

“A boulder being lifted”: A post-intentional phenomenological exploration of sense of belonging for rural students at a large, urban university

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the people, places, and memories that make up my rural hometown. Our relationship may always be fraught, but I am the person I am today largely because of my small town, rural roots. This one is for you.

Abstract

Rural students comprise an under-served and marginalized population in U.S. Higher Education. Little is known about the experiences of these students in college, particularly regarding the ways in which these students experience sense of belonging—a phenomenon which has been linked to myriad positive outcomes for college students. Utilizing a post-intentional phenomenological framework, this qualitative study seeks to explore how the phenomenon of belonging may take shape for rural students at a large, urban university. Secondary research questions explore conceptualizations of rurality and rural identity, as well as the ways in which university sponsored programs, student services, or departments impact the phenomenon of belonging for rural students. Interviews with ten self-identified rural students were explored in connection with researcher post-reflexion and *thinking with theory* to produce new understandings of rurality, rural identity, and the phenomenon of belonging. Based on this new knowledge production, recommendations and opportunities for research, policy, and practice are provided.

Keywords: rural students, rurality, sense of belonging

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Each year in the United States, between 200,000-250,000 rural students enroll in higher education directly after high school (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018) and this number increases when returning or non-traditionally aged students are considered. Despite constituting a sizable population in postsecondary education, these students, in the context of their rural identities, have been largely ignored in higher education research and several scholars have urged for increased study on this population (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Gillon, 2015; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008; Schultz, 2004, A. Stone, 2017). Rural students have been the focus of a small group of researchers for over one hundred years (Corbett, 2007); nevertheless, research exploring this population in higher education often examines the same questions. Most studies are quantitative and emphasize collegial aspirations, academic preparedness, and degree attainment of rural students (Cob, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Hu, 2003; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006; Schonert, Elliott, & Bills, 1991; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995).

The body of qualitative work exploring rural students is small and frequently centers on the transition between high school and the first year of college (Heinisch, 2017; Howley, 2006; Schultz, 2004; C. Stone, 2014; Tieken, 2016). Previous sociological research on rurality and rural students has infrequently explored the rural student experience past the point of out-migration from the rural community (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Elder & Conger, 2000). It is only recently scholars such as Gillon (2015)

have begun to explore and complicate the intrinsic connections between place, identity, larger systems of power (such as patriarchy and urban normativity) and the college experience for rural students. While existing research is helpful, many questions remain in regards to rural students in higher education, including a broader understanding of their strengths, challenges, resiliency, and sense of belonging in college.

Understanding rural students' path to, and experiences in, higher education continues to be a critical issue as interest in postsecondary schooling rises for this population (Snyder & Dillow, 2010), as does the demand for college graduates. By 2020, over 65% of all jobs will require higher education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Although rural student interest in college is increasing, rural students continue to earn degrees at a lesser rate than urban peers. In 2015, only 19% of rural adults held a bachelor's degree compared to 33% of urban adults (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2017). The 14% gap in degree attainment in 2015 was up from 11% in 2010 (USDA, 2017).

Data suggests rural students also face matriculation and first-year persistence rates below suburban peers and at rates similar to urban peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016, 2018). Findings also suggest rural students may need more support than urban or suburban peers to enroll in, and graduate from, college (Elder, 1968; Hu, 2003; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018). Although facing similar challenges as urban students, a highly studied group in higher education, little research has been done to understand how rural students comprise a marginalized and under-served population (Schultz, 2004).

If higher education is to support rural students through graduation and meet the growing educational demands of the economy, practitioners in the field must understand the struggles, strengths, and experiences of this population. Without that information, it becomes progressively more challenging to ensure colleges and universities are offering services that best serve rural students in higher education. Because so few studies exist exploring the lived experiences of rural students in college, it is difficult to make claims about the ways in which these students make meaning of their college experience, participate in or benefit from campus programs and resources, or experience sense of belonging. Until faculty and staff understand how these students experience college, it is difficult to offer targeted support.

This dearth in research on rural students is surprising, especially given the rise of research on other under-served populations in higher education, such as first-generation students, or the importance of identity markers such as social class on the collegiate experience. Numerous studies have found that in regards to social class, students who identify as working-class struggle with culture shock of higher education and have lower social capital, academic engagement, and sense of belonging than middle and upper-class peers (Hurst, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). These working class students are often found to be at higher risk for stop-out, or may never complete their college degrees (Braxton, 2000; Soria, 2012). First-generation students have also been found to have decreased academic engagement and lower retention than non-first-generation peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2012a, 2012b). First-generation students are also less likely to come to college with high-level coursework or Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credit (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). As will be explored in chapter

two, research indicates that rural students struggle with nearly all these same challenges as first-generation and working-class students.

Recent literature on under-served populations such as first-generation and working-class students has served to better illuminate the lived experiences of individuals in college as a means of understanding student persistence and belonging (Jehangir, 2010; Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015). Additionally important is the ways in which this research serves to highlight the assets these students bring to their higher education experience both in and out of the classroom. Certainly, a rural background may often overlap with these other identities, but rarely is rurality unearthed in these discussions as a primary lens through which to explore the college experience.

Purpose of Study

Data on rural students in higher education is mostly quantitative and qualitative studies largely emphasize the transitional and first year experience of rural students. As such, little is known about the experiences of rural students throughout their college careers and the ways in which these experiences may contribute to fostering a sense of belonging, a phenomenon that has been shown by myriad researchers to be an important part of the college-going experience (Berger, 1997; Freeman, Anderman, & Jenson, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2012; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

In order to better understanding the rural student experience in college, this study explores the following research question: how might sense of belonging take shape for rural students at a large, urban university?

To explore this question, three secondary research questions are also examined:

- How do rural students at a large, urban university understand and conceptualize rurality for themselves?
- How do rural students at a large, urban university understand intersecting identities as complicating their experiences in college?
- How do university sponsored programs, student services, or departments help shape and produce sense of belonging for rural students at a large, urban university.

Overview of the Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To explore these questions, I utilized a post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) framework. Within PIP, post-structural ideas of partiality, fluidity, and shared meaning-making are utilized to co-construct new knowledge. Utilizing this methodology, I drew upon three main sources of phenomenological material (data) to explore the phenomenon of belonging for rural students at a large, urban university. First, participant interviews with self-identified rural students provided an exploration of the phenomenon through the lens of current students. Second, my own post-reflexion activities as a researcher opened up my own understandings of belonging and rurality to explore my own positionality and perspective related to this phenomenon. Third, the incorporation of *plugging in* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) to theory allowed the phenomenon to be explored in new ways in an attempt to push the boundaries of existing knowledge about rural students. Chapter three provides a deeper overview into PIP as a methodological approach.

This study also utilizes two complementary theoretical frameworks: place theory (how physical places impact identity) and Pierre Bourdieu's social reproduction theory.

Together, these theories help illuminate the ways in which rural students, although each unique, bring to college similar experiences, beliefs, desires, interests, and skills that impact their time in college. A detailed discussion of these theories will appear in chapter two.

Significance of Study

This study contributes to existing higher education literature in several, important ways. First, this research builds upon existing research on rural students in higher education, a population that, despite being under-served, is also under-researched. As a qualitative work, this study also provides insights, in the words of study participants, into the rural student experience in college. This stands in contrast to the majority of research on rural students in higher education which is quantitative in nature. Second, in an effort to close a gap in literature, this study contributes to research on sense of belonging by exploring the experiences of rural students, a population on which belonging research has generally not focused.

Third, this study is unique in that it calls for participants to self-identify as a rural student, thus opening up the possibilities of experiences to be shared. This self-identification allowed for the participation of not only those who fit the federal guidelines of rural places, but also those from small, remote towns who may identify with a rural background, but are often missed in research on rural students. Broadening the possibilities of who might in fact identify with a rural background involves a rejection of using only demographics and geography as defining factors in geographic background. Rather, the culture of specific places and the importance of self-identifying one's identity

becomes paramount (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012). A deeper discussion of defining rurality will appear in chapter two.

Fourth, while most qualitative studies examine the transitional experiences of first-year, and often first-generation, rural students to college, this study examines the student experience of Junior and Senior students who are further along in their college careers. This allows not only for conversations about participants' initial transitions into college, but also about the ways they have navigated sense of belonging after their first year. Better understanding the experiences of rural students in college allows professionals within the field of higher education to make better informed decisions regarding services and programs targeted at this population.

Positionality

My interest in researching and understanding the rural student experience and the phenomenon of belonging is a personal one shaped by my own experiences and negotiations of identity. Although I now identify as a suburbanite, I grew up in a small, rural town of roughly 9,000 residents in northern Illinois. Across the river was another town of 15,000 which housed a movie theater, hospital, small mall, and a Super Walmart—all luxuries my town did not have. These “Twin Cities,” which made up my local community, sit 180 miles from Chicago, IL and over 50 miles in both directions from urbanized areas that housed the beacons of civilization for a teen in the early 00’s—Spencer Gifts, the Olive Garden, and Target.

The educational opportunities in my community were limited. We had gifted classes, but did not have Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course options. Opportunities did exist to attend vocational school while enrolled in high school

and there was a small dual credit program with the area community college, although in my memory these classes were limited, not advertised well, and the transfer process for those credits to a four-year school seemed nebulous. A handful of students in my graduating class of about 130 went on to higher education immediately after high school. Some of these classmates went to the area community college and a smaller percentage went directly to four year institutions, mostly public. I was the only one I recall from my graduating class who went out of state, a decision that while supported by my family wholeheartedly, was not bolstered by my high school guidance counselor. Instead, she simply told me I could “stay in-state for cheaper”—a statement that ultimately, due to generous financial aid, was unlikely to be true.

Growing up in a small town, I was active in a wide variety of activities. By high school I was participating in cross country, track, band, choir, drama, speech team, Spanish club, key club, and sportsmanship club. Although my town was small and classes never felt particularly challenging, I did, by and large, love my academic experience. For the most part I had grown up with the same classmates since elementary school and felt safe in my school community.

Having excelled at coursework in high school, I knew college-going was my next step. I also knew, despite the comfort of my small town, I was very ready for something new. Growing up I had the opportunity to travel the country fairly regularly for sports and saw the wide variety of people and places that make up the United States. So, when considering college locations, I knew I wanted an opportunity to be challenged academically, to engage with diversity my hometown largely lacked, and to experience the excitement of an urban setting.

Early in my senior year, after a Fastweb.com quiz and a quick in-person visit, I decided to attend a small, selective, private liberal arts college in an urban setting roughly 400 miles from home. I applied early decision and was accepted. In college, I continued to excel academically, worked in Residence Life, and was involved in my institution's music department. Although I loved my college experience and believe I flourished, I regularly felt disconnects between my pre-college life and the experiences of my peers.

These disconnects were strongest in regards to family socio-economic status, pre-college educational opportunities, and general know how of an urban environment. I remember being dumbfounded during a conversation early on with a peer that she had utilized a college essay coach and had written about her summer abroad experience in Europe. I had no idea my peers were using coaches to help them write entrance essays or that it might be commonplace to travel to Europe for a summer break. Suddenly, the essay I had composed about wearing a candy necklace to my Senior Prom seemed trivial.

The disconnect did not stop there. I learned my classmates were starting college having already earned many college credits and had no idea what detasseling, a common summer job in my hometown, was. I felt academically behind and more than a little podunk at times. Adjusting to college life in a city also meant new challenges like navigating public transportation. I quickly learned that without pulling that strange looking rope on the window, the 84 bus will not stop. The realization college was not just about harder classes, but also learning how to navigate an entirely new system and culture was not lost on me, even if I wasn't entirely sure how to manage it and lacked the language to express my experience.

Despite these disconnects and challenges, I also felt I had some advantages compared to many of my peers. I felt I took the opportunities presented to me in college more seriously, I had a stronger work ethic, and I was more focused. While I did not recognize it at the time, I now largely attribute those positive traits to my rural background. It is largely due to my own experiences as a rural student in higher education that I am drawn to better understanding this student population as a whole, particularly individual students' stories.

While my rural-roots are important to the way in which I as a research approach this study, so too are the myriad other aspects of my identity, many of which, admittedly, read as a check-list of privilege. I am a highly-educated, married, white, currently able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual female. As someone who is currently middle-class, but with working class roots, I strongly identify as a class-straddler and believe I have a very different approach to money and work than many of my peers who have always been solidly middle or upper class. My identity as an intersection, third-wave feminist also greatly informs the way in which I understand and move through the world. These various aspects of my identity coalesce with my rural upbringing and college experience to shape the ways in which I approached my research on rural students in college including how I interacted with participants, engaged in reflection, and thought about the relationship of theory and practice. Additional statements of positionality are explored in chapter four of this study.

Chapter Overviews

In this opening chapter I have overviewed the importance of researching rural students in higher education, outlined the purpose and guiding research questions of this

study, introduced the study's theoretical and methodological framework, as well as situated my own positionality as a researcher. Chapter two examines existing literature on rural students, both within their local communities and in higher education across quantitative and qualitative methodologies. I also explore literature on sense of belonging and further discuss literature related to my theoretical framework. Chapter three outlines the study's methodology as well as provides introductions to each of the ten participants. Chapter four presents major findings of this study organized by the post-intentional *productions* (i.e., areas of interest, connection, and disconnection) that emerged through analysis of the phenomenological material (data). Chapter five provides a discussion of the findings including implications for policy and practice as well as opportunities for future research. It is my hope this study serves as an opportunity to continue expanding the conversation around supporting rural students in higher education by exploring the stories of these ten participants.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of extant literature related to this study. First, an exploration of rurality is provided to contextualize the ways in which rural students have been classified in the United States. Second, the ways in which rural students have been explored within higher education literature is presented. Third, sense of belonging is examined in order to provide a brief overview of the ways in which this phenomenon has been explored in higher education research. Finally, a theoretical framework is presented wherein the importance of social reproduction theory in exploring the experiences of rural students in college is discussed. Taken together, this literature outlines the importance of this study and the necessity for further inquiry with, and for, rural students.

Defining Rural Places and Students

With over two dozen federal definitions of rurality in the United States, understanding which students qualify as rural can be difficult (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Two of the most widely used definitions of rurality come from the United States Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural locales using a deficit model wherein rural spaces are defined by what they are not—urban (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016). Urbanity is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau in two ways: Urbanized Areas (UAs) are locales with populations of 50,000 or more and Urbanized Clusters (UCs) range in population from 2,501-49,999 (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Rural locales, then, are spaces with populations of 2,500 or less.

Recognizing the wide-ranging locales the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of rurality encompasses, the NCES takes a more nuance approach to defining rurality. Within this classification system, locales are classified as either cities, suburbs, towns, or rural spaces using the criteria of both population and geographic location. Each of the four main categories are then further condensed to include three additional subcategories (Rural Education in America, n.d.). Cities and suburbs are broken down by population size (large, mid-sized, or small). Towns and rural areas are categorized by distance to UCs and UAs (fringe, distance, or remote). This classification system allows for more specific definitions of rurality by recognizing the importance of both population size and proximity to urban areas. Rural spaces can be defined as strictly those within the rural categorization, or can be collapsed along with small towns to create a larger categorization of rurality.

While these quantitative definitions are helpful in a variety of contexts, they are not as beneficial when conducting qualitative research as they fail to account for self-identification with a specific geographic background and the accompanying culture that often follows. In order to understand rural students' experience in college, one must first ensure the students identify as rural. This means expanding the traditionally held notions of rurality which many assume to mean simply agrarian or remote.

Take, for example, students who fall into the NCES definition of *small-town remote*; these students are not technically classified as rural, even though they could potentially live in a town with a population as small as 2,501 and would be at least 35 minutes away from an Urbanized Area (Rural Education in America, n.d.). It is highly likely that, even while living in a town, these students feel a connection to a rural identity

more so than a suburban or urban identity. This qualitative conceptualization of rurality acknowledges while population size and distance to urban areas contribute to rurality, the “cultural and relational dimensions of places and people” are also important (Halsey, 2009, p. 2). As McConaghy (2002) noted, a qualitative understanding of rurality acknowledges the “notions of movement” and “the ways in which places are connected by histories rather than geographies” (p. 14). Donehower et. al (2012) also emphasize the importance of acknowledging the culture of differing locales as well as the importance of self-identification with an identity marker such as rurality when conducting research.

In exploring this population, I categorize rural students as those who identify with living in a self-defined rural space for the majority of their pre-college life. This conceptualization encompasses those who may live in remote agrarian areas most commonly thought of as rural, students from agrarian non-farming families, as well as those students from smaller towns. This expanded conceptualization of rurality serves to capture the stories and experiences of those who might otherwise be missed in rural research.

While students from these various backgrounds might understand themselves as having a rural identity, to believe their experiences are homogenous is a dangerous assumption researchers must be careful to reject. Each students’ journey is unique, but research suggests what does seem to tie these students together is their interactions with various forms of capital (Elder & Conger, 2000; C. Stone, 2014; Heinisch, 2017). These students regularly have less access to the kinds of cultural and social capital valued in academia, but often have a strong work ethic and tight-knit community and familial bonds (Elder & Conger, 2000; Heinisch, 2017).

Literature on Rural Students in US Higher Education

Existing literature on rural students in US higher education can be categorized into three main bodies of literature. First, an exploration of rurality and rural youth in higher education is provided through literature grounded in sociology, geography, and anthropology. This literature predominantly focuses on the communities from which rural students come, and regularly leave, in the pursuit of higher education. Second, research exploring the collegial aspirations, academic preparedness, and degree attainment of rural students is discussed. These works, comprising the bulk of research on this student population, are generally quantitative in nature and utilizes large, national datasets such as the National Longitudinal Study and the High School and Beyond Study. Third, the small amount of existing qualitative literature that explored rural students is examined. This research interrogates the initial transitions and first-year experiences of domestic rural youth in higher education.

Understanding Place: Geographical and Sociological Perspectives on Rurality and Rural Students

Exploring the ways in which rural students have been discussed in literature related to higher education requires framing the discussion of rurality and *place* within the fields of sociology, human geography, and philosophy in order to understand the ways in which geographic background uniquely shapes the experiences, identity, and values of rural students (Corbett, 2009; Cresswell, 2004; Malpas, 2018; Massey, 1997, 2005; Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011; Trigg, 2012). A complete exploration and deconstruction of the concept of place is outside the scope of this paper. However, many researchers agree place transcends mere points on a map. Rather, places can be

understood as “integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*” (Massey, 2005, p. 130). Massey continues to explore places as “collections of...stories, articulations within the wider power-geometrics of space. Their character will be a product of these intersections within that wider setting” (p. 130). Within these intersections, place provides structure to the lives of individuals and, over time, helps define a sense of self (Trigg, 2012). In this way, place becomes a way of “seeing, knowing, and understanding the world” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 11) as intrinsically linked to identity formation as other more commonly recognized identity markers such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, and ability.

Like other markers of identity, place is socially constructed. Buildings; boundaries of towns, cities and states; and categories such as urban, suburban, and rural are all created to help give structure and meaning to our lives. Although a human-made category, places shape our experiences, identities, and worldviews in very real ways. As J.E. Malpas (2018) states,

place is not founded *on* subjectivity, but is rather that *on which* the notion of subjectivity is founded. Thus, one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; rather, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place. (p. 34)

Place, then, becomes more than simply a boundary or a location identified by latitude and longitude. Place becomes a site of interaction between the self and the outside—a space of multiple identities, histories, and processes (Massey, 1997) that is inherently complex and continually changing (Reynolds, 2004).

Numerous studies support the finding that rural students often feel a close tie to their rural culture and that this connection greatly informs their experiences and their sense of self (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Heinisch, 2017; C. Stone, 2014). It is precisely because of this research that a socio-cultural conceptualization of rurality must continue to be explored despite it being “the most elusive, least amenable to direct empirical measurement” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 31). Engaging sociological research on rural places is important because understanding the communities from which rural students come is imperative in order to proactively serve this population once they are in college.

Sociological texts also inform understandings of rurality, the struggles and strengths of rural communities, as well as the *awayward mobility* (Schwalbe, 1995, p. 309), or out-migration, of many rural students from their rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Elder & Conger, 2000; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018). Examining literature on rural communities brings to light many of the variables researchers have used to explore rural students in postsecondary education such as social capital and family size. In what follows, the work of several scholars who engage with both rural communities and rural students in higher education are explored.

From 1988-1994 Elder and Conger (2000) conducted yearly interviews with rural Iowan students and families on a wide-array of topics including family experience, personality, social development, and socioeconomic conditions as part of the Iowa Youth and Families Project. Families participating in the study all lived in rural Iowa and were categorized as current full-time or part-time farmers, displaced farmers, farm-reared only (i.e., no longer currently farming), or nonfarm families (no past or present familial

farming connections). Their book on the Iowa Project, entitled *Children of the Land*, covers an immense amount of data and shares findings on a wide variety of sociological issues including social ties to the community, pathways for success in education and developmental risks, children's labor, the role of grandparents, impact of religion, resiliency, and future change. Their work is one of the most comprehensive explorations of rurality in the United States today.

Social and familial relationships are two important discourses in studies exploring rural students in higher education highlighted in Elder and Conger's (2000) work. When asked what one elderly participant would most want to pass onto her grandchildren she responded,

I think it's important in your life to love each other, and to be there for each other.

There are rough times when maybe you don't agree, but during those times we

have always been able to get together. I think that is the way it has to be. (p. 41)

The importance of family in rural communities, and physically being present for one another, is one reason deciding to attend college, a decision which regularly physically removes students from their families, can be very difficult for rural students to make (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Looker, 1993; Looker & Dwyer, 1998; Lucas, 1971; Tieken, 2016). This is not to say family ties in urban and suburban families are not important, but literature suggests these relationships may play a deeper role in rural communities (Elder & Conger, 2000).

Elder and Conger (2000) also highlight the connections between rural students, families, and close social ties to the community in relation to academic achievement and out-migration. This out-migration of high achieving students in rural communities,

otherwise known in both popular media and academic research as *brain drain*, is typical (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Nadworthy & Marcus, 2018). Elder and Conger found the highest achieving students in rural Iowa were those seeking to make their lives elsewhere, leaving behind those youth who will likely be successful in agriculture and another group who may lack overall skills and motivation to compete in the workforce outside of their rural community.

Their findings also indicate families with the strongest ties to the community also had a better pulse on the activities and attitudes of their children throughout the day thanks to the monitoring of other adults in the community. Engagement with community activities may also provide students with additional community mentors to serve as role models, though the “runnin’” and time commitment associated with these activities can be draining on parents (Elder & Conger, 2000, p. 115). These parents with close social ties more frequently had children who would out-migrate for college after performing the best academically (as quantified by grades and peer success) and appearing the most socially competent of their peer group.

In another sociological text, Carr and Kefalas (2009) explore the *hollowing out*, or brain drain, of a single small-town in Iowa. Carr and Kefalas unpack various types of rural students, whom they identify as achievers, stayers, seekers, and returners. Illustrating the brain drain identified by other scholars, it is the achievers who are “air-lifted out to fulfill their potential someplace else” and the stayers, those with the fewest resources, are forced to deal with a dwindling rural economy (p. 25). Often the seekers and returners circle back to rural life after they complete college or enlist in the military discovering that the “outside world fails to live up to its promise” (p. 25).

For achievers, Carr and Kefalas (2009) make the observation that the process of what Corbett (2007) calls *learning to leave* their rural community is a gradual one often filled with feelings of loss and excitement. Carr and Kefalas' study again confirms the importance of social capital and the vital role parents and other adults have in providing support to rural students beginning as young as kindergarten. One mother's advice to her high achieving daughter was as simple as, "don't stay in Ellis" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 42).

This single-town case study highlights the immense dilemma rural families and communities face in supporting these students to leave, knowing they will likely not return. Emphasizing the impact on the community is important as "helping children succeed does not simply mean they leave their families; they also leave behind a community that has provided them with so much as that, quite possibly, will not be able to survive without them" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 42). Carr and Kefalas name this the "paradox of preparation"—the dichotomy of rural communities supporting their most promising students with whatever resources may be available only to have them leave (p. 51).

Carr and Kefalas (2009) highlight the difficulties of the academic and social transition many of these achievers face in college—a concern that has been highlighted by more recent research (Heinisch, 2017; Nadworthy & Marcus, 2018; Schultz, 2004; C. Stone, 2014). Achievers recognize the culture shock between their rural communities and college life and comment on their disconnect between their former hobbies (such as deer hunting and fishing) and the hobbies of their urban and suburban peers. In regards

to understanding the unwritten social culture of college, one achiever said she was, “completely clueless” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 45).

Despite these difficult transitions, achievers also comment on the excitement of broadening their worldviews, reinventing themselves away from their rural communities, and experiencing and engaging with diverse populations in ways that had never before been possible. These findings are supported by other research as well (Heinisch, 2017; Nadworthy & Marcus, 2018; C. Stone, 2014). It is experiences such as these that make returning to a rural community for achievers not merely uninteresting, but seemingly impossible. As one achiever stated, “no disrespect to the people [in Ellis] or my family... It’s too small, bottom line” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 48). For many others, the return to their rural communities is impossible due to their specialized career interests and struggling economy back home. Much of rural America has historically persisted on specialized economies such as recreation, leisure, manufacturing and farming (Deavers, 1992) and since the recession of the late 2000’s, these rural places have been significantly slower to recover (Hertz, Kusmin, Marré, & Parker, 2014).

The work of researchers such as Elder and Conger (2000), Carr and Kefalas (2009), and research based in geography and philosophy (Cresswell, 2004; Malpas, 2018; Massey, 1997, 2005) are helpful to researchers within higher education who are interested in understanding the contexts from which many rural students enter college. Researchers must have a grounded understanding of rural community struggles and strengths, the importance of various forms of capital (specifically social capital), and the challenge of out-migration in order to understand rural students in college. Next, several important studies on rural students in higher education are explored emphasizing both the

ways in which rural students are commonly researched as well as the various findings between quantitative and qualitative works.

Quantitative Explorations: Collegial Aspirations, Academic Preparedness, and Degree Attainment of Rural Students

When rural students are explored in higher education literature within the US, the focus is commonly on the ways in which collegial aspirations, academic preparedness, and degree attainment are shaped by various factors. These studies generally utilize data from projects such as the High School and Beyond Survey (Cob et al., 1989; Schonert et al., 1991; Smith et al., 1995) or the National Educational Longitudinal Study (Byun et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2012; Hu, 2003; Koricich et al., 2018; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Roscigno et al., 2006) and compare rural students to their urban and suburban peers in an effort to better understand the ways in which the urban/non-urban divide impacts students.

This research is complex for several reasons. First, researchers rarely examine only one influencing factor at a time. For example, studies will explore aspects of social capital in addition to economic or family-structure influences simultaneously. Second, several studies look at multiple research questions in a single study, making it difficult to categorize research as solely focused on aspiration, academics, or degree completion. Lastly, research findings across all three main areas of exploration are frequently contradictory, further complicating a clear understanding of rural students. What has been a positive change across much of this quantitative research is the shift from viewing rural students through a deficit model (Herzog & Pittman, 1995)

and instead recognizing the systemic factors impacting these students and the benefits of their rural communities (Fan & Chen, 1999; Howley, 2006; Roscigno et al., 2006).

