear that technology plays a major role in the socialization of rural students. Technology taps into the students' backgrounds and influences parental and non-college reference groups (friends back home) and drives the normative pressures found both academically and socially at MAU. Not mentioned directly, technology nevertheless plays an important role in Weidman's Socialization Model (1989). It acts as a driving catalyst to make the collegiate experience positive through the support of friends and encouraging interactions with faculty and the students' urban environment.

Support from non-college reference groups, including friends, is important for marginalized students in particular to "cope with many competing expectations and, hence, potentially conflicting normative pressures" (Weidman, 1989, p. 303). Taking rural students as a marginalized group struggling against the large size of their environment and exposure to different organizations and larger peer groups, technology is used to connect the students with friends from their hometown. These friends offer encouragement, sympathize with the students' situation, and offer advice. In this case, parents also play a similar role, as they too are connected by technology and support their child.

Breaking down the boundaries of faculty interaction, technology creates more access, with less pressure for the rural student. These students are unfamiliar with communicating with professors and do not feel comfortable in a large classroom asking questions or making comments. Non-rural students who are also intimidated by large classes or interacting with their professors in a formalized setting may also benefit from the use of technology to access and interact with faculty. These information interactions, I would assume, could make any student feel more comfortable in their learning environment and lead to favorable impressions of their

college academic experience. The students also felt a greater connection with the faculty member and the subject material if they interacted with a professor outside of the lecture hall. As students in the study had only begun their first semester, it is hard to determine if these interactions will develop to influence the students' career aspiration; however, Weidman (1989) suggests the more interaction a student has with a faculty member or a particular academic department, the more of a chance they will draw from the experience in pursuing certain career aspirations. This finding calls faculty to action in an effort to communicate through less formal methods and use technology to reach their students—rural and non-rural alike.

Overall, technology creates a positive environment as the rural students are integrated socially and academically into MAU. Technology allows for an easy form of communicating, both over distance and intimidating boundaries. It allows for the ability to integrate not only within the university but also within the city through useful apps. Weidman claims (1989) “the expectation is that the less favorable the student is in his or her perceptions of the college environment, the less likely that student is to be socialized toward the norms of the college” (p. 310). Through technology and the creation of a positive environment, rural students will likely experience socialization.

In Weidman's Socialization Model formulated in 1989, technology, as we know it today, was in its infancy. The idea of technology overcoming rural boundaries is not unfamiliar in other fields. A report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) describes the way in which rural areas' boundaries are becoming blurred as technology links the urban and rural areas. Using this concept, technology may blur the lines between rural and urban students experiencing socialization. While this study observed the effect of technology with rural students, its role may not be exclusive to this population. Being from a small, rural area, a

student can use technology to connect more easily with family and friends back home, engage with faculty, and navigate around the city. Students from urban areas, however, may also utilize technology in the same way in socializing within the campus environment. Likewise, both rural and urban students could use technology as a way to navigate around the city. The results of connecting with family and friends back home, engaging with faculty, and navigating around the city allow students to better socialize and integrate within the MAU. While Weidman does not include the significance of technology in his model, further studies should consider it as factor.

### **5.1.3 Challenging Weidman's Socialization Model: Connection to Hometowns**

The students' connections to their hometown affected the way rural students experienced socialization. While Weidman (1989) suggests the spatial location of reference groups can affect students' potential for socialization, the findings seem to indicate the students' physical location and the time spent in this location can also influence their socialization. In returning home more than three times a semester, students experienced less interpersonal interactions and social integration (in the university setting). This time away from MAU lessens the influence the college has on its students (Weidman, 1989). If first-year students are connected and engaged on campus, their academic performance and persistence to their second year are likely to increase (Kuhn, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). As such, these first-year students who return home frequently and do not engage on campus may not become socialized and may be more likely to withdraw from the University after their first year.

The students who did not return home frequently were able to process and reflect on their hometown with more insight and attention on how they have changed or integrated into MAU. This is part of the intrapersonal process of socialization where "socialization encompasses both

the transmission of norms and the individual processing of normative influences that result in the development of unique personal orientations to social contexts” (Weidman, 1989, p. 309). Due to their ability to reflect on their hometown and compare them with their college experience, the rural students who returned home less frequently were able to experience the socialization process through intrapersonal reflection.

