FAMILY AND SCHOOL INFLUENCES ON RURAL YOUTH PERSISTENCE TO

COLLEGE GRADUATION

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The literature presents conflicting views of the rural experience, with one perspective chronicling the deficits associated with growing up rural while the other reveals advantages to small-town community and schooling influences. Adding to the complexities of the rural narrative are the recent demographic and social changes in rural communities—and the increasing number of rural youth migrating out of rural regions in search of brighter futures. Despite an increasing number of rural students enrolling in college, little research exists on understanding their precollege characteristics and college experiences—and the influence on college persistence. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which rural youth perceive the influences of family and high school on their ability to persist to college graduation. To gain an understanding of the complexities contained with the experiences of participants, a qualitative approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews as the study method. Participants shared positive perceptions connected to school, highlighting the benefits derived from small school size and teacher encouragement and personalized attention. Participants were less satisfied with coursework rigor, dual enrollment access, and financial planning, and discussed how these aspects could have been more beneficial to their efforts to access and persist through college.

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Strong family connections emerged in participant stories. While consistent and informative messaging regarding accessing college was not as apparent within families as in school, participants clearly felt supported by parents to attend college—and, in most cases, to pursue other higher education and/or career paths if they chose to do so. Participants articulated a clear desire to return to home communities to live and work but expressed concern about finding viable job opportunities. This study's findings could have important implications for rural youth and their families when considered in concert with the larger body of research related to rural youth persisting through college. Findings from this study could inform further research and practices designed to enhance college readiness and graduation rates of rural youth. In particular, participant stories highlighted the value of maximizing rural youth interactions with family, school, and community.

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

1.1   PROBLEM AREA

Rural communities across the United States have endured social, economic, and demographic changes corresponding with the decline of manufacturing and agriculture in rural regions. Youth may perceive that moving away is the "price of progress," while outmigration, with little countervailing in-migration, has profound economic and civic implications on communities. Family and schooling experiences, nevertheless, transmit cultural messages to rural youth, serving to shape identity and aspirations. Given this backdrop, how do rural youth envision their futures? And how are their college and career choices influenced by the forces embedded in their rural experience? Conflicting narratives emerge in the research: one perspective chronicles the deficits associated with being rural, while a second perspective reveals advantages to growing up rural. These contrasting viewpoints represent the complexities at work in attempting to understand the decisions rural youth make regarding their futures, including accessing and persisting through higher education.

1.2   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Rural students are an often-overlooked and misunderstood population despite representing a significant proportion of Americans. In 2010-2011, "Over half of all operating regular school

districts and about one-third of all public schools were in rural areas, while about one-quarter of all public school students were enrolled in rural schools" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Despite representing a significant proportion of Americans, rural students, historically, are less likely to enroll and persist in college. However, in the past decade, the rate of rural students participating in higher education has increased. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016), the fall 2012 college enrollment for higher income rural school was 65%, as compared to 70% enrollment among similar-income urban schools (p. 1), and the enrollment rate of low-income rural schools was 50 percent, compared to 55 percent of their urban counterparts.

Furthermore, Player (2015) noted, "Recent estimates identify a 10-percentage-point gap in college attainment between rural students and the national average, despite rural students having higher average high school graduation rates and scoring higher on math and reading achievement tests than students in cities or towns" (p. 2). Discerning the causes of this gap-- which may not be academic in nature or at least not exclusively--is imperative to improving the college-going (and staying) patterns of rural youth. However, as Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) asserted, "Despite the growing number of rural high school students enrolling in college, little is known about the background characteristics, precollege preparation, and college experiences of these rural students, as well as how these factors may shape their college completion" (p. 1). Given this comparative void, inquiry into the influences and characteristics of successful rural college students seems strongly warranted.

1.3   PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

My research study focused on students about to graduate from a regional campus of a large mid-Atlantic public university; the participants grew up in rural communities within "Sylvan County"—an area within 10-55 miles of the University. I sought to understand the influence of family and schooling experiences on participants' ability to graduate from college. This line of inquiry is of great importance for a variety of reasons.

First, it is likely that Sylvan County youth are not accessing higher education at rates comparable to their suburban and urban peers. Moreover, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the national six-year graduation rate at four-year institutions hovers at about 60%. Therefore, if Sylvan County youth do matriculate into college, a strong possibility exists that they will not graduate. In addition, as with rural communities across the United States, Sylvan County has lost manufacturing and agricultural jobs as youth move away in pursuit of viable employment. In fact, Grassmueck, Goetz, and Shields (2008) noted that the mid-Atlantic state, in which Sylvan county is located, has experienced slow population growth attributed to a high rate of loss of young residents between the ages of 25 and 34, one of the highest rates in the country.

Despite this gloomy backdrop and the "rural deficit" often portrayed in the literature, rural youth, including Sylvan County residents, *are* successfully matriculating into and graduating from college. The importance of place, and specifically, the dynamics at work in the rural setting, are central to this study. Budge (2006) argued that "a consideration of rural America cannot be complete without contemplation of the importance of place" (p. 2). The researcher underscored the insight of Michael Tierney, a rural West Virginian activist: "(t)here is

something very powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that helps them transcend the challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources (in Nadel & Sagawa, 2002, p. 66)" (p. 2).

So, then, investigating the experience of place by Sylvan County college graduates is at the forefront of this research study. Do these individuals possess the strong sense of family and place attachment often found in rural residents? Did family socioeconomic status and expectations influence decisions related to college? Do participants believe that their interactions with rural schooling within Sylvan County prepared them academically and socially for the challenges of higher education? The insight derived from the narratives of Sylvan County youth could shed light on engaging other rural youth in appropriate opportunities to position them for success in higher education.

1.4   STAKEHOLDERS

Certainly, the most important stakeholders are rural youths themselves, and in this case, Sylvan County youth, who deserve to imagine and pursue futures that include college and the resulting life enrichment and opportunities that higher education can provide. Rural communities have much at stake, given the influence of urbanization, outmigration, and the shifting economic base. Rural communities also have a responsibility to pursue proactive, innovative means to develop new jobs to attract youth who wish to return to their home communities. Families play an integral role in decisions youth make with regard to their future, and in turn, family members are affected by the choices youth make. This study could shed insight into the external and internal resources accessed by rural college graduates—important insight to share with parents. For instance, Yan (2002) revealed the power of parental expectations, particularly maternal

influence. The researcher found that 95% of rural students who persisted to college graduation reported that their mother expected them to attend college or graduate school, similar to urban and suburban students" (Yan, 2002, p. 9).

Likewise, rural teachers and administrators could benefit from an improved understanding of the protective factors of students who access college and persist to graduation. What role could schooling play in assisting rural students to build experiences leading to success in higher education? Moreover, college personnel have much to gain from learning more about rural students and how to meet their needs most effectively. In the era of increased competition for attracting and keeping students, it is good practice to recruit and support rural youth through graduation. According to McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky, ". . . 'the rural life,' being qualitatively different than urban and suburban cultures, is unattended to by higher education. Systems, institutions, and individual organizations are not congruent with rural students' specific concerns about money, lifestyle, or academic preparation" (in Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010). Schafft (2016) asserted that "rural education policy as a whole has arguably been relatively ad hoc," contending that the programs that do exist are designed to overcome "structural disadvantages in meeting federal policy goals and achievement outcome guidelines established for all public schools" (p. 5). Schafft (2016) called for both academia and government policy makers, another vital group of stakeholders, to work to create a "coherent vision" and set of rural school-specific policies.

1.5   SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Meece, Askew, Agger, Hutchins, and Byun (2014) noted the dearth of research on young women and men in correspondence with the economic and social shifts occurring in rural communities at the beginning of the 21st century. Being rural, then, can offer an important social and cultural category for exploring youth development that could differ from the experiences of urban youth. Previous inquiry has focused on college enrollment of students from rural areas, but much less research may be found about rural students who complete college degrees. Likewise, "prior research overlooks features of rural communities that may be conducive to college enrollment and degree attainment" (Byun, Irvin, Meece, 2012, p. 15).   Colleges and universities must do better to increase the likelihood that their students, including rural youth, who gain entry into their institution are positioned to graduate.

Moreover, given the reform efforts at work in American schools, attention should expand to K-16 reform that emphasizes the standards and curricula as well as higher education admissions, placement, support initiatives for its students. As Michael Kirst of the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement poignantly noted in 1998, "While colleges and universities seem to be ignoring the changes occurring below, K-12 reformers have failed to look up. This conflict and misalignment has confounded the policies that send signals to students and schools about what knowledge is necessary for success in the postsecondary classroom" (p. 2). Not only should college administrators be prepared to respond to the academic needs of students, appropriate social support structures should be in place for rural students. According to McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky, ". . . 'the rural life,' being qualitatively different than urban and suburban cultures, is unattended to by higher education. Systems, institutions, and

individual organizations are not congruent with rural students' specific concerns about money, lifestyle, or academic preparation" (in Schaftt & Youngblood Jackson, 2010).

Furthermore, Schafft (2016) asserted that "rural education policy as a whole has arguably been relatively ad hoc," contending that the programs that do exist are designed to overcome "structural disadvantages in meeting federal policy goals and achievement outcome guidelines established for all public schools" (p. 5). Schafft called for both academia and the federal government to work to create a "coherent vision" and set of rural school-specific policies. In recent years, the rhetoric surrounding college readiness has amplified as schools, higher education institutions, and policy makers grapple with the reality that the skills and knowledge acquired by high school students often are insufficient to graduate from college. The results of this study should provide insight into the perceived readiness of rural Sylvan youth who manage to graduate from college.

Unfortunately, much current research and corresponding policy recommendations aim to repair perceived deficiencies. While rural youth assuredly can experience socioeconomic challenges and conflicting parental expectations, research in the past decade has revealed academic performance similar to urban and suburban peers. Moreover, rural schools may contain distinctive opportunities to build social capital that can serve them well in higher education. Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) emphasized, "Unique rural high school experiences may enable students to develop greater feelings of school belonging and stronger commitment to education beyond high school (Downey, 1985), which may lead to persistence and ultimately improve the likelihood of completing a college program for these students" (p. 8). As Nelson (2016) asserted, while rural youth college access has improved, "Prior research has attributed this accomplishment to family, school, and community social capital, yet the processes through

which students translate social capital into educational attainment remain unspecified" (p. 249). This study provided a glimpse into participants' social capital that could have been accrued as a result of interactions with the family and school environments.

In summary, the study aimed to develop an improved understanding of the lived experiences of rural youth—particularly those which serve to propel individuals to college graduation. It is a purposeful attempt to move beyond the deficit perspective too often attached *to being and living rural* to reveal family and schooling dynamics that serve rural youth in the quest to access and persist through college.

1.6 STUDY OVERVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which rural Sylvan County youth perceive the influences of family and high school on their ability to persist to college graduation at Northeast University (NEU—a pseudonym). To gain an understanding of the complexities contained with the experiences of participants, a qualitative approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews as the study method. Participants were NEU students who applied for graduation in December 2017 and April 2018 and who attended a Sylvan County, Pennsylvania, high school designated as rural. The theoretical framework serving as the foundation for the study is Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong's (2012) Ecology of College Readiness which is based upon Brofenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development. Within the ecological model, an individual's college readiness is shaped directly through interactions with his or her microsystem (immediate settings), of which family and schooling are significant forces contained within a student's micro system (Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong, 2012, p. 31).

The inquiry questions for exploration in this research study are:

--How did high school experience impact persistence to college graduation?

--How did family experiences impact persistence to college graduation?

2.0   BACKGROUND LITERATURE

2.1   BACKGROUND: THE RURAL EXPERIENCE

To enter into meaningful consideration of what it means *to be rural*, it is first beneficial to attempt to define *rural*. Government definitions typically start with what rural is *not*. The U.S. Census Bureau defines two types of urban areas: Urban Areas consist of 50,000 or more people, and Urban Clusters have populations of at least 2,500 and fewer than 50,000 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). Those who dwell in any other area outside these parameters are considered rural. Other government agencies and organizations employ various definitions of rural areas so that no common description exists. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania's definition (2016) is based upon population density, so that a county, school district, or municipality is considered rural if fewer than 284 people per square live within the designated area.

While the numeric categories have important implications from the standpoint of policy and resource allocation, these definitions do little to represent the complexities of rural life. Past research typically situates rural youth research in comparison with urban youth. While understanding similarities and differences of these populations can be meaningful, rurality should be investigated as a distinct social and cultural category. An additional complication to arriving at a common definition are the variations that occur within rural regions across the

United States. For instance, the culture, demographics, and challenges facing Appalachian communities may or may not be consistent with the experiences of residents in the rural South. Ritchey (2006) explained, ". . . the development of more localized definitions can lead to the identification of other equally important rural qualities, such as locally-based independence, intimacy with nature, and the importance of shared values and collective responsibility," (Ritchey, 2002, p. 3).

2.1.1   Rural communities

To understand the rural youth experience, it is important to grasp the influences at work within rural communities in regions across the United States. In *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community,* authors Kai Schafft and Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2010) asserted, "In the United States as well as across the globe, the history of development has been largely one of urbanization, rural outmigration, and the subsumption of spatial peripheries into the social cultural, economic, and political spheres of the urban core" (p. 1). The authors argued that rural education systems in both the United States and in countries around the world have served to reflect and perpetuate these processes. So too are rural communities influenced profoundly, having endured social, economic, and demographic changes with the decline of agriculture and manufacturing jobs.   Petrin, Schafft, and Meece (2014) emphasized, "The rural economic base has shifted increasingly from a production of goods toward the provision of services" (p. 295). The researchers noted further that the change to the economic base is disproportionately associated with part-time, temporary work situations which yield little or no paid benefits.   As a result, rural youth might receive messages that moving out of their rural community to a more urban area is the "price of progress"--which could create internal

dissonance as the individual considers college- and career-related decisions. Prior research reveals competing narratives within rural communities—teachers and families may promote higher education while a common component of the rural experience is strong kin attachment, including a responsibility to stay close to family.