When researching rural students, pre-college factors such as household income, parental marital status, family size, and parental degree attainment are commonly explored, as is social capital. Social capital can be broadly understood as “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (Portes, 1998, p. 6). When defining social capital, many researchers make distinctions between *family* social capital, such as the relationship between student and parents, high parental expectations, and emotional parental support, and *educational* social capital which encompasses the relationships a student has with important school figures such as teachers and guidance counselors.

Both forms of social capital rely heavily on both the quality and quantity of interaction (Smith et al., 1995). Several studies have illustrated rural communities regularly have high levels of social capital due to their close-knit nature and size (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Elder & Conger, 2000; Howley, 2006). These studies and others illuminate and complicate our understanding of rural students and their collegial aspirations, academic preparedness, and degree attainment.

Examining the important relationship social capital plays in the relationship between place of residence and college attendance, Smith et al. (1995) found, compared to other students, rural students were disadvantaged in forming collegial aspirations due to low parental income, a higher likelihood of parents without college degrees, and less parental encouragement. Rural students were also the least likely study participants to attend college (45%) when compared to students from urban locations (62%), suburban

locations (67%) or towns (53%) (p. 370). However, social capital provided an opportunity to greatly impact rural students. Smith et al. illustrated when both human and social capital was low for a rural student, he or she had only a predicted college attendance rate of 4%, but high levels of these factors could raise a rural student's predicted attendance to 83% (p. 376). Even when human capital did not change, added social capital created higher chances for college enrollment.

Smith et al.'s (1995) findings stand in contradiction to the more recent work of Howley (2006), who found rural youth had slightly higher aspirations for earning an undergraduate degree than nonrural youth. Additionally, nonrural youth were nearly twice as likely to indicate the desire for continued study after earning a college degree. Other research has also shown, in connection with social capital, the economic uncertainty of rural areas also helps shape the desire to attend college for rural students in order to have more economically secure lives (Corbett, 2009; Cox, Tucker, Sharp, Van Gundy, & Rebellon, 2014). It is important to note Howley was not examining social capital, but rather independent variables such as family income, head of family education level, race, gender, and age.

In a study examining both social capital and independent pre-college variables such as family composition, socioeconomic status, community social resources, and academic preparation, Byun et al. (2012) conducted research utilizing data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study to explore the differences in collegial aspirations and degree attainment for rural students in comparison to urban and suburban peers. Confirming the findings of Smith et al. (1995), Byun et al.'s (2012) analysis found parents of rural students were less likely to have college degrees and had lower

expectations their children would attend college (70%) when compared to suburban (80%) or urban (84%) respondents (p. 422). They also determined community social resources generated a small, but significant, upturn in the likelihood of completing a college degree for rural students, even after controlling for other variables. However, rural students' lagged in college enrollment and degree attainment when compared to urban and suburban peers by and large due to lower socioeconomic backgrounds (p. 431).

Byun et al.'s (2012) finding supports other research that suggests rural students face disadvantages in collegial aspirations and enrollment compared to urban and suburban peers due in part to disadvantage in exposure to achievement-oriented goals and opportunities for achievement (Elder, 1968; Hu, 2003). Utilizing more recent data from the 2006 National Educational Longitudinal Study, Koricich et al. (2018) also found a rural background impacted postsecondary enrollment and college choice for high school students. While 66.3% of rural students had enrolled in some sort of postsecondary education within two years of graduating high school, this was 8% lower than non-rural students. Additionally, rural students were 20% more likely to attend community colleges and only 17.2% of rural students enrolled at highly selective institutions versus 25.4% of non-rural students. Several other researchers have also found rural students have lower participation in postsecondary education and that the geographic isolation and depressed economies further constrain higher education options (Adelman, 2002; Flora & Flora, 2008; Gibbs, 1998).

While the work of these scholars highlights the disparities rural students face, it also illustrates the contradictions found in research on rural students. For example, Byun et al. (2012) discovered rural students' family size (number of siblings) did not negatively

impact collegial aspirations. This finding complicates several older studies that highlighted a negative relationship between bigger families and career/college aspirations (Elder, 1968; Smith et al., 1995). Roscigno et al. (2006) also found siblings also increased likelihood of dropout. In a later study utilizing the same data set, Byun et al. (2015) illustrated that, overall, rural students were also more likely to have delayed entry into college, less likely to attend a selective institution, and less likely to maintain continuous enrollment. These findings around delayed entry and higher stop-out rates affirm recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016, 2018) as well.

When exploring the academic preparedness of rural students in comparison with urban or suburban peers, the findings are conflicting. On one hand, numerous studies have illustrated rural students are less academically prepared than their suburban peers, (Edington & Koehler, 1987; Lindberg, Nelson, & Nelson, 1985; Provasnik, KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001), have less access to Advanced Placement classes (Poole & More, n.d.), and lower SAT scores than urban peers (Caison & Baker, 2007). Roscigno et al. (2006) indicate both urban and rural students lag behind in educational achievement when compared to suburban peers, mainly due to socioeconomic factors.

On the other hand, utilizing data from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study, Fan and Chen (1999) found rural students performed as well as metropolitan (urban and suburban) peers in the areas of reading, math, science, and social studies (p. 42). According to Fan and Chen, rural students “do not suffer disadvantage simply as the result of their residence in rural areas or their attendance at rural schools” at least in

regards to performance on standardized exams (p. 31). Similarly disproving the widely held belief that rural students do not perform well academically, Schonert et al. (1991) revealed rural Iowan students performed well in high school, went on to postsecondary education at a higher rate than the national average, and generally persisted to degree completion. However, it is critical to acknowledge Schonert et al.'s (1991) data came from Iowa, consistently one of the top performing states in public education (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017; National Education Association, 2017). This may mean their findings are not representative of rural communities nationally. What none of these studies are able to illustrate is how rural students feel about any of these situations. To discover answers to those questions researchers must look to qualitative studies.

Qualitative Explorations: Initial Transitions and First-Year Experiences of Rural Students

While the majority of research on rural students is quantitative, a small body of literature exists exploring rural students in higher education through a qualitative lens. These studies principally examine rural students' access to higher education and initial transitions into college and most have been published within the past five years (Gillon, 2015; Heinisch, 2017; A. Stone, 2017; C. Stone, 2014; Tieken, 2016). Mara Casey Tieken (2016) conducted interviews and observations to explore the messages rural, first-generation students receive concerning the value of higher education. Tieken wanted to discover how messages about higher education were delivered to rural students—helping them make the decision to stay in their rural communities, or leave in pursuit of higher education.

Conducting interviews with guidance counselors in rural areas, college admission staff, and staff in community based organizations, Tieken found the messaging concerning higher education was generally centered on college as a vehicle for economic stability—stability that can often not be found in rural farming or single-industry towns in the 21st century. In addition to a focus on career opportunities, Tieken also found participants routinely promoting the worthwhile investment of a flexible program such as a liberal arts degree. While these talking points often helped convince rural students to attend college, counselors and admission representatives interviewed for the study also noticed significant resistance to these college-positive messages from some rural parents. This resistance can cause uncertainty in rural students who are deciding whether or not to attend college.

In an early qualitative study, Schultz (2004) examined the first-semester experiences of first-generation agrarian rural students in college. Schultz found parental expectations and support were critical in a student's decision to attend college and the choice to leave their rural communities was often anxiety producing. Although Tieken's (2016) interviews with high school counselors revealed these figures in a student's life sold the importance of attending college, Schultz's (2004) findings illustrate rural students were not equipped to negotiate the transition to college. Many of Schultz's participants found the transition to college in their first semester "emotionally charged" (p. 49) and felt ill-prepared to build new social relationships and navigate the culture of higher education. Schultz notes that "their [the students'] agricultural background seemed to be either a help, or a hindrance. But, in all cases...background had an effect

on the phenomenon” of adjusting to college (p. 49). This finding further illustrates the importance of geographic background and place in one’s life.

A decade after Schultz (2004), C. Stone (2014) researched rural students at Montana State University. Stone was interested in exploring the ways in which students describe themselves, their rural backgrounds, and their experiences within the first year of college in order to better understand their transition to college and the impact of a rural identity. Stone found all participants felt a strong connection to their rural identities and their rural background had helped shape them into hardworking and honest people.

Similarly to Schultz (2004), Stone also found broadly that students’ rural backgrounds did not prepare them for the academic rigor, social challenges, or diversity they would encounter in college. One participant remarked, “[m]y first semester was an eye opener” (C. Stone, 2004, p. 104) and that, “I didn’t necessarily know everything that I felt I should have known” (p. 125). This sentiment was echoed by many of the participants—supporting previous research that suggests rural students are less academically prepared for college (Caison & Baker, 2007; Edington & Koehler, 1987; Lindberg et al., 1985; Pool & Moore, n.d.; Provasnik et al., 2007). However, Stone’s research suggests that, despite these initial difficulties in academic and social transitions, participants attributed their persistence and first-year success in college to their rural background. As another participant notes,

I think it instilled a lot of drive in me for what, you know I want to stay on track and get what I want done ... I think just the drive and stuff that they instilled in me there [in his rural hometown] and the determination to do things has made it easy to adapt here and do well. (p. 99)

Stone's work illustrates participants strongly identify with, and define themselves through, rurality.

Heinisch's (2017) research is some of the most recent qualitative work exploring rural first-generation, students. First-year rural students were targeted to better understand their pre-college planning, initial transition, and experiences in college. Heinisch found parental support was vital in the college planning process, more so through emotional support and parental expectations of college-going than first-hand knowledge or experience. Findings also illustrated that for rural students, opportunities to visit a wide-variety of schools was limited and participants often selected a larger-sized institution for an environment change. Participants were also interested in utilizing the improved resources of a bigger university in comparison to their rural communities and high schools.

As with the research of Schultz (2004) and Stone (2014), Heinisch also found rural students were considerably unprepared for the collegial lifestyle and struggled with time management, anonymity of a larger school environment, academics, and city size. Regardless, students were able to navigate these concerns successfully and, similarly to the participants in Stone's study, attributed their success to their rural identity specifically citing their strong work ethic and community support at home (Heinisch, 2017).

What is missing in this literature on rural students are explorations into the experiences of these students during college outside of the initial transition of the first year (Heinisch, 2017; C. Stone, 2014). There is much to be learned about the experiences of rural students across their entire time in college that may illuminate the reasons why

this population has consistently higher stop out rates, time to degree completion, and lower overall graduation rates when compared to peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016; USDA, 2017). One concept that has yet to be explored with rural students is *sense of belonging*, a theory that has consistently been linked to a wide variety of outcomes including academic performance, motivation, persistence, and social acceptance (Berger, 1997; Freeman et al., 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007)

Sense of Belonging

Although sense of belonging is a newer concept in higher education, its lineage extends back to the work of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) exploring college dropout and integration theory. Tinto's theory was heavily influenced by Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide which posited those who committed suicide did so due to an inability to create social and intellectual integration with societal structures like church and family.

In Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) work, integration theory hypothesizes that in order to remain at an institution, a student must feel a part of the community. Without successful integration, a student will be unable to be successful in college. Students can find integration through formal structures, such as academics and social clubs, or through more informal interactions of fellow peers and/or faculty. Clear in Tinto's writing is that the responsibility of integration falls to the individual student and "some degree of social and intellectual integration must exist as a condition for continued persistence" (Tinto, 1987, p. 119). At the time of its writing, Tinto's work was lauded as helpful in highlighting the ways in which college settings differed from that of pre-college spaces for students and for theorizing the steps necessary for students to persist in college.

It is important to note that while Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) work is pivotal in higher education and student affairs research, it is not without concern and has been criticized by many (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992). A main critique of Tinto's theory of integration is that his research was based predominantly on the experiences of full-time, on-campus, white men in college—a population which certainly does not encapsulate the wide array of diversity on college campuses in regards to race, class, enrollment status, and many other aspects of diversity. Rendón et al. (2000) interrogated the universality of integration theory and challenged whether a student with any non-dominant identity could integrate.

While acknowledging the benefits of Tinto's work, Tierney (1992) also critiqued integration theory for requiring students from racial minorities to acculturate, abandoning their cultures for that of an educational system founded on oppression. Writing on the experiences of Native Americans and minority students more generally, Tierney illustrates the complexities within Tinto's work around college as ritual, the roles of colleges, postsecondary success, and college as leave taking. It is on this last issue that Tierney highlights the experiences of Delbert, a Native American student choosing to go to college. Tierney writes,

Delbert viewed college as an avenue that would enhance his economic potential. Yet he saw colleges as a harmful and difficult choice. He commented that Indian parents 'see education as something that draws students away from who they are.' He wanted his teachers to 'see how much trouble it is to make the decision to leave home and come to school...how it's really a struggle to come here.' From a critical perspective, then, the ritual of college is a decision for Indian students that

forces them to choose between the world of their tribe and that of the academe. (p. 318)

In this way, the experiences of rural students and the difficulty of leaving for, and transitioning into, college is similar to that of Native American and other minority students. Lest there be ambiguity around how clearly Tinto felt disassociation was needed for successful integration, he writes, “to become fully incorporated into the life of the college, they, [students] have to socially as well as physically disassociate themselves from the communities of the past. Their persistence in college depends upon their becoming departers from their former communities” (Tinto, 1987, p. 95). This inability to acknowledge the strengths and experiences students bring with them from their pre-college lives and cultures is troubling for all students, but particularly those from minoritized or underrepresented populations.

Another critique is that Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of integration puts too much responsibility on the students and disregards the obligation of institutions to support and serve all students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón et al., 2000). This allows institutions of higher education to avoid responsibility in providing a place where students of all types feel welcome, safe, and included. This stands in stark contrast to Nancy Schlossberg’s (1989) similarly timed work on mattering wherein she advocates for “purposefully designed programs” that help students engage in a “high quality of community” (p. 6).

As a response to their critique of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), Hurtado and Carter (1997) put forth the theory of sense of belonging stemming from Bollen and Hoyle’s (1990) Sense of Belonging Scale. Their 1997 study sought to understand the

“achievement and persistence of students who have historically been excluded from education” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 324) and defined sense of belonging as “the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (p. 327). As they state, “studying a sense of belonging allows researchers to assess which forms of social interaction (academic and social) further enhance students’ affiliation and identity with their colleges” (p. 328). Their findings indicate a variety of factors such as engagement in religious and social organizations and speaking with peers about academics outside of class positively impacted sense of belonging in Latino students, but that perceived hostile racial climates negatively impacted sense of belonging. Thus, Hurtado and Carter posited greater attention ought to be paid to the subjective experiences of minority students in order to understand belonging and adjustment in college.

Numerous definitions of sense of belonging have been suggested since Hurtado and Carter (1997); however, the main facets of the concept remain constant. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) define sense of belonging as “the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community” (p. 804). Strayhorn (2012) outlines this concept as the “degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group” (p. 87). Apparent in these various definitions is the importance of feeling valued. This connection can come from a wide variety of relationships on a campus including those with peers and faculty, (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Solomone, 2002), residence hall communities (Berger, 1997; Gilliard 1996; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), or co-curricular activities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For the purposes of this study, a modified definition of sense of belonging developed from the

writings of Terrell Strayhorn (2012) is utilized where the concept is defined as a feeling of social support, connectedness, respect, and value between a student and campus community.

A wide-array of literature has been written exploring the importance of sense of belonging in college both broadly (Strayhorn, 2012) and for specific populations of such as Latino students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008b), African American students (Strayhorn, 2008a, 2011), Native American Students (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017; Tierney, 1992), LGBTQIA students (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017), first-year students (Hoffman et al., 2002), working-class students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013) and students enrolled part-time (Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001). Stemming from similar concepts such as mattering (Schlossberg, 1985) and in response to Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of integration, sense of belonging has emerged as a popular theory to explore the experiences of college students.

Studies indicate sense of belonging within a college environment is linked to a host of outcomes including grades, motivation, and social acceptance, and persistence (Berger, 1997; Freeman et al., 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Yet other studies, attempting to find these links between sense of belonging and markers such as academic progression (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010) or student/faculty interaction (Johnson et al., 2007) did not prove successful in discovering connections. A study by Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) explored how a variety of underrepresented and non-traditional students felt they *fit in* to academia. They found that simply having classmates of similar age, gender, race, or class did not alone foster sense of belonging. This inability to fit in may contribute to higher levels of

underrepresented students leaving college before obtaining a degree (Just 1999; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997).

To explore sense of belonging for rural students, it is important to consider how their geographic backgrounds have shaped their lives because it is their experiences prior to college that will inform their sense of belonging on campus with other peers from urban, suburban, and international locations. These pre-college lives include past experiences and hobbies, traits and values, learned behaviors, social and academic skills, and more.

Social Reproduction Theory: A Framework for Exploring Rural Students

The notion of place as used in human geography and philosophy, in connection with Bourdieu's social reproduction theory and conceptualization of field, habitus, and capital, are concepts that can be used to better frame and understand the experiences of rural students in higher education. These theories work particularly well in tandem as they serve to situate pre-college experiences and backgrounds as important to the identity formation of rural students, and help unpack how geographic background impacts the ways a rural student moves through their college years, experiences sense of belonging, and negotiates the various power dynamics at play within a college campus.

What follows is a brief overview of social reproduction theory, exploring the foundations of field, habitus, and capital in order to situate these ideas in relation to the concept of *place* and to each other. Although three distinct concepts in Bourdieu's writing, field, habitus, and capital work in tandem with one another and cannot be separated out without fetishizing, minimizing, or piece-mealing these concepts (Fine, 2010; Maton, 2008). While they each stand alone, they are intended to be used together

as a way to understand the complex interactions between individuals, their dispositions, and various situations and settings.

It is critical to note that while definitions will be provided to help elucidate these concepts, Bourdieu himself did not like “professorial definitions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 95) and each of these concepts underwent significant adaptations throughout Bourdieu’s extensive career. Beyond a singular, static definition, Bourdieu sought these ideas to be fluid and relational. These “open concepts” (p. 95) were an intentional response to rejecting positivism. As Bourdieu states, “[These] concepts have no definition other than systematic ones, and are designed to be *put to work empirically in systematic fashion*” (p. 96). To assist with an understanding of all three concepts, the analogy of playing a game will be used to illustrate the ways in which all three concepts connect with one another, a helpful example employed by Bourdieu himself as well as others (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1993a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Maton, 2008).

Field

The first of three interconnected concepts, Bourdieu defines a field as “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). In today’s complex societies, an innumerable number of fields exist such as artistic, religious, economic, education, or literary fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 2005). Fields are not deliberately constructed. Rather, they should be seen as socially constructed and only carry meaning through relationships between the field itself, agents (i.e., individuals) within the field, and various forms of power and capital within the field. Exact boundaries of any given field are nebulous and are

“situated at the point where the effects of the field cease” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100). Each field has its own set of laws and operates both autonomously and is structurally homologous with other fields (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 6). Bourdieu is clear to articulate that fields are constant sites of struggle between agents and institutions with unequal strength for the various stakes inherent in each field (Bourdieu, 1993b).

To better illustrate the concept of field, Bourdieu cautiously compares this idea with that of a game (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1993a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Maton, 2008). In any game (field) you have players (agents) who have agreed upon a set of rules (norms, various forms of capital, etc.) through which the game is played. Stakes (struggles) are created through competition which inevitably occurs between players.

The notion of the game exists not as an objective truth, but only in relation to the people playing the game with agreed upon rules and processes which define the game. Being invested in playing the game is what reifies the game as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1984). One game (field) can exist alongside other games (other fields) which have different rules (norms, various forms of capital), and agents (players). Fields might be large (geographic regions of the US, other countries) or small (one side of town versus another).

While agents are important to fields, Bourdieu is clear fields “are systems of relations that are independent of the populations which these relations define” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999, p. 106). Bourdieu believes while individuals are important, research must return to understanding the field. He continues,

it is knowledge of the field itself in which they [agents] evolve that allows us best

to grasp the roots of their singularity, their *point of view*, or positions (in a field) from which their particular vision of the world (and of the field itself) is constructed. (p. 107).

To better understand rural students in higher education, then, one must first interrogate the field of education as a constructed space of power struggle between agents (i.e., students) and institutions (and the other agents such as faculty and staff, policies, and privileged forms of capital therein). Situating rural students as particular agents within the field of education allows us to better understand their specific perspectives. It is due to his careful consideration of relationships such as those between context, (i.e., fields) and individuals that Bourdieu has been dubbed a “thorough-going phenomenologist” (Robbins, 1991, p. 172).

It is easy to conceptualize this discussion of power as a hierarchical discourse that supersedes all interactions; however, this view does not account for the ways in which power changes in various contexts nor for how it produces and reproduces itself to restrict individuals. To understand this nebulous definition of power, it is helpful to turn to the work of Michel Foucault (1978). Foucault defines power as “permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (p. 93). In this definition power is, above all, relational and omnipresent.

In the context of rural students in college, power is produced and reproduced through the interactions students have with every aspect of the community including other peers, faculty, staff, the curriculum, etc. Foucault (1978) continues “relations of

power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a direct productive role, wherever they come into play (p. 94). Viewing power as non-hierarchical and context specific is vital in understanding the work of Bourdieu who believed power was “at the heart of all social life” (Swartz, 1997, p. 6) and conflict, an inherent part of any society, was fundamentally about shifting and relational power dynamics across both individuals and institutions.

Habitus

Habitus is the next of the three interconnected concepts pivotal in Bourdieu’s work that can also be helpful in understanding rural students in higher education. Stemming from the work of Aristotle, Elias (2000), and Mauss (1979), Bourdieu (1990) defines habitus as “durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Habitus is seen as durable as it is long-lasting and functions as a *structured structure* in that it is defined by the collective history and objective social conditions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Habitus functions as a structuring structure as it limits and guides the decision making of agents to what is practical or probable for individuals based on past experiences (Bourdieu 1993b; Reed-Danahay, 2005).

Defined another way, habitus can be understood as a “socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). Functioning below the level of consciousness, the habitus creates what Bourdieu calls “orienting practices”—embedded acts that often get synonymized with values (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 468). These practices assist individuals in constructing and evaluating the social world, functioning as “a ‘sense of one’s place’” (p. 468). In the process of orienting the individual and constructing meaning making, the

habitus becomes dynamic—creating, reinforcing, and naturalizing itself in simultaneity. Socioeconomic status is one of several discourses that plays a sizeable role in this process. Holt (1998) describes this relationship well in the following excerpt,

in Bourdieu's theory, resources that are valued in field of consumption are naturalized and mystified in the habitus as tastes and consumption practices. Within the field of consumption, tastes and their expression as lifestyles are stratified on the basis of the objective social conditions that structure the habitus. *Thus, the field of consumption is stratified so that there exist different lifestyles organized by class position.* (p. 3, emphasis mine)

Not only is the habitus structured via class association and access to capital, but “this process leads to consumption patterns which simultaneously serve to express and reinforce the psychological structure of the habitus” (Yenney-Henderson, 2012, p. 13).

Bourdieu believed habitus was a forward-thinking concept as it impacts the choices agents makes as being appropriate or “for” them or “not for” them based on previous experience and reveals ambitions as “reasonable or unreasonable” (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 106). In this way, habitus shapes both current and future actions, which in turn reinforces the structure of the habitus itself. Habitus then becomes a “powerfully generative” concept that simultaneously reproduces and transforms itself and the agents within (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 87). Bourdieu is also clear to recognize that cultural practices related to one's habitus are “automatically classified and classifying, rank-ordered and rank-ordering” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 220). For Bourdieu, social class is formative in the conceptualization of the habitus.

Returning to the game metaphor, habitus is akin to having a “feel” for the game (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 63). A feel for how to play a particular game means a player understands what is acceptable or unacceptable. Often, this knowledge operates without conscious thought on the part of the player. The rules of the game are followed because that is how the game is played. This is how the habitus functions—by embodying agreed upon norms and beliefs at a subconscious level that becomes second nature. The habitus is simultaneously made up of each individual’s culture as well as personal experiences and history. When entering into any *specific field*, an individual uses, in part, their habitus, to navigate the struggles of power inherent in the field.

In better understanding rural students in higher education, then, habitus becomes important in the ways in which rural students may share norms, beliefs, and values of a similar geographic background. Remembering that all rural spaces cannot be assumed to be the same, each rural student also has a unique habitus. However, there are classes of experiences (and thus habitus) which suggests that habitus can be explored across individuals from similar backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1993a). Myriad questions then arise when we consider how these students navigate and understand the field of higher education, which, arguably, is very different than the habitus of rural students.

Capital

In connection with field and habitus, capital is the third interconnected concept pivotal to Bourdieu and it takes many forms. Economic capital centers on financial resources. Social capital can be understood as the various relationships an individual has and the ways in which those relationships can be leveraged for power. The acquired behaviors of an individual by virtue of their habitus is conceptualized by Bourdieu as

cultural capital. Cultural capital includes both implicit or institutionalized knowledge and aspects of societies such as types of knowledge, hobbies, as well as tastes and exposure to various forms of music or art (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998).

Though many academics discuss issues of class, power, and conflict on as an “add on” when using Bourdieusian concepts (Fine, 2010, p. 86), Bourdieu was centrally concerned with the relationships between class hierarchy, oppression, and social reproduction as well as how the relationships between field, habitus, and capital can be used to interrogate these complex connections (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Returning to the analogy of a game, if the specific social structure, or field, is the game itself and having a sense of how to play the game through natural/secondhand knowledge is the habitus, capital, in all its various forms, become the playing chips and trump cards. In this example the number of chips you have determines your relative power in the game. Translated to social reproduction theory, the more capital an individual has that is deemed valuable in a specific field, the better off, and more powerful, he or she is. The value of capital shifts depending on the field and individuals can attempt to grow, maintain, or convert their various forms of capital into different types (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This perpetual shifting value of capital along with attempts at capital conversion and accumulation, create the power struggles that Bourdieu posits are inherent in all fields.

Bourdieu (1986) synthesized these ideas with the following equation: $[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$ (p. 101). This equation highlights Bourdieu’s critical point that practice is not simply a product of one’s background or dispositions (habitus), but rather the interplay between one’s position within a field (capital) and the

struggle of these two concepts within the broader framework of a particular field (Maton, 2008).

Critiques of Bourdieu

While arguably one of the most important sociologists in history (Reed-Danahay, 2005; Robbins, 1991; Swartz, 1997), Bourdieu's social reproduction theory is not without critics. It is often argued Bourdieu's theories are problematic, primarily for being overly deterministic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 2005). Such a reading of Bourdieu positions individuals not as agents of their own lives, but as pawns who have very limited autonomy. Giroux (2001) summarizes this critique as a failure to recognize "both the active nature of domination as well as the active nature of resistance" (p. 91). This removal of personal agency relegates individuals to the lives they were already enculturated to lead.

Bourdieu believed that pessimistic critiques of his theory was due in part of hurried or bad readings (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). He writes,

habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! (p. 133)

Bourdieu is not arguing that it is impossible for an individual to have agency. Rather, he is claiming agency can be difficult to employ, perhaps specifically from particular habitus or social positions due to relations of power, especially in relation to economic capital.