While physically returning home frequently lessened the degree of socialization experienced by rural students, a connection to parents and high school friends from the campus space allowed rural students to feel support and increased their ability to socialize through an interpersonal interaction. As Calzaferri (2011) indicates, parents are a source of support as their child applies for and is accepted into a post-secondary institution. The support parents can give their children does not end when they leave for college (Agliaie & Renk, 2008) and their expectations and influence shape student socialization (Weidman, 1989). With the support and the expectation to do well, rural students were driven to accept a great sense of responsibility and maturity.

The combination of the influences of parents, hometown friends, high school teachers, and infrequent trips home with engagement and support of peers on MAU’s campus created balance to ensure socialization for the rural students. Contributing to Weidman’s Socialization Model (1989) where students’ socialization takes place during the college experience and preferably on a college campus, the study found students’ infrequent physical returns home and interactions with parents and non-college reference groups combined with their collegiate experiences on a university campus to strengthen their ability to socialize. If students returned home too frequently, they lost the effect of the campus experience and diminished the socialization process. Nevertheless, the study shows infrequent returns home combined with

students' connection to parents, hometown friends, and high school teachers benefits rural students' socialization. This illustrates that a total disconnect from their hometown is not advantageous. As such, a balance of both the physical on-campus and hometown experience aids in the overall socialization process.

Rural students also connected their hometown by their background experiences. These background influences included their high school teachers and the size of their hometown. High school teachers influenced career knowledge and development, along with providing self-confidence for the student. Coming from a small town, rural students feel like they need to be friends with everyone in their class. This created a sense of isolation within the campus environment and their peers. Drawing from Weidman's Model (1989), "characteristics of individuals that tend to be correlated with specific types of outcomes must be included in any conceptualization of the undergraduate socialization process" (p. 303). The attributes of rural students' small-town atmosphere origination connect them to their feelings towards their peers on campus. Due to small high schools and towns, rural students knew most people growing up. Coming to a university, it is understandable for these students to feel discouraged or like they are not making friends if they do not know their whole class. These feelings can decrease interpersonal interaction and create barriers to socialization. The findings present interesting problems and implications for both research and practice.

## **5.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

The current study contributes to the discussion of rural students in higher education by examining the case of a single institution and how rural students were socialized within it. With



the redefining of rural students comes a desire to know more about this population and examine the rural student in a variety of contexts. As parents have attended college and are not from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, they are active in the lives of their children. Noting the importance parents play in the support of their children, future studies should also focus on parental socialization.

I designed the interviews conducted in this study to allow for a greater understanding of rural student socialization over the course of a single semester. The study did not consider socialization outcomes, including career choices, lifestyle preferences, aspirations, and values. While the first-year students in the study did allude to these outcomes, they were not clearly established by the end of their first semester. Future research should conduct a longer longitudinal study following a certain set of students from their high school years, throughout college, and then their eventual placement in society upon graduation. On the other side of the spectrum, future research should employ a survey to gather large amounts of quantitative data. As there is not another study to date that explores rural student socialization, this study would provide valuable data in the formation and focus of those survey questions.

The content of the findings reveal more information is needed in terms of reference groups that exert normative pressures on the rural students and the background characteristics that influence a sense of isolation rural students feel while they are on a large, urban university's campus. As parents, high school teachers, faculty members, hometown friends, and university peers all play some role in student socialization, we should seek to better understand these individuals and groups in relation to and interaction with rural students. Given parents and hometown friends play a vital role in supporting these students, we should conduct research on interventions that may be effective in enhancing that support. As students were relieved to

discuss their experiences, intervention research may also examine the effects of rural students talking about their experience or being informed of some obstacles they may encounter.

Following Weidman's Model of Undergraduate Socialization (1989), this study took a deductive approach to the data analysis. In doing so, the findings stemmed from the theory. Two key findings express the use of technology and the students' return home influencing their socialization process. Both the influence of technology and the physical location of the student during the collegiate experience influenced the rural student's socialization. Nevertheless, these students are not directly part of Weidman's Model of Undergraduate Socialization (1989). Further research, however, should consider the extending the effect of technology and challenge how location affects socialization for students, regardless of rural status. Research should also explore these issues with marginalized student populations in order to investigate how these students are socialized within the college environment and address their socialization needs. Weidman (1989) supports this principle:

If knowledge of how colleges influence their students is to be extended, researchers on college impact should begin to pay closer attention to identifying and operationalizing the specific social and interpersonal mechanisms that transmit and mediate the influences of the college environment. (p. 293)

This study identifies both technology and physical location as influences on students' socialization within the college environment. As such, future efforts should revise Weidman's model to incorporate these changes for further research.