It is possible, then, the messages that accompany modernization can conflict with the more traditional characteristics of American rural communities. Blakemore and Cooksy (in Harber, 2014) contrasted characteristics of the traditional and modern individual, explaining:

> . . . that a modern person is more individualistic as opposed to the putting the family and group first; . . . favours urban living and working in large organisations as opposed to rural living and distrusting large organisations; sees occupation as the main determinant of status and life's purpose as opposed to traditional or religious positions being more important. (p. 70).

As Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) described (as cited in Coleman, 1988; Crocket et al and Elder & Conger, 2000), "Rural communities often are characterized as high in social resources or capital due to their small size and strong connections among families, schools, and religious institutions" (p. 413-4). Perhaps as a result of these caches of social capital, rural youth may construct a strong sense of place attachment. Howley (2005) noted that place attachment experienced by rural residents differs from the experience of urban and suburban dwellers. She explains, "Place for rural people, involves the meanings and relationships associated with land, nature, and local history of knowledge" (Howley, 2005, p. 65).

The influence of modernization and globalization on rural spaces must be considered in an examination of the experience of today's rural youth. In her case study of a small Minnesotan community, Edmonson (2001) described the emergence of three dominant literacies of the

townspeople, which the researcher argued was a response to the influence of neoliberalism, which "has meant a decreased investment in public goods and a move towards subjecting all noncommodified public spheres to the rules of the market" (p. 3). Edmonson (2001) further contended that for-profit schools and vouchers "moved market logic into the general public's thinking about education" (p.3), and the geographically isolated local schools struggled with meeting federal requirements to secure funding. The first community literacy identified was represented as nostalgia for a way of life that conflicts with progress. The second dominant literacy within the town and school focused on "the brain drain"-- the need to send youth away from the community to find an economically rewarding life. Within this literacy, little consideration was given to finding alternative ways to define success in the region. Edmonson (2001) identified a third, new rural literacy as well, which represented growing dissatisfaction with both the traditional literacy and the neoliberal influence. Edmonson's work is useful in considering rural youth aspirations and college and career decisions, which must be examined within the intersection of community and schooling. Her emphasis on understanding dominant discourses is particularly interesting in the quest to understand the individual narratives of rural youth.

Cairns (2014) set out to investigate the influence of neoliberalism on the ways in which rural youth imagine their futures—and the study revealed gender-specific patterns related to aspirations. Cairns (2014) engaged in three months of observation and focus groups of seventh and eighth grade students, who lived within a working-class rural community of "Fieldsville" in Ontario, Canada. The researcher situated her study within Dunkley and Panelli's work on locally defined identity categories. She also drew upon the field of girl's studies, and in particular, the influence of neoliberal and post-feminist discourses, emphasizing that the "girl power" messages

of popular media which telegraph the individual responsibility girls hold for creating their own futures. Cairns (2014) identified conflicting narratives at work, particularly for girls in her study, who "construct contradictory future narratives, idealizing urban femininities yet insisting they will continue living 'in the country'" (p. 478). For example, Hilary aspires to become a fashion designer who travels around the world participating in fashion shows—yet reveals a strong desire to remain in Fieldsville (p. 482).

The neoliberal discourse also promotes the notion that success means moving oneself upward and outward. Cairns found that Fieldsville girls, more so than boys, articulate dreams of obtaining successful jobs that are available only in more urban locales, while simultaneously expressing desires to remain in Fieldsville. Males in the study were more likely to envision future jobs tied to the local rural landscape. Girls consistently articulated attachment to the rural landscape and the safety and sense of community found in Fieldsville as rationale for remaining in the community. Importantly, Cairns concluded that middle-class females are more likely to possess the necessary cultural capital to envision futures beyond Friendsville. So, then, both gender and class influenced the imagined futures of rural youth in the study.

Interestingly, Meece, Askew, Agger, Hutchings, and Byun found, in a 2014 study of almost 9,000 rural adolescents, that female participants aspired to nontraditional careers more so than males (p. 251). In addition, rural girls aspired to higher levels of education as well as careers that required more education when compared with boys. For example, Meece et al. (2014) noted, "Nontraditional occupational aspirations may provide rural adolescent girls with greater flexibility in a changing labor market" (p. 251). The researchers further asserted that globalization and technology are likely forces in rural youth self-conceptions and development, including the identities they construct around educational and occupational aspirations.

Looker and Naylor (2009) also engaged in an exploration of rural youth's decision to remain within their rural communities or move to an urban location, which is perceived by participants as symbolic of progress and modernization. The researchers discovered that males were more likely than females to move to an urban area, and youth with parents with college degrees were more likely to move to an urban area. Participants living in a rural setting reported more fatalistic attitudes as compared with their urban counterparts. Rural youth who remained in rural settings also were more likely to perceive their situations as a product of luck—rather than effort, and rural youth who attribute life outcomes to effort were more likely to move to an urban location. Rural participants described remaining in that setting as "failure," while becoming urban is equated with progress. The researchers were careful to note positive features of remaining rural, including articulation of strong support networks.

2.1.2 Rural families

The literature overwhelmingly cast a negative light on the inhibiting family factors influencing rural youth aspirations and in particular, accessing, and attaining higher education. However, given that increasing numbers of rural youth are attending college, it is possible that some family messages have shifted over the past decade from a narrative of constraint to one of encouragement. Prior research establishes a connection between the amount of parental discussion about college plans and actual college attainment of children. In fact, Yan (2002) found that most rural students from Pennsylvania who attended college reported that they "sometimes" or "often" discussed going to college with their parents, with very few reporting that they "never" discussed college, (p.10). It is clear that more research is needed to delve further into the influences shaping rural youth college-going decisions. The policy implications

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seem evident as well; sharing the value and power of positive messaging with rural families and school personnel is a worthwhile pursuit.

Understanding the dynamics of rural family life is important to understanding youth aspirations and higher education decisions. In rural areas, it is likely that multi-generational families dwell on the same parcel of land, and perhaps the same home, as many prior generations of relatives. In interviews of rural youth, Looker and Naylor (2009) consistently found that participants choosing to remain in a rural area after high school attributed their choice to family connections. Parents were willing to provide housing and help when needed, and participants expressed mutual support by helping to support the family financially and as caretakers for ill family members (p. 59). Looker and Naylor (2009) noted that mutual support and reliance on social networks are not necessarily unique to rural youth; however, in order to remain close to their families and communities, rural youth may forfeit educational and occupational opportunities that may be more readily available to suburban and urban youth. Again, parental expectations figured powerfully in the decision-making process.

In addition to parental expectations, the bonding of family also seems to serve as an influential force in shaping rural youth aspirations. In interviews of rural residents, Looker and Naylor (2009) consistently found that participants choosing to remain in a rural area after high school attributed their choice to family connections. Youth in the study conveyed that parents were willing to provide housing and help when needed, and participants expressed mutual support by helping to assist the family financially and as caretakers for ill family members (p. 59). Likewise, Irvin et al.'s (2012) national study of over 7,000 students from rural school districts revealed that the most frequent barriers to pursuing post-secondary education were identified as: getting married, the need to help family, and not wanting to leave family.

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Furthermore, one of the strongest predictors of perceived barriers of youth in the study was family economic hardship.

2.1.3   Rural schooling

Rural youth aspirations and decisions also are shaped through interactions with teachers and through experiences with schooling more generally.   In a study investigating the reasons Appalachia youth pursued post-secondary education and training, Wright (2015) pointed out a potential dichotomy that could emerge in rural school settings. She referenced Alan Peshkin's ethnography of Pueblo schools, *Places of Memory*, which revealed a dichotomy between schooling, regarded as an "institution of becoming," and the native culture, an "institution of remaining" (p. 2). Both Peshkin and Corbett (in a 2007 study of a Nova Scotian fishing community) chronicled a tug-of-war between commitment to place and the pursuit of higher education. Wright (2015) noted that in the case of Peshkin, the community and school pushed high achievers out of the community. In contrast, Wright (2015) found that while some students connected education with outmigration, others sought ways to use their degrees for transformation of their home communities. Here, Wright (2015) drew from the work of Labaree, who emphasized the transformative influence of schooling to increase civic capacity as well as yield advantages for the individual. She further pointed out that while many youth believed that their degrees might serve them better in more urban locations, their attachment and sense of obligation to their rural community were more influential in shaping their aspirations.

Petrin, Schafft, and Meece (2014) provided additional perspective in understanding the role schools and educators play in the formation of rural students' aspirations. The researchers contended that a firm foundation of research exists representing schooling as a conduit of

modernity, serving to assimilate rural youth out of their "backward" ways. Their study focused on discerning student "types," relative to: academic performance, community attachment, and aspirations; the extent to which educators encourage their "best and brightest" to leave; and student desire to return among those who plan to leave. The researchers conducted three separate focus groups of students, community members and teachers. The study revealed four types of students—categories that mirror those identified in Carr and Kefalas's 2009 ethnographic study chronicled in *Hollowing Out the Middle*. The student types labeled by the researchers include:

> "Achievers," academically successful students from professional-class backgrounds who are college bound and rarely return; "Stayers," who are low-achieving from working class backgrounds who remain in the community; "Seekers," who lack academic and financial resources but who are determined to leave home; and "Returners," young people "hungry to experience life someplace else but with time, "boomerang" home after their new lives fail to take hold. (Petrin, et al., 2014, p. 297)

Carr and Kefalas argued that teachers and other community adults encouraged the "Achievers" to leave, serving to contribute to the decline of the community. In contrast, Petrin et al. (2014) found that while adults in their study did encourage outmigration of "Achievers," they did so accompanied by the message that youth ultimately should return to the community after acquiring higher education and skills. In fact, many of Petrin et al.'s conclusions centered around the commitment of teachers to help students feel connected to their communities, and that future studies should shift attention to local economic structures to understand forces that propel youth outmigration.

2.1.4 Rural youth identity: Shaped from a perspective of deficit or advantage?

Recent research does reveal clear benefits to growing up rural. Byun, Meece, Irvin (2011), in an examination of precollege factors in college enrollment and attainment, found that rural students possessed a higher level of community social resources than non-rural counterparts. Moreover, the researchers discovered that rural youth benefited from these resources in terms of a small but significant increase in college degree attainment (p. 20). Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2011) traced the origin of the community resources to the "strong kinship bonds and the close social ties among families and religious institutions in rural communities (Coleman, 1988; Crockett et al., 2000; Elder & Conger, 2000)," (p. 20). So, then, the very factors often viewed as detrimental to rural youth aspirations and decisions are found to support and serve students in their pursuit of higher education.

At the same time, much has been written regarding the inferiorities of being and living rural. Theobald and Wood (in Schafft and Jackson, 2010) argued that negative stereotypes associated with being rural may be traced as far back as 17the Century Europe—and are perpetuated today through popular and mass media (p. 18). These messages often equate the rural experience with deficiency and ignorance, and it seems some rural residents can buy into that characterization. Looker and Naylor (2009) found in their study of rural youth that participants regard remaining in the rural setting a "failure," and characterize those who left their home community for more urban settings as "more knowledgeable" and "goal oriented" (p. 55). In addition, Theobald and Wood (2010) concluded, "Somewhere along the way, rural students and adults alike seem to have learned that to be rural is to be sub-par, that the conditions of living in a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds—and educational deficiency in particular" (p. 55).   So, then, rural youth may construct identity in response to deficit notions, such as being

"backward, uncouth, and unsophisticated—a hayseed, hillbilly, cracker, yokel, hick, or country bumpkin" (Theobald and Wood, 2010, p. 18). Not only are rural youth exposed to these messages—so too are suburban and urban residents, who in turn, may perpetuate these notions of what it means to be rural.

Rural schools can serve as a powerful antidote to deficit messages portrayed in the media. It is well-chronicled in recent literature that, because of small size and limited resources, rural students, in comparison to urban peers, may not have the same access as to the quantity and diversity of extracurricular activities and college preparatory coursework, such as Advanced Placement and dual enrollment classes (in which local colleges collaborate with high school teachers to offer coursework for college credit). However, as Nelson (2016) noted, "Students in rural areas performed better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than their peers in cities and towns (though not as well as their peers in suburban areas)" (p. 4). In addition, Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) concluded, "Despite . . . challenges, rural students were more likely than their metro counterparts to attend college full-time" (p. 431). Furthermore, the researchers indicated that small school size, paired with "strong community-school connections, and supportive teacher-student relations" (p. 431) served as positive forces.

Another, often-researched variable in college attainment is parental education level. Meece et al. (2014) explained that parental education and income tended to be lower in rural communities when compared to metropolitan communities. In addition, the research of Byun et al. (2012) revealed that students with parents who possess post-secondary education are less likely to identify barriers to pursue education, while students with parents not possessing advanced degrees identify more barriers (p. 80). Furthermore, in their study investigating factors influencing college aspirations of rural West Virginia high school students, Chenoweth and

Galliher (2004) found that parental levels of education were significant in predicting the adolescents' college aspirations.

However, Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) provided a powerful counter-narrative to the ways in which rural students perceive their parents' situation: Given the increasing rates of rural youth entering college, these students, "who may be turning toward college education as a pathway to a different future from their parents may be more dedicated to college education" (p. 7). While education attainment of parents is a powerful predictor, so too, is parental expectations related to college attendance. In a study of post-secondary enrollment and persistence patterns of rural Pennsylvania students, Yan (2002) revealed the power of parental expectations, particularly the level of education encouraged by mothers:

> Students who enrolled in college were more likely to be expected by their mothers to go to college or graduate school, regardless of high school setting. For example, 95% of persistent rural students reported that their mother expected them to attend college or graduate school, similar to urban and suburban students" (p. 9).

An additional variable, family income, has a powerful connection to higher education attainment, and as noted previously, land use in terms of agriculture in rural areas has shifted as farming has declined. The lack of local jobs and low wages as well as the corresponding likelihood of experiencing poverty could influence rural youth's aspirations. Brown and Schafft (2011) contended that in some ways, poverty is as much a rural problem as it is an urban one. They pointed to USDA research indicating that rural poor tend to be more persistently poor, with nine of ten persistently poor American counties categorized as rural (pg. 209). Brown and Schaftt (2011) are influenced by Swidler's work which endeavored to remove a judgmental response to generational poverty, and instead, attributed behaviors and norms of rural poor as

legitimate responses to structurally embedded disadvantage (pg. 209). The authors argued that outmigration for the rural poor likely is not an option for several reasons, including the prohibitive costs of funding a long-distance move. Likewise, rural poor were less likely to possess and utilize human capital assets that might support moving. Brown and Schafft (2011) pointed to the research by Wilson and Tienda, which demonstrated that migration of the rural poor to more urban areas failed to result in employment (p. 210). Finally, the authors argued that rural poor may experience more significant attachment to place and rely on community support networks more so than rural individuals with higher socioeconomic status. In terms of rural youth and college attainment, the research of Byun, Meece and Irvin (2012) "confirmed that rural students lagged behind suburban and urban counterparts in college enrollment and degree attainment largely because of their lower socioeconomic background" (p. 431).

A rural student gap in college attendance, therefore, may be more aptly traced to socioeconomic conditions—rather that variables within the rural environment. One of the strongest predictors of perceived barriers to higher education is family economic hardship (Irvin, et al., 2012). The research of Byun et al. (2012) revealed that students with parents who possess post-secondary education were less likely to identify barriers to pursue college. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) found in their study of West Virginia high school students that lower and middle class males were less likely to plan to attend college than their upper class peers. Furthermore, it seems that a student's socioeconomic status could elicit specific messages (from teachers, families and community members) related to expectations for his or her future—and these messages could vary depending on the student's family income level. As Howley and Howley (2010) poignantly explained, "Middle-class rural students learn to aspire to a permanent elsewhere, but youth from impoverished families are confined to a place where they learn from

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their schooling is *no place to be*" (in Schafft and Youngblood Jackson, 2010, p. 46). Howley and Howley (2010) noted that youth construct notions of who they are in response both to being rural—and to being poor.

It is important to point out that a scarcity of financial resources could translate into insufficient informational resources for rural youth. For instance, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and meeting completion deadlines can serve as barriers to obtaining student aid. Completing the FAFSA is instrumental to securing federal and state funding—as well as aid packages offered by an individual college. Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006) claimed, "The federal system for distributing student financial aid rivals the tax code in its complexity" which presents a "serious obstacle to both efficiency and equity in the distribution of student aid" (p. 319). Low-income and first-generation students, those most in need of financial aid, are less likely to complete aid applications (Roman & Millard, 2006; King, 2004). Rural youth tend to be first-generation college students—more so than their urban counterparts (Byun, Irving, and Meece, 2012, p. 7). First-generation status is an oft-cited predictor for college dropout rates—affecting students regardless of location of upbringing

2.2   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Employing a social constructivist approach is warranted to elicit an understanding of how youth aspirations and decisions might be influenced by interactions contained within the rural experience. Constructivism situates human development socially, with individuals constructing multiple aspects of self (including knowledge, beliefs, skills, etc.) through interactions with one another and their environments. A useful perspective is Halfacree (2004)'s "dematerialized

concept of rurality" that "places rural within the realm of the imagination" (in Schafft, 2014, p. 4). In other words, as Schafft (2014) noted, "the social constructivist position contends that mental constructs are an element of culture that helps to determine what people consider as 'rural'" (p. 5). As a corresponding vantage point, Bourdieu's notion of habitus can be considered in an exploration of rural youth experiences; as Lois Weis et al. explained,

> . . . habitus encompasses all of the general dispositions (ways of doing things, of reacting, of being) which result from the internalization accumulation of past learning; a form of "know-how" inculcated by the family, the school and the broader social environment as part of the generalized process of socialization. (p. 26).

Therefore, rural youth learn "how to be" rural through experiences within and outside of school. Helfenbein (2011) pointed out that too often, studies of youth are conducted within the "bounded system" of the four walls of schools, serving to ignore other, powerful forces at working in shaping identity (p. 319). Furthermore, Bourdieu's habitus can provide a perspective to develop an understanding of the college experience of rural youth. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) argued, "The construct (of habitus) is especially useful when combined with the social networks view for understanding individual behavior in a specific institutional setting and the meaning that students make of college life" (p. 15).

Through interactions with each sphere of influence, youth may acquire social capital, which Bourdieu (1986) described as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248). Woodcock defined social capital as "encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit" (in Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000, p. 3). Social capital is constructed through interactions with others and "constitutes a

particular kind of resource available to an actor (Coleman, 1988, p. 98). Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) positioned social capital as a "resource which can be stored and drawn upon" (p. 3). Importantly, the researchers added that, as a resource, social capital also may be depleted. Falk and Kilpatrick's (2000) study, which focused on a community case study, revealed that social capital is dependent on the number of meaningful interactions in which one engages. Not only must sufficient quantity be present to build and maintain social capital, quality of the interactions matters as well. Interactions that build self-confidence are particularly valuable as are those in which sharing of knowledge resources occurs. The researchers found that the sharing of those resources among individuals facilitates community engagement in common activities.

Investigating the nature of social capital rural youth accumulate—and the ways in which capital is activated within the college setting —could be critical components to understanding factors associated with persistence to graduation. An individual's social capital is dependent upon the contextual influences to which he or she is exposed, and Crockett et al. (2000) offered four ecological dimensions through which one may explore rural youth development and identity: population (size and density), community ties, traditionalism and land use. For instance, in terms of population, rural areas tend to feature small community size and numbers of residents, leading Crockett et al (2000) to assert that, "These demographic criteria may be important for adolescent adjustment because of their effects on social participation and psychological well-being" (p. 48.) This type of inquiry provides a valuable lens through which to understand how ecological dimensions of a space serve to shape rural youth identity.

An additional and related perspective informing the rural youth experience is the powerful notion of *place*:

Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken and which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. (Brueggemann, in Harvey, 1996, p. 304)

Greenwood (2011) explained the interplay between place and people: "A key concept in critical geography is the reciprocal nature of human relationships with places: places shape people (identities and cultures); and people shape places" (p. 634). In other words, each of us forms our identities through interactions with our environments, constructing notions of who we are through, and as a response to, our experiences. In terms of the rural experience, Budge (2006) engaged in case study of rural leaders within a small community in Washington state, arguing that "a consideration of rural America cannot be complete without contemplation of the importance of place" (p. 2). One's surroundings, then, serve not as an inert backdrop but rather contain multiple and varied forces that influence one's ideas and behaviors.

Farrugia et al. (2014) likewise endeavored to explore identity within the structures of the rural space. The researchers argued that engaging in this kind of research brings focus to a "hitherto marginalized perspective which speaks in new ways to the contemporary meaning of place in young people's lives, as well as (demonstrates) different ways in which young people's identities are 'stretched' over the 'glocalised' spaces of contemporary youth culture" (p. 1037). Farrugia et al. (2014) examined the identity construction of youth within the local rural site— while the teens drew upon globally available cultures through their use of technology. For

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instance, Emma belonged to a worldwide video gaming community of 32 million members, and she has connected with an online digital artist, who has mentored Emma as she creates her own art. Despite Emma's daily experiences within a global online community, she articulated aspirations linked with traditional aspects of rural life. Investigating individual narratives in this manner seems most worthwhile to develop an understanding of how youth imagine their futures while navigating within both rural local and global spaces.

Furthermore, Proshansky's theory of place-identity, described as "an individual's incorporation of place into the large concept of self" (Hauge, 2007, p. 8), can further inform the influence of geography on identity. Hauge (2007) explained that place-identity can encompass "symbols of class, gender, family, and other social roles" (p. 8) and contributed to the formation of an individual's self-concept, which in turn, shapes aspirations. Ultimately, as Meece et al. (2014) note, aspirations function as predictors of actual educational and occupational attainment (p. 238).

The primary theoretical framework employed in this study is Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong's (2012) Ecology of College Readiness, which is grounded in Brofenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development. The ecological model of development emphasizes the significance of place in the construction of identity by assuming that individuals and their environments are interdependent and intertwined. As noted by Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012), "The ecological model contains four nested levels of the environment ranging from the most immediate to the most distant: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem" (p. 14). Brofenbrenner (1997) presented two axioms of his paradigm that are of particular relevance for this research study: first that "development is an evolving function of person-environment interaction," and second, this interaction must occur within a microsystem, the

"immediate" face-to-face setting in which the person exists" (p. 302).   These face-to-face settings include "the immediate social and physical environment, including the people, places, objects, symbols, and activities that an individual experiences directly" (Arnold, et al., 2012, p. 14).   Family and schools figure prominently in the microsystems of youth, and this study endeavored to explore the influence of the microsystems on participants who attended rural Sylvan County school districts.

Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012) applied Brofenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development to college readiness—providing a strong and relevant foundation for this research study.   Arnold et al. (2012) argued that engaging in an ecological perspective of college readiness allows "educators, researchers, and policy makers to focus on interconnections between active individuals and multiple environments" to better understand the phenomenon of college readiness and to create more effective interventions (p. 106).   Moreover, as Arnold et al. (2012) asserted, "In the ecological model, there is only one way in which college readiness is directly shaped: through the individual's interactions within his or her immediate settings, or microsystems" (p. 31). The researchers further underscore the powerful influences of family and school contexts on college readiness; therefore, the primary research questions driving this study are focused upon these two areas of influence.

The specific interview questions attempted to elicit participants' impressions of both of these influences on their own college readiness.   Arnold et al.'s (2012) model identified dynamics contained within the family and school experiences that can shape an individual's degree of college readiness.   Interview questions were composed to represent these various dynamics and are discussed specifically in Chapter 3, Data Sources. Of particular interest in this

study were the ways in which participants characterized their family and school experiences—as

constraining or encouraging or, at times, a combination of both.

3.0   METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which rural Sylvan County youth perceived the influences of family and high school on their ability to persist to college graduation at NEU. Using interviewing as the study method created an opportunity for participants to share their stories relative to their experiences growing up in rural Sylvan County communities. Seidman (2013) asserted that interviewing allows for study participants to "select constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them," which makes "telling stories a meaning-making experience" (p. 7). This meaning-making process was at the crux of this study, providing valuable insight into the experiences and perspectives of rural youth participants as they approach college graduation. Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong's (2012) application of Brofenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development to college readiness guided the research questions—highlighting participants' family and schooling experiences. To elicit these detailed perspectives of participants, the following inquiry questions guided the study:

--How did the experience of high school impact persistence to college graduation?

The aim was to understand the role schools and educators can have in encouraging and preparing rural youth academically and socially to persist in higher education. In particular, I endeavored to discern the content of teacher messages related to becoming a college student—and the role those messages played in participants' experience of higher education. In terms of

academic preparation, rural schools typically are less likely than urban and suburban counterparts to offer Honors and AP coursework. Within the interviews, I asked participants questions related to perceived rigor of high school coursework as well as the perceived effect on academic performance in college. The interviews also contained questions to gauge the extent to which participants felt supported and encouraged by school personnel to attend college. In general, I sought to understand the influence of experiences within Sylvan County schools and any positive and negative effects identified by participants.

--How did family experiences impact persistence to college graduation?

The literature casts a negative light on the inhibiting family factors influencing rural youth aspirations as well as in accessing and attaining higher education. However, given that increasing numbers of rural youth *are* attending college, it is possible that some family messages have shifted over the past decade from a narrative of constraint to one of encouragement. Prior research establishes a connection between the amount of parental discussion about college plans and actual college attainment of children; therefore, I was interested in discerning if parents encouraged or discouraged higher education and how those messages might be perceived by participants. Given the influence of socioeconomic status and educational attainment on accessing and persisting in college, I also included interview questions related to financial support and navigating financial aid. Participants also were prompted to reflect upon messages received from family members regarding college.

3.1   RESEARCH SETTING

The study investigated participants' views of their family and school experiences—particularly the influence of these dynamics on accessing and persisting through NEU, a four-year-regional college, part of a large public university system. Persistence occurs when "entering college students remain, re-enroll, and continue their undergraduate education" through graduation (Cuseo, 2009, p. 2). The study's participants were NEU students who attended a Sylvan County school district designated as rural and who applied for college graduation for fall 2017 or spring 2018. Sylvan County is situated in a scenic part of a mid-Atlantic state and is home to about 75,000 residents (or 72 residents per square mile.) A county or school district is considered rural when fewer than 284 people per square mile live within the designated area (the average population per square mile of the state); Sylvan County's population density is 70 people per square mile (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). Sylvan County residents maintain a median household income of $44,587 as compared to the state's median income of $53, 599. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015, Quick Facts). From 2011-2015, 15.3% of people 25 years and older living in Sylvan County possessed a Bachelor's degree or higher, while 28.6% of the state's residents over 25 earned a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015, Quick Facts). The following chart depicts data related to three rural Sylvan County school districts attended by three of the interview subjects—as well as suburban and urban comparison schools within the region. Of particular interest is the contrast in the numbers of high school graduates who report intention to pursue post-secondary schooling.