Current research in the United States shows Bourdieu might be correct. A recent study from Carr and Wiemers (2016) illustrates lifetime earning mobility has steadily

declined since the 1980's in the United States. With limited economic mobility comes more limited opportunities to expand one's various forms of capital through education, economic mobility, or geographic mobility. One's habitus, then, remains largely unchanged and it becomes more likely that an agent will remain in the same social class they were born into. In attempting to understand the complex relationship between habitus and individuals, Bourdieu may have posed one of the greatest sociological questions of all time; to quote Alain Touraine (as cited in Reed-Danahay, 2005), Bourdieu forces us to ask "how can an individual have freedom while captured in multiple constraints and determinisms?" (p. 16).

Another critique social reproduction theory has less to do with Bourdieu and more so with the "explosive contemporary growth" of the concept of capital, specifically that of social capital (Fine, 2010, p. 51). After Bourdieu, James Coleman (1988) and Robert Putnam (1993) became the leading figures in social capital, leading the concept far from a Bourdieusian understanding and into one focused on rational choice and political theory. Fine (2010) argues that so many scholars since Bourdieu have had a hand in (re)defining social capital that the term has become so broad as to mean anything in any situation, thus losing the potency it had when conceptualized by Bourdieu in relation to field and habitus.

While it is important to give weight to these various critiques, the foundational concepts of Bourdieu's work can be helpful in multiple ways when thinking about how to better understand rural students in college. First, Bourdieu provides a lens through which we can see the ways in which intersecting identities shape one's individual context. In the case of rural students, a common geographic background is often met with the

common socioeconomic status of being poor (Farrigan, 2014). This clearly shapes the habitus of rural students—their ways of being in, knowing about, and experiencing the world.

Secondly, the habitus of a rural student impacts the ways in which they are able to engage with and gain various forms of capital. For example, while social relationships may be strong in their communities, rural students may not feel equipped to build the same types of social relationships once in college. Similarly, for those rural students who attend an urban institution, they may not feel as though they possess the right *kind* of capital—that of a largely upper-middle to upper-class culture—to connect with others.

These disconnects, brought forth by the habitus shaping the unique experience of the rural student, may in turn play a significant role in how rural students experience college. Put simply, Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory provides a framework to remind academics that research is relational and involves not just individuals, but their backgrounds, social positioning, and current context. To try and evaluate one in isolation of the others is to ignore the complex workings of power and the ways these distinct ideas work to (re)inscribe hierarchy and oppression in various forms.

Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory provides a lens through which researchers can begin to explore the complex ways a rural student’s geographic background and sense of place impacts their experiences in college. Such an exploration creates openings for several lines of inquiry to better understand rural students in higher education and begin to address current gaps in literature on this student population.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the significance, methodology, ethical considerations, and limitations of this study. In order to best understand these components, it is helpful to restate the purpose of this research. This study aims to explore the following primary research question:

- How might sense of belonging take shape for rural students at a large, urban university?

Secondary research questions include:

- How do rural students at a large, urban university understand and define rurality for themselves?
- How do rural students at a large, urban university understand intersecting identities as complicating their experiences in college?
- How do university sponsored programs, student services, or departments help shape and produce sense of belonging for rural students at a large, urban university?

Methodological Framework

In order to understand the ways in which rural students experience belonging and make meaning of their rural backgrounds in college, this study utilized a post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) framework. The term *framework* is intentionally chosen as PIP employs a rigorous, but still flexible method for analysis depending upon how the data calls to be studied (Vagle, 2014). PIP serves as a framework through which meaning making can occur, but not through any single step by step method of analysis.

Rooted in post-structuralism, PIP is one strain of many that has stemmed from older, more traditional forms of phenomenological inquiry. At its most basic, phenomenology is the study of various phenomena within the world. Phenomena can be anything; as Moran and Mooney (2002) state:

The phenomena of phenomenology are to be understood in a deliberately broad sense as including all forms of appearing, showing, manifesting, making evident or “evidencing,” bearing witness, truth-claiming, checking and verifying, including all forms of seeming, dissembling, occluding, obscuring, denying, and falsifying (p. 9).

The particular ways in which a phenomenon is approached to be studied, and how an understanding of a phenomenon can be understood, has led to multiple variations of the methodology that rely on differing theoretical assumptions.

Origins of Phenomenology

Husserl’s original school of phenomenology centered on the concept of finding the essence, or true experience, of a phenomenon. Husserl felt there was a pure experience to be unearthed and studied through an exploration of one’s experience within a specific phenomenon. For Husserl, subjects could not be removed from the rest of the world. Therefore, meaning making is created in the relationship between the subject (person) and object (phenomena). Meaning making is then understood as an act directed at an object with the goal of being able to describe the true essence of a phenomenon. Contemporary phenomenologists adhering closely to this descriptive, Husserlian understanding of phenomenology such as Amedeo Giorgi (2009) have moved from seeking an essence to identifying “invariant structures” of a phenomenon and outlined

clear methodological approaches to discover such structures. Descriptive phenomenology relies heavily on the importance of bracketing, or separating, one's thoughts as a researcher in order to arrive at the purest form of understanding the phenomena in question.

Martin Heidegger, Husserl's student, took his own stance on phenomenology, putting the methodology in conversation with hermeneutics. Freeman and Vagle (2013) discuss this relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics as closely grafted and situate *being* at the center of what is to be studied. In this way, phenomenological questioning naturally transitions from questions of knowing/discovering a true essence to more ontological questions, or concerns of being. "Phenomena, in this case, are conceived as the ways we find-ourselves-in the world—In-love, in-pain, in-hate, in-distress, in-confusion" (Vagle, 2014, p. 38). Since Heidegger, phenomenologists such as Max van Manen (1997) have continued to develop this hermeneutical approach to phenomenology with an emphasis on remaining mindful that hermeneutical phenomenology is inherently interpretive.

Post-Intentional Phenomenology

Post-intentional phenomenology is an attempt to open up phenomenological methodologies outside of the descriptive-interpretive dichotomy and imagine phenomenological inquiry in connection with poststructuralist thought (Vagle, 2014). Vagle conceptualizes PIP as a *through-ness* that recognizes movement and fluidity. He continues,

although phenomenological research grounded in a 'through-ness' conception is still an ontological project, it moves from a focus on being to a focus on

becoming. This then allows us to see intentionality as intentionalities, i.e., as multiple, partial, fleeting meanings that circulate, generate, undo, and remake themselves. In a ‘through-ness’ conception there is not a linear link between subjects and objects. (p. 41)

This partiality and multiplicity inherently recognizes humans engage in the world not in isolation, but as individuals with histories and myriad identities that shape experience. PIP is also dialogic. Data is not only filtered through the beliefs of the participants, their willingness to share, and their ability to make meaning from their experiences, but also by one’s own interpretations as a researcher, theoretical concepts that may illuminate the phenomenon being studied, the site of the phenomenon, and the history/narratives at work in a particular context.

Within PIP, participant interviews do not become a privileged means of understanding a phenomenon. Rather, the illumination of a phenomenon happens in the fluid coalescing of interviews, theory, and researcher post-reflexion—all sites of phenomenological material (i.e., data; Vagle, 2014). This attunement to fluidity and interpretation in experience is complex, yet is an immense benefit. Just as the entire world is being (re)produced and by discourses such as power, knowledge, and privilege, so too is this study. To claim a qualitative exploration of the human experience can rise above these ubiquitous discourses would mean disregarding the contextualization and grounding of this study in the lived experiences of individuals, which I believe is the ultimate purpose of phenomenological inquiry.

Chapter two outlined the impact of sense of belonging on a variety of outcomes in college including academic performance, persistence, graduation rates, and overall

satisfaction with the college experience. Clearly, sense of belonging is an important phenomenon to explore with rural students who, as discussed, often face myriad challenges in higher education. PIP emerges as an effective methodology for this exploration when one considers the multiple complexities inherent in this research.

First, although participants share a geographic background as rural, the exact conceptualization of this concept may differ between individuals. Second, participants create meaning as individuals within a given habitus (context) through their multiple identities, experiences, and interactions. As a post-structural scholar, I recognize the partiality and fluidity of this meaning making process. Third, my post-structural lens also requires recognizing meaning as co-constructed—in this case between myself and the participants. This co-construction requires me as a researcher to remain attentive to my own positionality, assumptions, and beliefs. It is within the margins of exploring these multiple, varied, and partial constructions of experience that a more dynamic understanding of the rural student experience can be unearthed. PIP provides space to explore the phenomenon of belonging with these participants while also allowing for potential differences in the conceptualization of rurality; the various other, intersecting, identities of participants; as well as the role of myself as the researcher.

Methods

Location

This study is situated in exploring the tensions and phenomenological intensities that rural students may experience with sense of belonging when attending college in an urban environment. An urban university was selected as many existing studies on rural students have been conducted in researcher-identified rural or suburban locations using

existing post-positivist definitions of rurality. Exploring the rural student experience at an urban institution contributes to existing literature in an exciting new way and incorporates the importance of considering geographic background and place, as well as the Bourdieusian concepts of field and habitus in the development of sense of belonging in college.

As of Fall 2018, Midwest Urban University has an undergraduate student population between 20,000-35,000 students from all 50 states and over 120 countries, although the majority of students hail from the university's home state. The university is located in an urban setting of over 250,000 people in the Midwest region of the United States. The undergraduate population is roughly 50% female and 20% of undergraduates identify as students of color.

Participants

Ten students participated in this study exploring the ways in which sense of belonging might take shape for rural students at a large, urban, university. Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- Be 18 years of age or older
- Be born and raised in the United States (domestic students only)
- Be a currently enrolled undergraduate student at Midwest Urban University (MWUU) and have attended for a minimum of 2 years post high school enrollment.
- Self-identify as spending the majority of their pre-college years in a rural environment within the United States.

In what follows, the rationale for these participation criteria is outlined. Setting a minimum age limit of 18 allowed for ease in IRB approval. Additionally, as participants

must have attended MWUU for a minimum of two years, it would be rare for a student to fit the other participation criteria and not already be 18 years of age.

Participants were also required to be currently enrolled undergraduate students at (MWUU) who have attended the institution for at least two years post high school enrollment. The qualifier of *post high school enrollment* was important as MWUU has a high population of students who complete college coursework on campus during their high school years for dual credit. Despite sometimes graduating from high school with as many as 60 college-level credits, these students are still considered new, entering freshman when they begin at MWUU unless they first attend another college or university. Although these students are able to earn dual credit and experience college curriculum while in high school, they are unable to participate in student clubs, organizations, or athletics at MWUU and they also do not have access to many of the university's resources including counseling or academic support services. Exclusion from university resources, opportunities, and organizations constrains these students' abilities to engage fully on campus, at least during the duration of their dual enrollment time.

Limiting participants to those who had been on campus for a minimum of two years post high school enrollment better ensured that participants had several years in which to experience the university setting as a college student with full access to university resources, opportunities, and organizations. While most qualitative studies on rural students emphasize the experience of the first-year, I was interested in speaking with students who are further along in their college careers in order to better understand not only initial transitions into college, but how an individual's sense of belonging has (or

has not) changed over time. Requiring two years of experience at the university post high school enrollment provided participants with many experiences from which to draw.

Participants were also required to self-identify as spending the majority of their pre-college years in a rural environment within the United States. As discussed previously, this emphasis on self-identification is a rejection of more restrictive, post-positivist definitions of rurality and differs from previous research on this population in order to potentially allow for a unique contribution to the field. Currently, for the purposes of this study, I conceptualize rurality in the following ways. First, rural is a geographic place wherein population size is small and access to other larger cities or towns is limited (by distance, lack of public transportation, etc.). Second, my conceptualization of rural places includes an understanding of these communities as tight-knit, where crime is relatively low, and the majority of job opportunities do not require college degrees. Third, I also conceptualize rural places as often sites of decreased opportunity to gain forms of cultural capital that translate as useful in spaces of higher education due to factors such as increased chances of population homogeneity (in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, etc.) as well as limited community financial resources.

Key to this conceptualization are two reminders. First, this conceptualization does not presuppose students with rural backgrounds operate from within a deficit framework; however, there are differences to be acknowledged between rural and suburban or urban places. Rural places do have their own forms of beneficial social and cultural capital, but the ways in which capital takes shape and is valued is often different between rural communities and spaces of higher education.

For example, previous research has well documented the robust and important interpersonal relationships (social capital) in rural places (Elder & Conger, 2000) and even the ways in which these relationships can strengthen a student's chances of enrolling in higher education. Yet, once students arrive at college, they often remark they feel ill-prepared for social interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds and often do not understand how interacting with college-level faculty and staff might be different than that of their high school instructors. Similarly, high value cultural capital from their upbringing such as skills in farming and hunting or hobbies such as four-wheeling may not be as highly regarded within the context of higher education. While these forms of social and cultural capital are important "back home," they may not be as conducive or valuable in an urbanized higher education setting that, historically, has prioritized and favored forms of capital that are more cosmopolitan.

Second, it is important to remember that while this constituted my current understanding of rurality, participants undoubtedly conceptualized rurality differently than this, and from one another. It is in this co-creation of rurality between myself as the researcher and participants that a new, more nuanced understanding of this term may arise and why I specifically refrained from using the term *definition* when discussing rurality throughout this study. This exploration of what constitutes rurality and rural spaces was a secondary research question for this project.

Participation in this study was also limited to domestic (i.e., non-international) students. While some international students undoubtedly identify as rural, it is likely their experience with sense of belonging in college is not only impacted by their rural background, but also by the context of their international experience and adjustment to

the culture of not only an urban environment, but of a different country as well. These complex relationships, while interesting, were above the scope of this project. By focusing on domestic students I was able to give the study more bounded parameters which was helpful when analyzing the phenomenological material, drawing conclusions discussing implications for practitioners, or suggesting opportunities for further study.

Participants self-identified in response to emails advertising the study. Emails were sent out to university-affiliated clubs and organizations as well as to specific students who had expressed interest in participating in research on rural students during another research study in the fall of 2017. Snowball sampling was another way participants were recruited as participants told their peers of the opportunity. Participants were compensated for their time with a \$10 gift card after each interview.

Of the ten participants interviewed, nine identified as female and one as male. Seven of the participants grew-up in the same state as the university, two came from a close neighboring state, and one participant spent the majority of his youth in the western US. While the majority of participants identify as white, two participants self-identified as biracial or “mixed,” and one participant has distant Native American ancestry, although she feels as though she passes and identifies as white. Below, a brief vignette of each participant is provided.

Madison is from a small town of roughly 4,000 residents located in the same state as Midwest Urban University. A junior at MWUU, she is interested in majoring in nutrition. She loves fashion and grew up showing animals for 4H. She has a lot of hometown pride for the people and places in her community. She was homecoming queen of her local high school and graduated with roughly 62 other students. Growing up

feeling more liberal than many people in her hometown, Madison came to MWUU to expand her horizons and expose herself to different types of people. She felt as though her transition to college was smooth, as her older brother had also attended MWUU, so she was familiar with the campus. Although Madison reports having some struggles with academics at MGUU, she is glad she is at the university. She has previously been involved in the student nutrition club and is also in the process of applying for jobs to work while in school. She described herself as a “super personable” and extroverted person.

Zoe graduated with 25 other students from her high school in a small town roughly two hours from MWUU. Zoe grew up on her 40 acre family farm and recalls doing a lot of outdoor activities such as four wheeling and snowmobiling. She describes herself as a “small town girl living in the city” and wants to make a difference in the world. She grew up gardening with her grandmother, which lead her to a major in Plant Science and a minor in Agriculture Communication. She identifies as more conservative and religion is also very important to her. Zoe was active in a wide variety of high school activities including tennis, track, softball, basketball, Future Farmers of America, her church youth group, and many musical activities. She has remained very active in college as well, taking part in religious student organizations, a sorority, and various roles in student government. She has done well academically, but did struggle with Chemistry in her first year.

Jessica describes herself as a very sharp-witted, but introverted individual. A current junior at MWUU, Jessica is studying animal science. Originally she is from a small town about 70 minutes from the university; however, she attended most of high

school in a neighboring community after realizing she would have more educational opportunities. Since coming to college, Jessica has gotten involved in a sorority and has learned how to cope with some mental health concerns. She has struggled with some academic-related issues, but is feeling more confident as time goes on at the university.

Jake is a senior from a small city of about 400 people in the western United States. Although his town is small, he did grow up about 20 minutes outside of a city of roughly 110,000 people. He is studying Economics with a minor in Political Science. He was born in the same state as MWUU, but moved to Montana when he was in elementary school. He describes himself as smart, but never had to apply himself until college. For Jake, the academic transition to college was rough, especially as a first-generation student. He considers himself a “ambitious, hard working...and down-to-earth social guy.” In high school he participated in debate and while in college he has gotten heavily involved in the economics club.

Ann is from a town of about 3,000 people about three hours north of MWUU. Graduating in a class of roughly 60, Ann reported she did not feel academically prepared to come to college and found the transition difficult. Identifying as mixed-race, she had also never encountered a lot of racial or ethnic diversity prior to college and struggled to fit-in initially. A junior at MWUU, Ann is interested in pursuing a career related to public health. She is very involved on campus and even started her own student organization for first-generation and multicultural students.

Mary, a junior at the university, grew up on a working dairy farm about 150 miles from MWUU and has older sisters who attended the university. She grew up active in many activities including 4H and felt as though the transition to college was fairly easy

both socially and academically. She credits part of the academic transition to her ability to earn college credits via a dual enrollment program at her local high school. Since arriving at MWUU she has gotten involved in a sorority as well as a few clubs. She feels very at home in both the country and the city. Describing herself as “very social,” Mary is studying Spanish and criminology with the hopes of working with youth after graduation.

Andrea is from a small town of about 2,500 people in a neighboring state and graduated high school with roughly 50 others in her class. A senior at MWUU, she is studying communications and geographic information systems. Describing herself as a resilient, funny trailblazer, Andrea was very involved in higher school activities including wrestling. She took advantage of all seven AP classes her high school offered, but wished she had had more options. She identifies as white, but does have Native American ancestry on her dad’s side. At MWUU, Andrea has appreciated the ability to be her own person and enjoys the anonymity of a large school located in an urban environment.

Lucinda is a junior majoring in American Studies. Since age nine she has lived in a small town of roughly 550 people located about 2.5 hours from MWUU. Her family lived on a hobby farm and until recently kept animals. Lucinda was very involved in high school and was a 4H state ambassador. She was also able to earn college credit through a dual enrollment program based in her high school. Describing herself as hardworking and ambitious, Lucinda hopes to attend law school after graduation. When not in school, Lucinda works full-time and maintains part-time work during the academic

year. Lucinda describes herself as “more conservative than she should be” and believes growing up in a small town allows her to connect with wider groups of people.

Laura is a junior from a small town of 4,500 people roughly 50 minutes north of MWUU. She is studying nutrition and has found some of the science classes challenging in college. Having not had a positive experience with the school district in her hometown, Laura actually transferred to a large school system about 20 minutes away during high school. Laura was also able to study abroad for a year in high school, something she plans to do again in college. Laura’s favorite days at MWUU are when the football team is playing at home and everyone on campus is hanging out.

Rebecca, a junior, is an honors student majoring in Political Science with a minor in psychology. She is from a small Midwestern town of about 2,500 residents. Although she identified as living in a rural community growing up, since coming to college Rebecca calls her hometown “pseudo-rural” due to living roughly 30 minutes outside a city of roughly 250,000 people. Rebecca identifies as “extremely liberal” and is very active at MWUU in a variety of student leadership positions. Her transition to college was very challenging, but she has since found her place at the university.

Collection of Phenomenological Material

As is common with phenomenological inquiries, interviews were one source of phenomenological material for this research project (Vagle, 2014). Semi-structured interviews allowed the conversation to be guided by the participant in larger part than structured interviews and provided rich detail (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Two interviews of approximately 60 minutes each were held with all participants individually. Multiple interviews provided the opportunity to ask follow-up questions for clarification, to delve

more deeply into the experiences of participants, and allowed for greater rapport building between participants and myself as the researcher (Vagle, 2014).

The first interview primarily focused on guiding questions (Corbin & Morse, 2003) related to understanding the participants' backgrounds prior to arriving at Midwest Urban University (MWUU) and initial transitions into the university (see Appendix A for interview questions). The second interview more deeply explored participants' experiences with belonging at MWUU as well as intersections of their identity (see Appendix B for interview questions). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. In addition to participant interviews, theory and researcher post-reflexion were also used as phenomenological material. Below, a discussion of the way in which these three forms of material work together to create meaning is explored.

Analysis of Phenomenological Materials

As discussed previously, phenomenology as a methodology retains close ties to philosophy and theory. In order to assist in the intertwining of theory, I utilized the concept of plugging in and *thinking with theory* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Jackson & Mazzei (2012) view plugging in as a method of thinking with theory in which the production of new knowledge emerges as a process that unfolds from the chaos of endless possibilities between the phenomenological material, the context of what is being studied, and the positionality of the researcher. This dynamic process of making and unmaking theory (also called an *assemblage*) requires drawing conclusions from the “connectivities *emerged in between* data and theory” (p. 2).

In this way, no one source of phenomenological material (i.e., interviews, post reflexion, and theory) becomes more or less important than the others. Rather, all three

work together to create new knowledge productions and lines of inquiry. This method of analysis remains in-line with PIP as the method calls for complicating understandings in the creation of new knowledge as opposed to searching for knowledge across themes. Specifically, the work of Malpas (2018), Massey (1997, 2005), Trigg (2012), and Bourdieu (1984, 1986) were used to examine the phenomenological material via plugging in and thinking with theory.

For interviews, each transcription was read over for initial reaction and thoughts via a whole-part-whole analysis as outlined by Vagle (2014). This process requires a reading of the text in its entirety followed by close line by line readings with notes, memos, and questions for follow-up. Additional iterations of line-by-line readings were then conducted for each individual interview. Throughout these readings I paid particular attention to detail moments of the post-intentional concepts of intensity, productions, and provocations.

The Deleuzian concept of “intensity” is defined as “the characteristic of the encounter [which] sets off the process of thinking” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016). Examples of intensities identified throughout the phenomenological material included specific stories from participants and questions asked during the interview that sparked new lines of inquiry, connections, or thought processes. An investigation of *productions* and *provocations* required drawing attention to moments in the phenomenological material that illustrate the phenomenon of belonging coming into being. These moments may be specific instances (provocations) or may come into being over time (productions) (M. Vagle, personal communication, June 2017). Provocations

and productions were also identified through exploration of post-reflexion materials such as memos and reflective journaling.

Questions of Validity and Trustworthiness

Inherent in plugging in as an analytical approach, as well as PIP as a methodological framework, is a commitment to remain attuned as a researcher to assumptions and presumed knowledge of a phenomenon. Post-intentional phenomenology is, in many regards, very similar to traditional qualitative research in that it is interpretive and empathetic (Stake, 1995) with less interest in finding a single, valid truth than positivist strains of quantitative work. Within phenomenology, numerous scholars have taken up the notion of trustworthiness with validity requiring sustained engagement and openness with the phenomenon and the participants (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1997). This sustained engagement certainly relates to time spent studying the phenomenon and collecting material through interviews, observations, etc. However, another critical component of this engagement and openness in post-intentional phenomenology is post-reflexion.

Post-reflexion plan. Post-reflexion stems from the long history of bracketing in qualitative research. Historically, bracketing has served as an attempt to suspend researcher knowledge in order to analyze data objectively (thus supposedly giving validity to findings) and has been used by many phenomenologists (Giorgi, 1997). Dahlberg (2006) and Dahlberg et al. (2008) advocated for a different concept, called bridling—an interactive, ongoing, and forward-thinking process of containing a researcher’s pre-understandings of a phenomenon so that a researcher may remain open to the phenomenon in question.

In PIP this setting-aside of researcher knowledge required in bracketing, and to a lesser extent bridling, is understood to be not only impossible, but undesirable. Rather, PIP acknowledges the researcher is inexorably intertwined with phenomenological material and that it is at these intersections of researcher/participant interpretation and theory that meaning is co-constructed. However, it is still vital within post-intentional phenomenology to reflect critically and interrogate the ways in which the positionality of the researcher impacts new knowledge productions.

Acknowledging the critical role post-reflexion assumes in post-intentional phenomenological research, I employed a wide-variety of post-reflexion activities throughout the study including an initial statement of assumptions, knowledge, and beliefs as well as a positionality statement outlining my own identities, (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Vagle, 2014). An understanding of my own positionality is critical as this helps situate myself as a researcher to my topic as well as clarify the ways in which my world view(s) may impact my research project(s). Writing these statements allowed me as a researcher to bring more clarity and awareness to the ways in which my own lived experiences as a white, middle-class, able-bodied woman with rural and working-class roots impacted analysis of the data. Chapter one outlined my own positionality in regards to this study.

Post-reflexive journaling and memoing also occurred throughout the research process in order to continually interrogate my relationship with the research as well as moments of connection, disconnect, assumptions, questionings, and disbeliefs (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Vagle, 2014). Reflexive journaling took place immediately after each participant interview as well as after each time I engaged in analysis to keep track of

changes and nuances in my interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). During analysis of phenomenological material, memoing assisted in capturing my wonderings about research process, highlight and challenge assumptions, as well as surface opportunities for further inquiry throughout the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Vagle, 2014). This process also allowed me to attentively unpack the inherent interpretive and interactive process of qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). Journaling and memoing also provided an audit trail to illustrate the thoroughness of the study.

Throughout my post-reflexion plan, I also engaged in a form of electronic member checking which I called member consultation (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). Although knowledge production in post-intentional phenomenology is created through more than just participant experience, I felt that consulting with participants on initial findings was an imperative rooted in respect for the time and stories they shared. These consultations provided an opportunity to confer with participants on further questions, provocations, or productions I saw arising throughout the analysis process. These consultations also served as a touch point to ensure a sense of “ring[ing] true” to the general experiences of participants (Fetterman, 1989, p. 21). Being clear and attentive to this process of discovering meaning *with* participants as opposed to *from* them is pivotal to pursuing validity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Creating a clear, focused write up of findings and analysis is also important to pursuing trustworthiness. Through my write-up of findings and analysis, I aimed to provide a clear “coherence criterion,” otherwise understood as path readers can follow to trace a researcher’s understanding of a phenomena that lends validity to the study (Kvale,

1989). Thick description assisted with this process, as it allows readers to hear directly from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations. Ethical considerations were taken into account when handling all aspects of this study. Phenomenological materials were stored on a private, password protected laptop to which only the researcher had access. Paper notes and analysis were kept in a locked cabinet when not in use. In order to maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from participants' experiences and all participants were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym. For participants who did not self-select a pseudonym, one was selected on their behalf.

Limitations. This study is limited in a variety of ways. First, as a phenomenological study, I am purposefully interacting with a small number of participants. While this research method is specifically employed to delve deeply into the experiences of participants, it also limits the broad generalizability of findings. For this study, participants were largely female, white, and grew-up in the same state as Midwest Urban University. Second, this study is also constrained by only researching participants attending a single institution. Third, this research is impacted by my own positionality, assumptions, and biases as a researcher. Although steps have been outlined to acknowledge and attend to my own positionality, my involvement as a researcher has shaped the ways in which meaning has been created in partnership with participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: STUDY FINDINGS

This post-intentional phenomenological study aims to explore the following primary research question: how might sense of belonging take shape for rural students at a large, urban university? In pursuit of understanding this phenomenon, three secondary research questions are explored:

- How do rural students at a large, urban university understand and define rurality for themselves?
- How do rural students at as large, urban university understand intersecting identities as complicating their experiences in college?
- How do university sponsored programs, student services, or departments influence and produce sense of belonging for rural students at a large, urban university.