### 5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of this study provide valuable insight into the rural student population, which has implications for university administrators and faculty. The findings suggest the connection back to students' hometowns can have both positive and negative consequences. These findings not only stress the importance of maintaining a connection to their hometown both physically and emotionally through their parents and hometown friends, but also keeping the students active and engaged on campus. Students should remain connected to their hometown through their relationships with parents, hometown friends, high school teachers, and infrequent returns home, while also engaging with campus life at the university. Ultimately, colleges and universities are responsible for helping all their students to obtain desired academic outcomes, persist through graduation, and maintain a sense of belonging to the institution. For rural students to achieve these aspects, they should participate on campus, physically return home a maximum of two or three times a semester, and retain connection with their parents, hometown friends, and high school teachers. As this study demonstrates, rural students experience socialization into a large, urban institution differently; as such, we should view them as a marginalized population in need of further research; targeted, informed practice; and inclusion into diversity programming and strategic planning efforts.

Parents are heavily involved in the lives of their students. Past research demonstrated rural students came from first-generational and low socioeconomic families and parents could not identify with or financially support their child (or sometimes themselves). This study's findings demonstrate this is not always the case for rural students coming into an urban institution. With the concept of rural students at MAU redefined, admission professionals at the University may wish to revisit their recruitment strategies. As demonstrated, parents were

heavily involved in their students' education. It is important to engage parents along with their children during the recruitment process and transition into MAU. The use of technology and social media should also be used in the recruitment effort to allow admission representatives to tap into a population located a distance from the urban center. For example, to diminish the shock students may feel when coming to campus, virtual tools may be used to showcase the university and accustom students to the size and buildings. Additionally, texting with students or encouraging them to connect on Facebook may engage and benefit these students.

Parents could also be great assets when socializing students into the college experience. Currently, MAU has an Office of Parent and Family Resources. As this study found parents of rural students to be a source of support, this office could specifically target parents of rural students. The university could provide parents with information on the city in general, how to travel around the city, and social opportunities happening on campus. As the institution devises specific programming for rural students, parents could also receive a brief outline of this programming. Parents could utilize this information to maintain an open connection with their child in order to lend support. In addition, MAU could engage parents as partners in student socialization. Parent groups may be established to aid other parents in staying informed about the campus, answering questions, and serve as support groups for other parents who may need help guiding their children.

During their first-semester, parents supported their children emotionally and financially. If there were disagreements in points of view, they did not change the students' relationships with their parents. Nevertheless, a situation could evolve where parents and students disagree to such an extent that parents withdraw financial and emotional support. At the time of his second interview, Nathan had just found out his roommate was gay. His parents had encouraged him to

move, but he refused. As the situation was currently developing at the time, it is difficult to conclude whether Nathan's parents would try to persuade him to move by threatening to cut off their financial support or if they would respect their son's decision. It may be assumed, however, that some rural students could be placed in a difficult situation where they develop views and beliefs vastly different from their parents and hometown values. These differences could cause the student to be cut-off emotionally and financially by their parents. Administrators should be ready to support those students who face a hostile home environment by developing housing policies that would allow them to stay on campus if they could not return home over breaks; helping them access funds and scholarships for tuition and expenses; and providing counseling services. Parent groups could also prove useful to support students who may need housing or a parental figure in their lives or reaching out and talking with the students' parents.

With technology playing a large role in the way rural students are socialized, administrators and faculty should utilize it more intentionally. To aid in the navigation of an unfamiliar city and urban environment, administrators/faculty should show rural students exactly how to use apps to navigate public transportation and find out about events happening on campus and around the city. Incorporating this into orientation would be ideal, as it would allow students engage with their new environment quicker. During students' first week on campus, administrators/faculty should also encourage them to maintain a connection to home, as shown, parents and high school friends relieve stress and aid in personal development. This, in turn, enables socializations.

Technology was also a way students communicated with their professors. It broke down the boundaries of formality and intimidation and took the students out of the large class environment and placed them in direct contact with the professor. As such, administrators should

make faculty aware of the unique socialization experiences rural students encounter. Faculty should recognize these students may feel intimidated by the large class size and lack of experience interacting with professors. As such, administrators should encourage an openness and willingness to engage students through less formalized methods of social media. In addition, rural students are used to interacting with their high school teachers outside the classroom and in the community. Universities should encourage and compensate faculty to participate in on-campus activities or create ways to for faculty interact with students outside the classroom in order to simulate a familiar teacher/student context and become more approachable from the perspective of rural students. Additionally, having more access to faculty allowed the students to interact on a more personal level with their professors. It is also possible that these interactions may spur a deeper connection between the faculty member and the student and influence career development later in the students' college experience (Weidman, 1989).