Table 1. College-Bound High School Graduates, Southwestern Pennsylvania, 2014-2015

School District	Location	Graduate Count	Total Post-Secondary Bound	Total Post-Secondary Bound Percentage
Mapleton	Sylvan County	52	26	50%
Sylvanwood	Sylvan County	50	25	50%
Shadysville	Sylvan County	29	12	41%
A	Regional City	314	222	70%
B	Regional City	162	118	73%
C	City County	381	341	89%
D	City County	383	322	84%
E	City County	305	258	85%

Adapted from Department of Education. (2015). Graduate Data and Statistics, 2014-2015.

Approximately 3,000 students attend the four-year public institution NEU, including this study's participants, whose home county of Sylvan adjoins the county in which NEU is located. Some study participants commuted while others chose to reside on-campus, which for residents is within an hour and a half from their home communities.

3.2   INQUIRY APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

In order to represent the lived experiences of rural college graduates and the complexities contained therein, a qualitative study was most appropriate for yielding an understanding of the rural youth experience. As Bruner (2004) explained:

Given their constructed nature and their dependence upon the cultural conventions and language usage, life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about "possible lives" that are part of one's culture. Indeed, one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life. (p. 694)

The ways in which Sylvan County youth experience their rural spaces, containing family and school influences, was highlighted in the study. A qualitative study provided an opportunity to communicate the voices of participants as they described their experiences growing up in rural spaces. Furthermore, Creswell (2007) noted, "We also conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue" (p. 40).

To obtain this richly detailed and nuanced data, in-depth interviews served as the inquiry method. Seidman (2013) asserted, "(Interviewing) is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues" (p. 14). Engaging in interviews utilizing a semi-structured approach, with the aid of an interview guide, created consistency of questioning and at the same time, offered flexibility to follow and encouraged the unique perspectives of individuals in the study. A semi-structured approach produces coverage of important issues as well as flexibility to respond to newly generated concerns (Mertens, 2015, p. 383). This dynamic is a powerful one given that the researcher cannot anticipate the range of experiences of participants—and the potentially complex reasons for constructing their perceptions of those experiences. In this study, pre-planned interview questions provoked unanticipated responses, and the semi-structured approach afforded the flexibility to construct meaningful follow-up questions to glean the unique experiences of participants.

3.2.1   Researcher's epistemology

I operate from a social constructivist perspective in my professional work, and whether in the classroom or in informal interactions with students, I try to be mindful that individuals construct their realities and make meaning of the world through their experiences. It makes sense, then, that I utilized a constructivist philosophy in examining my problem of practice, with the understanding "that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process" (Mertens, 2015, p. 16.) Within this paradigm, Mertens (2015) emphasized the importance of understanding the lived experience of individuals from their point of view (p. 16). Moreover, Gray (2008) noted that within constructivism, "Meaning is constructed not discovered, so subjects construct their own meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (p. 18). This notion is particularly important to my study as I attempted to give voice to students' experiences. Each participants' perceptions of growing up in rural Sylvan County may be different, perhaps contradictory, but each perspective is valid and worthwhile. I sought to discover and communicate the ways in which students interacted with their rural environment—and to represent the authentic experiences of each individual.

3.3   PROPOSED SAMPLE AND DATA SOURCES

Study participants were selected based upon specific criteria through purposeful sampling. Participants must have attended a rural, public school district within Sylvan County and were traditionally-aged college students who applied for graduation from NEU for Fall 2017 or Spring 2018. A list of 36 students who met these criteria was obtained from the NEU Data Warehouse.

An introductory email to these 36 students served as an invitation to participate in the study, yielding 10 study participants—seven females and three males. Appointments approximately 45 minutes in length were set with willing participants and occurred within a space on NEU's campus. I read participants the introductory script, explaining the study's purpose, the recording and secure storage of responses, and their option to refrain from answering questions or to withdraw from participation at any time. I captured participant responses using the Voice Memo iPhone application; audio recordings were downloaded immediately to my office computer and saved to the university's protected Box storage space—at which point Voice Memos were deleted from the iPhone. To increase confidentiality, each interview was categorized with an identifying letter instead of using the participant name.

Interview questions corresponded with the two broad research questions focusing on family and school influences. Arnold et al. (2012) described family influences related to college readiness, such as parent messages related to college aspirations and planning, parental education attainment levels, family socioeconomic status, and family financial literacy related to college (p. 43-44). Likewise, the researchers identified potential influences on college readiness contained within the school context, including academic coursework, college-going culture, teacher-student relationships, and small learning environments (p. 35-39). Interview questions represented this range of family and school dynamics linked with college readiness in Arnold et al.'s Ecological Model of College Readiness.

3.4   DATA ANALYSIS

Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) asserted, "Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner' (p. 1). Arnold et al.'s (2012) application of Brofenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development to college readiness drove the study's research questions and provided directed content analysis of data collected that corresponds with the two broad categories of participants' family and schooling experiences.

To prepare data for analysis, I transcribed the individual interview audio files into word documents. Engaging in the verbatim transcription process, while tedious, created a familiarity with data helped to really "hear" the stories of participants. As I moved from transcribing one interview to the next, I was thinking about previous responses--and any similarities and differences. Periodically, I added to an on-going memo to record observations of the meaning I was making from the data. Mertens (2015) offered a warning that interpretive researchers should seek to "confirm that the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher's imagination" (p. 405). The process of memoing was vital throughout the analysis process not only as an organizational aide but also as means of data confirmability.

Saldaña (2009) offered a framework to guide the data analysis process, which includes two phases of coding data. The utilization of Dedoose, an online data analysis platform, assisted with both phases. The First Cycle involves "coding processes (which) can range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence to an entire page of text . . . ." (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). During this stage, I engaged in applying descriptive codes to condense and summarize the primary topics of interview excerpts—a process guided by the range of family and school

influences represented in Arnold et al.'s (2012) college readiness model. Importantly, Saldaña (2009) pointed out that the coding process should achieve multiple goals: ". . . when we reflect on a passage of data to decipher its core meaning, we are *de*coding; when we determine its appropriate code and label it, we are *en*coding" (p. 4). I was mindful to create emergent codes that not only accurately represented the data but also reflected the nuances contained within Arnold et al.'s (2012) model. Indeed, a second iteration of coding included not only developing new codes but developing subcodes as well. For instance, in analyzing feedback relating to participants' connection to community, some participants described a strong affinity for nature. Connection to nature became a subcode, under which participant quotes represented entertainment connected with outdoors pursuits.

After using Dedoose to create initial codes for the text-based interview content, I identified themes that emerged from the patterns within the coded data. Dedoose was particularly helpful in designating themes and moving data under the appropriate categories. As Saldaña (2009) explained, the Second Cycle (and perhaps the third and fourth, and so on) of recoding further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory" (p. 8). Given the iterative nature of qualitative data analysis, I engaged in a process of reflecting further upon initial codes and amending accordingly and developed new codes as necessary. Saldaña (2009) cautioned that researchers should not set out to "code for themes," but rather, "a theme is an *outcome* of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection . . . describing more *subtle* and *tacit* processes" (p. 13). This second cycle of coding was more focused, resulting in clearer connections among participant statements and serving to elaborate upon themes. Some data were eliminated because the information was deemed inconsequential

upon further review. Throughout the process, I attempted to code and discern themes that could best answer the research questions.

3.5   RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVITY

My own identity is linked closely to the research questions and goals contained within this study. I grew up in a small community within Sylvan County and attended rural public school. As Kai Schafft (2010) noted in *Rural Education for the Twenty-first Century*, "Identity is complex, and being rural is merely one force, but a significant one" (p. 18). In retrospect, I realize that as a youth I bought into the deficit narrative often associated with the rural experience. Schafft (2010) pointed out, "Since the United States is synonymous with 'progress,' and progress is culturally defined as even more urban growth and development, rural youth see themselves as non-participants in the American experience, at least until they leave their home and move to the city" (p. 27). Indeed, this was my plan as a teenager; I equated a move to the city with proving myself—as if in doing so, I would be joining "the real world"—and a better world at that. My personal and professional journey initially led me away from my rural roots, but I have since returned to the county of my upbringing. I have a vested interest in serving rural youth, and that perspective has driven my research goals and the angle of my investigation. It is this vested interest that also could lead to bias within the study. Confirmation bias posed a threat to maintaining the integrity of the qualitative research and analysis process. Certainly, I carry with me my own experiences and perceptions of growing up rural, which could have clouded my expectations of others. The research and interview questions were crafted to elicit the unique narrative of each participant. During the interview, I attempted to give particular care to framing

follow-up questions to represent the true message conveyed by participants rather than leading them with questions tailored to my pre-conceived notions. Moreover, I kept a reflexive journal, with an entry to follow each interview, to maintain awareness of my values and interests and to prevent my biases from infiltrating the execution of the study.

My positionality also is affected by my experiences as an administrator at NEU. I have worked within higher education for 25 years, interacting with scores of students in a multitude of formal and informal learning settings. My work's focus is to discern and implement the appropriate combination of challenge and support to facilitate student development. In addition, I possess a deep appreciation for the multiple and complex issues connected with students accessing and persisting through higher education. I am acutely aware that many students who enter college do not graduate, and I firmly hold the notion that higher education institutions are obligated to support the unique and diverse needs of the students who are admitted and pay tuition. These experiences and perspectives contributed to the sensitivity I possessed for participants and to the rapport I established within interviews. At the same time, I tried to be mindful that participants may not share my own rural experiences—and that I was not functioning in my professional role as I interviewed participants. Rather than to serving in a helping capacity, my role was to ask sensitive and meaningful questions, to listen attentively, to record responses, and to identify themes in as unbiased manner.

3.6   STUDY LIMITATIONS

While this study revealed a meaningful glimpse into the rural youth experience, it is important to note limitations. As with any research method, interviewing has potential drawbacks. It is a

time consuming and challenging process, with the quality of study results largely dependent upon the skill of the interviewer to recruit participants, lead a quality interview, to transcribe, code, and analyze data, and to communicate findings in a coherent and accessible manner. Furthermore, as Alshenqeeti noted (2014), ". . . interviewees will only give what they are prepared to reveal about their perceptions of events and opinions. These perceptions, however, might be subjective and therefore change over time according to circumstance" (p. 43). Despite this limitation, it seems a worthwhile pursuit to capture the perceptions of participants at a certain point in time given that an individual's perceptions of the world around them often guide their choices and behaviors. I found that some participants seemed more eager and comfortable sharing their experiences in detail. Indeed, even within each interview, participants typically varied from question to question on the extent of details provided. I attempted to allot time and space for participants to respond, while moving on to a new question when it became clear he or she was finished with a response.

Despite these considerations, researcher bias is a potential pitfall of any study and may be more challenging to avoid in qualitative studies. With interviewing, the investigator must strive to ask questions clearly and consistently, while not leading participants. As noted, I grew up in the same county as study participants and have my own perceptions of the rural experience. I attempted to remain detached and open-minded during data collection and analysis. However, it is impossible to separate completely because as Norris noted (1997), "Research whether quantitative or qualitative, experimental, or naturalistic, is a human activity subject to the same kind of failings as other human activities" (p. 173).

Another potential drawback to interviewing is a lack of anonymity of participants; therefore, I attempted to develop careful communication and safeguards for protecting

participant confidentiality throughout the interview and transcription processes. Furthermore, the small sample size of 10 limits study generalizability, as does the geography of participants, which is limited to the same Northeastern state's county. Furthermore, participants all attended the same local college. These dynamics serve to limit study conclusions describing high school and family influences on youth accessing and persisting through a four-year college. Further research is required to explore the diverse rural populations living potentially different experiences in various regions throughout the United States. Likewise, examining rural youths' experiences at larger universities at a farther distance from home could result in different findings.

4.0   FINDINGS

4.1   A DESCRIPTION OF THE RURAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Arnold et al. (2012) emphasized the following influences of schooling related to youths' college readiness: teacher interactions, academic coursework, size of the learning environment, and college-going culture of the school. The findings in this section represent themes within participant responses to the first research question: *How did the experience of high school impact persistence to college graduation?*

4.1.1   Overall perceptions of school experience

When asked to describe their perceptions of their overall school experiences, nine of 10 respondents described it as positive, with one participant identifying a "good and bad" experience. Most of the participants associated their positive experience with the personalized attention they received as well as with connections they felt with teachers and peers. For instance, Joe remarked, "If you need help you can get it. You don't get forgotten."

Participants identified positive aspects related to the smallness of the community, school, and class size. Eve noted, "I had a positive experience. I was able to connect with my peers and my teachers, and I felt like if I needed help, there was always someone there to give it." Interestingly, Jessica articulated a belief that this sense of connection could be unique to small

schools: "The connection probably wouldn't be as strong in a bigger, more urban school—that one-on-one attention from teachers." Abby noted two contrasting perspectives within her family related to the schooling experience:

My experience was good. It was small obviously. I graduated with like 25 kids, but it was good. Now my brother, actually, wishes he would have gone to a bigger school somewhere else for AP classes and more opportunities. But I had a good experience and felt like it prepared me for college.