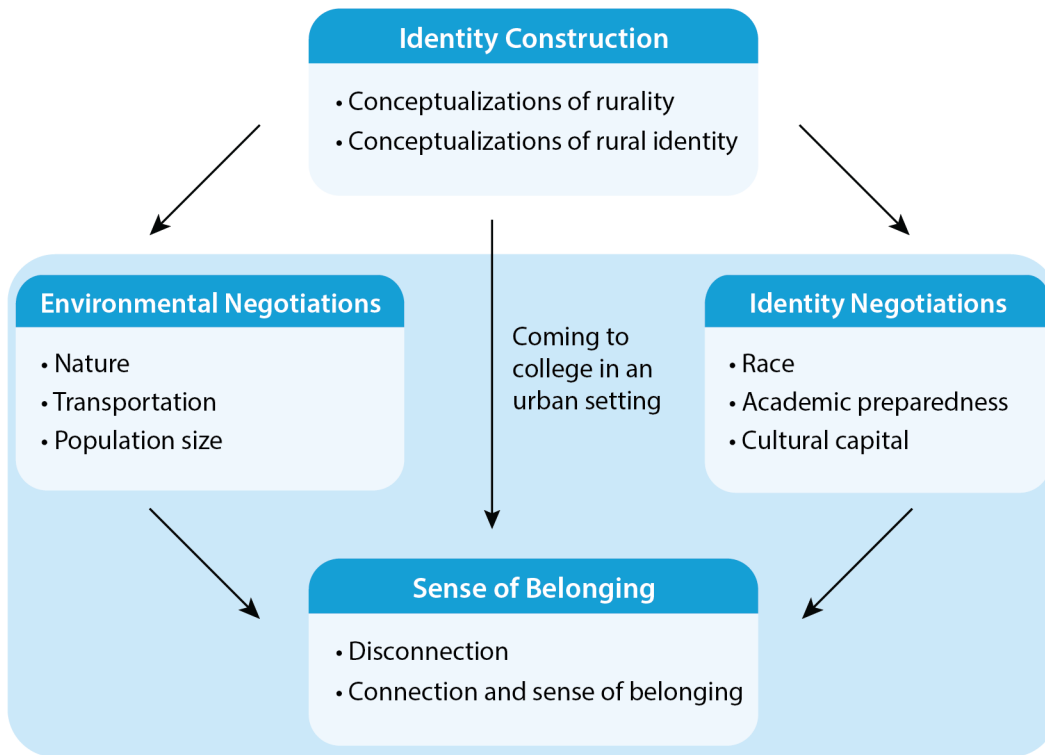
Ten self-identified participants were interviewed in exploration of these questions. These interviews served as one means of phenomenological material (data) through which to explore rural students and better understand the phenomenon of belonging in college. Researcher post-reflexion and thinking with theory served as additional opportunities for phenomenological material. Together, these points coalesced into four distinct productions (i.e., areas of interest from the assemblage of phenomenological material): identity construction, environmental negotiations, identity negotiations, and sense of belonging. Within each of these productions arose several additional provocations (i.e., elements that give rise to the larger production category).

This chapter provides in-depth explorations of these four productions and their associated provocations through the coalescence of participant interviews, thinking with

theory, and researcher post-reflexion. Although a divergence from more traditional presentations of qualitative findings, post-intentional phenomenology (PIP) intentionally integrates all three sites of phenomenological material in presentation of study findings. This integration serves as a reminder that no single source of phenomenological material is privileged; rather, each source offers key insights. It is within the convergence of all three sites of phenomenological material that new knowledge and understandings emerges. Depending on the production or provocation being discussed, one site of phenomenological material may be more heavily discussed than others, but all three commix to produce and reproduce a possible understanding of the phenomenon.

First, the production of geographic identity is explored to better understand how students conceptualize their rural backgrounds and the impact of these places on their own identity development. Second, cultural and identity negotiations are examined as participants arrive, and move through, college. The term *environmental negotiations* is used to categorize the challenges and surprises participants had to navigate in regards to differences between rural and urban spaces. *Identity negotiations* refers to the challenges and surprises participants faced related to aspects of their identity and sense of selves. It is before, during, and after these cultural and identity negotiations that participants grapple with the phenomenon of belonging. Figure 1 illustrates the ways in which I see these productions and provocations working separately and in tandem to produce sense of belonging for rural students.

Figure 1



Creating the Rural Self: Identity Construction

In order to understand how rural students find belonging in college, it is helpful to explore how these students understand the concept of rurality and the ways in which growing up in a rural setting has impacted who they are as individuals. Two provocations arose out of analysis with the phenomenological material. The first is *conceptualizations of rurality*. This provocation explores the various ways in which rural students understand rural places—the land, the people, and even an exploration of cultural stereotypes. The second is *conceptualizations of rural identity*, or the ways in which rurality shapes the sense of self that rural students hold.

Conceptualizations of Rurality

When asked how they envision rural places, participants often first discussed their hometowns. Oftentimes these conversations were fraught with a tension to both defend and critique the ways in which their home communities, and rural spaces more broadly. As Madison explained,

Oh, [my hometown's] got nothing going on...like super boring. But also it's, like, very, like, free there. It was, like, very low maintenance to live in [my hometown]. It was very, like, you're not stressed out living [there]. You know, like here [in the city] it's like you gotta pay for, like, everything. The culture, like, back in [my hometown] was, like, designer jeans and it was living on a farm. And it was showing cattle. Showing sheep pigs chickens, what have you. You know? And it was just, like, being a real lady and being nice. I really love [my hometown], like... definitely it was just very repetitive. It was, like, you know, day-in day-out and not lot of things going on unless there's a big events going on such as the county fair or the school play etcetera etcetera or you know like homecoming etcetera.

Andrea, too, shared a similar dichotomy between critique and defense of rurality and her hometown,

Definitely you get to know everyone, everyone who knows everything about you which could be nice because.....like in high school you maybe have.... just feel like you have more support from people. It is like, it's really great to know that you are connecting with people because it's so easy to do that. there's just more

opportunity to form those deeper connections...and really seeing children grow up... I mean it also just sucked because everyone knew, like, if you were getting in trouble and if you weren't and, like, the gossip and the rumors...were just awful, And like... the extreme lack of diversity and you know, people from other cultures just like leaving immediately once they came. I mean I just can't even imagine like coming into [my hometown] being from a different culture and having to experience that.

The fact that participants focused on discussing their hometowns when conceptualizing rurality makes sense when considering the structuring structure of habitus. For these participants, their local communities are the first notions of rurality that come to mind when asked. How they conceptualize rurality is structured by their habitus. While these communities had similarities, each habitus (and participant response) was unique. I connected with the participants' instincts to first discuss their local communities because when I think of rurality, my mind also jumps to my upbringing in rural Illinois. To start conceptualizing an idea (such as rurality) with a memory and experience of something familiar and known makes sense. In this way, each participants' understanding of their rural habitus becomes reinforced and more powerful.

Another aspect of this provocation I found fascinating was the simultaneous defense and critique of each participant's hometown habitus. Throughout our discussions, it was as if participants felt the need to clarify or amend nearly every comment they made about their local community. As someone with a self-identified rural background, I, too, understand the complexities inherent in loving and loathing my hometown. I believe Madison's example of her hometown being "so boring," but also "super chill" and "low

key” conjures a reoccurring theme of many rural students as tightrope walkers. When discussing their local communities and rurality in general they are always careful to never sway too far for or against their local communities. Again, from my own experience, I resonated with the discomfort I felt from participants at times discussing their rural communities. I did, and often still do, struggle with discussing my hometown community to ‘outsiders’—always careful to never seem too critical for fear of derogating, nor too flattering for fear of seeming uncritical. The entirety of the conversations between myself and participants were often largely built upon their hometown communities as complex starting points for understanding rurality. However, participants ‘conceptualizations of rurality did also expand from their childhood habitus.

In addition to discussing their hometowns, participants also discussed rurality in terms of nature, farmland and the business of agriculture, as well as people. Several participants also discussed the importance of recognizing access when discussing rurality. In what follows, each aspect of rurality is discussed in depth to more fully realize the similarities and differences of rural places.

The geography of rurality: nature, history, and access. Most participants conceptualized rurality in terms of openness, farmland, and a connection to nature. Although more than half of the participants did not grow up on farms, nearly every participant situated flat, treeless farmland as important to rural places. Seemingly, the stereotypical picture of midwest cornfields and cattle rang true, even if they themselves had not grow up on a farm. In addition to the acknowledgement of farmland and openness related to rurality, participants also discussed their close relationship to nature

in defining rural places. This included having access to many rivers, lakes, and parks.

As Jake remarked about his small town in Montana,

I mean there was always things to do. It wasn't a lot or like going out to fancy bars and restaurants, but there's things that go on. We had our swimming holes and place to go fishing. Do I guess just more outdoorsy things...mudding in our trucks or things like that.

A part of the relationship between nature and conceptualizing rurality was a connection to history. When asked how she conceptualizes rural places, Zoe recalled the large plot of land her family's house has sat on for generations, as did Madison who remarked that three generations had grown up in the same family home. Mary was drawn to remembering history and nature when asked how she remembered her rural upbringing. Discussing the hill behind her family's decades-old dairy farm she stated, "I can definitely go in one of my pastures and...there is this one hill...and I would always go there. I don't know, just have some alone time." Andrea also equated rural places with nature and history. She remarked,

I think, like, growing up in a small town [we were] just a lot more physical in our action with the local nature and even just like driving on, older or like back roads and walking through forest and, fishing, farming, and gardening...just like a sense of understanding of like where food comes from. Like, what is important and just like...let me just like be at peace, right? I mean just, like, natural. Just feeling [that] this place has been [the same] for so many years and what it probably [will] continue to be...just been like this hill out here in the middle of this farm... you know, probably been out here for all time.

Participants' myriad connections between rurality and nature, agriculture, and history echoes and reproduces common stereotypes of rural places as pastoral and unchanging (Massey, 2005; Thomas et al., 2011). Massey (2005) and others illustrate the ways in which "'nature' and the 'natural landscape,' are classical foundations for the appreciation of place" (p. 137). However, this conceptualization of rurality, while romantic, can be problematic as it reproduces what Thomas et al. (2011) name as the *rural simulacra* of rurality as wild, simple, and escapist.

I believe wholeheartedly that when participants share the ways in which they physically feel nature and history more closely at home and in other rural places, they are telling their truth. What is harder, and perhaps impossible, to untangle is the ways in which stereotypes impact the very ways in which we experience places. Participants' comments allude to a connection with land, simplicity, and unchanging landscapes despite the fact that the areas of their hometowns and homesteads have likely changed dramatically over the years due to industrialization and agriculture practices. Perhaps, in this way, the picturesque return to nature that rurality seemingly provides is more concocted through man-made stereotypes.

A surprising concept throughout participants' discussions of rurality was the ways in which they discussed distance, or more specifically *access*, as another an important part of conceptualizing rurality. Several participants lived many miles from neighbors and felt as though this solitude was an important aspect of conceptualizing rural places. As Mary explained, "I don't know if isolated is the right word, but there's definitely distance... I mean, my closest neighborhood is like a mile away and it's my grandma."

Many participants recounted making special family runs once a month into larger cities for groceries and clothing.

This type of physical distance is typical when rural spaces are discussed and greatly influence the ways in which rurality is often defined (Rural Education in America, n.d.; United States Census Bureau, 2016; USDA, 2017). As discussed in chapter three, several participants grew up much closer to larger cities in their respective states and still identified as rural. From an outsider perspective, it may seem strange these participants, particularly Jake, Laura, and Rebecca, might identify as rural. Certainly, their hometowns do not meet the common criteria for rural places as outlined by the U.S. Census or National Center for Educational Statistics. Nevertheless, the ways in which these participants discussed access to these larger cities as influencing their beliefs that they grew up rural was illuminating. Jake recounted why he did not decide to pursue a dual credit program in high school, despite an opportunity in a nearby city,

Yeah there are some opportunities where you can go in and take classes there [at the city college]. I always thought it was super prohibitive because of just the time to drive and to drive from my house. 10 miles to school, and like 20 miles back to [the city] to go take a class and then in order to come back. It would mean a lot of gas and time.

A lack of transit to these cities further isolated these participants. Laura recounted how a nearby city was inaccessible to younger people due to a lack of public transportation,

A lot of people have cars cause it's like you know some sort of [public] transportation is, like, not there. But now they actually have like one bus that goes through, but that's, like, as of last year or something, yeah.

Rebecca also echoed similar feelings as Laura as she discussed the importance of having a car. Although she and her family routinely grocery shopped in a nearby city, she did not have access to explore the area on her own until she was older. She recounted growing up and hanging out with friends at her local town parks or houses until she was old enough to drive and then “exclusively hung out in [the city].” She continues, “we'd like commute ourselves out there to do things. Um, but in the actual, like, in [our town], we didn't really do anything at all.”

In these examples, the proximity of a larger city was not always helpful to participants, mainly because they were unable to drive until their final few years at home. Even with the ability to drive, time and money were still concerns. These constraints, coupled with a lack of public transportation, kept these students largely rooted in their smaller communities despite geographic proximity to larger cities. For these participants, geographic proximity to larger, more urban spaces was unimportant to their conceptualization of rurality because their ability to access these larger communities was limited.

Throughout my own post-reflexion, this concept of access particularly resonated with me. Based upon the most common federal guidelines, my hometown of 9,000 residents was not rural. Still, my inability to freely access opportunities and amenities of urban areas, or even larger towns, exacerbated my feelings of disconnect from more urban environments. I was fortunate to travel in my youth and see large cities such as New Orleans, New York, Chicago, and Seattle. For most of my adolescence my older sister also lived in a more city-like setting about 60 miles away. I was able to visit her often and attend activities such as museum outings, Irish music concerts, and volunteer

activities such as habitat for humanity. These trips and visits allowed me to expand my worldview and, in many ways, were likely responsible for my desire to attend college in a larger city.

Through these experiences in more urban environments I undoubtedly gained social and cultural capital. However, I was also keenly aware that these same opportunities did not exist in my hometown and should be enjoyed on these travel opportunities or weekends with my sister. Like many of this study's participants, I was not cut-off entirely from experiencing urban environments and building various forms of capital, particularly cultural capital. In some ways, seeing the lack of opportunities to gain cultural capital in my local community heightened my concern later in life that my rural, small-town community had perhaps been inadequate.

Rebecca's remark that she and her friends did "nothing at all" for fun in their small town is another example of how, compared to activities in an urban environment, rural opportunities for fun seem simpler, less exciting, and, at times, unworthy of mention. Rebecca would later go on to explain she and her friends would play at local parks, hang out in basements, and walk around their rural community. These activities are not "nothing at all," but wind up seeming small when compared to opportunities in a larger environment.

This provocation around access from participants and my own post-reflexion illustrate the importance of access to urban locations and accompanying social and cultural capital in the conceptualization of rurality. Connections between rurality and access to social, cultural, and economic capital also opens inquiry into characteristics of

the people who constitute rural places. It was in this discussion on people where, again, participants articulated significant tensions in defining rurality as they simultaneously described, critiqued, and defended the people of rural places.

The humanity of rurality: community, legacy, and homogeneity. When discussing rurality, participants were quick to discuss the types of people they grew up around. Nearly every participant began by describing the many positive aspects of a rural community. Mary described the “community mindedness” of her town by saying,

the people are definitely super willing and super able to help out a lot of student activities. Um, like, when I think about going to sports games, there would be so many community members and not just the parents of the athletes. It would be anyone and everyone. Um, and benefits are definitely a community thing. Um, basically if you are from this community we're going to help you out. So, like that was super, super cool, too, I think.

Echoing similar sentiments, Jake stated,

I think [the people are] pretty friendly. I think we had a pretty strong community. Like I said it was really based around our school and so it was, like, whenever something bad happened, whenever tragedy struck... there would be huge fundraisers and a lot of events put on. I always felt like everybody in the community were united behind whoever was in need and there was a lot of community support—and I mean you can see people on the road and you'd wave and probably smile and things like that.

For Zoe, these activities were largely tied to the churches in her area.

Overall everyone was so kind. And in our community, if someone was having a hard time they would receive help. So there were five churches in my town, which is a lot. Um, and the churches have this fund, like all of the churches contributed to this fund so that if anyone in [the town], like, couldn't pay their heating bill, or needed to buy shoes or boots for their kid for the winter and just couldn't afford it, the church fund would contribute. It didn't matter who you were. Like, it didn't matter if you were religious or not, or even belong to a church. They would like help you out. It's that sort of kindness and when you know community members that I really remember appreciating.

Jessica summarized these types of activities as common in her hometown and defined it as a “good small-town mentality, where you just help someone out who needs it.” This emphasis on community has been illustrated elsewhere (Car & Kafalas, 2009; Elder & Conger, 2000; Howley, 2006) and this provocation reinforces the notion that community is important in rural communities. “Friendly,” “helpful,” and “down-to-earth” were other words and phrases used to describe people in the rural communities of participants.

Many participants noted the closeness of their communities was rooted in, as Ann succinctly phrased it, “everybody knowing everybody.” Madison recounted a situation in which she needed help out of a snowbank,

I remember it was just snowing so heavily this one time I had to go to work and it was just wild and so I was turning...I kind of had to make a wide turn to get over the snowbank [and] of course I just didn't make it. Not even a minute later there was [sic] two people inside the road helping me out. I knew, of course, that one of the guys was a stepdad to one of the guys I graduated with. So it's just a very,

very small town like that. Like, ‘Oh, hey! Your Cole’s dad! Thank you so much!’, you know? And I wore Cole’s jersey for homecoming and stuff so it was a super fun. I mean everybody is like willing to help out.

As discussed in chapter two, social capital and community connections are often very strong and important aspects of rural communities. Nearly every participant had at least a few nice things to say about the comradery of their rural community. Participants also felt as though this close-knit environment was unique to, or at least significantly more present, in rural versus suburban or urban places.

In my own post-reflexion, I recalled my rural hometown as fairly close-knit. I remember numerous benefits our local community had for residents who fell ill or were victims of tragedies such as car accidents and house fires. Nonetheless, this is one area where my own experience and memory seemingly diverges from that of many study participants. Participants recall these benefits and activities as cornerstones of their rural communities and opportunities for social capital and community-building. I do not disagree. However, I also recall thinking these benefits and fundraisers were glaring reminders of how little economic capital most residents of my hometown had. American Legion benefits, donation cans at gas stations, raffle boards—to me these seem(ed) like last resort efforts of individuals who do not have adequate means of social or economic capital.

This is not to say that a rallying community is a bad thing. On the contrary, it is beautiful and empowering. Still, I am quick to move to feelings of sadness and frustration. How sad that the people of these communities are virtually required to band together in times of financial crisis. How disappointing that so often the educational,

occupational, and cultural opportunities are not brought into rural communities to allow them to thrive in the same ways as urban and suburban areas. In my own experience, these moments of rallying rural residents, while admirable, is illustrative of larger societal inequities regarding capital acquisition and geography. In my experience, these economic concerns often seem generational as families in my local community remained in the same town despite increasingly limited occupational options.

Many participants also spoke to the generational lineages that were common in their hometowns. These lineages appeared to greatly contributed to the close-knit community feeling, particularly for participants such as Madison, Zoe, and Mary who were proud of their own family legacies. Yet, not all participants felt similarly. Rebecca discussed this type of legacy in her hometown with a tone of defeat,

Like, generations live in [my town] for some reason that saddened me too like, you're parents went through [this] high school. And now you're going through it, and you just want to have a family here, so that your children can go there too.

Andrea felt as though the complicated generational legacy of her family combined with her small hometown hampered her ability to discover who she was as a person. She explained,

Both my grandma and my grandpa were teachers. Then my grandpa died when my mom was twelve. So he left this positive mark on the town and in the school and when people, you know, find out that I was his granddaughter, they'd be like, 'Oh! I knew so many things about your grandpa!' I definitely felt like...I sort of had an advantage in some ways over someone who came to the town and was, like, new. Like, I was...I don't think I was really popular, but I was well liked

and I was respected by most people, you know? Sometimes I wondered if that was because I was a good person or if it was because, like, my grandma was a good person? So I was always like, ‘Am I really me?’ and ‘What is me?!’ You know?

These participant quotes illustrate the formative power of habitus as well as the desire for many participants to push back against the tradition of remaining in their local communities. In both excerpts, Rebecca and Andrea appear to feel their rural communities enact power over each woman’s development and potential trajectory—showing them what is possible, expected, and assumed. Conversely, Madison, Zoe, and Mary were proud of their familial legacy in their rural communities. The varying opinions on familial legacies in rural places varied dramatically across participants.

This line of inquiry is also one example of the ways in which individual experiences uniquely shape and define understandings of place and, more specifically, rurality. Conceptualizing rurality through an experiential lens allows for multiple understandings of place. Trigg (2012) further develops this definition of place by also situating it as *affective* and *particular*—meaning places are produced and reproduced through our bodily experiences in specific settings. To understand place as experiential, affective, and particular requires place to occupy a space between a participant’s construction of the world and reality. Experiences shape the ways participants understand rurality in ways that may be similar or different from others. None are more right or wrong than another—simply different, equally valid, and contributing to a more nuanced and open understanding of the complications of understanding place.

Another varied experience of participants involved how they interpreted the tight-knit relationships of their rural communities. Building upon her quote that opened this section, Andrea categorized many adults in her hometown as “two-faced” even though “surely, they [the people in her community] would not agree.” Lucinda also recounted a story where the closeness of community members felt more stifling than protective,

She [the town librarian] was like, ‘Oh, did you go to the post office on Saturday?’ I said ‘Yeah, yeah, we did.’ She's like, ‘Yeah, I was sitting across the cafe. We were just watching people, like, figuring out what they were doing!’ Like, Barb you can't do that you know?!

Certainly in my own post-reflexion I recalled questioning whether my hometown was too close for comfort and remember feeling excited to experience a greater diversity of people when I left for college. Many participants also named this as a reason for leaving their rural communities for college.

Nearly all participants agreed there was relative homogeneity in their communities, particularly in regards to race, religion, and political values. Most participants categorized rural places, and their own hometowns, as majority conservative, although Madison reported her hometown was more “open-minded conservatism.” Additionally, most participants discussed the importance of religion, particularly Christian denominations, in their hometowns and rural places more broadly. In her small town in Wisconsin, Andrea noted the strong Catholic presence with religious diversity existing, “not, like, at all.” Jessica also reported a heavy religious presence in her town stating,

There's a lot of Lutherans. There's like four different Lutheran churches within two miles of each other and then another like three ten minutes out of town so there's a lot of Lutherans. There's only, like, one Catholic church but that has a huge-huge following all the time like they're packed constantly, but other than that...not really diverse.

Perhaps unsurprising for a study conducted in the Midwest, all participants also identified their communities as largely white, which several participants said impacted their ability to understand complex issues such as racism when growing up. As Rebecca explained,

Like 99% of my town is White. Um, and so it's kind of this bubble... like, we don't see issues so, like, issues don't exist. And so I think part of that goes into how it was majority conservative. Um, it's just to some degree a lack of awareness.... I think especially being White and actually privileged and, like, being in a school that was entirely White, I just didn't think about it...because I never had to, and I never saw it. My freshman year of high school I remember being in an art class. Um, there was one woman of color in my class, and we had to make a collage of something you're passionate about and...she wanted to, like, act for civil rights, and work for civil rights and she wanted to help end racism. And I remember thinking, being a fourteen year old in this class, like 'Oh, that happened in the 1960's. Like, it's over... racism doesn't exist.' Because I never saw it and I never heard of it.

Rebecca's self described "lack of awareness" closely mirrored my own experience growing up in a rural community. However, my rural hometown was seemingly a bit more diverse. We did have a large population of Latinx people and the

town across the river also had several families of Indian and Asian descent. While these rural places were/are not as diverse as urban locations, they were also not as homogenous as one might assume for the cornfields of Illinois.

The ways in which Madison discussed racism in her dominantly White community also resonated with me. The closeness of a rural community and the importance of relationships can make calling out racist language challenging. As Madison recounted,

[Y]ou know, it was just never brought up in conversation. I don't think people wanted to talk about it because they didn't want to feel uncomfortable... especially like with White people too. I feel like when, especially like in small towns as well, if you call your grandma or your grandpa out for, like, saying the N word....you know there'll be an awkward silence. Every other family member, like everybody knows it's wrong. But nobody calls that out. And that's what I really want to start doing. Like, I definitely...I've been one of those people that have heard that but I just like stood by, and didn't speak up you know. And looking back now that...that was, like, embarrassing. You know, like, personally I should have just said something, you know?

For participants who identified as mixed-race, growing up in a predominantly White community was also challenging. Ann recounted an on-going issue with identifying “where she's from.”

It was, like, this one big incident... I was at work and they really liked me over at my work. They didn't want me to leave when I went to college. They were really good and were good at promoting me and they're just really kind people. But

there was this one co-worker she was like, ‘Oh Ann, I don't mean to be rude but, like, what are you?’ And I'm like ‘American.’ And I got to the point where if people ask me that, I'll just say American and stuff and then sometimes they won't let up and I know a lot of people...even people who grew up in the city...they still like get that like racial like, ‘What are you?!’ I'm like American it doesn't really matter what else...

This interrogative questioning from others made Ann question her belonging at times and, while telling this story, Ann became visibly annoyed with the memory. This excerpt also provides yet another example of a participant defending their community, in this case her co-workers, while sharing a story which may portray rural people or places in a negative light. Lucinda also recounted the challenges she faced with racism as a person of color in her rural hometown.

My mom didn't really speak to us in Spanish that much growing up. So we didn't really grow up speaking much Spanish. But, umm, some kids would be like, ‘Oh, can you speak Spanish?’ I'd be like, ‘Yeah.’ And they're like, ‘Oh say a few words!’ And I was like, ‘Mmm...no thank you.’ Like, I do know a little bit of Spanish, and stuff. But I was like no, I don't really want to stand out or like have people go, ‘Oh! Come listen to her!’ Like, ‘Let's look at our little circus pony!’

These examples from Ann and Lucinda again illustrate the complex ways in which stereotypes coalesce with lived experience to produce and reproduce understandings of rurality. The stereotype of people in rural places as incapable of understanding diversity or interacting in culturally sensitive ways was a reality for Ann and Lucinda. When discussing the people of rural places, including their hometowns, many participants

utilized the language of stereotypes. Tensions again emerged in this discussion surrounding whether or not stereotypes were true or negative. Here again the push and pull of defense and critique was clear. In discussing the archetypes of rurality in her hometown Andrea stated,

It's like here, you know you have a dad that grew up maybe in the town or the town over. He likes to fish, you know he's a farmer and he met his high school sweetheart and they have a few daughters. You know, like, they have a dog and bought a house and stuff like that. Old people, classic old people, you know? Like, old war veterans and stuff and wear their little hats and stuff and they go to the bar. Yeah, that's it. But a lot of them have just, like, been born there and grew up there, they live there, they work there, they have their kids there and stay there forever and they never really get out of that. Its stereotype. I mean, he's got a dog and the dog likes to swim in the water and has a wife and two kids and I think a lot of my area just look up to that stereotype. That is why I had to get out of there. So, it's hard to separate them. All of it is pretty true. Simple people...simple people thinking simple stuff. I think the simple stuff though gets underrated sometimes though, you know?