The findings illustrate it is important for students to engage physically on campus, while also having the support and influence of their parents, hometown friends, and high school teachers. With multiple trips home during a given month, rural students are more likely to view their hometown as part of their collegiate experience and may not undergo interpersonal, intrapersonal, and social integration of the socialization process. As with other first-year students, it is important to engage rural students socially on campus (Kuhn et al., 2008). Student Affairs professionals, in particular, should encourage on-campus participation. As students mentioned they find large crowds overwhelming at first, Student Affairs could limit activities by size to allow for a more intimate and familiar environment. Additionally, faculty and staff could make these returns home more meaningful by encouraging self-reflection either through a class assignment or as part of an extra-curricular activity.

To build on the impact of parents, hometown friends, and high school teachers, administrators should make an effort to involve them in the lives of the students. The support from these groups aids students as they navigate the unfamiliar environment of college. As the findings demonstrate, technology could aid these influencing groups in connection to and communication with the students, as well as faculty and staff at MAU. By creating a stronger network for the students through diverse groups in their hometown and at the university, the students will socialize more readily and at a deeper level and their returns home are facilitate meaningful experiences.

The study reveals the sense of isolation rural students can feel as they perceive the need to become friends with everyone in their class. As revealed through Mike's interview, to cope, students may drink excessively or retreat back to their hometown where there is a sense of familiarity. Feelings of isolation diminish as students engaged with others, particularly those who also came from a rural background or friends from high school. Intentional peer mentoring and intimate programming that identifies and brings specifically rural students together and allows them to ask advice (particularly on such things as interacting with professors) and discuss their experiences as rural students in a large, urban institution would likely diminish this sense of isolation. Administrators should also encourage students to use technology to maintain a connection to other rural students at MAU.

#### **5.4 CONCLUSION**

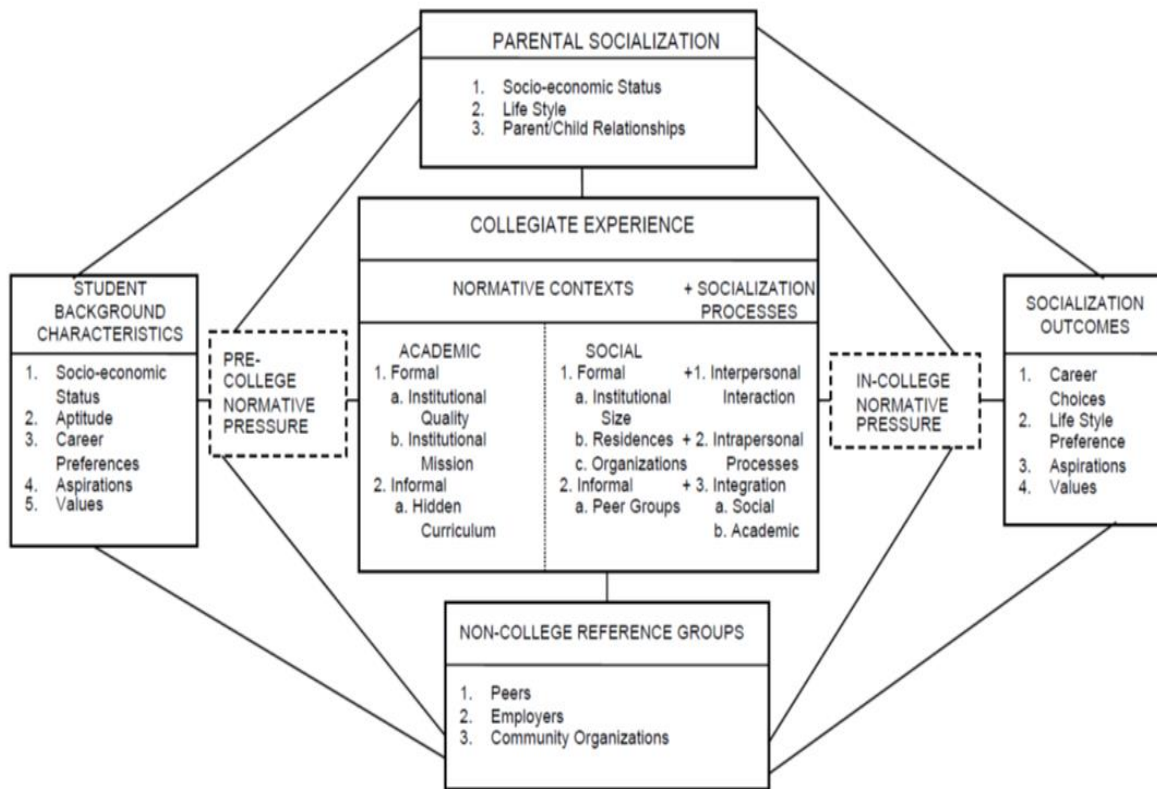
Many rural students expressed feelings of being overwhelmed as they entered MAU. Living and attending school in an urban environment for the first time, rural students experience