Some participants held both positive and negative perspectives on the smallness of their rural school. For instance, Jack noted, "It was nice--my grade size was only around 30. I knew everyone personally. On the other hand, everyone knows everyone else's business." Abby shared this conflicted sentiment:

It was good because everyone knew everyone else, and it was bad at the same time because you couldn't get away from anyone or anything. It would have been better for a lot of people if it would have been bigger. Some people might not connect—and may be better off in a larger school to find people with the same views.

Jack identified an additional negative characteristic of small school and class size:

I had only 32 in my graduating class, and I have been just finding this out now—that I am not very good about dealing with bigger groups, and that is a scary thought if I go to med school. The classes will be much bigger. That is a scary aspect. I haven't had a lot of experiences with bigger groups. In big groups, I just feel awkward and out of place.

Sam described an overall positive experience, noting that he felt prepared for the college environment, but acknowledged that he felt his school was underfunded for academic and

extracurricular programs, while Jack described cuts to the music program: "My school recently disbanded its music program, and that is awful. They share a band with a neighboring school, and a lot of kids think that is too much hassle. They have to go 45 minutes away." Joe provided an example of diminished extracurricular opportunities at his school: "We didn't have a football team, and I always wanted to play and have a normal experience. Since we shared a team (with a school 20 miles away), doing football was a lot more trouble than it was so worth." However, he quickly moved from that more negative experience to describe a positive outcome:

> Then I did rifle team, and I really loved it—and that is something a lot of schools might
>
> not have. Rifle was the best thing ever. My Boy Scout troop—we all did rifle together.
>
> We got to screw around together, go camping, then go shoot. It was fun."

A prevailing characteristic of rural school districts is small grade and class size, and as Bailey (2000) noted, "Nearly every study of educational attainment finds that small schools, whether measuring graduation or dropout rates, have a significantly greater ability to graduate students than do large schools" (p. 2). Although rural students may offer fewer extracurricular opportunities than rural and suburban counter parts, participants in this study maintained an overall positive perspective on their experiences despite the drawbacks.

4.1.2   Teacher interactions

Seven participants described their teachers as "very supportive" for them to attend college, and the remaining three viewed teachers as being "somewhat supportive." When asked for an example of how she felt supported by teachers, Eve commented, "My 10th grade Biology teacher was very keen on talking about doing things on our own because in college, no one would do the

work for us. College would be filled with academic challenges—I heard that throughout high school." Abby also described consistent messaging from teachers about preparing for college as well as a generally supportive atmosphere. She explained, "They were constantly talking to us about what we wanted to do, and our futures, and our lives in general. They were always willing to talk—always there." Muller (1998) demonstrated that student expectations were strongly influenced by the expectations of teachers. The quantity and quality of messages youth receive regarding pursuing college—and the result sense of perceived support--is vital to forming their expectations and aspirations. Maggie described the kinds of support she received from teachers:

> All the teachers I had were definitely supportive. There were teachers who I was really close with specifically. They kind of kept up with my applications to college—where I was applying, asking, "Did you take your SATs? Where do you plan to go? What are your options?" So, they really sat down with me and sorted all of that out—and made sure I stayed on track.

Amanda also described accessing and receiving support from her teachers in terms of college preparation:

> I just think that they gave advice on what they went through—really it was--what college was like, or finding loans, or when you should apply. I remember my English teacher saying in September, you should apply early, and I was like, really, Mrs. D? I'm just getting over your summer homework, and I should be applying to college already? They were really good at giving life advice. They helped me fill out college applications and scholarship applications. I would ask them, "What do you think I should write?" They'd ask if I needed a letter of recommendation. Anything, I needed, they were super helpful.

For some participants, connections with teachers formed on a deeper level. Eve described her relationship with her Family and Consumer Science teacher, explaining that they "connected on a personal level." Eve continued, "I could talk with her about classes and personal issues with friends and boyfriends. I still see her now and then and we'll talk about how things are going." Most of the participants mentioned staying in touch in with high school teachers—four years later. Abby noted that she still has contact with her middle school English teacher. She explained, "She is one of those teachers you can talk to about anything. She's always there for you." Maggie also discussed the relationship with a teacher that endured through her college career:

> There is one teacher both my best friend and I are really close with. He and his wife are Russian Orthodox, and they had their Christmas two weeks about, and they invited us so we got to go. That was awesome.

Jack also described staying in touch with high school teachers throughout college. He stated, "I find videos on YouTube, and I'll send them to them and say, hey, this would be great for you to use for Pi Day or something." Jack explained that he recently received feedback from high school teachers on applying to med school. Moreover, Maggie identified her World Cultures teacher as "like a mom almost." She explained,

> There were certain students she nurtured a little more. It made me comfortable to talk with her about college because my mom didn't know a whole lot about the whole college process. That was really comforting to have someone who knew the process and could help me. She really cared about where I wanted to go.

Jessica described her former science teacher/softball coach as a mentor: "He cared. He taught me life skills. He actually went out of his way to help me get recruited in college. He

was more than a coach—more like a second father. Now, I help him coach." Abby volunteered the viewpoint that this support and attention could be more likely to occur in a small school setting: "I think it's unique to small schools. Teachers go out of their way to stay in touch and see what you are up to—because they know you and your family and what's going on in your life. It's personal."

Participants consistently drew a connection between the relationships they had with teachers—and the teachers' willingness to be helpful with college planning. Most participants seemed to carry this sense of teacher support with them as they progressed through college, at times seeking out feedback and advice, such as Amanda asking her high school English teacher for help with collegiate writing assignments. Almost all participants described interactions with teachers that they felt demonstrated care and concern for them and their aspirations to attend college.

4.1.3 Rigor and access to coursework

While teacher support to pursue college was conveyed by participants as a unanimous experience, they expressed more mixed reviews regarding the adequacy of high school classes in preparing them for the rigors of college-level coursework. Jessica, who was in a college preparatory track, expressed that participating in more challenging classes would have better prepared her for college coursework. She explained, "I needed more experience writing papers not just in English class, but in other classes too."

As Amanda reflected on her performance in college classes, particularly during the first semester, she noted that the "amount and rigor" of high school coursework did not prepare her for the collegiate academic experience. Four participants identified a lack of study skills. For

instance, Jessica admitted, "I think as far as preparing me to study, I was unprepared my first semester. I was clueless. I didn't know how to study in college because everything came so easy in high school." Maggie also expressed feeling ill-prepared academically:

I remember coming in my freshman year and not getting it—I didn't do well. In high school, I was used to not having to try as hard to get good grades. I feel like the teachers—especially as seniors--didn't push you that hard. They're just getting you to graduate.

An Engineering major in college, Joe expressed great frustration with a lack of science classes in his school. He explained, "My school did not offer Physics, so I had to take it online and it was a joke. You need a human to learn." Jack, a Biology major in college, attended the same school as Joe and also pointed out that the lack of a Physics class was problematic: "When I took Intro to Physics in college, I was lost—it was my worst class."

While the rigor of high school coursework was questioned, half of the participants took dual enrollment courses in high school and noted that doing so helped their progress through college requirements. Amanda transferred 15 credits to college, and upon reflection, said, "It was so nice to have that stuff already done. It took some pressure off me. The classes aligned with my general education requirements." Jack also transferred a semester's worth of credits into college, and as a result, graduated a semester early. However, he also pointed out that he ended up taking English Composition twice—once in high school and again at college because the dual enrollment credits for the class were not submitted to the college.

This misunderstanding of dual enrollment opportunities and confusion around the process for transferring credits into college was a consistent and concerning thread in participant's stories. Sam poignantly explained:

I struggled in Calculus in college. In high school, I knew there was a higher-level Calculus class, but there were only a few kids in it, and I didn't know anything about it. I don't know what the requirements were to get into the class, and I don't know if I had the option to take it. I remember finding out about the class from another kid, and I was like, "What's that class about?" I would have taken the class, and I think it would have helped me in college. I knew in my senior year I wanted to pursue Engineering, so taking that class would have been really beneficial, but no one even exposed to me the availability of the class.

Sam further explained that he did not participate in any dual enrollment courses in high school. A few additional participants admitted a lack of understanding about the utility of those credits applied to a general education college curriculum. Sam noted:

I didn't take classes that would transfer into college, although, now, I wish I would have. If someone had explained it to me, I think I would have pursued those classes. They did talk about cost, but I guess I wasn't aware you actually needed so many gen ed classes to fill slots in college. I remember thinking, I don't want to take anything I don't need, and that was what I was inferring. And that it where I crucially messed up. (Taking dual enrollment) would have made my first two years a lot easier.

Jessica echoed Sam's reluctance to take college in high school coursework, noting, "We had college in high school classes through (names two local colleges), but I didn't take any because I didn't know where I would end up in college, and I didn't want to waste the money in case they didn't transfer."

High school preparation is a critical variable in explaining the rural and non-rural differences in college enrollment patterns (Byun et al., 2012; Irvin et al., 2017), and Zinth (2014)

points out that students who participated in dual enrollment coursework are more likely than their peers to enter and graduate from college, (p. 1). The availability of dual enrollment opportunities certainly is of crucial importance to college attainment of rural youth—but so too is a sound understanding of how those college in high school credits can serve students in progressing through college curricula.

4.1.4   Guidance counseling

Most participants described a lack of assistance from guidance counselors with college planning. As Sam pondered his lack of understanding of college in high school course opportunities, he noted that a change in personnel occurred in guidance counseling while he was in senior high. He explained, "The one who was there didn't know me as an individual. I guess she was new and still adjusting She didn't know me on the personal level, which might have hurt me as well." When asked about help with college planning provided by his guidance counselor, Jack responded, "I treated her as this all-knowing resource, but that wasn't how it was . . . . I think I asked too much of her, then I was disappointed."

Maggie echoed Sam's sentiment of not understanding the role that dual enrollment courses played in fulfilling college curriculum requirements. She noted, "I didn't see my guidance counselor a whole lot during my junior and senior years. Especially my senior year. I mean (we met) once in a while to talk about my schedule but not so much as it related to going to college. She didn't ask, "Where are you going to college? What are your plans?" There wasn't much interaction."

Eve echoed this perception of guidance counseling as limited to assistance with class scheduling but not necessarily as part of a larger conversation related to college planning:

I didn't have any planned meetings where I could think about college. I can't think of any time I talked to the guidance counselor besides just scheduling classes for the next year. There were more opportunities to talk to teachers in the classroom.

Amanda held this perception of the role of her guidance counselor: "I think the guidance counselor was were there more if you were having a personal problem than career preparation or preparing you for college. I mean that seemed to be more what they were focused on—helping students in distress." Eve reflected on her experience in high school with planning for college:

I feel like I could have been helped more thinking about a major of career—because I was so undecided my senior year. I feel like I could have taken an interest inventory or something like that—it could have really helped me because I was clueless. I was scared because I knew about basic options but none seemed like a fit. It was scary because it felt like, well, you are 18, you should know what you want to do with the rest of your life.

Maggie relayed her thoughts related to help she received from her guidance counselor:

Applying to college is a process, and you have to meet certain deadlines, and there are fees involved and other things like that. Students can't keep up with that on their own, and sometimes, parents get lost in it too because it is a lot. So, I think guidance counselors should work more with students than mine did.

College planning has long been considered a part of high school counseling, and increasingly states and school districts are emphasizing college and career exploration and readiness. However, it is possible that, given the varied and multiple roles guidance counselors are expected to play, college preparation may not be prioritized within a given school setting.

Moreover, it is possible guidance counselors in rural settings may be faced with additional barriers. Morrison (2011) noted that rural guidance counselors are challenged by understaffing and the unavailability of community mental health services--and are less likely to hold proper credentials (p. 28).

4.1.5 Financial planning for college

Certainly, financial planning is a vital component to accessing and persisting through college. However, some study participants, particularly those who identified as first-generation, described experiencing challenges related to navigating financial aid. Jessica, one of the five first-generation students in the study, stated:

> It was a struggle figuring out financial aid. My teachers did help some, and my guidance counselor did talk about aid and the FAFSA, but I needed more in high school. Maybe if someone could have helped me fill out the forms and walk me through it. I did it by myself, and I was lost.

> Maggie, also first generation, described the extent of her fear related to paying for college:

> Money was tight, and I knew my mom couldn't really help even for books, like a lot of other students are able to do with their families. I was really scared because I didn't know what I would do. Once I figured out that there are programs out there, and the state is willing to help, I knew I could make it work. But at first (while in high school), I didn't understand and it was really scary and disheartening. I was like, "I'm 18, and I

have to pay for this myself?" I was under the impression I had to pay for it at the start. So, I was scared to death.

Sam, another first-generation participant, expressed frustration at navigating the financial aid process:

My biggest challenge was figuring out financial aid. It was really hard. The process isn't very user-friendly, and I think I knew less because I was the first in my family to go to college. All these passwords and sites you have to go through. I missed my state grants for my second and third semesters because we didn't fill out forms correctly. It's horrible. Even after four years, we are still lost. It's something that never just comes to you. And my parents are frustrated. My dad, since he was the one who filled out paperwork, was on the phone all of the time trying to figure things out. It helped that he stuck it out.