Andrea illustrates two key ideas in her excerpt. First, she explores the inexorable link between lived experience and stereotypes. She also comments on the challenges of mediating this experience. In one moment she remarks stereotypes are “why I had to get out of there” and in the next breath defends the stereotype of simplicity. Jake, too, discussed the stereotypes of rural people enjoying simplicity. He felt that although the stereotypes were not entirely untrue, they also unfairly characterized rural people.

I think everybody kind of understands what it's like to be bored and just like go out and just drink. That's a huge kind of theme in rural areas. Um a lot more outdoorsy stuff. Um, and I think just less sophisticated I guess. I don't think you intend to find people that have super fine tastes and a lot of things. It's just kind of more crass. It's more a down to earth, that sort of thing when you talk to somebody... and I think a lot of times people in the city might look down on what rural people do for fun. You're going to go drive your truck out in the field, they make sound like you're dumb...

Building upon the notion of stereotypes being complex and rural people being treated unfairly, Zoe remarked,

Like the really, really bad rural stereotypes are, like, [rural people] know nothing about the city. Can't get around, don't know where they're going at anytime. A lot of it is transportation [and] I have actually found that to be pretty true. A lot of my friends have no idea where they are going in the city. Um, and like, [rural people] don't know how to treat people who are different from them, like respectfully. Which I actually find that to be not true. Because I think they try really hard to be respectful. And sometimes they just don't know how. Like, in my class of 28 students, there were no people of color. So I didn't grow up exposed to that at all. So when I got to college like that was a huge learning curve for me. It's like just learning about that, and how to be respectful and how like people ask about their culture nicely, without being rude and offensive and all of that stuff. Yeah but those sort of stereotypes. Um, yeah another stereotype is like generally being ignorant.

Throughout the discussions with participants regarding the conceptualization of rurality and the people who live in rural places, it was interesting to see the mediation between critique and defense—again a tight-rope balancing act of conflicting emotions. While each participant had a different experience growing up, most of them did largely report enjoying growing up in a rural place, even if it was not perfect. When asked, each participant felt as though growing up in a rural place had impacted their identity as individuals in both positive and negative ways.

Conceptualizations of Rural Identity

Participants in this study were very clearly able to articulate ways in which they believed growing up in a rural place had shaped their identity and ways of being. Positive attributes included strong work ethic, maturity, appreciation for nature, and ability to relate to a wide-variety of perspectives. Political ideology was also routinely mentioned.

Work ethic and maturity. In discussing his maturity and work ethic stemming from his rural upbringing Jake stated,

I always felt like maybe we were a little bit more mature and self-reliant growing up in a rural area. I mean a lot of times I feel like there's probably less oversight from parents and we were left to our own devices for better or worse. But a lot of times you just had to figure it out by yourself. Now I live with four other guys and it seems like a lot of things like household maintenance or, like, your car breaks down or whatever it seems like...I seem to be the one a lot of times that they go to.

Jessica echoed similar sentiments regarding the responsible nature of people from rural areas.

There's more chances like for me or for someone who comes from that background to kind of grow up around adults or grow up with more responsibility and that's pretty much the norm for everybody. But, from what I've seen, more of the people that have lived in a small town or who've come from that rural background are a little more... if something needs to be done they do it right away. So I found a little more of that...it's just kind of they grew up a little faster, with a little more responsibility, they take on a little more in terms of what they're willing to do and their follow through I found usually a little more...ah common.

Jake and Jessica's comments echo my own reflection of responsibility and follow-through as explored in chapter one. However, I wonder how our lens of rurality impacts the way we see others. Are we really more responsible, self-reliant, and hard working? Or do we attribute these characteristics to ourselves in order to bolster a sense of pride in, and benefit from, our rural community? How does identifying a rural habitus shape the ways in which we see the world, including others? How do we tease apart these nuances knowing objectivity is a challenging (impossible) vantage point reach? Exactly where and how does experience align with reality to produce a notion of place that is experiential, affective, and particular? These same questions reverberated in my mind as participants also discussed nature and simplicity was important to their rural identity.

Nature and simplicity. Several participants also remarked how a rural upbringing connected them to nature more than others and how this connection helps them appreciate the simplicity in life. As Andrea shared,

Oh I feel like I don't, I don't take things, many things for granted and I just feel like small things, like, I am very content to like be happy with small things or very simplistic things. I don't need a lot to be happy because I'm grounded like I feel more connected to the earth and like in a way that sort of all that you need.

As discussed in previous excerpts, others such as Jake and Rebecca also explored concepts of nature and simplicity related to rural life as a return to simpler needs and desires, particularly when compared to urban places. Mary reported feeling “grateful” she had a different perspective coming from a rural area and that she is “slightly different than a lot of other people.” She also shared in the mentality of appreciating simple things and an “appreciation for life” that she developed caring for animals on her dairy farm.

[The farm was] a real important part of growing up. I wouldn't have had it any other way. I loved it so much. There is just so much you learn and I think one of the greatest lessons I learned on a farm was just the miracle of life, because I was able to see so many animals, like calves being born...just being able to see that life being brought into this world was something I will always value. Like I feel I have such an appreciation for life now and ...I mean, not only did I see [life] come into this world, but unfortunately sometimes I saw it go away as well. And so now, like I just have this appreciation for, for all forms of life, humans, animals. And so that's one thing I really take away from growing up on a farm.

Political ideologies and understandings. The other way in which many participants felt a rural background had shaped them was through an ability to understand multiple perspectives to issues, particularly related to politics. While this ability to “see both sides” came up often, students did feel as though their rural upbringing had

influenced their political ideology as well. Lucinda, Jake, Mary, and Zoe all described feeling more aligned with different aspects of conservative thinking. As Zoe explained,

It [growing up in a rural place] definitely impacts the way that I like to think about things. Because, this is kind of stereotypical, but, like, rural areas are generally more politically conservative as well. And that really shapes the way that you think about things. And even though I might not, like, have a lot of conservative opinions about issues, like those conservative values really shaped the way that like I treat people and about how I want to make an impact on the world.

Here, too, Jake illustrates an ability to understand multiple perspectives and keep political peace while also recognizing his own “middle of the road” politics.

I was always the debater, and argumentative and I earned myself the reputation that just nobody wanted to try and argue with me twice. I didn't like rubbing people the wrong way either. So just kind of got along by not talking about it. But yeah, I feel like I'm probably more um open to some conservative ideas though, too. More so than people I know here that grew up in a very liberal families...So, like, seeing myself somewhere in the middle, I like to argue anyway so I'll take the opposite side of whoever I'm with. I'd say if anything, any conservative leaning ideas I have like I'm probably more pro guns than maybe like your average city resident. So that, I mean probably comes from growing up out in the country.

Conversely, several participants identified as more liberal, which was a disconnect from their rural communities. Madison explained, “Like a lot of my friends in

high school since we were like pretty liberal, [we were just like], “Oh my God we just wanna just like get out of here.” As Ann explained,

I think I like the fact that I can see both sides to a story or a political view. Like, I understand both sides. And it can also makes it hard to choose a side too because I understand where both sides are coming from because I've like seen it on both sides and I understand. Like, I know people who on both sides and I know both sides are good people. And sometimes, like, liberal aspect gets a little loud and I'm just like you need to hear them [conservative arguments] out because they make some good points too, even though I'm a little more liberal leaning. So I think I feel like we're [folks from some rural towns] in the middle of stuff a little more.

Having the opportunity to live in both rural and urban places has likely exposed participants such as Jake and Ann and others to a wider range of political beliefs. Additionally, these participants have experienced the unique gift of living in both urban and rural places where, as illustrated previously, values, customs, and ways of life are disparate. Having this lived experience may or may not sway the political beliefs of these students, but it at least provides many of them contexts for understanding differing opinions. In a similar vein, Lucinda also felt as though her rural upbringing helps her connect with a wider audience, particularly in her job.

I am just more understanding....I can talk to the Ag[riculture] kids. I feel like I can talk to more people. Like one of my co-workers is like ‘Oh, if I went down to this [rural] place I would just, like, they would hate me because of the way I'm dressed.’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, it's probably true. You look like a total

city slicker. Like, you just look like a slick little politician. They would instantly hate you.’

While no two participants’ stories were the same, the similarities regarding the ways in which they conceptualize rurality and discuss their hometown areas was striking, as was the connections across interviews for rurality to impact work ethic, appreciation for simplicity, politics, and the ability to understand multiple perspectives. Interestingly, the similarities between these unique participants did not end at their hometowns, but continued into their experiences at Midwest Urban University (MWUU) as well.

Coming to College: Negotiations of Environment and Identity

When participants discussed their arrival at MWUU, they recalled myriad expected and unexpected challenges that impacted the ways in which they made meaning of their college experience and navigated belonging. Some of these negotiations were confrontations related to a new, urban environment. Categorized as *environmental negotiations*, these include rural and urban difference such as pollution, public transportation, and navigating larger communities.

Other negotiations were more introspective in nature; these *identity negotiations* revolved around participants being forced to confront and reconsider various aspects of their identity including confronting whiteness, engaging with diversity, and generally expanding their worldview. Discussing her arrival at MWUU, Zoe captures many of these negotiations and fears succinctly. She recounted,

[Arriving to college] was really overwhelming. Yeah and I didn't, I didn't really realize the magnitude of what was going on everywhere around me. I feel like I didn't realize that there was constantly activity all the time. Yeah, which was

quite interesting that like, when I went to bed at eleven there were still people walking around the hallways till like 4 am all odd hours of the night. So that was just, interesting to realize. It was kind of overwhelming but I was really excited for it. Like, that's what I waited for, for so long. And I was like 'Yes! This is finally, I'm finally here.' I was so excited I was terrified. But I was really, really excited to finally be here and be on my own. I'm out of [my hometown], I can make new friends and I'm not with the same 28 people anymore. I think I was nervous of screwing up. Or making any big mistakes. Because I didn't really know what I was doing at all. Like, I didn't know how to take public transportation at all. I had to figure out how to use the [university shuttle] and figure out where my classes were and all that stuff. And you know I've been in the same building for like 13 years. So adjusting to that and moving around for my classes was a big adjustment. And like the class load, I only took 16 credits which is not that much, but I was really nervous about that. Um, being surrounded by people. Like one hundred percent of the time it like kind of gave me a nervous breakdown in the first few weeks. Cause I was like, 'Oh my gosh there are people everywhere all the time!' And like I didn't...I never had that growing up. Like 40 acres just us. And outside of that it's just more cornfields. Yeah that was a really weird adjustment, because I was just, it was so weird for me to have people everywhere all the time, and like no privacy at all, it was very interesting cause I never had that before.

Zoe's story illustrates not only the many new challenges she faced at MWUU and within an urban environment, but the stress and complexity of tackling all of these concerns

simultaneously. This section further explores the ways in which participants discussed these various negotiations as well as connections that emerged across participant interviews, theory, and post-reflexion.

Environmental Negotiations

Environmental negotiations faced by participants upon arrival to MWUU can be divided by negotiations with urban life and negotiations with urban (and suburban) people. Reflecting on their adjustment to city life, participants were struck by the differences from their rural environments including proximity to nature, transportation, and population size. As these productions emerged from the participant data and my own post-reflexion, I was continually drawn to Bourdieu's notion of field and the ways in which rural habitus impacts the navigation of urbanicity. These negotiations and power dynamics clearly impacted the development of belonging for participants

Nature. While Ann felt comforted by MWUU's large green lawns and the city's expansive nature ways, she was struck by the changing sky on her first night in the city.

I remember not being able to see the stars. It was really actually kind of upsetting because it was a really nice day, a really nice night. There was like a warm breeze or whatever, but I couldn't see the stars 'cause [*sic*] there's so much light pollution and it made me really sad.

In my researcher post-reflexion I, too, recalled appreciating the greenery and community feel of my college campus located in an urban setting. This bubble of my college campus made initial transitions into a larger field of the city less overwhelming, but not without observable differences. For me, not only was the absence of stars surprising, but I remember looking for lightening bugs. I do not particularly like lightening bugs. I do not

have idyllic memories of growing up in my rural community catching them in mason jars or holding them in my hands. However, I distinctly remember walking around at night during my first weeks in the city and noticing the lightening bugs were absent. Something so mundane yet ever-present about my rural life was absent in this new field of urbanicity.

Living in a city, while exciting, also caused anxiety because I was not sure how things worked. Zoe also recalled a similar anxiety. She stated,

My freshman year I had a lot of classes [on the main campus] and that was actually kind of hard. It kind of stressed me out. I was not used to the city, and I didn't really enjoy being over there so much of the day.

Zoe's unfamiliarity with urban-living made the process of getting to and from her classes exhausting. This exhaustion was caused not only by the difference in greenery and lack of nature, but concerns navigating transportation differently in an urban environment.

Transportation. Many participants discussed the challenges associated with the sudden lack of a car and need to rely on public transportation to navigate a large city.

Andrea recounted her first experience navigating the system.

I was like, 'What? I have to buy a ticket and then I just stand here?' Like, 'There is this sign...wait...what does that mean?' Like, 'the number 3 bus?' I'm just like, 'What?!' And I felt so stupid because I have never been on a bus before, but I never had to and so that's totally, totally different.

Andrea's commentary of feeling stupid illustrates not only a divide between rural and urban places, but an assumption that navigating urbanicity is something everyone should just know how to do. Although she was tackling a new challenge in a new place, her first

emotion was that of stupidity for not automatically knowing how something should work. This is a clear example of the ways in which urbanicity and the skills of navigating an urban environment are assumed as normal or obvious (Thomas et al., 2011). Rebecca retold a similar experience learning to navigate the transit system.

I think um, part of—the thing that took me most by surprise was more city-related of, like, especially taking public transportation. I'd never had to do that before because I just always had a car in [my hometown] and would drive places. But I remember I tried tutoring at a middle school as like one of my honors experiences for first semester . I tried navigating the bus and it was so stressful and so scary and I remember I Google Mapped it to have my route figured out, but didn't realize that there is the same number bus going two different ways. And so I, like, go on one bus that was the right bus, but I thought it was the wrong bus and then got off and it was just, like, just figuring out that stuff was stressful.

Until beginning participant interviews, I had completely forgotten the nerves I felt taking public transportation my first months in an urban environment. However, as participants told their stories, I suddenly remembered the anxiety of looking up bus routes online and studying Google Maps prior to leaving my residence hall for Target or the mall. Even once I got on the bus, I was often unsure if I was going in the right direction. I was unfamiliar with the city and living without a smartphone. Much like Andrea, Rebecca, and other participants, I felt silly for being nervous about something so simple and was embarrassed to ask for help.

Now a seasoned public transportation veteran (and owner of a smart phone), I feel much more comfortable navigating transportation, even in cities I have never been. For

me, it was easy to forget how challenging that hurdle was at age eighteen. Over time, my habitus has changed and I have become more comfortable navigating the field of urbanity. It is precisely these types of seemingly small challenges and differences between urban and rural fields that, when added together, can make the transition challenging for rural students.

While some participants struggled to navigate the transit system, Jake struggled with the lack of independence that came from leaving his car in his hometown.

I think for me... I didn't have a car my freshman year and not having my freedom or mobility...being kind of stuck in the same area of campus was weird. I needed to take the light rail around and I probably should have done more of that I guess, but it's just like... it's more of a pain to take light rail or bus somewhere. So that was maybe the biggest thing was just the lack of mobility.

Population Size. As Zoe mentioned in the opening excerpt of this section, another one of the biggest transitions many participants faced adapting to the field of urbanicity was the sheer number of people around them at all times. As Madison commented,

[I]t's so weird. Oh my God I'm like, I'll be walking with my friends at, you know, 11: 00 pm, and there would be, like, groups of people. Like, aren't you guys supposed to be in bed? Like, guess me too, but still, you know, so it was just kinda funny.

Andrea also acknowledged the new, but exciting, possibilities of having so many people around all the time, something that was very different from her hometown growing up.

It was mostly just the amount of people in the area that [made me] totally shocked. Like, I knew it was going to be, but still [it was] just a shocking thing, the amount of people and the feeling of, like, literally no one cares about me. Like, I seriously don't matter at all. Yes, I love that feeling. That feeling of walking down the street and being like 'Don't know you, don't know you, don't know you, will never know you!' You know what I mean?! It felt great for me but I know that really doesn't feel good for everybody.

Similarly, Ann commented she enjoyed the anonymity that came with a larger city where "nobody has to know your business [and] nobody wants to know every little thing that's going on in your life." For myself, I recalled the excitement of being in a larger community provided by my college. I cared less about anonymity, but was excited for the opportunity to meet new people.

Suddenly encountering more people also meant participants were challenged to engage with diversity in new ways. This provided participants opportunities to rethink their own identities and expand their worldviews on a variety of topics. These identity negotiations include engaging with racial and ethnic diversity, confronting whiteness, and encountering class disparities.

Identity Negotiations

For many participants the initial transition to both college and an urban field impacted the ways in which they viewed and understood the world. Although not specifically unique to rural students, these encounters were perhaps more jarring given the self-described homogeneity of their hometown communities. For participants, the three areas of identity negotiation that repeatedly arose in interviews included race,

educational preparedness, and cultural capital. This section explores the connections participants made to these categories and their own identity negotiations in connection with theory and post-reflexion.

Race. Although many participants discussed engagement with diversity as a benefit to attending a large university in an urban environment, most also expressed concern or even distress around the topic. Several participants realized, once faced with interacting with people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, that they did not feel well-equipped. As Madison explained,

From being up here [from a small town] I feel like I wasn't prepared for how to, you know...interact with other races. And like, I could come off wrong you know. Just one of those things where it's like, 'Oh, you know, I wish I got a little more practice in that. I wish I had more people in town.'

Andrea expressed similar concern and furthers the conversation questioning how to be an effective ally.

I would say there were times that I have felt uncomfortable because it was just something that I don't know about and I didn't know. I don't know if this might be like a little off topic, but it does relate to coming from a smaller place. With just anyone that is ethnically different...it is just, like, I don't know what to do because I have never spent time with any Black people, Asian people, like nothing...and so there is so much diversity at [MWUU]. I mean, it is not the most diverse place, but there is [sic] student groups or, you know, just groups of people that are... lots of people speaking different languages and things like that. Where I am, was like, I was never really sure how to navigate those spaces. I am just not sure how to

support a minority group without being just, just like a White person. People from small towns, I think, sort of feel paralyzed or feel like they cannot break into that bubble because people that grew up in [urban places] just have more exposure to that and they know what to do and there is more education or they just spend more time with different groups of people.

Again, here rural habitus is structuring not only the experiences participants were able to have (i.e., less exposure to diversity), but also to the ways in which participants believe others (from a more urban or suburban habitus) negotiate and move through the world. The assumption, whether true or not, becomes for participants that urban and suburban peers are naturally better at navigating diversity as an aspect of the fields of urbanicity and higher education. This creates hesitation not only in their own ability to engage with diversity, but how they will be perceived by others. Ann explained how, even as someone who identifies as bi-racial, she feels ignorant regarding race due to her small hometown.

I guess I feel like I'm a little more ignorant towards stuff just because there's not very much diversity in people and culture. [It] makes me feel a little behind...I have people who are very, very proactive at knowing about equality and all this stuff and have all this history and knowledge about this because they have gone out searching. Then when I hear that and then I'm like, 'I don't even know how to how to put all of these feelings into words.

Feeling ill-equipped to engage with diversity impacted the ways in which several participants were able to find sense of belonging on campus, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Academic Preparedness. When recounting transitions into MWUU, many participants discussed the challenges of increased academic demands. When talking about the ways in which her high school prepared her for college, Laura recounted,

Um... [I was prepared] maybe a little bit, I don't know. I mean, I guess it [high school] helps with like the basic skills of, like, you know, just learning how to read and write and doing some things... but I don't feel like I really even took that much of the information that I learned in high school. I guess I...didn't actually absorb a ton of it, so yeah. It just took me like way longer to do homework [at MWUU] and stuff... because it already takes me forever to do homework.

Laura was not the only participant who discussed challenges with academics at MWUU.

Jake also noticed a difference. He explained,

Yeah it's probably more like this is just harder like I just have to trudge through it. But yeah I mean it was a different environment too. I mean, before [in high school], you know, it was just relatively small classes [you could] ask questions and talk to the teacher. Yeah, I mean being in college was different. I don't think I ever went to office hours in my first year for any classes...and so that was different and [I was] less comfortable asking for help, I think.

Learning how to ask for academic help was a common theme for participants. In my own post-reflexion writings, I wondered how the field of higher education and/or participants' rural habitus impacted asking for help. These students had performed well academically in their rural communities to gain acceptance in MWUU, so perhaps they felt as if they should automatically know how to study and succeed academically in college. As an academic advisor I know the academic transition for students from all

geographic backgrounds can be challenging. It may be that because rural students are feeling heightened anxiety around fitting in and navigating both the university and city, they are even less likely to seek out assistance. What became clear through participants' stories was that this academic transition was unexpected and caused inner turmoil related to participants' identities as academically prepared students. Specifically, many participants struggled with science-based coursework at MWUU. As Ann stated,

Like, I don't know, I failed chem 1 first semester, retook chem 1 and then I passed it by a C or whatever. And then the next year, this year, I took chem 2, failed chem 2, and I'm retaking chem 2 again. So like, that lack of like super strong chemistry and all that stuff I don't think really helped me as well. Like, I took I believe the equivalent of, not general chem, but the intro to chem. I took the equivalent to that in high school [in a dual credit program] but like I feel like it didn't kind of really prepared me for the level of how much studying needs to be done.

While Andrea has not struggled with grades in her coursework, she has felt less prepared than some of her peers. As she explained,

I think other people I know that came from bigger towns or cities are doing more than I am because they feel more prepared to do those things. Like, doing their own research, like writing their research, and like really being involved in like university things or...government or local politics or things like that. Where I feel like, "Whoa! I don't know even how to start!" I don't feel comfortable really even, you know, even talking to professors still. I am just like, "Aaahhh!" I don't even know how to approach that whole thing, you know? Like, what would I

even do, you know? I am a really outgoing and motivated person, but there are times I definitely feel like stuck because I don't know what to do and the other people I talk to do... because they got like such a head start in high school...and like how this whole systems works.

This academic turmoil impacted both those participants who had been able to take advantage of dual-credit programs as well as those who had not. Throughout my own post-reflexion, I was struck by how familiar this theme of academic unpreparedness, whether real or imagined, felt. Luckily, most participants felt as though over time they had learned, or were learning, how to better navigate the field of academics at MWUU. Nevertheless, these academic changes were often challenging for students and, as will be subsequently discussed, impacted belonging on campus.

Cultural capital. In addition to race and educational preparedness, another way in which participants negotiated their identity in the new culture of the city and MWUU was related to cultural capital and values. Recalling the differences between urban and city life, Lucinda noted the “faster pace” of the city. “People go out and do more things. It’s like a little bit like, I don’t know, I want to say like, higher class; like they have more opportunities, like you can go to the opera, you can go see ballet.” Andrea, too, commented on the disparities between the “simple life” of her rural community and her new urban environment.

[I]nstead of a lot of different things or things that are more, I don't know, high culture or like high class...right it is not like going to the opera or like learning to tie, but [activities in a rural community are] like, fly fishing. It is just very normal simple things like that. Like, simple food like potatoes. It is great,

it's...I don't know, there is something like wholesome about a glass of milk at dinner or something like that. I think simple can be underrated, like the consistency of the small life you know it's a stable thing.

As discussed previously with the people of rural places, stereotypes of rural habitus appear to surface. Participants were clear to identify the different hobbies and activities between rural and urban environments. Opportunities in urban environments such as ballet and opera were viewed by participants as high class, while rural activities such as fly fishing are seen as simpler, yet wholesome. These sentiments echo comments Jake made regarding differences between urban and rural hobbies and ways of life. He commented,

I think I always kind of knew I wanted to travel and experience what would it be like live somewhere else. That's probably why I'm here, but I think the longer I live here, the more I kind of miss it [back home] and how simple it is. And I mean there was always things to do. It wasn't a lot or like going out to fancy bars and restaurants, but there's things that go on. We had our swimming holes and place to go fishing. Do I guess just more outdoorsy things go mudding in our trucks things like that...

Missing the familiarity associated with rural habitus was a struggle for Jake and others—particularly those such as Zoe and Mary who largely had positive memories of their rural communities. However, even for those who appeared to struggle less with missing their rural hobbies, most participants named some sort of challenge navigating the capital needed to exist in both rural and urban places—two disparate fields. This challenge

undoubtedly shaped the ways in which the phenomenon of belonging took shape for these participants at MWUU.

Belonging on Campus: Understanding the Phenomenon

The primary research question of this study was to explore how sense of belonging might take shape for rural students at a large, urban university. To explore this question participants discussed their various experiences at MWUU related to belonging. This phenomenological material was explored alongside theory and post-reflexion to generate new understandings related to the phenomenon of belonging on campus for rural students. From their perspectives, participants recounted ways in which, depending on context, they felt simultaneously connected and disconnected at the university, as well as the ways in which belonging physically manifested in their bodies as a feeling.

This section highlights participants' stories related to disconnection and belonging as well as the physical manifestations of those feelings. Provocations related to disconnect at the university include politics and religion, academics and imposter syndrome, race and socioeconomic status, and social circles. Provocations of connection and belonging include campus offices and programs, student clubs and organizations, and informal friend groups. It is important to note that while participants were roughly split on whether or not belonging was challenging to cultivate on campus, all agreed it was something that took time to develop.

Disconnection

At least one story portraying a disconnect with belonging was shared by every participant in the study. Participants described the feeling of disconnect or not belonging as “cold,” “lonely,” and “isolating.” For most participants, these moments of disconnect

were attributed to cultural differences between their rural habitus and the field of MWUU as an urban institution of higher education. For others, concerns of academic worthiness and imposter syndrome impacted their ability to feel a part of the MWUU community. Racial and socioeconomic concerns also impacted how participants felt as though they belonged on campus. The struggle to make friends in such a large environment also played a role. Here, each of these ideas are explored further in the voices of participants. Connections to post-reflexion thoughts and theory are also provided to illuminate the ways belonging may take shape at MWUU for rural students.

Politics and religious impacts. As discussed previously, several participants felt their rural identities contributed to aspects of their identity such as political beliefs and religious affiliations. Interestingly, several participants highlighted moments within their college experience where these beliefs made them feel as though they did not belong in the college setting—specifically in the academic classroom. Mary shared an experience in a course where the instructor asked how comfortable conservative students felt expressing their beliefs in a place that is often considered more liberal. She continued,

I know if I say something people will be upset with me or they're like—they'll kind of lash back. That was maybe something that I actually feel like I can identify with in the sense that maybe I do express, like, a more like conservative viewpoint or something...I maybe wouldn't say it. I would just keep quiet because I know a lot of people around me are gonna disagree and I know I've seen it before where someone does speak out and then other people get upset. I'm like 'No. I don't want to do that.' Like, I just wanna be like, 'Hey, these are my

thoughts' and I want to participate in class discussion, but sometimes I don't on this issue or something like that I'm gonna keep quiet.