socialization differently than urban students. Rural students bring with them past experiences with high school teachers and their familiarities with a small town. They depend on their relationships with others and technology to help them make sense of this new world. While they should not return home frequently, or more than three times a semester, the return home did allow rural students to reflect on their current circumstances. As such, rural students, and we can assume, students in general should maintain a balance of interpersonal socialization on campus, with a return home acting as a catalyst to incorporate new ideas and concepts. Technology is a key source of support as it allows students to connect with family and friends to explore these viewpoints and incorporate them into their understanding of the world. This population needs further research in order to inform practitioners who should strive to meet the needs of rural students. Through a better understanding of rural students' socialization, the hope is that desired academic outcomes and retention rates continue to rise and these students develop a greater sense of belonging.



## APPENDIX A

### WEIDMAN'S MODEL OF UNDERGRADUATE SOCIALIZATION (1989)



**Figure 1.** Weidman's Model of Undergraduate Socialization (1989)

## APPENDIX B

### SCREENING QUESTIONS

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Are you over 18 years old?  
 YES    NO
  
2. Is this your first semester at a college/university, Pitt or otherwise (i.e. not a transfer student)?  
 YES    NO
  
3. What was your zip code for the years you attended high school? (If you attended various high schools, please list the zip code for each):

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**Figure 2.** Participant Screening Questions

## APPENDIX C

### DEMOGRAPHIC INSTRUMENT

#### **Socialization of Undergraduate Rural Students: Student Participant Information**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. All responses will be kept confidential and your identity will remain private. Your responses to these questions are *optional*, but will be helpful in reporting findings.

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_
2. Preferred alternative name (pick a name different from your own): \_\_\_\_\_
3. Preferred method of communication (check/complete all that apply):  
 Cell (text/call): \_\_\_\_\_  E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your sex or gender identity? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How do you identify racially/ethnically? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Mother's birthplace:  Rural Area  Urban Area  Decline to State
7. Father's birthplace:  Rural Area  Urban Area  Decline to State
8. Do you consider yourself a rural student?  Yes  No
9. Are you the first in your family to go to college?  Yes  No  Decline to State
10. Are you eligible for Pell grants?  Yes  No  Decline to State
11. Are you enrolled?  Full-time  Part-time Class level: \_\_\_\_\_
12. Current major: \_\_\_\_\_ Current academic department: \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you work?  Full-time  Part-time Number of hours per week: \_\_\_\_\_
14. Please list student organizations/co-curricular programs you are involved with:  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. Where will you live at Pitt during the Fall 2016 semester?  
 On campus housing  Off-campus; close to campus  At home  Other (\_\_\_\_\_)
15. Name of hometown (during high school): \_\_\_\_\_
16. Number of students in your graduating class:  
 Fewer than 25 students  25-99 students  100-199 students  200-399 students  
 400-599 students  600-799 students  More than 799 students  Decline to State  
Name of high school: \_\_\_\_\_
17. Mother's level of education: \_\_\_\_\_ Father's level of education: \_\_\_\_\_
18. Highest degree you plan to attain: \_\_\_\_\_