Jack, also a first-generation college student, acknowledged the help of teachers with financial preparation:

My teachers were very supportive—actually helping me fill out my FASA, my registration, everything. They did a lot more than my guidance counselor. My mom—she never did any of that stuff so she didn't know anything, so I pretty much had to go my teachers. We actually spent a day in my Anatomy class when we all filled out our FAFSAs in her class. Really nice. Financial aid makes me nervous.

Sadly, families of students who are eligible for financial aid are least likely to be aware of financial aid options, and low-income and first-generation students are more likely to lack essential information about financial aid information. The first-generation students in this study

seemed to struggle more significantly with the maze of college financial aid than those who are not first-generation; however, most students expressed some level of frustration and information deficit.

4.1.6   Teacher retention

A noteworthy trend emerged among participants who attended the schools with the fewest students.   These three participants noted a likelihood for teachers to stay only briefly-- particularly those who did not grow up in the area.   The schools of these participants had approximately 35 to 30 students per grade.   Joe explained, "My math teacher was very good but ending up leaving for a better job elsewhere. She left because it was too far for her to drive, and she got more money to go."   Emma revealed that she and her friends had a name for this phenomenon: "We called ourselves a starter school, where if you are teacher who just got your degree, you might end up at our school for a year, maybe, and then get out."   When asked if the starter school notion was common knowledge among the students, Emma became tearful as she described her disappointment with the departure of her music teacher:

> Yeah, we knew. There were some teachers we knew weren't going to stay—like a Music teacher who I absolutely loved came in my senior year and then left that same year. We knew she wasn't going stay. She was too ambitious for us. Our band was like 30 people max—and that was 7th through 12th grade. And so, she couldn't handle how small we were. She wanted more, but we just couldn't give her that.

Gagnon and Mattingly (2012) found that remote towns and rural school districts, along with large cities, have higher percentages of beginning teachers (p. 2). The researchers further

noted that this higher rate of beginning teachers could be connected with a high rate of teacher turnover as well as teacher quality issues.

The issue of teacher turnover was not raised among participants whose schools had over 50 students per grade. In fact, Maggie noted that most of her teachers had grown up in the area. She stated, "They grew up there and came back or were people who stayed. We had a few, but not very many, teachers who came from outside the area. A lot of teachers had been there for years." Both Tessa and Sam also pointed out that many of their teachers actually started as students in the school district—or in a neighboring community.

4.1.7   Teacher messages: Stay, leave, or return?

As previously discussed, the outmigration of rural youth poses complex implications for rural communities and families. The messages communicated by teachers regarding staying or leaving their rural communities can play a critical role in the ways youth envision their futures (Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Petrin et al., 2014).   Eve explained, " It wasn't communicated we needed to leave. It was communicated that there are plenty of options—lots of colleges and universities to go to. I decided to stay more locally because it was close to home, and that was important to me." When asked how her teachers discussed staying or leaving the area after graduation, Abby connected the idea that many of her teachers grew up in her community, so "they were never like, you have to leave in order to be successful." Abby also made this connection, explaining, "(My teachers) stayed in the area so they didn't say—oh, you have to leave in order to be a success."

While Carr and Kefalas (2009) found that teachers encouraged leaving among students categorized as Achievers (students perceived as college-bound), only two students in this study

noted teacher messages to leave the community to find success. Jack noted his computer science teacher who said, "You can't just stay here. She still knows all the kids personally and what staying in Riverdale kind of does. It can be rough." Emma perceived messages related to staying or leaving the community as dependent upon the teacher's background:

> The teachers who grew up in Sylvan County tended not to talk about the need to leave, but teachers who moved into the area tended to think you needed to get out because being stuck in such a small place, you don't have the opportunities you would have elsewhere—and they got to experience them while the people who grew up here kind of see staying here as continuing a tradition.

A few participants noted that while their teachers did not communicate the need to leave to find success, they did receive that message from other sources. Jessica noted that she heard that message from college professors, noting,

> More in college, I would hear from professors: "Hey, why did you stick around here? You need to experience greater diversity and have different experiences." But because I am so family oriented, you know, it held me back and I want to stay around here.

Amanda felt pressure from her peers to leave the area:

> I think there is a stigma—I know other kids felt like they needed to go. You know, small town Hopedale, there's not a lot here. There aren't a lot of opportunities. I think that is what a lot of kids felt. It was almost stigmatized by my peers if you decided to stay. It was like, "oh, you're just staying here?" I even felt that by going to a local university because it was like everyone goes there. It didn't come from the teachers—more from other students.

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Participants in this study experienced teacher messaging more consistent with the findings of Petrin, Schafft, and Meece's (2012) study wherein college-bound students were encouraged to consider returning to the community after acquiring higher education and experiences so that they may contribute to their hometowns. Jessica seemed to recognize the value of returning to her area where she grew up:

> I think people are quick to look past all of the good things in the area—like the medical research center. I think people tend to miss the good stuff. They focus on getting out of here. But I think it would be good if they stayed and tried to improve the area. I think we need more people willing to give back to their community.

This encouragement to return was echoed by Jack, who described the advice of his Biology teacher:

> She was like you gotta leave this area pretty much. You can come back once you get established but you gotta leave and you gotta get some higher education. She saw potential in me, I felt like, and she said you gotta go and do something, then you can come back. Make sure you get a degree.

Interestingly, Amanda's teachers emphasized the positives about growing up in their rural community when discussing staying or leaving:

> I wouldn't say teachers said we had to leave Sylvan County. They always said, if you do decide to leave, remember your roots, remember what you came from. That we had a good start, a good foundation, remember what we taught you and carry it with you where life takes you.

4.2   A DESCRIPTION OF RURAL FAMILY INFLUENCES

Arnold et al.'s (2012) Ecology of College Readiness emphasizes the role of the individual's environment in shaping college readiness, and specifically influencing one's microsystem, which contains school and family are primary forces. Arnold et al. (2012) explained, "High academic aspirations, for example, may result from family and school experiences while also driving student decision and behaviors that affect subsequent experiences" (p. 19). This section reviews study participants' experiences and interactions with family members related to college decision-making and experiences and represents responses to research question two: *How did family experiences impact persistence to college graduation?*

4.2.1   Family support & college-going messages

Nine study participants described their parents as "very supportive" of their college pursuits, with one participant, Maggie, describing her mother as "somewhat supportive." Maggie noted that as she moved through her college career, her mother became "very supportive," explaining that her status as first-generation accompanied by financial concerns could have contributed to her mother not engaging in conversations about college as she was growing up. Maggie explained, "I think my mom assumed I had my stuff together (in high school). It would have been nice to have her more involved."

While participants seemed to carry with them a strong sense of parental support as they entered and progressed through college, fewer than half conveyed participating in regular and specific conversations related to college aspirations and preparation. Four participants expressed a sense that they always knew they would go to college—all four with one or more parent who

graduated from a two- or four-year college. Two of those participants, Joe and Tessa, explained that their parents talked to them from an early age about going to college. Joe noted, "It was not an option not to go to college. I always felt the expectations to go to college. We always talked about it growing up." Tessa described a similar sentiment: "We would often have conversations—it was always in the plan for me to go to college."

On the other hand, Amanda explained that she decided for herself early on that she wanted to go to college. Perhaps observing her mother finish a four-year degree as she was growing up influenced her own decision. However, Amanda pointed out, "My whole family supported whether I wanted to go to college or take a different path." Support for college or an alternative pathway for education or a career was a consistent theme in most participants' stories. Sam, who is first-generation, stated,

> I think my parents more or less sat me down to get a feeling of what I wanted to do after school. They didn't say I had to go. I joined the Marine Corps Reserves for a year, then decided to go to college. My parents let me decide about going. I was interested in being a railroad engineer, but at the time people were being laid off because the economy was sluggish. My parents helped me talk through it.

Jessica also described feeling parental support for choosing to pursue college—or to choose an alternate path, pointing out that her dad is carpenter, and that the family is aware you can earn a living through other routes than pursuing a four year-degree. Jack, a first-generation student, also described a lack of family emphasis on the need to go to college:

> I think my stepfather would have liked it if I would have done a trade because he doesn't think I have as much common sense. Other than that, I did my own thing. They really didn't know what to do or say. They knew that I wanted to do higher education. I was in

the gifted program, so they knew I wanted to do it. It was never like, hey, do you want to

go? So, no conversations about what it might be like, and hey, you need to fill out these

forms? None of that.

On the other hand, Abby, who was one of the four participants who felt she always knew

she would go to college, explained that a four-year degree was a more likely pathway to job

opportunities, especially within Sylvan County. She observed, "There are not a whole lot of

opportunities around you can pursue without going to college—especially for women. The coal

mine is dying but still, welding and those fields are more available around home." `

It seemed that for some participants, clear and consistent encouragement and information

to access college was more likely to emanate from teachers than family members. As previously

noted, prior research established a connection between the amount of parental discussion about

college plans and actual college attainment of children. While familial messages surrounding

college aspirations may not have been as strong as within participants' school experiences, they

unequivocally felt their parents supported their college and career choices. So, while

encouragement to pursue college may not have been overt and informative, participants did not

seem constrained by families in their decision-making process.

However, one possible constraining aspect of participants' family experience could be

connected to the students' decision to pursue a regional college. Jessica explained:

My parents pushed me away from majoring in marine biology in a college down south.

They said we won't ever get to see you—only Christmas. They didn't push me—they

helped me see I wouldn't be as happy farther from home. They thought I wouldn't be

happy outside my comfort zone.

Jack described his sense of family obligations as key to choosing a local college:

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I was worried about my mom. I would tell her, I will be fine. I'll only be an hour away, and I will come back. I can't count on both hands the Saturdays I have spent on campus. I want to go home and make sure everything is in order.

In fact, most participants expressed that they chose to attend a local college because of their connections to their families. Moreover, half of the participants commuted all four years of their college career. Of the remaining half who lived on campus, three lived on campus all four years and two of them went home every weekend. Two participants lived on campus only one year and commuted for the rest. In other words, only one student lived on campus and went home only occasionally. Abby explained her decision to commute: "I've always commuted. My parents wanted me to commute. I am paying for it myself. Parents wanted me to get cheapest but best experience. They like having me home. And I like being at home."

This sense of familial attachment is highlighted consistently in the literature as a characteristic of rural communities, which holds true for the experiences of this study's participants. While youth in this study did not forfeit educational opportunities, they did seem to choose to attend local NEU and commute or make frequent trips home because of family ties. Amanda declared, "Being with my family is at the top of my list. I've always been that way.

4.2.2 Longevity of families in rural communities

For some, returning home is important in order to contribute to the family's economic stability. Amanda commuted in part because of the necessity of her contribution to working on the family farm, which included some mornings waking at 4:00 a.m. to work in the barn, then driving 50 minutes one-way to campus. Amanda attributed her work ethic to her family, and she noted, "My parents have always said buckle down and get it done—whether it was farming chores or

anything else. Keep grinding." Joe also commutes--for him it is an hour and 15 minute drive. He too works occasionally on his grandfather's farm.

Both Amanda and Joe described families who have lived in on the same property for multiple generations. Amanda's family farm has existed for 250 years, and Joe traced his paternal side of the family to settling on their property in the 1840's. In fact, most participants described families living in their rural communities—or nearby areas—for multiple generations. All participants have grandparents in the area; none of their nuclear families moved into the area.

4.2.3   Family messages related to staying or leaving the rural community

Looker and Naylor (2009) consistently found that participants choosing to remain in a rural area after high school attributed their choice to family connections. In the case of this study's participants, rural youth chose to attend college and are hoping to return to their rural communities to live post-graduation largely because of attachment to family. When asked if their families felt as though the youth could find success by living in their home communities after college graduation, most participants agreed their families believed doing so was possible. Most participants also expressed a belief that parents would prefer they lived in the area. Eve described her parents' perspective:

> They think I can reach my goals by staying in the area. I tell them that once I graduate, I would like to move to (a city 80 miles away) and they think I am crazy, but I love it there. I think because I am the older, the first born—and they think the city is scary—big and dirty. There is more opportunity than good old Sylvan County—there's not much to offer here anymore. I know my plan could change but . . . . My parents would prefer me to live closer to them.

Tessa, like most of the study's participants, wished to return home to live. She conveyed, "My parents do think I can reach my goals if I return home. They know I have always been wanting to stay in the area." Abby's parents also believed she could reach her career aspirations if she stayed in the area. In fact, Abby received an accounting job offer prior to graduating that would allow her to live in the community where she was raised. She further explained that she and her boyfriend and wish to build a home and raise children in the area.

Some participants articulated trepidation about finding work near their rural communities. Jessica explained:

> My parents know finding a teaching job in the area right away might be tight. They are supportive of me leaving the area but would like me to come back eventually. And that's what I would like to do. Moving far away is not an option.

Sam also described a conflict between finding suitable work and his and his family's wish to remain in the area:

> I know they'd probably like to see me stay. My mom encourages me to look for jobs outside the area too. I know I need to find a job, so I may need to look somewhere else—that's the main thing—finding a job, making enough money to be comfortable.

In summary, study participants—and their families—would prefer to remain in their rural communities. However, most articulated the need to find gainful employment as a priority—even at the cost of leaving the county. Moving away, however, for all would mean settling well within a few hours driving distance.

Emma described the conflict of maintaining the family and community ties and making a living: "I want to find a way to make it work, but I also want to have the small town experience I grew up with—being close to family and the people you care about without losing career

success." Not only do rural youth and their families experience turmoil over making these difficult decisions linked to staying or leaving, but rural communities across the country, Sylvan County included, are faced with the economic and social challenges resulting from youth outmigration. Brown and Schafft (2011) emphasized, "Rural net out-migration at young adult ages was highly selective of the better educated individuals," resulting in the so-called brain drain afflicting rural communities (p. 115).