Throughout my own post-reflexion, I wondered again about the ways in which the power dynamics within one field (in this case the field of MWUU) prevent individuals from sharing divergent perspectives for fear of being seen as othered or wrong, particularly in instances related to intensely personal issues such as politics and religion. Laura echoed Mary's sentiments regarding the ways in which her more conservative views are recognized in the classroom,

I don't know, I feel like I also have more, I don't know, I would say more of a Republican view, some liberal views...not like crazy or anything... I don't really go out and say them either. Because it's like the majority of the people here don't [have the same views]. And they also... I feel like there's a lot of people who are just biased because they're like 'Oh, if you're republican you're just like so far right.' So I feel like at times, you know, I definitely feel like the minority of the classroom in there sometimes. But it doesn't bother me at times, like, I'm kind of used to it, I would say.

Mary's recognition that her views may be in the minority within the field of MWUU impacts her ability to engage in discussion. As a researcher, I wonder about how she "got used to" this dynamic and how silencing her beliefs, while a survival tactic of sorts, also perpetuates the idea that institutions like MWUU are only for liberal political thoughts.

Laura also shared a classroom experience where she felt attacked for her religious beliefs, an aspect of her identity which she attributes to growing up in a rural community,

I had a teacher freshman year... a professor who really just [would] get way off topic and just start bashing Christianity. And I was just like, you know, that's not ok. But a lot of the kids like seemed to like him. I emailed him saying [I disagreed] you know cause it wasn't even related to what we were really talking about. He got way off topic and I don't think he really liked me either. I usually probably wouldn't have, but he just was like taking it really far. And it just wasn't even like related to what the passage we were talking about so I was just like you know that's really not cool. And I don't think it's something you should go out of your way to be doing. But he was like, 'Oh, I'm sorry you feel that way.'

The boldness Laura displayed in her story was not common among participants who largely remained silent when disagreements arose. More commonly participants learned to adapt to the dominant ideologies of the field by silencing their voices within the classroom setting. As a higher education practitioner and instructor, hearing this from these participants was unsettling for multiple reasons. First, these participants are being messaged in both covert and overt ways that to resist conformity within the field of MWUU is unwelcome. Second, within this messaging, these participants are silencing themselves and their beliefs in order to more appropriately fit in. Clearly, silencing dissent is not a healthy or welcoming way to foster belonging.

The stories of these participants also reminded me as a researcher of the multiple fields these students navigate on a daily basis, even within the realm of higher education. Not only are they attempting to find belonging within an urban setting and the larger university, they are also navigating individual spaces of belonging such as their classrooms and residence halls, all which have differing rules, and norms to navigate.

Participants are challenged with not only finding belonging at MWUU as a whole, but also within the power dynamics of each individual setting with various instructors and peers.

While Zoe did not have a negative experience in the classroom related to her faith, she did have a negative experience during an on-campus event for her faith-based student organization when she was heckled from someone in a passing car. In recounting how this experience felt, she remarked,

It feels like they're just shutting down a whole part of you, you know? Because that [her religion] is so much of my identity and how I grew up and it's really important to me. And it's shaped a lot of my values and goals. So it kind of feels like they're ignoring a whole chunk of you.

While Mary, Laura, and Zoe were learning to navigate these aspects of their identity to find belonging on campus, other participants struggled with feeling as though they belonged due to feeling academically unprepared.

Academics and Imposter Syndrome. Despite coming from small, rural communities, several participants had opportunities to earn dual high school and college credit in the form of AP exams and various dual credit enrollment programs based within their local high schools, at local community colleges, or via telecommunication programs. Access and engagement with these programs varied, but all participants discussed a dedication to academics and getting into a high quality college. Nevertheless, upon arriving to MWUU, many participants felt academically underprepared when compared to their peers. Lucinda described this feeling succinctly as “not being up to par with my classmates...coming from a rural school...we just didn't have the best of much.”

She continued, “[J]ust because I didn’t have much exposure to college environments or to, like, the type of academics...but I feel like at this point I’ve kind of caught up.”

The theme of “catching up” was common for participants. Rebecca felt as though in high school she largely defined herself by her academic and extracurricular achievements. However, in coming to college she realized she needed additional assistance to continue excelling. She explained,

So academically, I definitely needed some support because it was just kind of unlike anything that I've ever done before. I had always liked being super independent academically and not needing that help. I took advantage of the Writing Center, [to get] help with papers which again was I didn't realize that was a thing and just kind of thought that you had to like figure it out yourself. Like, having other people just help you write better papers. I always thought that those things were kind of remedial. Like, just the people who weren't good chemistry went to office hours or the people that didn't know how to write went to the Writing Center. And so my perception of those things was that it was only the like ‘not good enough’ part. So then I felt like in seeking them out I was admitting to myself that I wasn't good enough. But after actually using them I realized that that wasn't true at all and that I was doing a lot better and [okay] the classes because I got the help.

Jake also noted a tough academic transition, especially after taking a self-described “slacker” load of classes his senior year. This easy year of high school combined with being a first generation college student caused a lot of confusion of Jake in his first year,

I know my first day of classes I looked at my schedule and I said, 'Okay, so I have this math class' and I went to it and then the next day I showed up and there was nobody there. What's going on? I was like, in the discussion section and they alternate. I didn't know what each section was. So I looked at my schedule again. I know after that I was prepared to show up and be late. I was like, 'Sorry!' I didn't realize we moved classrooms...that it was like a whole different class. It wasn't the lecture. That was like a huge learning curve for me that I did not understand until I did it. Um, yeah, like I constantly felt in the dark about what it was going to take to graduate, what classes I should take. I figured it out now. I can figure it out or understand the requirements on the websites, but it was kind of a lot of conversations with my advisor and I was like, 'I don't know what I don't know. Like what do I do?!' What was I supposed to be doing? Yeah. Yeah. It's definitely been interesting. I think, you know, if I have kids, I'm going to try to prepare them a little bit better. Oh yeah I have also, I was, you know, [across campus] and I was like, 'Oh, I need to be, I got to figure out where this building is now.' And so I went over there and that was kind of preparing in my head, like, I thought they were going to say something to me when I walked in late, like, I have to have an explanation and 'I'm so sorry. I didn't realize that the classroom moved'. When I walked in nobody cared, like something completely different was going on and I was like 'Oh, okay.' I guess I'm just going to sit down and shut up until I figure out what's going on.

As discussed previously in regards to participants' struggles with urban transportation, Jake's confusion over class scheduling was seen as an individual error. Jake felt as

though he did not understand the ways in which college classes functioned when he “should have”. Again, participants seem to take on the blame and shame of not understanding a system, when in actuality they have never been taught how the field operates or given the cultural capital to navigate as smoothly as others. While the academic transition was new to many participants, so too was navigating issues of race and socioeconomic status within the field of an urban university. Especially for Ann, these factors greatly impacted her ability to find belonging on campus for better and for worse.

Race and socioeconomic status. Half of the study participants did not voluntarily discuss race or class as being salient to their experiences with belonging at MWUU. However Jake, Rebecca, Madison, Ann, and Lucinda did discuss these identities. As Jake explained, “I think, I understand it [issues of race and class]. But I guess that's something that I probably do just take for granted as a whole generally.” Madison, too, discussed her ability to take her privilege for granted. She stated, “I think, for some reason I feel like people trust me more. It's more of just, like, not feeling like I'm being like watched all the time....I mean privilege helps White people every day.” Rebecca acknowledged her privilege as a White person not impacting her ability to belong at the university. For Ann, issues of race and class were exceedingly salient in her journey to finding belonging on campus and, unfortunately, often contributed to her feeling unwelcome. Wanting to provide more representation in Welcome Week leadership, Ann signed on to oversee a Welcome Week group. However, during the training she almost immediately felt uncomfortable.

I felt didn't really feel like I belonged or, I mean, I didn't feel like I belonged in the group of people I was training with. They had a lot of different experiences than me that I could not relate to at all. Like, I didn't grow up [watching]the mainstream TV or all that stuff and I was the only person. Like, there was one other person who was mixed but she had a very different experience being mixed 'cause I think her parents were a little more privileged and they came from another country. But it was like, I didn't really have as many experiences traveling as a lot of other people had. I think everybody else just clicked right away. It takes me a while to click with people like that sometimes, it depends on the environment and whether or not I felt welcome. I guess [I felt] ashamed of where I came from a little bit. Like that's one of the few times I can recall that I kind of felt ashamed. Like, okay, I didn't have the ability to travel. I didn't have the money to go to all these fancy music festivals or go fishing or be part of Greek life and all that stuff. Like, it all costs money and I know my family didn't have it. I think a lot of people in that group were from those suburbs and probably didn't understand it or like couldn't relate to me and maybe that made it a little awkward.

Here Ann illustrated the ways in which she felt as though her life experiences in a rural habitus was not enough and how the disconnect between her life and those of her peers impacted the development of belonging. Although she still thinks representation in Welcome Week Leaders is important, this negative experience has prevented Ann from considering this leadership role in the future.

Lucinda also had experience with moments of tension related to socioeconomic status that made her feel like an outsider. Describing a conversation she overheard on the campus bus she explained,

I was listening to these two guys talking. and they were like, 'oh, what are you going to do for your like, this summer around there? Are you going to, like, going to work?'. They were like, 'Yeah, kind of have to' and 'I'm going to work at the country club. How about you?' And they're like, 'Oh, I'm working at the Marina.' And I'm like, 'Wow! [Laughing] That sounds great!'

She continued,

Or I hear about, you know, people who have parents who pay for things. And that's super nice. Um, there's actually, I remember looking this up; there is a study that has [MWUU] in it, and it was discussing how many students go there by class...And it was a lot of middle class, upper middle class people go to [MWUU], like, a surprising amount. And then when I went to my law class, they broke down who they admit and they were like, 'We do admit a lot of middle class or international students because we need them, because they pay full price. Whereas scholarship students, we don't get as much money from them.' It definitely makes me think, 'Well how am I going to get in?' Because you know, they have... they're thinking about how much can you pay and they milk every cent out of you and...I don't know.

Both Lucinda and Ann discussed these instances with equal parts humor and hurt and both seemingly recognized this was not the first nor last time race and or class might be a barrier for them to belong within the field of higher education. Feeling as though a place

is not made for you is challenging, but particularly when multiple identities are simultaneously being called into question at once. While I personally recalled feeling uneasy in college about my rural background, socioeconomic status, and, at least at first, my academic preparedness, I had the privilege of Whiteness which undoubtedly helped mitigate these other areas of disconnect by providing mirrors in both my peers, instructors, and staff. The final area of disconnect for participants involved peers and navigating new social circles in the university setting.

Navigating Social Circles. Throughout the interviews, a few students such as Mary and Madison commented that making friends at MWUU was fairly easy. Largely they attributed this comfort with their outgoing personalities, but each also expressed the ways in which showing animals and other involvement in 4H (a U.S.-based youth organization focused on agriculture, citizenship, healthy living, science, and technology) helped them sharpen their interpersonal skills. Even so, it was much more common for participants to note meeting new people was a major barrier to feeling a sense of belonging on campus. Several participants explained their discomfort stemmed from never needing to practice those skills growing up. As Rebecca explained,

I'm super introverted and it's really difficult for me to make that first initiation of contact with people and then second of all, like, coming from a small school we all just knew each other growing up forever and so I never had to think about [it] unless somebody new moved... but it was just one person. I've never had to meet all these strangers at one time. Um, so, yeah. I don't know. I guess I really try to challenge myself to be more extroverted I guess. Um, and I think especially at the beginning tried to like convince myself that I was an extrovert to meet all these

people. Especially, I was like ‘Oh! I can redefine myself like coming to college.’ Um, but it didn't really work ‘cause that wasn't really who I was. And so for a while I was kind of lost because I felt like everybody was making all of these new friends.

While participants discussed the ways in which social capital and community is vital to rural places, being “out of practice” with these skills was a reoccurring comment from participants. Hailing from smaller communities and schools, participants often felt ill-equipped to make new friends quickly, a side effect of their rural habitus. Interestingly, those who did feel more at ease also attributed this to their rural upbringing, again highlighting the differences in individual experience. My own process of making friends went well enough in college, due in large part to a residential learning community and quick involvement in the college’s choral program. However, I do recall feeling suddenly more shy than I did in my rural community. I was also astounded to learn my new peers had come from schools with hundreds, sometimes thousands more students than my own. Several peers in college recounted meeting someone new from their graduating class in line at high school commencement and my mind reeled.

As one of the only students in my high school class to go out of state for school, I was also the only person from my area at my new college. I had never given this much thought, even in college, but I do recall being surprised to learn some of my college classmates had known each other from high school, even those who came from out of state. Although I never felt at a disadvantage by not knowing anyone at my college ahead of time, I can see the benefits to having a familiar face around. Jake discussed his own challenges with making friends as the only person from his rural hometown,

It was really hard in the beginning. A lot of people that I felt that came here, came from bigger high schools around [the state] for the most part or even neighboring states and they had lots of other people that also came from their high schools. And so they knew a few people coming in. I didn't know a single person and that was, I think, really hard.... I'm not, like, antisocial or anything. But, I mean, to make all your new friends from scratch and I probably had known my last group of friends for, like, ten years. I mean it's like being social and making new friends probably wasn't a skill that I'd really used much recently. So it was really hard. I think I remember the first month I was just really kind of bummed out and not enjoying it. Once I kind of found some friends that I would hang out with it was good.

Although several participants faced concerns with meeting new friends initially, most felt successful within the first year of school. In fact, while participants mentioned academic programs and offices as helpful in cultivating belonging, it was primarily informal friend groups and students clubs and organizations that helped them feel most connected to campus.

Connection and Belonging on Campus

As mentioned previously, many participants remarked they believed belonging took longer than anticipated to develop. Still, at the point of interview, all participants felt that they had found at least one place at MWUU where they felt as though they belonged. Participants describe the physical manifestation of belonging as “warm,” “happy,” “content,” and “safe.” Madison described finding belonging on campus as “a boulder being lifted off [her] shoulders”. This section explores the primary ways in

which students discuss finding belonging on campus via campus offices and programs, student clubs and orgs, as well as informal friend groups.

Campus employees, offices, and programs. Myriad staff and faculty in campus offices and programs connect with students during the college years. While many of these offices emphasize the importance of belonging, participants were hesitant to call out these spaces as beneficial to their own development of belonging on campus. In my own post-reflexion, I discussed my surprise that these places were not highlighted more frequently by participants. I believe these offices can impact belonging for students both by providing trusting adults as well as serving as points of connection between students.

However, by and large, these programs were not discussed by students. Perhaps they are seen as tangential or less important compared to the primacy of peer relationships in college. It is also possible the power dynamics of a student/staff relationship is was not viewed by participants in the same way as peer to peer connection. Even for those participants that did not bring up specific employees, offices, and programs, I still believe the presence and actions (or inactions) of these spaces impact the ways in which students experience the phenomenon of belonging.

Having ample service and identity-group centers for students to attend signals assistance, support, and community is available, even if it is never utilized. Institutional investment in academic support services such as Writing Centers and identity spaces such as multicultural, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, A-Sexual/Ally (LGBTQIA), commuter, transfer, or working class student centers, signal to students that there are others like them on campus and that the institution supports their development and visibility. This is especially true when these offices and programs are

well staffed, funded, actively programming, and utilized by other students. While not every student will utilize these spaces, I believe their existence does, in even a small, subconscious way, send a message that diversity of all types is welcomed at the institution. If these spaces exist, but are not supported well by the institution, the exact opposite message can be felt by students and impact belonging negatively.

For those participants who did discuss specific programs and offices, the impact appeared to be significant. Take for example, Lucinda, who mentioned her academic advising office as one place of support. Struggling to find her place on campus, Lucinda was considering a transfer and recounted a conversation with her academic advisor,

I actually [had] this conversation my advisor a couple of times and he was like, ‘you belong here... you shouldn't transfer because this is like where you should be.’ And I was like, ‘I feel like I'm not... my academic skills are not up to par, like coming from rural school and like...we just didn't have like the best of much.’ And he was like, ‘No, you belong here.’ And I just remember him saying that too, like, ‘you belong here.’ And I was like, ‘I don't know about that, but okay.’

Lucinda was also unique in that she had an important interaction with a faculty member that helped connect her to resources that cultivated belonging,

I was down about something [and went to speak to an instructor] and I was like, ‘Uh, I'm doing volunteer work and I'm doing this and that and that and I'm so overwhelmed.’ I was telling her like how hard it was finding and going to classes. Like, finding the buildings and it's such a huge campus. [She goes] ‘So are you first gen?’ I was like, ‘Yeah. Yeah.’ She was like, ‘You're not in

Trio are you?’ And I was like, ‘No.’ And she was like, ‘What?!’ And I was like, ‘No I’m not. I don’t even know what it is!’ She had to explain it to me. She’s like, ‘Okay. I’m gonna write down some names for you and I want you to email this person and they’ll set you up.’ So I did and I actually got into the program, and it was just a much smoother ride from there on.

These interactions with faculty, staff, and university programs provided support at critical moments of self-doubt for Lucinda. Although not a panacea for fostering belonging, these resources appeared to assist Lucinda in navigating aspects of the field of MWUU that she otherwise felt unprepared for. Although she may not know it, perhaps the affirmation from her advisor that she belonged signaled to her that she could persevere. This story illustrates the importance of individuals with power and capital rooted in one field (e.g., a faculty member or advisor at MWUU) extending their knowledge, support, and capital to others (such as rural students) to persist and foster belonging.

Lucinda was not the only participant who had a positive faculty interaction impact their belonging on campus. Jessica also recounted a connection with a faculty member in her on-campus job as a research assistant. She explained this relationship helped give her confidence in college and made her feel more like she belongs. In describing the benefits of having someone at the university trust her she stated,

Like yes, my mom can tell me I’m handling this [work situation] correctly, but, and she’s pretty unbiased or you know, she’s good at being unbiased, but it’s also like she also gets a little tense sometimes. So, it’s like, well, I don’t know, like it’s just nice to have kind of that backing. It’s like, you know what, it’s not my fault. This guy with a PhD told me that it was okay, so.

While individual connections with faculty and staff on campus can be effective, several students also found important connections and a sense of belonging with campus sponsored programs. Both Ann and Lucinda participated in an early move-in program during their freshman year for students of color. Ann recounted the experience as challenging, but ultimately very rewarding.

I remember walking in the [multicultural program] kick-off [event] and it was the most diverse group of people I've ever seen. It was, like, I had never seen this many people of color in one place and I was...I was...I mean I had never in my life felt more white, which I think was really saying something 'cause I think I needed to feel or be uncomfortable in order to learn and just to figure it out. I felt a little alone for a while because I didn't know anybody super personally...but then after the second day I felt like I knew more people. [A]t the second day of [the multicultural program] kickoff I grew really, really close to the people and I'm still in contact with them today. I think that the [multicultural program] kick-off really prepared me. Like, I was able to make some connection so I wasn't completely alone if I needed a break from my Welcome Week group. On the second day we got into really, really race related topics or issues that have happened that have shaped us and I hadn't had that dialogue before. I met somebody who had the same mixed identity, who had a mixed identity I could relate to...like not feeling completely white but not feeling completely Asian. It was really nice to have at least one other person who had the same experience.

For Ann, this experience was so rewarding and strong that she was inspired to create her own, new student organization where she was able to connect with even more peers and

continue to develop her belonging on campus. Being seen and understood in a way she had never felt was incredibly affirming, if anxiety-provoking at first. For many participants, student clubs and organizations were a large way in which they met peers and cultivated belonging on campus. The next section examines the ways in which students found belonging in these spaces.

Student clubs and organizations. Participants in this study were involved in a wide variety of student clubs and organizations. While most students were involved in at least one activity, a few participants were involved in four or more. Regardless of the number of activities each participant became involved with, they each noted these groups had been vital in helping them develop a sense of belonging on campus.

Mary, Jessica, and Zoe all belonged to the same sorority, a group to which they credit much of their belonging on campus. Jessica explained the story of finding her sorority,

I know, as anyone in [our sorority] would say, like, I didn't come into this college planning to join a sorority, like you see the stereotype and, you know, I'm personally, like, that's not my thing. And so, I kind of stumbled on [the sorority] by accident. One of my friends, guy friends, knew someone in there and they're like, 'Have you ever looked at it?' And I'm like, 'No.' They're like, 'Well why don't you go?' I'm like, 'Okay. Sure.' And so, I walked through [the sorority house], and it was just so nice because it was, everyone was relaxed, everyone was, it was obvious. It was more about who you are as a person. Like I told my mom, it's nice because I can go over to the house or something. Now I live in the house so it's like, I can go over to the house and it was like I could sit down, and I

could talk with people or I could not talk with people. They didn't really care. It was like, you do your own thing. It's not a big deal.

Other students found positive connections with student clubs and orgs that were closely related to majors or minors they were considering. Especially helpful for Jake were mentoring opportunities in his first year on campus,

There was an honors and mentorship program that I signed for, so I paired with a senior and they don't a whole lot, but we got to meet somebody new and pick his brain a little bit about stuff. He was in the same major—Econ. So to ask them some questions and you know, such and such restaurant is good and stuff like that. So we kind of try to take advantage of all the opportunities that the university put out there. Um, I'd done that honors mentorship program every year since.

For participants who identified as students of color, multicultural organizations also provided outlets for connection. Often, students expressed hesitation in entering these spaces, but found them welcoming. As Lucinda recounted,

I started going to the student cultural center. And I actually went one night and I actually had, ended up having a ton of fun because I stayed late. And then other people stayed late just to kind of talk and then we had like, we just hung out and it was, it was so much fun. And I had never gone there before because I was like, 'I don't have time, this is so dumb,' but then I ended up going and I really liked it.

When asked how specific organizations have impacted her time on campus, Ann was quick to name her cultural club as important. She stated,

I've been able to surround myself with people who have very similar experiences and learn from those who have different experiences which is really nice to know. And then, like, that's the group that I really identify with.

Not all student groups participants joined were long-lasting. Mary discussed joining an agriculture-related club to keep ties to her farming upbringing, which she left after her first year at MWUU. She explained,

I think that they were good friends and a good group of people, but I think the reason why I'm pulling out was because, I don't know, I just didn't feel like it was aligning with what I wanted with the career goals. Um, I don't know, it just wasn't a group that, yeah... I guess, felt right or didn't make sense. I was the only one and I felt like I was doing it more to be connected to, like, a past like my history of being like a farmer.

Similarly, Madison and Laura have lessened their involvement in their profession-related student club and instead have invested more time in individual friendships and hobbies within the city.

To me, the dynamic relationships between participants and their involvement with particular clubs and organizations indicates a development of their belonging on campus. Seemingly, participants initially gravitate towards a community that feels welcoming and familiar. A sense of belonging develops, which bolsters their confidence and feelings of connection across campus. As participants feel more comfortable with themselves within the field of MWUU, they often slowly expand their involvement to new and different activities. In doing this, their belongingness begins to morph. Mary's example of the agriculture club is one example. At first it was a place of connection, but over time it

actually became a site of disconnect and she felt able to look elsewhere for a new and stronger source of belonging including informal, unstructured friend groups.

Informal friend groups. For many participants, informal friend groups first formed in the residence hall communities. Jake recalled sitting out in the community room just trying to talk to people or “popping into rooms” when doors were open. A bit more reserved, Andrea recounted living in a single residence hall room and how although making friends took time, she was happy with the process.

In a way, the single room ended up being a really good thing because I didn't have to be forced to hang out with anyone. Like, it wasn't like, ‘Oh, I am just friends with you because I live with you and your people are over here, so now I am friends with them.’ It was like, it forced me to really like decide what I wanted to do, take time. It took a long time for me to make good friends. Yeah, but that to me, looking back, was definitely worth it.

Rebecca also faced her own challenges with coming to college and feeling as though she was having to carve out a new identity after a long-term relationship ended. However, she found support through her roommate and small group of friends she met during the first week of the term.

Yeah it [Freshman Year] was kind of a mess. The first semester was really, really hard. I remember calling my mom and having a midnight conversation crying on the phone about how I didn't know if I was good enough for it, um to be here... if college was right for me, if the [university] is right for me and she was also supportive of that, like, if it's not the right fit like that's okay. But it was really hard and I definitely questioned my decision a lot. But then I found that I was slowly

building that support system here. Like, I remember I got really lucky and had a really good freshman roommate. She was from California and I remember she had mentioned something about comfort and discomfort. That's something that still resonates with me today. She's like, 'You didn't leave [your hometown] to come to [the city] to be comfortable.' That really stuck with me because I think even if I wasn't aware of that when I decided to come here; I do think that when I made that decision it was to get out of my comfort zone and go and explore something new and be challenged and dive into those hard times even if I've never experienced them before. And so now being out of it, I can look at it and be like, 'Oh, yeah, like, that was really hard, but that was a huge period of growth and learning because I was exposed to all these things and all these challenges that I'd never had before.' But at the time it was really, really hard and I didn't have the tools to know how to solve it. I just got lucky that I had the support to help me.

Rebecca's honesty about her struggles belonging during her first year is admirable and as a higher education practitioner I am glad she now sees how far she has come. Yet, from a researcher perspective I find it interesting she largely attributes meeting these challenges to getting "lucky" that she met supportive people. While certainly these social connections were important to overcoming these challenges and cultivating belonging, I wonder if she is not giving herself enough credit for the strength it took to persevere despite difficulty.

While participants all conceptualized belonging differently and found different routes for connection, all agreed that without belonging they would not be enjoying their college experience. Each also credits having found belonging in at least one place on campus with their overall happiness with their college experience. Seemingly, the

phenomenon of belonging generally requires time for participants to adjust to the various challenges they are suddenly faced with in their new, urban, college environment.

Participants largely discussed belonging in regards to approaches they took to actively build connections, or moments of disconnect based on a negative experience. However, exploring their interviews more deeply also revealed that powerful forces at work in the field of MWUU and the urban environment more broadly also impacted belonging. These forces of privilege and power related to aspects of rurality and identity such as participant hobbies, values, political and religious ideologies, racial identity, and socioeconomic status also impacted belonging.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to present a discussion of the phenomenological material from participant interviews, thinking with theory, as well as researcher post-reflexion. Although a divergence from more traditional organizations of qualitative research which may privilege one source of data over others, this method of organization aligns with post-intention phenomenology's goal of creating new dialogic understandings of a phenomenon across and between phenomenological material. The final chapter revisits each of the major provocations discussed in chapter four and responds to each research question explored in this study. Also explored is a discussion of implications and opportunities for further research related to theory, policy, and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I provide a discussion of the findings as they relate to the four research questions of this study. After a discussion of the findings and answering of the research questions, implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and research are presented. While these recommendations are related to the field of higher education, many can also extend to greater ways of knowing and thinking about rurality as a whole.