Created 7.5.2016

**Figure 3.** Demographic Instrument

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

**Table 1.** Interview Questions

<b>First Interview Questions</b>		
<b>Research Questions (Weidman, 1989)</b>	<b>Interview Protocol Questions</b>	<b>Probing Questions</b>
	Tell me a little about where you grew up?	
1. How are parents and non-college reference groups involved in the socialization process for rural students?	Did your close friends attend college? If so, where? If not, what are they doing now?	
	How do your friends and family feel about you attending MAU?	
	Can you describe your relationship with your mother and father and/or the people who raised you?	How did this relationship and/or the way you were raised impact your decision to attend MAU?
2. What role do rural students' background characteristics play in the socialization process?	When you were little, what did you want to be?	Has that changed? Why or why not?
	There are lots of things that are important to people. I'm going to give you a couple examples and let me know if what you would rank as the most important and why. 1) family and friends 2) hard work 3) religion or spiritual beliefs 4) responsibility 5) success	Are there any other ways you would describe yourself?
	Tell me about how you decided to apply MAU?	Was there a specific person influencing your decision? If working- How did you use your paycheck?
	What occupied your time outside of high school?	

**Table 1.** Interview Questions (continued)

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	<p>Would you describe yourself as hard working? Community oriented? Family oriented? Are there any other ways you would describe yourself?</p> <p>Do you see yourself returning to your hometown after graduation? Why or why not?</p>	
<p>3. How are the normative contexts, both academic and social, experienced by rural undergraduate students and how do these contribute to the socialization process?</p>	<p>What's it been like at MAU so far?</p> <p>How do you feel about the size of MAU? Is there anything you would like to add about your experience so far?</p> <p>Where are you living?</p>	<p>Why? Do you feel like people care about you?</p> <p>Why did you decide to live there? Where you randomly assigned a room (if in a residence hall)? If in a res hall, how are things with your roommate?</p>

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**Table 1.** Interview Questions (continued)

<b>Second Interview Questions</b>		
<b>Research Questions (Weidman, 1989)</b>	<b>Interview Protocol Questions</b>	<b>Probing Questions</b>
1. How are parents and non-college reference groups involved in the socialization process for rural students?	Has your relationship with your parents or anyone (friends/acquaintances) from your hometown changed in this past semester? How so?	
2. What role do rural students' background characteristics play in the socialization process?	Does the race/ethnicity of your peers & professor influence your relationship?	
3. How are the normative contexts, both academic and social, experienced by rural undergraduate students and how do these contribute to the socialization process?	<p>What are your thoughts about your classes this semester?</p> <p>Are you still friends with those you went to high school with?</p> <p>How do you interact with faculty across campus? Describe those interactions.</p> <p>How do you interact with staff (e.g., resident directors, advisors) across campus? Describe those interactions.</p> <p>How would you describe your group of friends?</p>	<p>Where you treated fairly by your professors? Did you feel like you received enough personalized attention? Are you happy with your performance so far this semester?</p> <p>Do you interact with faculty outside of the classroom setting? Do you ever attend office hours?</p> <p>Are you part of any co-curricular experiences that allow you to interact with staff?</p>

**Table 1.** Interview Questions (continued)

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How would you describe the other students in your classes?	
Can you describe your activity on campus?	
If you're employed, do you feel like work influences your school performance? How?	What do you send your paycheck on?
How do you feel about the size of MAU?	How do you feel about being in large lectures?
Do you feel confident navigating around the city?	
Did you find this semester challenging?	How so? (academically? socially?)
How has MAU supported you this semester?	Did you receive career counseling or did someone (who?) at MAU that influenced your decision of major?
Has your idea of a major or career path changed in this past semester? If so, how and why?	
What types of adjustments did you have to make throughout the semester?	
If you could change something about MAU, what would it be and why?	
Do you participate in any clubs/organizations? What are those experiences like?	
Do you think you made the right choice in coming to MAU? Do you wish you went somewhere else?	If no: Where do you wish you would have gone? Why?
Do you see yourself returning to your hometown after graduation? Why or why not?	
Do you think you made the right choice in coming to MAU? Do you wish you went somewhere else?	Where do you wish you would have gone? Why?

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**Table 1. Interview Questions (continued)**

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How would you describe your group of friends?

Do you feel confident navigating around the city?

Is there anything you would like to add about your experience at MAU?