4.2.4   Participant intentions to leave or return

So, how do these complex forces influence participants' desire to return to their rural communities or strike out in quest of employment? Seven participants articulated a desire to return to their hometown or county, and Jack and Sam explained that if they did move away, they wished to live in a rural area similar to where they grew up. Jack considered his options:

> It's tough because my hometown really needs a doctor, so they are all the time saying, "So you will come back and do medicine here?" And I'm like, I don't know. I would like to practice in a rural area. That is my ultimate dream. I am drawn to the beauty of the area. The woods and the rivers . . . and so wherever I go, it will need to look like Sylvan County.

> Sam shared similar thoughts:

> If I could get the railroad job in the area—that would be my preference to stay. I enjoy the area. I know it is better than a lot of other places out there. I don't want to move to the city. I am staying away from jobs in (a city 80 miles from his hometown). That type of environment is not for me. I like to have my own space. Growing up here--it's what

you want. I couldn't even live in a small town. I need to be in the country—have your big yard where you can do your own thing. That's just a part of me—and that's hard to change.

Nine participants described their experience growing up in their rural community as positive, with one participant explaining the experience was both positive and negative. Furthermore, few participants articulated a desire to return home to contribute to the community that gave to them. Jessica, who while in college, returned to her high school softball team to help coach explained:

I love my community. They were so supportive. Growing up, I would have random people come up to me say that they saw my name in the newspaper, or they would hand me a newspaper clipping that I was in. I knew my community supported me—not just on the athletic field or in the gym—academically too. They would say, "I saw you on the honor roll." It such a small town that everyone knows everyone else—but it felt good—and I'd like to continue to be a part of that.

This idea of the importance of returning to contribute to one's home community is consistent with Petrin et al.'s (2104) findings that when adults in their study did encourage outmigration of "Achievers," they did so accompanied by the message that youth ultimately should return to the community after acquiring higher education and skills. It is possible that this study's participants absorbed messages of this manner communicated by families and teachers. Tessa also wishes to give back to the community where she was raised:

I do want to return to home to live and work after graduation. I feel almost an obligation to give back to the community—that's important to me. I always volunteered and was involved in sports, and I got a scholarship from the community so I have a strong

connection. So, I feel it's important to give back—and what better way than to teach? I think it would be great for students to see someone in the area be successful and come back—that was my experience. You don't have to be that person who goes far away— you can be successful if you stay.

Finally, Amanda expressed a positive experience in school and a strong attachment to family as well as a connection to community as she reflected upon the reasons she wishes to return to the farm in Sylvan County where she grew up:

I grew up beside my grandparents my whole life, my uncle is right down the road. I don't know what it would be like to go home and not be able to talk to my gram next door. I had a good experience growing up, and I would be happy to send my kids to the school I went to. And my experience in the community was definitely positive. In the community and school district, they promote a positive, can-do attitude—a tenacity and resilience. They know it is in you. And they did what they could to bring it out of you.

4.3   CONCLUSION

This study employed Arnold et al.'s (2012) model for Ecology of College Readiness, focusing on participant microsystems, and specifically on family and school influences relative to accessing and persisting through a four-year college. Participants had much to relate regarding their perceptions of schooling, emphasizing the ways in which they benefitted from teacher encouragement and support to attend college. On the other hand, they de-emphasized the role guidance counselors played in supporting college planning, and conveyed the sense that

coursework rigor, dual enrollment access, and financial planning were lacking. They also mused about ways these aspects could have been more beneficial to their efforts to access and persist through college. Overall, however, the participants shared a positive perspective on their rural school experiences, enjoying the small size, personalized attention, and connections to peers and teachers.

In terms of family influence, strong connections emerged in participant stories. While messaging regarding accessing college did not seem as strong and informative within families as in school, participants' clearly felt supported by parents to attend college—and, in most cases, to pursue other higher education and/or career paths if they chose to do so. While the intention to return to home communities to work and live was very strong, a sense of conflict was apparent with some participants as they expressed concern about finding viable employment in their rural spaces. Detailed discussion of the implications of these findings will occur in Chapter Five.

5.0   DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study supplements current research on the rural experience, and specifically contributes to an improved understanding of rural youth aspirations and persistence through higher education. Establishing the rural experience as a distinct social and cultural category should allow for the creation of tailored responses to meet the needs of rural youth, their families, and their communities. Perhaps in doing so, the deficit perspective related to being and living rural that can be found both in research literature and in mass media can shift to reveal the true benefits and challenges accompanying today's experience of rural life. Furthermore, college completion rates in the United States are far from desirable—and as more rural youth access higher education, we must search for ways to increase the likelihood of retaining this unique category of students. Finally, if rural communities are to survive in the 21st Century, we must look for ways to support our young people—particularly those whose attachment to family and community contribute to their desire to live and work in the same spaces of their youth. This chapter further discusses findings of particular interest as they relate to current policies and practices that affect rural youth. Chapter Five also offers recommendations to support rural youth, their families, and their communities.

5.1 KEY FINDINGS

Utilizing Arnold et al. (2012)'s Ecology of College Readiness, this research study investigated participants' perceptions of family and school influences on accessing and persisting through college. The study's findings reveal the stories of participants as they reflected upon their journeys within their families, schools, and communities—and the influence of these dynamics on persisting through college. The participants overwhelmingly conveyed a positive perception of their school experiences, highlighting the connections they felt with peers and school personnel and the attention they received in the classroom. School size primarily was viewed as positive, with some participants noting the drawbacks to everyone knowing everyone else. School size was connected to another, more concerning theme with the smallest schools within the county. Participants reflected negatively upon teacher retention, highlighting a tendency for new teachers to stay only a year or two in order to pursue better opportunities elsewhere. Participants also described dissatisfaction with access to rigorous coursework as they considered their readiness for college-level academics—particularly for college math and science.

Despite these drawbacks, participants largely regarded teacher interactions as positive. Most participants felt very supported by their rural teachers generally—and specifically for attending college. They described receiving consistent and varied messages from teachers to attend college. Some youth described personalized help to complete college applications, and a few participants described receiving detailed information from teachers related to financial aid. The connection with teachers ran deep with most of the participants in the study, evidenced by meaningful interactions that continued while participants were in college.

While teacher support related to accessing and succeeding in college was communicated, a theme emerged within participants' stories revealing less satisfaction with guidance counseling

at their high schools. Participants described little interaction with guidance counselors around the topics of accessing college, majors and coursework, and financial aid. In fact, a pattern emerged among some participants, representing a lack of comprehension related to taking college in high school credits, including a deficit in understanding the benefits of doing so. Misunderstanding of dual enrollment opportunities and confusion related to financial aid were more likely reported by the five first-generation students within the study.

Most participants did not describe hearing teacher messages that encouraged leaving Sylvan County in order to find success. In fact, most participants noted feeling encouraged to leave to earn an education but to return to the county to live and work. A few participants pointed out that they felt as though the message to leave the county was not conveyed because of many of their teachers grew up in the community and chose to return to work and raise families in their hometowns.

Rural youth in the study also tended to view family interactions as positive and conducive to accessing and persisting through college. While a few participants noted hearing encouraging messages to attend college from an early age, most participants describe a lack of specifics from parents regarding college aspirations. One reason for this phenomenon could be because 50% of participants were first-generation college students, and parents may simply have lacked information regarding college-going. While all participants felt supported by parents, they revealed that parental support would have been extended regardless if the individual chose to pursue college or an alternative education or career path.

A strong sense of family attachment predominated the stories of every participant. Connection to family could be a reason that half of the participants chose to commute to college, with two more individuals going home every weekend. Only one participant might have had

what some college officials would describe as a "real college experience"—living on campus all four years and going home only occasionally. A narrative of encouragement was conveyed in participants' households; at the same time, it is possible to construe threads of constraint present in parents' messages related to youth choosing to attend a local college, to live at home while doing so, and/or to come home on weekends. It is important to note while some might view these parental influences as limiting to the youth, others, including this study's participants, view this influence as a product of parental love and regard. All participants placed high importance on maintaining close relationships with parents.

In summary, family and school influences predominated the microsystems of youth as they envisioned their futures, and Sylvan County youth, poised to graduate from Northeast University, categorized their experiences as positive. Study participants seemed to prosper as a result of social capital afforded them through interactions their communities, families, and schools in terms of their ability to access and persist through college. Byun, et al. (2012) emphasized the availability and quality of social resources within rural communities—an aspect of rural life that should be celebrated and cultivated.

5.2   STUDY IMPLICATIONS

This study's findings could have important implications for rural youth and their families when considered in concert with the larger body of research related to rural youth persisting through college. Byun et al. (2012) noted that a gap exists in prior research related to the features of rural communities that could be conducive to college enrollment and degree attainment. Findings from this study could inform further research and practices designed to enhance college

readiness and graduation rates of rural youth. In particular, participant stories highlight the value of maximizing rural youth interactions with family, school, and community.

5.2.1 Rural schooling implications and recommendations

As previously discussed, interactions occurring within the school setting influence the ways in which youth construct their identities; therefore, care should be taken to ensure teachers and guidance counselors engage in narratives of encouragement with students for whom higher education is appropriate. However, an environment that builds self-confidence among college-going students is insufficient. Rural school systems also must provide access to rigorous coursework and ensure that accurate and timely information is conveyed to students and their families that may be utilized to increase college-going preparedness.

Youth in this study noted an inadequacy in the availability of some science courses and experienced a disadvantage when matriculating into college to pursue STEM majors. A 2017 College Board and Education Commission of the States reports declared, "Rural schools face many of the same challenges as inner city schools—poverty, overcrowding, limited resources— as well as additional obstacles unique to rural areas" (p. 1). These forces result in diminished accelerated learning options to take college in high school courses, such as dual enrollment and Advanced Placement (AP) coursework. As noted, rural schools, including participant schools in Sylvan County, are less likely than urban and suburban counterparts to offer AP coursework. Furthermore, dual enrollment opportunities, although available, varied in number and topic from school to school in Sylvan County. While online technology holds promise, as one participant pointed out in the case of his online Physics course, quality of content and instruction can be

compromised. Moreover, policy makers should take action to ensure that broadband technology reaches even the most remote school districts.

Barnett and Stamm (2010) noted in a dual enrollment report for Blackboard Institute that little is known about the scope of dual enrollment—nor of student outcomes. More research is necessary to understand current benefits and challenges of online dual enrollment opportunities. In addition, it is worthwhile to investigate the utility of county-wide partnerships with rural schools and local colleges so that students within the county could access courses at partner schools not offered at their home school. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), twenty-one rural school districts within the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC) are partnering in this manner. Using public and private grants as well as state funding, OAC connects teachers with peers to increase the number of advanced classes across the partnership— and to engage in efforts to improve teacher retention. Collaborative efforts of this nature can be useful in maximizing and connecting rural school resources.

While dual enrollment opportunities were more available than AP coursework in this study, some participants did not access the courses because of self-perceptions that they were inferior candidates to take the classes and/or because of misunderstanding of both the benefits and logistics of transferring college in high school credits. Accumulating dual enrollment credits holds great advantages for students, including financial benefits. Participating in college in high school courses can be an important route through which underrepresented college students access college and make a successful transition once on campus. One participant in this research study accumulated a semester's worth of credits, allowing him to graduate a semester early. Entering college with credits also provides a cushion in case a student needs to withdraw from a class here and there; the transferred credits can facilitate on-time graduation despite reduced credit loads

within the student's college career, and at the same time, alleviate student anxiety, which also can threaten persistence. The financial implications of not graduating in four years are significant; unfortunately, according to the 2011 Department of Education's Schools and Staffing Survey, rural student on-time graduation rates trailed behind suburban and urban peers. Therefore, access to dual enrollment could be a vital component of rural student success in college.

Importantly, Barnett and Stamm (2010) pointed out that state policies and programs often determine the extent to which a school district's dual enrollment program succeeds. Furthermore, a 2016 Education Commission of the States report on dual enrollment emphasized the critical role that high school counseling plays both in maximizing student success and in understanding the connection to college coursework. The Commission provided a 50-state comparison of dual enrollment counseling and reported that only "22 states specify that prospective or currently dually-enrollments students and their parents be provided with counseling about program participation" (p. 1). Pennsylvania is one of the 28 states not requiring dual enrollment counseling. The absence of counseling related to not only college in high school coursework--but also for college financial planning—has significant ramifications for students, including this study's participants. All states should not only require schools to offer both dual enrollment and basic financial aid counseling but also should provide appropriate training to guidance counselors and teachers.

However, reliable and timely college planning information may be compromised by the limitations experienced by rural school guidance counselors. Unfortunately, prior research has revealed an overburdening of rural school guidance counselors that could prevent them from engaging in appropriate college preparation conversations with students. Indeed, this study's

participants perceived their guidance counselors' role to be limited to intervening with at-risk students and course scheduling—and in a manner disconnected from the individual's college aspirations. Morrison (2011) argued that rural communities tend to lack community resources, requiring guidance counselors to fill the gap; likewise, the researcher notes that rural schools tended to be grossly understaffed. Increasing guidance counseling by high school personnel is one solution—albeit not likely given limited funding.