Discussion of the Findings

This study aimed to answer one primary research question: how might sense of belonging take shape for rural students at a large, urban university. In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, three secondary research questions emerged related to conceptualizing rurality, intersections of identity, and university programs and resources. These questions are as follows:

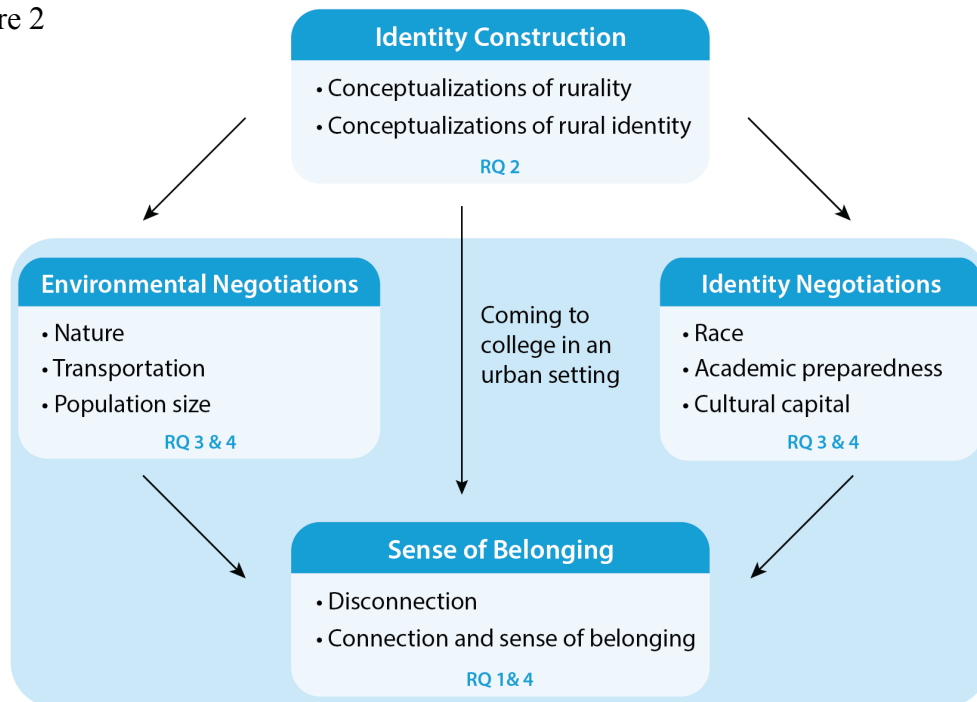
- How do rural students at a large, urban university understand and conceptualize rurality for themselves?
- How do rural students at as large, urban university understand intersecting identities as complicating their experiences in college?
- How do university sponsored programs, student services, or departments help shape and produce sense of belonging for rural students at a large, urban university.

To answer these questions, interviews were conducted with ten participants at a large, urban university. A post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) framework guided the study's methodology, and the theoretical and philosophical concepts of social reproduction theory and place theory guided analysis. Chapter four provided an

overview of findings that emerged from analysis of the phenomenological material via four primary knowledge productions: identity construction, environmental negotiations in college, identity negotiations in college, and sense of belonging on campus. In this chapter, these findings are further discussed and specific answers to the research questions are provided. Implications for practitioners, educators, and policy are provided, as are opportunities for future research.

In organizing this discussion, I begin by first discussing secondary research questions and then returning to the primary research question of this study. My rationale for this method of organization is that, in analyzing the phenomenological material, it became clear that the ways in which participants made meaning of their background, identity, and interactions with on-campus programs, services, and departments greatly impacted the ways in which belonging took shape. Figure 2 illustrates how the study’s research questions map onto the productions discussed in chapter four.

Figure 2



Conceptualizing the Habitus of Rural Places: A Convergence of Stereotype and Perceived Reality

As evidenced by the participant profiles in chapter three, study participants came from diverse backgrounds with various connections to more customary, and quantitative definitions of rurality. While some participants such as Mary and Zoe grew up on farms, most participants were from small towns, most of which would not even qualify as rural according to the US Census or the National Center for Education Statistics. Rebecca, Laura, and Jake even lived in close proximity to cities with over 50,000 residents. Despite these differences, each of these participants self-identified as rural and was able to clearly articulate their conceptualizations of this aspect of their identity.

Coming from a small town myself, I found it interesting so few participants fit into the more narrowly quantitative definitions of rurality. To have others from similar geographic backgrounds as myself also identify as rural further strengthened my belief that self-identification of geographic background is important and that, without it, researchers run the risk of losing out on a wide variety of perspectives when trying to better understand the complexities of rurality.

So how did these rural participants understand and conceptualize rurality for themselves? As evidenced in chapter four, many participants conceptualized rurality in relation to their immediate local communities and then branched off into broader conceptualizations. In both discussions, participants routinely utilized stereotypes to both confirm and complicate the notion of rurality. Within analysis, three primary provocations emerged around the conceptualization of rurality: people, places, and access.

People make the place. Participants were quick to discuss the ways in which people living in rural places are stereotyped as White, uneducated, poor, “hick,” religious, and politically conservative. Participants were also able to critique these stereotypes and offer counter points of views based on their lived experiences. However, when asked to describe their own hometowns and how they conceptualize rurality, participants again classified the people in their communities, by and large, as White, lower middle class to working class, religious, less educated, and politically conservative. Interestingly, many participants ended up conceptualizing the people in rural places very similarly to the stereotypes that they also critiqued.

Despite some of their harsh conceptualizations of the people in rural places, many participants were also quick to discuss the positive traits and diversity of people living in rural areas. Traits such as hardworking attitudes, independence, dependability, maturity, and a deep connection to community were often directly attributed to living within rural places. These characteristics of residents became more than individual or collective personality traits. Rather, these characteristics became indicative of the concept of rurality broadly defined. Rurality, as a conceptual place, was inexorably bound with hard work, independence, and connection to community.

Some participants were also often quick to illustrate the ways in which diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and political ideology does exist in rural spaces, despite stereotypes to the contrary. Both Laura and Madison highlighted political diversity as they discussed the more liberal or “conservative liberal” adults in their hometowns and several participants also explained that their hometowns have been becoming more racially diverse in recent years.

Seemingly, participants felt it important to illustrate that rurality, while bound up in some truthful stereotypes, also subverted common understandings of its simplicity. This simultaneous embracing and rejection of stereotype is illustrative of the complexities inherent in conceptualizing and understanding place, a notion that has been discussed by previous scholars at length (Malpas, 2018; Massey, 1997, 2005; Reynolds, 2004; Thomas et al., 2011; Trigg, 2012). As participants illustrated, rural places are held in a particularly complex limbo between being romanticized as sites of tradition and strong moral fabric, while simultaneously critiqued as backwards and unsophisticated (Thomas et al., 2011).

These more negative stereotypes of rural places and people are created and reinforced through media such as television (such as *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Little House on the Prairie*), film (*Joe Dirt*), literature (*The Grapes of Wrath*), as well as news outlets. Conversely, positive stereotypes can be found in the frequent revisionist histories of the United States found in school textbooks, as well as through the countries' collective desire to recall rural places as sites of simplicity and times gone by. Participants' understandings of the ways in which people constitute reality stem from, and then build upon, classic tropes of rurality. This complicated understanding does not end with the people of rural places, but extended into the ways in which participants also discussed geography in regards to rurality.

Elements of place. In addition to people, participants also conceptualized rurality in regards to the elements of nature, agriculture, and access. Again, in this discussion of place, lines of stereotype and lived experience were inexorably intertwined to form the habitus of rurality.

In one illustration of the ways that stereotype produces and shapes a habitus, agriculture and farming were consistently discussed as an aspect of defining rurality for participants, despite the statistics that indicate rural places are often erroneously overequated with these industries (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Certainly, agriculture is important to many rural communities. However, to denote agriculture as synonymous with rurality, as so often is the case, is overly simplistic. In fact, less than 7% of people working in rural areas are employed in agriculture, whereas this number reaches almost 20% in more urbanized areas (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Many rural places rely on single, specialized economies such as mining, logging, service jobs, and recreation (Deavers, 1992).

This is not to say participants equating agriculture with rurality is wrong, but rather to illuminate the complexities inherent in understanding how meaning making is created. Agriculture may have been routinely mentioned by participants for a variety of reasons. Perhaps part of it was internalized stereotypes of what traditionally constitutes a rural place. The fact that this study was conducted in the Midwest, where most participants grew up and agriculture is present, is likely also a factor. If this study had been conducted elsewhere in the country it is possible logging, mining, oil drilling, or manufacturing might have also been discussed.

While participants did discuss concepts such as remoteness, physical distance, and small population sizes, no participant put quantifiable numbers on these ideas when conceptualizing rurality. This more generalized understanding of rurality has been illustrated elsewhere (Gillion, 2015). However, several participants in this study were quick to frame their self-identified rural identity in terms of *access* to urbanized areas.

Framing rurality in this way is a unique contribution to current understandings of how rural students conceptualize place impacting their experiences. Participants such as Jake, Rebecca, and Laura grew up in small towns, but lived relatively close to larger cities. Nevertheless, their inability to freely access these cities until they were of driving age, or later, inhibited their ability to feel connected to an urban or suburban identity. At the time of this study, conversations of access have not been included in previous qualitative research on rural students in higher education. Continued exploration into the ways in which urban access, or lack thereof, impacts one's geographic identity and sense of self is an interesting opportunity for future research that will be explored later in this chapter.

The puzzle becomes how to make sense of participants' conceptualizations of rurality. Ultimately, the conceptualizations of rurality presented by participants reveal three important findings. First, as has been documented, stereotypes about rural places are still alive and well for those living in rural communities (Elder & Conger, 2000; Pappano 2017a, 2017b; Thomas et al., 2011). Participants were aware of the ways in which rural people are constrained by their habitus and the ways their rural communities were looked down upon by those in more urban and suburban environments. This othering occurs in a society that privileges the social and cultural capital of urban spaces and utilizes largely negative stereotypes of rural places to maintain power.

Second, participants were keen to combat these negative stereotypes with more positive notions of their communities (e.g., strong work ethic, care and concern for others, and connection to nature). While these positive traits are equally ensnared in a complicated web of stereotype and imagined reality, they at least serve to bolster participants' understandings of their communities and give them reason to be proud.

Certainly, these students *should* be able to feel proud of the communities they come from. Third, I believe these conceptualizations of rurality illustrate, regardless of *how* or *why* participants understand rurality as they do, this geographic identity becomes an important aspect of their sense of self. For participants in this study, rurality contributed a great deal to the ways in which they see themselves in the world and find belonging in college. This finding supports previous research that suggests the importance of rurality as an aspect of identity (Heinisch, 2017; Schultz, 2004).

As a researcher operating within a post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) framework, it is impossible to tease out some sort of definitional Truth to a rural identity or to illustrate the line of demarcation between stereotype and reality. Rather, the words of this study's participants help illuminate the complex, multiple, and nuanced ways rurality can take shape. As Thomas et. al (2011) state, "rural identities are real because they are defined into existence, and in turn, their existence has real and measurable consequences" (p. 10). For these participants, a rural identity is produced and reproduced through stereotype, lived experience, and personal understanding to create the experience, and subsequent impact, of hailing from a rural habitus and internalizing a rural identity. For each participant this rural identity then intersects with other aspects of their sense of selves to complicate the ways they understand and experience belonging in college.

Rurality and Intersecting Identities

While participants in this study all self-identified as rural, they also held a wide variety of other identities including race, gender, religion, and political beliefs. Academic ability and area of study, hobbies, and personal characteristics (e.g.,

hardworking, relaxed, attuned to nature) were also presented by participants as important aspects of their identities. These intersecting identities coalesced with participants' rurality to shape the ways in which they experienced the field of MWUU. When asked to describe themselves in interview one, the majority of participants relied on hobbies, areas of academic interest, and personal characteristics to describe themselves—something that was challenging for many. Participants' abilities, or perhaps interest, in speaking about their different identities ranged dramatically. Throughout the interviews, gender and race appeared largely challenging for participants to discuss while political and religious identities academic skills, and personal characteristics seemed easier. The ease of which participants could discuss various aspects of their identities appeared to coincide with how readily they were able to connect these intersections to the phenomenon of belonging.

Challenging conversations: race and gender. Some participants were very aware of, and willing to discuss, multiple of their identity. Lucinda and Ann, both students of color, openly identified race as an aspect of their identity and were able to make direct connections to how race has impacted their college experience. Lucinda recounted how being in college has allowed her the opportunity to learn what she “should have” known about her cultural heritage growing up, while Ann discussed at length how in college she has found people with similar mixed-race identities as her—a first in her lifetime.

Both participants discussed utilizing various centers and programs on campus for multicultural students, but it was Ann in particular who found value and belonging in this setting. Not only was she able to connect with others students from her ethnic

background, but she also met people who shared other intersecting identities, which was powerful. Andrea, who identifies as White, also felt as though coming to college in an urban setting was an opportunity to learn about her Native American ancestry. For these students, coming to college was an opportunity to explore aspects of their identity that were not shared by many, if anyone, in their rural communities. This opportunity to connect across identities marginalized in their rural communities appeared impactful for these students and help foster a sense of belonging at the university.

For other White participants, only a few were able, or willing, to discuss the ways in which their race had impacted their college experience. Jake noted his ability to largely ignore thinking about his race or gender and how that was a marker of privilege. Rebecca and Madison also identified White privilege as impacting their college experience and making things easier for them overall. Zoe, Rebecca, and Madison were all also able to highlight the ways in which the “monochromatics” of their rural hometowns impacted their abilities to engage with diversity at MWUU. All expressed hesitation in engaging with diverse peers, afraid to accidentally insult someone with questions or a poorly worded, well-meaning sentiment. Other White students, even when pressed during the interviews, did not have much to say about their racial identities

As a researcher, I am unable to definitively say what caused the hesitation I often noted in participants around these conversations. One possibility was that participants were simply uncomfortable discussing these topics with me as a researcher. However, given the other in-depth and personal stories participants were willing to share, this does not seem likely. Another possibility may be that participants, particularly those who held racial privilege as White, were uncomfortable discussing this privilege and shied away

from this aspect of the conversation. A third possibility is that participants, all of whom fall into the “traditional” college age of 18-22, are still grappling with/learning about identity and perhaps do not yet have the language to discuss these issues. The reason this portion of the conversations with participants was challenging is likely a combination of multiple factors and is different for each person.

Easier conversations: religion and political ideology. Most participants appeared to have an easier time discussing the ways in which their religious and/or political identities have impacted their experiences in college. I am unsure why these conversations occurred throughout the interviews more naturally; however, participants who did not discuss race or gender freely discussed religious and political identities. Perhaps these identities felt a bit more removed or distant from the student, or involved less volatile emotions than race or gender.

For most participants with positive experiences at MWUU, religious and political beliefs were supported by a broader community. Several participants discussed the positive development of their political selves since coming to college and expressed happiness being in a community that largely shares more liberal beliefs. For these students, the university setting was an opportunity to connect with those who share similar political beliefs, something they were not always able to do back home. When discussing religion, several participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity to carry a consistent aspect of themselves into college which, in turn, eased their transition and facilitated belonging.

Unfortunately, as explored in chapter four, not all students felt as comfortable. For these participants, feeling othered due to political or religious beliefs impacted their

ability to feel as though they fully belonged in various spaces on campus. This feeling of disconnect impacted participants' abilities to engage in classroom discussion, freely share ideas, and make connections to classmates.

Study participants do not appear to be alone as other politically conservative students at MWUU and beyond expressed similar concerns. A recent internal study at MWUU indicated that for those who identified as conservative, agreement with the statement "students with my political beliefs are respected on this campus" fell from 76% in 2012 to 36% in 2017, a decrease of 40% (J. Adams, personal communication, January 18th, 2019). The stories of this study's participants, as well as the internal study at MWUU, mirrors increasing, broader national discussions regarding how conservative students feel welcomed on college campuses. Examples include opinion pieces in higher education spaces such as The Chronicle of Higher Education entitled *Don't Ignore Your Republican Students* (Usher, 2017), articles regarding campus climate on specific campuses such as Harvard (Schroeder, 2015), and even an episode of *This American Life* (Chace, 2018).

A 2017 survey by McLaughlin and Associates found that for self-identified Republican students, 61% felt often "intimidated in sharing [their] ideas, opinions or beliefs in class because they were different than [their] professors" (McLaughlin & Schmidt, 2017, p. 23). In sharing differing opinions in class with peers, this number only dropped to 58% (p. 24). Interestingly, this survey found self-identified Democratic students felt similarly. Certainly, students feeling uncomfortable to express divergent opinions hurts classroom learning and the broader campus community climate, which likely also impacts the phenomenon of belonging. This may be particularly true for rural

students who feel marginalized not only because of their geographic backgrounds, but their religious or political beliefs as well. Implications and opportunities for continued research in this area is provided at the end of this chapter.

Rurality and academic identity. As illustrated in chapter four, academic identity was also discussed by several participants as an important, but difficult negotiation in college. Several participants, although having received high grades in high school, recalled “knowing” they would not be accepted into MWUU and their shock when offered entry. As a researcher, these examples of “what is accomplishable” by these rural students connects to larger theoretical discussions of social reproduction theory and place theory. Despite their clear academic and co-curricular achievements, these rural students did not see MWUU as a viable option or see themselves as good enough in the right ways to warrant admittance.

Here, complex notions of cultural and social capital intermix with delimitations of habitus to illustrate to participants, whether real or not, the limits of what is attainable. Their rural habitus informs how they see their academic ambitions as, in the words of Bourdieu, “reasonable or unreasonable...suitable or unsuitable” (as cited in Reed-Danahay, 2005, p.160) as a “socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). Despite feelings of inadequacy or fear of rejection, all participants in this study enrolled at MWUU directly from high school thus excluding them from existing research indicating rural students delay matriculation into higher education (Byun et al., 2015; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016). This is not to say these patterns do not exist, but simply that delayed matriculation was not a part of these particular students’ experience.

For many of these participants, they are often the only one of their high school class attending MWUU, with peers opting for smaller, regional colleges, community and technical schools, or no higher education at all. However, once accepted and enrolled at MWUU, most participants expressed challenges with academics. This finding lends support for existing research that rural students are less academically prepared than their peers (Edington & Koehler, 1987; Lindberg et al., 1985; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Some participants have utilized resources on campus and feel as though they are moving in a more positive academic direction. Others continue to struggle in coursework, but are not giving up. This perseverance and resilience to setbacks is illustrative of the ways in which their rural identities impact their experiences in college. When faced with challenges, these rural students have been able to draw upon their hardworking attitude (which they previously attributed to growing up in a rural place) to keep reaching for their goals. Heinisch's (2017) research also highlighted the perseverance of rural students as an immense benefit from their rural upbringings.

This perseverance also provides a strong example of habitus influencing, but not overly-determining, the path of an individual. As Bourdieu reminds, "habitus is not the fate that some people read into it" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). For participants, their rural identities mean that getting into, and being academically prepared for, MWUU seemed like a stretch. Yet, once here, that same rural identity and experience became a well from which to draw motivation and perseverance.

Analysis of phenomenological material from this study suggests participants commonly struggled with discussing their various intersecting identities; however, these intersections did impact the phenomenon of belonging in various and complicated ways.

In instances at MWUU when marginalized identities (such as race or class) intersected with their rural background participants felt increased disconnection from the university. Feeling minoritized in specific university contexts, for example in regards to political or religious beliefs in the classroom, also contributed to decreased feelings of belonging for participants. Participants with these various marginalized or minoritized identities seemed to easily recall these negative experiences while participants had a much more challenging time discussing the ways privileged identities (such as being White at a predominantly White institution) benefitted them.

Utilizing Campus Resources

The final secondary research question of this study explored the ways in which campus resources impact the phenomenon of belonging for rural students. As discussed in chapter four, participants utilized a wide variety of university sponsored programs, student services, and/or departments which helped shape a sense of belonging on campus. Unsurprisingly, the exact resources utilized depended on the needs of the particular participant, but, multicultural programs, Welcome Week programming, academic advising, and student clubs or organizations were three areas that were routinely discussed as beneficial.

Multicultural programs. Only two participants in this study identified as people of color, but both utilized multicultural programs during their first years at MWUU and felt as though these offices contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. For Ann, the multicultural office on campus provided her an opportunity to connect with other people of color in a way she had never been able to experience in her small, rural community. This sense of shared experience helped her feel connected on campus, even

when other areas of college, such as coursework, got challenging. While Lucinda utilized the multicultural office less, she, too, regarded the sessions provided during move-in week as helpful and “nice.” Although multicultural programs were not discussed by most participants, I believe these programs serve as important points of connection and community for participants who also identified as students of color. Particularly at a predominately white institution, opportunities for connection with peers from the same or similar racial backgrounds can cultivate belonging through representation, visibility, and community. Findings from the study regarding the importance of multicultural programs in the development of belonging is supported by previous research which indicates an encouragement of diversity on college campuses contributes to student sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; O’Keefe, 2013), as does the existence of dedicated multicultural spaces (Patton, 2006; Patton, Ranero, & Everett, 2011; Stewart & Bridges, 2011)

Welcome Week programming. Welcome Week programming at MWUU is an extension of orientation for first-year students to welcome and acclimate them to university life. Although not mandatory, most study participants took part in at least a few Welcome Week events. For those who were most involved, Welcome Week became an opportunity to meet new people and explore the campus and surrounding city. Through Welcome Week activities participants were able to begin to build social capital with their peers that fostered a sense of belonging. Several participants also recalled meeting initial friends and overcoming feelings of isolation and loneliness during Welcome Week programming. For others, Welcome Week became the first opportunity to practice decision making regarding their individual time management and self-care.

This opportunity in turn fostered belonging on campus by reinforcing the idea that participants were prepared to self-advocate and make decisions.

Whether by helping participants connect with others or giving them freedom to make their own decisions, Welcome Week programs may provide an opportunity to help further ease the transition into college life for rural students, particularly when immersed in an urban setting. Opportunities for further outreach for orientation professionals will be discussed later in this chapter.

Academic/Faculty Advising. Academic advising was one of the few offices (in addition to the multicultural center) that multiple participants referenced as helpful to their sense of belonging on campus. Academic advising structures at MWUU vary college to college, but most participants who recalled academic advising as helpful were those who had full time, professional staff advisors who assisted in holistic degree planning, resource navigation, and student development. These academic advisors helped participants navigate the college process before students themselves felt fully equipped and supported participants by reinforcing they belong. As discussed in chapter four, several participants recalled caring faculty who also assisted them in navigating the college system and connecting with opportunities, even when these faculty were not formal advisors.

Both full-time professional and faculty advisors provide an important point of connection to students. For rural students who come from close-knit, small communities, this connection to a single individual is even more important, particularly when cultivating belonging. Previous research has shown that for other populations, having at least one strong connection to a faculty or staff member can assist in the development of

belonging (Curran & Millard, 2016; Matthews, 2016). Seemingly, these connections are also helpful for rural students who, for a variety of reasons, may feel uneasy or confused navigating the college environment. Whether professional advisors, caring faculty, or other staff, these connections served as another way in which rural students could grow their social capital on campus, leading to increased belonging.

Student clubs and organizations. Researchers have illustrated the ways in which student clubs and organizations help students develop sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Similarly, most participants in this study also discussed the ways in which student clubs and organizations helped them find community on campus and feel as though they belonged. The type of student club or organization varied for each participant. Some, like Jake, Lucinda, Ann, Laura, and Madison took part in organizations that were closely related to their academic or professional interests. Wanting to build social connections, Mary, Zoe, and Jessica found community through a sorority on campus. Zoe and Ann also found belonging in student groups that were closely tied to aspects of their religious and racial identities, respectfully.

As explored in Chapter four, participants were also connected to clubs and organizations related to their hobbies and interests. Andrea was the sole participant who did not discuss participation in student clubs or organizations when discussing belonging on campus, although she did explain she “tested out” many of them during her first year at MWUU. Rather, she attributed the majority of her belonging to peers, particularly those who she got to know through the city’s music scene and opening her home. Interestingly, consistent participation in student clubs and orgs fluctuated greatly across participants. Some students have maintained ongoing participation in their student clubs

and organizations. Jake has taken part in the Economics Club every year since arriving at MWUU and Ann has continued her work with her cultural clubs, including founding her own organization for multicultural and first-generation students.

However, a more common pattern that emerged from participant interviews was utilizing student clubs and organizations to build initial belonging and then branching outward. Although participants discussed student clubs and organizations as important to cultivating belonging, many participants also stated it took them longer than anticipated to get connected and several wanted to continue to become more involved on campus. Rebecca remarked that her first year in college did not go the way she “anticipated”. For her, this was largely due to a lack of involvement in clubs and organizations.

Research shows Rebecca and other study participants are not alone. Data from the 2017 and 2018 National Survey of Student Engagement indicate that while incoming students anticipate becoming engaged in student clubs and organizations, a full 34% of students report spending 0 hours on these activities in the first year (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2019). This percentage of increases to 41% for first-generation students, an identity that, as discussed previously, often intersects with rurality. Research indicates this gap in expected versus actual student club and organization involvement has remained constant for over a decade (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2007).

University sponsored programs, student services, or departments certainly did assist participants in cultivating belonging on campus, but this process and engagement looked very different across participants. As discussed in chapter four, it is also important to consider the ways in which programs, services, and departments may impact the phenomenon of belonging for rural students in subconscious ways. For example, the

mere existence of a thriving, well-supported multicultural center (such as the one at MWUU) signals to participants who identify as students of color that their existence and community at the university matter. If no center existed or, perhaps worse, a center did exist, but without proper funding or space, the message may likely be received that supporting students of color is not a priority. Similar arguments can be made for well-functioning and inviting advising departments, tutoring centers, etc. Each of these spaces suggests to students that support and opportunities for assistance exist, which in turn may bolster belonging on campus. Implications and opportunities for further research on this topic are presented at the end of this chapter

Belonging on Campus

The primary research question of this study was as follows: how might sense of belonging take shape for rural students at a large, urban university. The answer to this question lies partially in the experiences of study participants as their stories provide powerful and importance context. However, an investigation of MWUU as the site of the phenomenon is also important, as are examinations of theoretical connections and post-reflexive insights. Although complex, this study suggests the phenomenon of belonging may take shape and be influenced by three key factors. First, belonging takes shape and changes over time. Second, belonging is complicated for rural students by aspects of rurality, other intersecting identities, as well as within and through specific spaces and experiences on campus. Third, belonging is cultivated across and through a wide variety of means. Many of these points have been discussed at length in exploration of the secondary research questions, but a summary of this discussion is provided below.

Time and the phenomenon of belonging. As discussed in chapter four, belonging was defined by participants as a feeling of comfort, familiarity, relief, and peacefulness, but this feeling often took longer than often anticipated to develop. Generally, participants equated belonging with finding peers to connect with, although some found that professional and faculty advisors helped them navigate belonging on campus and even reinforced the message that they, as students, belonged, even when they were unsure themselves. The finding of these peer groups, connection to professional staff or faculty, and engagement with students clubs and organizations naturally took time to unfold. While some opportunities such as Welcome Week assisted in the initial process of finding belonging, most participants felt as though their belonging on campus was not fully realized until late in their first year at the institution or even well into sophomore year. Extant research supports this finding that belonging takes time to cultivate.