## APPENDIX E

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

**Table 2.** Demographic Information

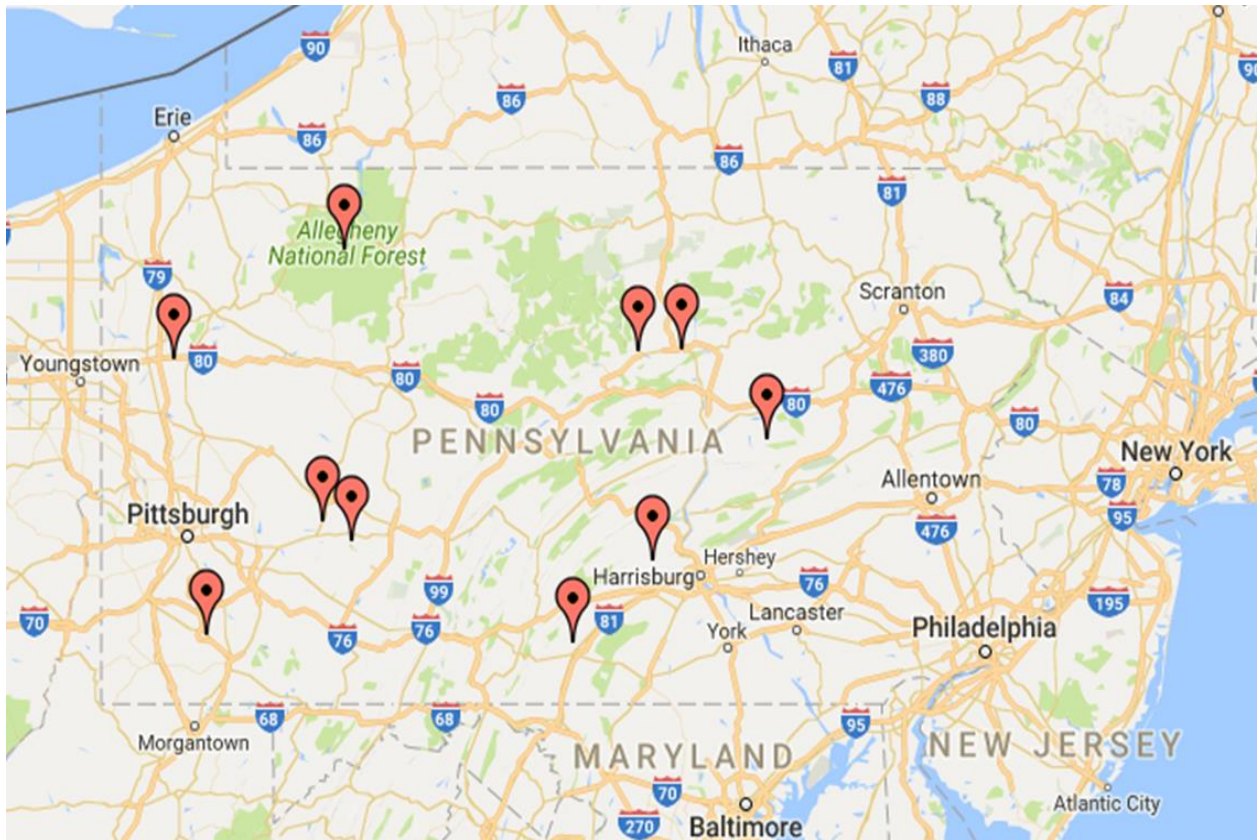
Name (alias)	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	First-Gen. Student	Pell-Grant Eligible	Major	Current Academic Program
Sarah	Female	White	No	No	Pre-Physical Therapy	Arts & Sciences
Jessica	Female	White	Yes	Yes	Accounting	College of Business Administration
Mike	Male	Caucasian	No	Yes	Political Science/Eastern European Studies	Arts & Sciences
Eric	Male	White	No	No	Finance	College of Business Administration
Karen	Female	White	Yes	No	Psychology	Arts & Sciences
Maggie	Female	Caucasian	No	No	Bioengineering	Swanson School of Engineering
Joe	Male	Caucasian	Yes	No	Molecular Biology	Arts & Sciences
Tim	Male	White	No	No	Biology	Arts & Sciences
Vincent	Male	Caucasian	No	No	Chemistry	Arts & Sciences
Nathan	Male	Caucasian	No	No	Molecular Biology	Unanswered

**Table 2.** Demographic Information (continued)

Name (alias)	Hometown Population*	Graduating Class Number	High School Type	Mother's Level of Education	Father's Level of Education
Sarah	29,249	200-399	Public High School	Bachelors	High School
Jessica	4,337	100-199	Public High School	High School Diploma	Jr. High
Mike	325	25-99	Public High School	High School Diploma	Bachelors
Eric	20,508	400-599	Public High School	Masters	Bachelors
Karen	486	25-99	Private High School	High School Diploma	Vo-tech
Maggie	5,511	100-199	Public High School	Bachelors	Masters
Joe	2, 311	100-199	Public High School	High School Diploma	High School Diploma
Tim	2, 194	100-199	Public High School	Masters	M.D.
Vincent	2, 346	25-99	Public High School	Bachelors	Bachlors
Nathan	8, 199	100-199	Public High School	Bachelors	Masters