Not only should we look to high schools for solutions, but institutions of higher education also hold a vital stake and responsibility in filling this gap. Anton (2015) encouraged "higher education leaders (to) consider what types of activities or experiences would warrant the creation of a mutually beneficial partnership within a rural school" (p. 3). Colleges should collaborate with county and/or regional high schools within partnerships to play a pivotal role in providing financial aid and academic counseling. Anton (2015) suggested sponsoring classes of rural students to visit a college campus for a day to bolster college-going aspirations and to hear vital information related to accessing and persisting through college. However, higher education personnel also should look beyond the boundaries of campus to engage with prospective rural college students—particularly those who live within relatively close proximity of the college. College personnel could visit with local high school freshmen and sophomores to engage during daytime hours and with families in the evening. These college representatives should expand to include not just admissions counselors, but also financial aid, student affairs and academic success staff—as well as professors and any other campus constituents willing to share college planning information.

Finally, community members who are alumni of local high schools—and of the regional college—could serve as powerful ambassadors. Alleman and Holly (2013) engaged in a case

study of six small rural school districts in Virginia and revealed that the participation of community members supported preparation and aspirations for post-secondary education among students. In the study, community organizations such as 4-H, church, and civic groups helped students complete the FAFSA, and community partners advised students about college and career options. Community members supplemented school personnel efforts by engaging with rural youth in multiple and meaningful contacts focused on college preparation. Alleman and Holly (2013) concluded, "In several of the school districts, the accumulated and combined efforts of school and community stakeholders did create a palpable sense that education was high priority and supported across the community" (p. 5).

Strong community and family bonds served to influence study participants to return to their home communities to live and work. Re-integration into rural areas after migration can result in positive outcomes for rural communities, including an increase in population base and human capital investment resulting from education and/or job experiences procured post-migration. In fact, both in the United States and abroad, attracting rural returners is recognized as a valuable aspect of sustaining a community's livelihood. In their study of American rural "brain drain," Petrin et al. (2014), explained, "Our qualitative data suggest that many educators and rural community members understand that preventing the "hollowing out" of rural communities is not necessarily a matter of keeping kids on the farm," but rather of ensuring that rural youth have the opportunity to gain skills, education, training and resources outside the community that they might ultimately bring back with them" (Farmer et al., 2006, p. 323).

It was clear that most study participants wished to return to their communities, and they felt supported by teachers and families to do so. Also clear was a sense of anxiety resulting from feeling ambivalent about finding employment consistent with their new credential of a college

degree. In particular, three students who are seeking teaching jobs expressed concern about their job prospects. The same partnerships recommended to increase college preparedness among rural youth could promote dialogue related to youth envisioning viable futures in rural spaces. Rural students can gain exposure to regional businesses and organizations who hire college-educated employees. Schafft (2016) emphasized that schools "represent a critical facet of rural community economic development, social well-being, and community sustainability" (p. 9), and argued for local, state, and national policy to consider the vital connection between rural education and rural development.

Carr and Kefalas (2009) highlighted the Home Town Competitiveness (HTC) program, developed in 2002, as an example of "economic gardening" designed to counter demographic shifts in population and economic decline in rural communities in America's heartland. The program is a joint effort among the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in Lincoln, Nebraska, the Nebraska Community Foundation, and the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. With the overarching goal of "increasing the capacity of residents to improve and sustain their community," RTC focused on four aspects of development: leadership, youth, entrepreneurship, and charitable assets (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 156). As Carr and Kefalas (2009) noted, "The youth pillar is designed to 'support and enhance the ideas of adults and youth working together to create opportunities for youth to stay in or return to the community'" (p. 156). HTC conducted surveys with youth in local communities, collecting information of youth intentions and perceptions of their communities. In 2018, HTC consultants continue to work with community and education leaders to develop strategies to encourage youth to stay or to return home after college. HTC receives support largely from private foundations as well as the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), housed within the University of Iowa. Federal and state

representatives should engage with RUPRI to develop policy and expand programs such as HTC to reach rural spaces across the United States.

5.2.2   Rural family implications and recommendations

Study participants unanimously conveyed a sense of family support for attending college. At the same time, most of the participants said that their parents would have supported them if they would have chosen to pursue a different route. Only two participants articulated that college was always in the plans for them—and that college-going messages were communicated from an early age. Obviously, student participants matriculated into college and graduated, but a question arises: Are there other capable rural youth who do not opt to pursue college because of a lack of emphasis in the home? Further research is needed to parse through family influences; it is important to investigate the family and school experiences of qualified rural youth who did not attend college or who dropped out of college. In other words, more research is required to understand family barriers to post-secondary aspirations and persistence.

This study also revealed a lack of specifics related to college preparation and expectations conveyed through conversations with parents. It is possible participants accumulated adequate social capital to access and persist through college through school interactions and other means. Importantly, half of participants were first-generation college students. It is well-documented that youth whose parents did not attend college are less likely to pursue college themselves. The dynamic of first-generation status could have served as a more powerful variable than rural status in inadequate familial college-going messages. For the most part, parents did not seem to play an enhancing role in accessing and understanding dual enrollment opportunities nor in financial literacy related to college.

While these dynamics did not interfere with persistence to graduation among participants, it is likely the individuals would have experienced less stress in the college transition if their experiences were different. Irvin et al. (2012) advocated for targeted efforts to help rural youth overcome barriers and pursue their postsecondary education goals. The researchers (2012) noted, "Our results indicated that particular rural youth may need additional efforts (e.g., counseling) in order to appropriately address the educational barriers they may encounter" (p. 83). As previously discussed, overburdening of rural guidance counselors might interfere with this kind of targeted intervention. As with previous recommendations, it is warranted that we turn to higher education and rural communities to supplement the efforts of local schools.

Irvin et al. (2012) recommended career and college mentoring by college students, an idea that holds promise. Peer mentoring and tutoring programs routinely are offered on college campuses; extending the model into regional schools could benefit rural youth and families as well as the paraprofessionals themselves, especially prospective rural teachers. Moreover, Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless (2001) argued, "Despite the key role of families in promoting their children's academic success, families are generally left out of the mix of strategies proposed to strengthen American's human capital resources" (p. 61). Schools should engage more actively parents and guardians as a part of ongoing conversations related to college planning. Parents of rural youth, and especially of first-generation and lower SES students, should feel empowered to join these discussions.   Regular correspondence and invitations for meetings should start in middle school to help families understand how they can nurture educational aspirations. Schools and institutions of higher learning should arm parents with an informed understanding of how college "works," including the connection between high school and college coursework as well

as the details associated with financing a college education. State and local educational policy and resources must support school's investments in building family capacity.

5.3   CONCLUSION

This research study sought to represent the lived experiences of rural youth, including family and high school influences on college-going aspirations and persist to graduation. The findings revealed rural schools and families rich in support for their youth, and the participants, for the most part, described experiences inconsistent with a deficit perspective. Rather, they valued their interactions within their families and within the school setting. At the same time, participants conveyed a sense of disappointment and disadvantage with some aspects of college preparation—especially with dual enrollment and financial literacy.

Prior research emphasized the close-knit nature of rural communities, school, and families, which study participants noted consistently throughout their responses. The human bonds found in rural spaces can serve as a strong foundation to further build the capacity within schools and family to communicate accurate and timely college planning information to youth—and to identify barriers to accessing a college education. Likewise, collaborations among rural communities, schools, families, and higher education institutions can bridge the gap between youth education and rural community economic development. These partnerships can function to develop and deliver tailored strategies that appreciate and maximize local rural resources. Moreover, rural education policy should allow for appropriate funding and training to support these localized, asset-based efforts. Efforts of this nature, while complex and challenging, are

worthwhile to support rural youth in their quest to achieve fulfilled lives—and to enhance the sustainability of our nation's rural communities.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Name (alias)	Gender	Years of Commuting	Major	Community/ High School	Grade Size	First-Generation
Abby	F	4	Accounting	Shadyville	25	No
Joe	M	4	Engineering	Riverdale	32	No
Emma	F	0	Writing	Sycamore	25	No
Jack	M	0	Biology	Riverdale	32	Yes
Maggie	F	1	Justice Administration	Hillston	85	Yes
Jessica	F	4	Biology	Hillston	85	Yes
Sam	M	3	Engineering	Sylvanwood	50	Yes
Tessa	F	0	Education	Mapleton	80	No
Eve	F	4	Education	Oakton	95	Yes
Amanda	F	4	Education	Mapleton	80	No

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Script
Thank you so much for your participation today. As I described to you in our previous communication, I am a student in the EdD program. I am conducting this research study to learn more about how Sylvan County youth perceive the influences of family and school experiences on their ability to graduate from Northeastern University. To gather this information, I am interviewing NEU students who have applied for graduation for fall 2017 or spring 2018 and who attended rural schools within Sylvan County. This interview will take approximately 45 minutes. I would like your permission to record this interview so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to stop the recording or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you. However, please know that your involvement is very much appreciated in my quest to give voice to the experiences of rural youth. Your responses are confidential and responses will be secured. Your research/data may be shared with investigators conducting other research; however, this information will be shared in a de-identified manner (without identifiers). Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this project at any time. I can be reached through email at_____or by phone at _____. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission, we will being the interview.

Demographic questions *(interviewer completes based upon participant's spoken response)*

Hometown: _____ School: _____Gender: _____

Graduation Date: _____

Can you tell me about how you made the decision to go to college?

School Influences

I would like to talk about your experiences in high school.

Think back to your experiences in junior and senior high school—both the positive and negative aspects. How would you describe your experiences as a student at _____ school? Can you think of a positive and a negative incident or relationship that helps demonstrate how you felt at the time?

How would you rate the support from your teachers to attend college? (Will show participants the following scale, reading each category and asking them to choose a category which best represents the overall support of their teachers:

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unsupportive	Somewhat Unsupportive	Neither Unsupportive or Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Very Supportive

Please explain and provide examples.

       Follow-up: Did you stay in communication with any of your teachers while in college?

What kind of messages did you hear from your teachers about leaving Sylvan County to pursue your academic and career goals?

Did anyone from your school serve as a mentor for you? If yes, who?

       Follow-Up: Did you stay in communication with your mentor while in college?

Do you think your teachers prepared you for success in college? Can you please explain how they did or didn't help you?

Do you think the coursework you took in high school prepared you for success in college? Can you please explain how the courses helped you succeed or didn't (help you succeed)?

       Follow-up: Were honors, AP classes, and/or college in high school courses offered?

                      If so, what courses did you take?

Approximately how many students were in your graduation class? Do you think the size of your grade was a positive or negative aspect of your school experience?

Do you think the size of your individual classes worked well for you or not? What were the approximate sizes of your classes?

Knowing what you now know about college, what advice would you give today's students from your school?

If you could change one thing about how your high school prepared you for the college experience, what would it be? Why did you make that choice?

Family Influences

I would like to discuss your family influences now.

Who lived in your household while you were in middle and high school?

What is the highest level of school your (father, mother, and/or grandparent if primary caretaker) has received?

How would you describe the financial status of your family while you were in high school? *(Allow the respondent to select a category from listed categories or to decline to respond.)*

- ☐ *We were comfortable.*
- ☐ *Finances were tight, but we made it work.*
- ☐ *Finances were a real struggle.*

Can you remember a conversation you had with your father/mother/grandparent about going to college? Did you have these conversations rarely, occasionally, or often?

People who love you can have different points of view. Were some family members not in favor of your attending college? Were others in favor? Or were the messages pretty consistent from person to person?

How would you rate the support from your father/mother/grandparent to attend college? (Can differentiate among family members if different members offered differing levels of support. Will show participants the following scale, reading each category and asking them to choose a category which best represents the overall support of the family member):

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unsupportive	Somewhat Unsupportive	Neither Unsupportive or Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Very Supportive

Please explain and provide examples.

How would you rate the support from family while you are in college? (Will show participants the following scale, reading each category and asking them to choose a category which best represents the overall support of the family member):

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1	2	3	4	5
Very Unsupportive	Somewhat Unsupportive	Neither Unsupportive or Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Very Supportive

Please explain and provide examples.

Does your family think it is important for you to leave Sylvan County in order to pursue your academic and career goals? Or do they think you can reach your goals by staying in the area?

Do you think you will return to Sylvan County to live and work after graduating from NEU?

Knowing what you now know about college, is there anything you wish you would have known or heard from family members before you left for college?   Would you change anything about your experiences with your family either while you were in school or in college? Please explain.

And, finally, do you feel as though growing up in _____ was positive or negative for you in terms of your ability to graduate from college? Can you explain?

Thank you so much for your participation. I really appreciate your time. Is it okay if I follow-up with you over the phone if necessary? (Clarify a phone number to reach the participant.) If you think of anything you would like to add of if you have any questions, you can reach me through email or phone (offer again).

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL

University of Pittsburgh
Institutional Review Board

Memorandum

To: Katherine Kinsinger
From: IRB Office
Date: 10/16/2017
IRB#:   PRO17070011
Subject: Family and School Influences on Rural Youth Persistence to College Graduation

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The above-referenced project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board. Based on the information provided, this project meets all the necessary criteria for an exemption, and is hereby designated as "exempt" under section

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)

Please note the following information:

- Investigators should consult with the IRB whenever questions arise about whether planned changes to an exempt study might alter the exempt status. Use the **"Send Comments to IRB Staff"** link displayed on study workspace to request a review to ensure it continues to meet the exempt category.
- It is important to close your study when finished by using the **"Study Completed"** link displayed on the study workspace.
- Exempt studies will be archived after 3 years unless you choose to extend the study. If your study is archived, you can continue conducting research activities as the IRB has made the determination that your project met one of the required exempt categories. The only caveat is that no changes can be made to the application. If a change is needed, you will need to submit a NEW Exempt application.

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

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