Identity, experience, and the phenomenon of belonging. As discussed in response to a secondary research question, belonging for many participants was tied to various aspects of their identity and, at times, intersecting identities complicated finding a sense of belonging on campus depending on the specific experiences participants encountered. From the perspective of participants, various aspects of their rural identity made cultivating belonging a challenge on campus. First, as rural students, many participants felt ill-equipped to engage with the diversity they encountered on campus, even though diversity was often a large reason for attending MWUU. This discomfort made participants uneasy and forming some relationships became more challenging. Second, academic preparedness and imposter syndrome impacted the cultivation of

belonging for several participants as they struggled with their academic worth and place at the university. Third, political and religious affiliations, which participants largely attributed to their rural backgrounds, often made it challenging to always “fit in” at the university. Fortunately, although participants faced these challenges, all persevered and felt as though they had grown in their respective ways (understanding of diversity, academic preparedness, mediation of intersecting identities) and had ultimately found ways to build belonging at MWUU.

Cultivation and the phenomenon of belonging. As explored in the unpacking of several secondary research questions, participants identified belonging as being cultivated through a variety of means including multicultural programs, Welcome Week programming, academic advising/faculty advising, student clubs and organizations, and informal peer groups. Ultimately, while there were similarities in the ways participants cultivated belonging, each process was unique.

In many ways, the expansiveness of this finding may feel unhelpful for those looking to best and most easily support belonging for rural students in higher education. Certainly, the diverse ways participants understood cultivating belonging makes meaning-making complex, but understanding the experiences of people is always challenging. For myself as a researcher, this finding illustrates the diversity of experiences college students have and reinforces the notion that there is no single panacea for helping students cultivate belonging on campus. Instead, conversations of belonging should be infused across institutions to insure that, no matter what programs, offices, or people a student interacts with, they are being helped to build connections and

belonging. Opportunities and ideas for cultivation for practitioners and educators are discussed later in this chapter.

At the time of this study, all participants reported having found a sense of belonging at MWUU with which they were comfortable. For some participants, like Rebecca and Zoe, this meant being heavily involved in a wide variety of campus activities. For others, like Laura and Andrea, a feeling of belonging simply required feeling as though they could “make it” at MWUU, had a few close friends, and were overall happy with their college experience thus far. As a subjective issue, belonging looked different for all participants and, as such, how belonging took shape also differed.

Through interviews with 10 self-identified rural students, thinking with theory, and researcher post-reflexion, this research study explored four interconnected research questions and offered insights into the ways in which rurality intersects with, and impacts, sense of belonging at a large, urban university. From these findings, practitioners, educators, policy makers, and researchers can draw important implications for their work. In what follows, opportunities for further research and recommendations for practice and policy are provided.

Recommendations and Opportunities for Further Research

As a post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) inquiry, the purpose of this study is to better understand the phenomenon of belonging for rural students and to share the ways in which this phenomenon take shape for participants. The goals of PIP are antithetical to generalizability based on in-depth research with a few, select study participants. However, as a practitioner I also believe all research should offer some practical applications for practitioners and researchers. The participants of this study

gave generously of their time and stories. To take their time and interpret their experiences without carrying their words forward for continued work and improvement seems a disservice.

In what follows, I highlight recommendations for practitioners, educators, and policy makers regarding the support of rural students in higher education. These recommendations are grounded in the findings of this study, but also connect to existing literature regarding rural students in college. Recommendations include ways to foster sense of belonging, but also encompass other support systems that more holistically support rural students in higher education more broadly. I then provide a discussion of opportunities for future research related to the areas of rural studies, rural students in higher education, and sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Educators

This study illuminated several practical steps practitioners can take when working with rural students in higher education. Given the scope of this study, these recommendations are specifically suggested for practitioners and educators working with rural students in urban contexts, but some recommendations may be more generalizable to institutions in a variety of geographic settings. Based upon my interviews with ten research participants, five recommendations emerged from the phenomenological material including developing increased awareness of place identity, implementation of universal design concepts, expanded pre-college outreach for rural students, targeted orientation opportunities for rural students, and connection with academic advising services.

Increased awareness of place identity. As discussed throughout several previous chapters, place based identity and, specifically, the impact of a rural identity, have often been overlooked in higher education despite these students facing very different challenges than their urban and suburban peers. This lack of awareness is compounded by geographic background being invisible as well the misconception that rural students are generally captured in other underrepresented groups such as low socioeconomic status (SES), working-class, and first-generation students. Many rural students are indeed low SES, working-class, or first-generation. However, the misconception that *all* rural students share these identities serves to conflate social class and first-generation status with rurality and potentially impacts the likelihood rurality is discussed as a separate identity.

One recommendation emerging from this study for practitioners and educators is an increased awareness of rurality as a distinct identity that impacts the ways in which students understand and move through their college years. A heightened awareness of rurality could begin with discussions of geographic background in staff and faculty trainings related to student diversity and underrepresented populations. Drawing awareness to the invisible identity of rurality could take place through the stories of these students as well as existing data on college matriculation, retention, and graduation. Through this education, faculty and staff may feel more inclined to see this population as deserving of increased institutional attention and back initiatives to support this student population including those discussed in this chapter.

Implementation of universal design concepts. Another recommendation related to increased awareness of rural students' needs is to consider the ways in which those

working with this population can utilize universal design when discussing the various processes of higher education. The concept of universal design serves to ensure spaces, tools, or environments can be accessed by the greatest number of people possible. The suggestion of universal design is perhaps most applicable to faculty and other instructional staff (e.g., adjunct instructors, teaching assistants, etc.) who have a higher frequency of interaction with students than staff. Although the majority of classroom time is rightly focused on course content, this high volume of contact provides faculty an opportunity to clarify some processes and resources that often go unexplained, but could better support rural students in higher education.

One example from this study's findings is office hours. While most faculty and instructional staff include office hour times and locations in their syllabus, not all may take the time in class to explain what an office hour really is and the ways in which students may utilize them. If faculty and instructional staff took time to explain this concept on the first day of class, rural students may feel more empowered to attend when questions arise, potentially bolstering belonging through connection with faculty and increased academic performance.

Other resources faculty and instructional staff could spend time demystifying include academic support services on campus, mental health resources, and clear grading criteria. Dedicating a few minutes at the start of each class on a topic provides rural students with additional context and support without substantially cutting into overall instructional time. I recently began a similar practice in my own college-level teaching and have noticed students being receptive to learning about this information in a classroom setting. I also believe demystifying these resources in class helps to share a

responsibility that can easily be written off as a staff (versus faculty) concern. Spending even a brief amount of time discussing resources, sharing insider knowledge about the institution, and clearly outlining expectations is beneficial to all students, but particularly to rural students and other under-served student groups such as first-generation and working-class students who may feel lost in the college setting and uneasy asking for clarification. Dedicating class time to elucidate processes in higher education serves to normalize the notion that many students struggle with navigating the systems, processes, and offices of higher education. This recommendation requires faculty to educate themselves on campus resources and take some time out of their instructional periods; however, given the benefits, fostering student belonging should be a priority of everyone on college campuses.

Pre-college outreach. While participants of this research study all found their way to MWUU, many discussed challenges with researching, visiting, and applying to the university. Many of these challenges stemmed from a lack of understanding of the college exploration and application process by others in the participants' lives. For some participants, like, Laura, her parents did not understand the importance of a college visit, calling them "stupid" and "ridiculous". It was a challenge for her to arrange a visit to MWUU, the only campus she saw in person prior to committing.

For other participants the application process was challenging and confusing. Despite having high grades in high school, Jessica recalled how she was in tears after her tour of MWUU, positive she would not be accepted. Others recalled similar anxieties, all largely stemming from confusion regarding the admission process. While application to

college is stressful for most students, the process may be particularly challenging for rural students and, thus, additional outreach and support is warranted.

As discussed in chapter one, rural students lag behind both urban and suburban peers in college attendance, despite studies indicating rural students perform as well academically (Fan & Chen, 1999; Schonert et al., 1991). Researchers have also illustrated rural students under match in college selection, despite qualifying for higher-tier institutions (Burke, Davis, & Stephan, 2015; Pappano, 2017a) In order to best support rural students and diversify student bodies, institutions of higher education should do more to assist students in learning about, and applying to, their institutions.

Institutions should extend recruitment efforts to rural students by entering their local communities to provide information on the institution's campus, programs, and application process. Physically going directly to the students has two benefits. First, it removes the geographic barrier of distance that often exists for rural students who may be interested in urban institutions, but are unable to easily transport themselves there. Second, it helps support students gather information when they may not have the same type of college-going support from immediate family members.

Another option is to create admission programs that coordinate campus visits for rural students, without the need for them to drive. Such a program is currently being implemented at Texas A & M, where students are bussed into campus for admission visits (Pappano, 2017a). Again, this program serves to eliminate barriers that may otherwise prevent rural students from applying to various institutions. Certainly, these types of coordinated trips are an investment in time and money, but also show a dedication to supporting rural students in their college exploration.

Target orientation opportunities. As several participants discussed, the first few weeks at MWUU were overwhelming, as is often the case for many students entering college. Suddenly dealing with an increased academic demand, total time management control, and being faced with “adult” tasks such as laundry and meal planning for the first time is daunting. However, in addition to these challenges, rural students are also charged with adapting to aspects of their new urban environment such as larger numbers of people, increased diversity, public transportation, sprawling campuses, and more. These environmental adjustments are often greater than those faced by urban or suburban peers and cause increased stress on rural students. One way institutions can respond to these stressors is through targeted orientation opportunities and adjustments to orientation programming for rural students.

Targeted orientation sessions for rural students could take a wide variety of forms, depending on the orientation process of the institution. One idea is to organize orientations sessions specifically for rural students on urban campuses. According to a 2017 survey of over 200 participating institutions by the Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education, individualized orientation sessions are commonly offered for “special populations” such as transfer students (87%), first-year students (78%), and other special populations (30%) including veterans, academically underprepared students, honors students, disabled students, and minority students, among others (Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education, 2017, p. 18).

While rural students are undoubtedly caught-up in some of these other categories, there is no data to suggest that responding institutions are cultivating an orientation

experience specifically for rural students. Benefits of this type of session including incoming students meeting with peers who have a similar geographic identity and perhaps more quickly building connections with a shared identity, a greater level of comfort with the orientation process without fear of feeling different, and tailored programming to help address new challenges and negotiations rural students may face. Certainly, potential downsides to this type of orientation practice exist. Perhaps, if oriented together, rural students may pair off only with one another and not engage in the broader diversity on campus, at least as quickly as they might have otherwise. This concern may be mitigated by having rural-only orientation sessions be options and/or offering additional welcoming activities in the first weeks of school where students from all backgrounds can mingle.

A smaller version of this same idea may be a *if 1 then 2* model of grouping students for orientation. In this philosophy, students from under-represented and marginalized communities are always paired with at least one other person who shares that identity within their orientation group. This process does not presuppose students from similar identities will have exactly the same experience or needs, but this care in grouping rural students together is a small gesture in showing students they are not alone, which may mitigate some feelings of otherness. University of Miami Ohio is one institution that currently utilizes this grouping method for low-income, first-generation, and students of color in orientation. Such a practice could easily be extended to rural students, particularly if more care is taken to seek out who identifies as rural—a policy suggestion that will be explored later in this chapter.

Another way to offer targeted orientation for rural students would be to provide specific sessions on aspects related to adjusting to urban life such as navigating public transportation, personal safety, and even engaging with diversity. Offering these types of sessions would be beneficial not only to rural students, but to all students who want to learn more about these aspects of urban living. It is important these sessions not frame educating rural students from a deficit approach. Just as not all minority, veteran, or transfer students have the same orientation needs, neither will rural students. However, the important difference is that targeted sessions already exist for these other student populations, while rural students are largely forced to figure it out on their own. Interestingly, MWUU does offer a few sessions on public transportation during Welcome Week, but only one participant in this study expressed knowledge that these sessions were an option. Therefore, campuses who are already offering these programs may want to re-examine the ways in which these sessions are marketed to ensure students know these options exist.

Fostering connections to academic advising. Given the ways in which belonging has shown to drive the success of students, cultivating belonging in students should be a priority of every employee. Unfortunately, giving a job to everyone often results in the job being carried out by no one. There must be individuals on campus whose mission is to promote the cultivation of belonging for students, particularly those who may be underrepresented. Based upon participant experiences shared in this study as well as my own post-reflexion, I believe academic advising offices serve as a natural place for conversations around belonging to develop. This belief is supported by previous research indicating academic advising services promote belonging for students

in college (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Therefore, an important recommendation of this study is to foster increased connections between rural students and academic advising services to try promote belonging on campus.

As discussed in chapter two, extant literature indicates many rural students form, and rely on, strong bonds with faculty and/or guidance counselors in high school. For these rural students, academic advisors, either via professional staff roles or faculty, may serve as a replacement for those trusted members of their previous academic communities. As participants in this study illustrated, trusted professional and faculty advisors helped connect them to resources on campus, bolster their self-confidence, and gave them opportunities to get involved on campus, all of which helped foster a sense of belonging for these students.

According to a study with 770 institutions conducted by The Global Community for Academic Advising, nearly all college and universities have some sort of academic advising services for students (The Global Community for Academic Advising, 2011). Survey results indicated that while small schools with enrollments less than 6,000 students largely used faculty advisors and 53.9% (n = 229) of small school respondents required mandatory advising for all students (p. 5). Conversely, large schools (such as MWUU) primarily utilize full-time professional advisors or a mix of professional and faculty advisors, but only 13.1% (n = 11) of large school respondents required mandatory academic advising for all students. Mandatory advising for “some students” was required in 36.9% (n = 31) of large institutions. Presumably, this mandated advising was for special populations such as honors students, probation students, and other populations.

Given the important role advisors played for several study participants, as well as the positive impact advising services have been shown to have for students more broadly, one recommendation from this study is that rural students have mandatory check-ins with an advisor. Ideally, these check-ins would occur at least a few times a year for the best opportunity to foster a positive interpersonal relationship. Through this relationship building, the academic advisor can serve as a touch point for the student—connecting him or her to academic and co-curricular resources as well as acting as a support for the student. Given the challenges in retaining rural students in higher education, the argument should be made that these students constitute a marginalized population and, as such, institutions should bear the responsibility of providing extra support for this population.

This recommendation requires institutions to confront potential barriers of time, money, and advising philosophy. Certainly, adding rural students into mandated advising may put a strain on already heavy advising loads. Knowing this, schools should take a close look at the rural students at their institutions (see recommendation for policy makers below) and brainstorm ways to increase advising services to these students in a way that is sustainable. When possible, institutions should explore hiring additional advising professionals to ensure that each student is being served well.

Differing advising philosophies is another challenge institutions may need to explore in order to carry out this recommendation. A wide variety of advising philosophies exist; however, they can largely be separated into relational or transactional approaches. Transactional advising is primarily aimed at answering a student's questions and sending them on their way. This form of advising offers very little opportunity to

know the student on a personal level or “check-in” on how they are doing outside of academics. Through a relational advising approach, the academic advisor goes beyond answering basic questions regarding classes, majors, and finances and works to build a connection with the student. Through this connection building advisors are better able to explore the full experience of college with a student, guiding and coaching them in a deeper way. In order for mandatory advising to be most productive, relational advising should be promoted to best mirror the types of social capital from which rural students most benefit from.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

In addition to practitioner and educator recommendations, this study also generated three primary recommendations for policy makers. These recommendations aim to ease the transition for rural students into college by making this population more easily identifiable and open this student population up for additional supports.

Mandated tracking of rural students. Currently at most institutions of higher education, geographic background is not tracked in the same ways as other aspects of identity such as age, race, socioeconomic status, or gender. This makes easily identifying these students for research challenging. Upon calling the admission offices for over twelve institutions, none of the institutions could easily provide the number of rural students they were currently serving. When asked why this information was not tracked, the response I routinely received was variations of “because it is not required information to report to the federal government” (J. Allen, personal communication, October 27th, 2017). This highlights a fundamental flaw in how higher education ignores rural students, at least in regards to their geographic background. The simplest policy

recommendation emerging from this study is that geographic background should be compiled, reported, and tracked like any other demographic information.

This is not to say that all rural students have exactly the same experiences or needs; however, with this information more readily available institutions could more easily analyze, track, and research the experiences of rural students on their campuses. Institutions could also then more accurately target and implement the practitioner recommendations made previously. Targeting these recommendations more specifically may also mean that a higher number of rural students engage in the activities and services that this and other research has demonstrated to promote belonging.

Allowing rural students to self-identify. As extant literature has illustrated, identifying who qualifies as a rural student is challenging and often requires relying on quantitative coding systems from the National Center for Education Statistics or various other factions of the United States government. In addition to the recommendation that geographic background be tracked for students, this study also supports the recommendation that this identity marker be self-identified. In the implementation of mandatory tracking, institutions could change policies of their admission materials to ask students to denote how they identify their geographic background. Prospective students could notate whether they were from primarily urban, suburban, or rural locations. Fourth and fifth options could be “other” and “prefer not to answer.” This identification of geographic background would be similar to that of self-reported categories of gender, race, and ethnicity that currently exists on most college applications.

A benefit of self-identification is it allows for a wider-variety of students to be captured under the umbrella of rurality. This, in turn, expands and nuances the ways in

which higher education practitioners and scholars think about and serve this student population. Findings from this study suggest a wide variety of students identify as rural and if this self-identification can be tracked and quantified, institutions may be able to advocate for increased services for this student population.

Incorporation of rural identity as criteria for participation in support programs. The final recommendation for policy makers is to expand criteria for participation in existing support programs to include rural-identified students. As discussed in chapter two, rural students face challenges in college similar to students of color, students from lower socioeconomic statuses, and first-generation college students. However, while many national, state-wide, and institution-specific programs exist to support these students, geographic background is generally not included a criteria for participation. Certainly, some students participating in these programs are indeed rural, but their acceptance into support programs is due to connections with another underserved identity. With data showing the challenges rural students face, federal, state, and institutional policy makers should allow rural-identified students into their support programs. Doing so may provide rural-identified students additional resources for college success.

Within the past several years, many policy makers have already begun to make the change to include rural students within existing support programs. Many of these programs still identify rural students through quantitative means, but the intent is moving in a positive and exciting direction. In fall 2018 the University of Georgia unveiled its “ALL Georgia” campaign, a scholarship and support program for students attending the university from rural Georgian counties. Students receive four years of scholarship funds

as well as support programming coordinated from a variety of departments and offices on campus (Beeson, 2018). Unfortunately this program can only support six students each year.

The University of Michigan's Kessler Presidential Scholarship was also recently expanded to include geographic background as a criteria for selection for up to one-third of its recipients. Similar to the All Georgia Scholarship, the Kessler Presidential Scholarship provides financial assistance for four years as well as a community of support including mentorship programs, social opportunities, service learning, and leadership development ("Becoming a Kessler Scholar," 2019). Programs such as this expand opportunities for rural students to receive support and illuminate the ways in which rurality may intersect with other identities such as first-generation status or social class.

Other institutions are implementing brand new programs to support rural students. Cornell University will begin a scholarship program for rural students beginning in the fall of 2019 and, recently, Lycoming College in Pennsylvania has secured one million dollars in grant funding to provide scholarships for students hailing from two rural counties within the state (Nadworny & Marcus, 2018). North Carolina State University also offers several targeted programs for both rural students and rural communities. While the university offers its Rural Works! Program to offer student internships in rural communities, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is promoting a new Student Access Initiative diversifying and easing the path for rural students into their Baccalaureate programs ("Student Access Initiative," 2019). Interestingly, even the agriculture college within MWUU started a new scholarship program for rural students in

Fall 2017 aimed at providing financial, academic, and social support for students across four years of college.

As evidenced, some colleges are taking note of the needs of rural students and the importance of supporting this population in college. However, there remains significant opportunities for federal, state, and institutional policy makers to further support rural students in programs such as TRiO and other institutional support programs such as first-generation student centers. Expanding existing programs to include rural background as acceptance criteria is a particularly easy win as the infrastructure for these programs is already in place. Certainly, this type of policy update may require additional funding, space, or staffing as programs increase in size, but these costs are significantly less than those associated with building a program to support rural students from the ground up. Amending existing programs also helps call attention to the intersecting identities that these rural students often face and, over time, has the potential to make geographic identity a more common topic of discussion and research.

Opportunities for Future Research

While this study provided some insights into the experiences of ten self-identified rural students at a large, urban university, even more questions were generated by these interviews and post-reflexion. These opportunities for future research are not exhaustive, but aim to highlight some of the most important gaps that emerged from my review of extant literature as well as this study. Opportunities include continued exploration of self-identified rural identity, the experiences of rural students in higher education, as well as the racial identity development of rural students. These opportunities could be taken up by higher education scholars and practitioners as well as others interested in rurality.

Continued exploration of rural students in higher education. Although literature on rural students in higher education is growing, this population is still understudied, particularly when compared to other populations of college students. Continued exploration of the experiences of rural students in higher education will allow practitioners and researchers to better understand this underrepresented student population, their struggles, and their strengths. Specifically, qualitative work that aims to share the student voices is particularly important, so as to amplify the experiences and needs of these students in their own words.

At the time of this study, I am not aware of any longitudinal works to trace the experiences of rural students across multiple years of higher education. This may be a particularly interesting project to trace the ways in which understanding of the student experience or specific phenomenon (such as belonging) change over time. Of particular interest might be studying the experiences of rural students in specific higher education settings such as rural institutions, minority serving institutions, community colleges, or study away experiences. A more detailed look at the rural student experience across various college and universities would allow for insight into the rural student experience and comparisons across institution types.

Another way in which to explore rural students in higher education could involve a critical reflection of the ways in which intersecting identities impact experience getting to, moving through, and reflecting upon college. Intersections with rural identities which may be of interest include first-generation status, social class, sexual orientation, gender expression, religion, political ideology, and race. In regards to sexual orientation, gender expression, and race, it would be illuminating to speak to students who occupy non-

dominant identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or asexual students; trans-identified students, and students of color. Focused exploration of these students' experiences would add to practitioner and researcher understanding of the rural student experience.

Exploration of intersecting identities would also positively challenge the dominant stereotype that rural places and people are always heteronormative, cis-gender, and white. At the time of this study I am unaware of any projects which undertake any of these student populations specifically. Learning more about the rural student experience may continue to shed light on cultivating sense of belonging and well as the persistence, retention, and student engagement of this population.

Exploring the importance of self-identified rural identity. The stories and experiences shared by this study's participants illustrate the importance of continuing to explore the nuances in self-identification of a rural identity. Most existing literature on rural students utilize quantitative definitions of rurality that rely on geographic distance to urban areas and population density; even most qualitative studies utilize these criteria. It is only recently that researchers have begun to explore how self-identification with a rural identity might impact research on this population (Gillion, 2015). Continued research on this topic is necessary in order to better understand both the individuality and shared experiences these self-identified rural students hold. This work could also further understandings of the importance of social reproduction and place theory within the student experience of higher education.

Racial identity development of rural students. Within PIP, the researcher studies as much as what is absent in the phenomenological material and post-reflexion as

what appears. Throughout this study, I was struck by the ways in which participants were, or were not, able and willing to discuss issues of racial identity and, specifically, White privilege in relation to their rural identity. This line of inquiry was interesting and aspects of this provocation were discussed as impacting sense of belonging. However, an in-depth exploration of this topic was largely outside the scope of this study. I believe a deeper exploration of racial identity development is warranted and may provide interesting insights. I am curious how the relative homogeneous areas participants grew up in impact their racial identity development. This exploration of racial identity development for rural students would also be interesting as a comparative analysis of students from racially homogeneous and racially diverse rural locations.

Conclusion

Rural students are an important, under researched, and underrepresented population of students in higher education. This study, framed through social reproduction and place theory and examined through a post-intentional phenomenological framework, has aimed to explore the phenomenon of sense of belonging for this population at a large, urban university. Through exploration of phenomenological material generated through participant interviews, thinking with theory, and post-reflexion new knowledge was produced regarding the ways in which rural students conceptualize rurality, the impacts of rurality on identity, participants' engagement and experiences in college, as well as the ways in which belonging takes shape for these students.

Findings suggest the processes of understanding notions of rurality, identity, and belonging are complex. Conceptualizing rurality for rural participants was, and remains,

a complicated process predicated on both stereotypes and lived experience. Although participants had numerable critiques of their rural communities, each also had positive memories in addition to a strong belief their rural background played an important role in shaping them as people. While participants worried about gaining acceptance into MWUU and have faced challenges with navigating both the university and urban setting, they rely on their work ethic, positive attitudes, peers, and university programs, offices, and departments for support. Throughout their time at MWUU, belonging has slowly developed, though not without challenges and set-backs. The phenomenon of belonging at MWUU for these rural students is impacted in co/overt ways by the various intersecting identities held by participants, their lived experiences at the university, as well as the existence of university sponsored programs, services, and departments.

Although constrained by a small sample size consisting of largely white, cis-gender females, a single institution setting, and my own lens as a researcher, this study contributes valuable new knowledge to those interested in rurality or rural students in higher education. First, this study began to expand traditionally held notions of rurality by asking participants to self-identify as rural and explore the areas of connection and disconnect in their experiences. Within this exploration, the notion of *access* as an important component of rurality and a rural identity emerged.

Second, this study contributes new perspectives on the rural student experience in higher education—an area of research that, while growing, is still limited. Specifically, this study highlighted the voices of rural students with multiple years of college experience, a divergence from other qualitative studies that have solely explored first-year rural students and initial transitions to college. Third, this study contributes to

literature related to sense of belonging by exploring this phenomenon with a student population previously unexplored in this lens.

The stories and experiences of rural students matter. Practitioners and scholars must continue to seek out new knowledge about this population in order to ensure these students are being served in ways that contribute to their academic, personal, and professional success in college. As research on rural students continues to grow, so does the opportunity to re-center rurality and rural students as individuals with gifts, talents, and strengths outside the realm of urbanormativity. The time to question why rurality matters has passed (Holmes & Dalton, 2008). Faculty and staff at institutions of higher education have a responsibility to better understand the gifts, challenges, and experiences of this student population. It is my hope this study will contribute to existing literature on this topic and encourage others to continue this important line of inquiry into the future.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Interview One

- Tell me a bit about yourself.
- If you were to describe important aspects of yourself, what would those be?
- Describe the area you grew-up in for me.
- How did it feel growing up in your area?
- What does rural mean to you?
- What does it mean to you to come from a rural background?
- Has growing up in a rural area shaped you? How?
- Do you feel your rural background influences any aspect of your experience at the university Why or why not?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Interview Two

- What made you want to come to MWUU?
- What were your first weeks at MWUU like?
- What does the word belonging mean to you?
- What does it feel like when you belong somewhere?
- Do you feel like you belong anywhere on campus? If so where? What does that feel like?
- Have you ever felt like you didn't belong somewhere? Tell me about that? How did that feel?
- If you were to describe yourself to someone, what would you say?
- Do aspects of your identity ever impact your belonging on campus? Why or why not?
- Do aspects of your identity ever make you feel differently at different places on campus?
- If you have an example of a time you felt you belonged at MWUU, describe that experience.
- Tell me about your involvement at the university (student services, clubs, etc.)
- Are there specific programs or departments that you are involved in or use frequently? Why or why not? If yes, how do you feel using these departments?
- How does it feel to be going to college in an urban environment?