## APPENDIX F

### MAPPED LOCATIONS OF PARTICIPANTS' HOMETOWNS



**Figure 4:** Mapped Locations of Participants' Hometowns

## APPENDIX G

### IRB APPROVAL



## University of Pittsburgh *Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
(412) 383-1480  
(412) 383-1508 (fax)  
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

### Memorandum

To: Emily Cerrone, EdD  
From: IRB Office  
Date: 8/3/2016  
IRB#: [PRO16070081](#)  
Subject: Socialization of Undergraduate Rural Students in a Large, Urban University

---

The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the above referenced study by the expedited review procedure authorized under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. Your research study was approved under:

45 CFR 46.110.(7)

The risk level designation is Minimal Risk.

Approval Date: 8/3/2016  
Expiration Date: 8/2/2017

For studies being conducted in UPMC facilities, no clinical activities can be undertaken by investigators until they have received approval from the UPMC Fiscal Review Office.

**Please note that it is the investigator's responsibility to report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others [see 45 CFR 46.103(b)(5) and 21 CFR 56.108(b)]. Refer to the**

IRB Policy and Procedure Manual regarding the reporting requirements for unanticipated problems which include, but are not limited to, adverse events. If you have any questions about this process, please contact the Adverse Events Coordinator at 412-383-1480.

The protocol and consent forms, along with a brief progress report must be resubmitted at least one month prior to the renewal date noted above as required by FWA00006790 (University of Pittsburgh), **FWA00006735 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center)**, FWA0000600 (Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh), FWA00003567 (Magee-Womens Health Corporation), FWA00003338 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Cancer Institute).

Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.

### **Figure 5: IRB Approval**

## **APPENDIX H**

### **FINAL PROPOSAL OF DEMONSTRATION OF SCHOLARLY PRACTICE**

The Demonstration of Scholarly Practice intends to place the research into the context of the practitioner. It allows for the dissemination of relevant information obtained in this study to affect stakeholders. This study examines the socialization of undergraduate rural students at MAU—a large, urban university located in Pennsylvania. Currently, the top three departments at MAU that may benefit most from this study’s findings are Residence Life, the Counseling Center, and the Center for Non-Traditional Student Support.

As there is a requirement for all first-year students to live on campus, the Residence Life is a common department for all first-year rural students at MAU. Interacting with rural students through residence hall programming and wellness-initiatives, Residence Life professional and student staff have many touch-points with rural students and can identify early behavioral issues that may lead to socialization problems in the future. Residence Life can provide targeted programming for rural students and aid students as they encounter problems within the University. Two other departments at MAU that may find information on rural students relevant are the Counseling Center and the Center for Non-Traditional Student Support. The counselors and advisors in these areas may encounter rural students struggling to socialize within MAU. Making these departments aware of this marginalized student population and highlighting the

struggles they face may allow for a better understanding of these students. With this knowledge comes a better ability to serve the rural student population.

The Demonstration of Scholarly Practice will take the form of a 30-minute presentation to the areas of MAU that are mostly likely to interact with rural students: Residence Life, the Counseling Center, and the Center for Non-Traditional Student Support. The presentations made to these departments will include a brief overview of the study, the findings of the study pertaining to returning to rural students' hometown and the use of technology, and a discussion on ways in which each department can translate these findings into effective interventions for the rural students they encounter. Supplementary information will be provided in the form of informational reference sheets on rural students.

It is also important to disseminate these results and encourage further study amongst colleagues. To that end, this study will be presented during the poster session at the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) Convening in Pittsburgh on June 12-14, 2017. Additionally, a chapter based on this study's findings will be submitted for consideration of publication in a book tentatively titled *Socialization in Higher Education and the Early Career: Theory, Research and Application*. Edited by John C. Weidman, PhD and Linda DeAneglo, PhD, the book seeks to explore the application and issues of student socialization in higher education, while also reflecting and recommending revisions and updates to Weidman's model for student socialization (Weidman, 1989, 2015; Weidman, et al., 2001). It is hoped this presentation and chapter will lead to more informed research and practice using the socialization model and on the rural student population.

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