

A Two-Lane Road:
The Pathway between Rural America and Higher Education

by

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Abstract

How does rurality influence rural student perceptions of higher education and pathways to attaining it? This research examines the relationship between rurality and higher education and explores how rurality shapes student perceptions of higher education. I argue that rurality creates unique challenges for education, and I theorize that these challenges amplify the disjointed relationship between the K-12 and Higher Education systems. As a result of how the disjointed relationship interacts with the challenges of rurality, rural students lack college awareness and knowledge. This lack of exposure creates a mismatch between the expectations of rural students and reality, which hinders rural students' ability to legitimately pursue their aspirations. I theorize that this phenomenon of student mismatching is partially responsible for low rural student attainment rates and difficult transitions for those students who do pursue higher education.

Despite the challenges created by rurality, the strengths of the rural community offer great potential. Scholars must be willing to legitimately partner with rural communities to leverage the strengths of rural communities. I conclude that the strengths of rural communities should be an essential piece of the conversation as these strengths could be the key to overcoming the challenges that rural students battle.

Preface

When I first began this research, I was in a class on critical issues in education. Each week a new guest speaker came to our class to present a critical challenge within education. I loved this class, but each week, I consistently found myself frustrated by my belief that the issues we were discussing did not seem relevant to my own educational experiences in a rural school. I was confused that so many of the discussions of our class had no consideration of rural education or rural spaces.

Following this frustration, I first began this research by questioning if there is an urban bias in education reform. I theorized that reform efforts prioritize urban education systems, and that as a result, rural education systems are forgotten. I hypothesized that this is harmful to rural students and that education policy should be tailored to the diverse educational environments. This research was first imagined as a comparative study.

However, as the research progressed, I became increasingly interested in focusing on the unique challenges and experiences of rural education and of rural students. I began to focus on trying to understand how the rural environment shapes students' educational experiences and perspectives, and their ultimate pathways to higher education. As I became increasingly attracted to studying the effects of rurality, I decided to focus solely on rural education. Although this research could be furthered with comparative data of non-rural systems, this research focused on bringing awareness to realities of rural systems.

As this research was designed qualitatively and not structured as hypothesis-testing research, I formed my theory gradually and in response to the data collected in the interviews and student surveys. The theory that is argued in this research emerged as student surveys began to notably contrast the story being told in the interviews. Because of this dynamic, the theory is presented in thematic chapters with data from the student surveys and the interviews integrated and in conversation throughout.

Although I chose not to design a comparative study, I recognize the critical challenges facing our urban education systems. This research is not intended to diminish that essential conversation or reforms in that space. Scholars should continue to explore how our urban education systems can be strengthened. However, this research was designed to bring awareness and conversation to the realities of rural education. A conversation that I suggest has long been neglected. It is my hope that this research would continue to build this conversation so that all students have access to the resources and support to succeed.

I. Education, Equality and Democracy

As notions of geographical diversity and equality and opportunity in education become a growing conversation in higher education, rural education grows in significance. This research examines the relationship between rurality and higher education and explores how the rural environment shapes student perceptions towards higher education and the pathways that students travel in pursuit of it. Specifically, this research questions how rurality affects students' exposure to and value of higher education. Moreover, how does this perception of higher education inform rural student transitions into higher education and attainment rates? I theorize that the disjointed relationship between the K-12 system and higher education is amplified by the challenges created and structured by rurality. This disjuncture then hinders rural students' exposure to higher education. I theorize this lack of exposure to higher education skews both student knowledge and expectations of higher education which effectively hinders rural student attainment rates and student achievement.

This research seeks to promote the strengths and experiences of rural communities and resists engagement in the rural disadvantage perspective which stigmatizes rural communities. Ultimately, the aim of this research is to draw attention to the perspectives of rural students so that institutions of higher education may acknowledge these perspectives by creating outreach programming which is feasible and realistically interacts with the realities of rural education.

It is essential that educational outreach programming is inclusive of all students and is reimagined so that all students are exposed to, and receive access to higher education, because education matters. The well-established link between education and

social mobility accentuates the importance in providing all students with the equal opportunity to receive a quality education. Scholars have long explored the relationship between education, social mobility, and the perpetuation of generational poverty. Education has been identified as an indicator of an individual's eventual economic well-being and has been recognized as an avenue out of the cycle of poverty (Weber et al. 2007). Weber et al. (2007) demonstrate in their research that the greater an individual's educational attainment, the lower their risk of eventual poverty (443). They conclude that there is a strong, direct link between education and one's subsequent risk of living in poverty. Neelson (1975) echoes this conclusion, referencing education to be an instrument of socialization in which "education reflects the norms and values of the ruling groups and has essentially the function of confirming and stabilizing existing class differences" (143). In this understanding, education functions as a tool for the upper classes to perpetuate the asymmetric power relations between social classes and ensure the continuation of their dominance. Education is an influential institution and has the power to either welcome or impede opportunities which may have a significant effect on one's life. Recognizing the powerful potential of education has significant implications because it underscores the importance of providing a quality education to all children.

These points considered, it is essential that all students, no matter their race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or zip code, have the equal opportunity to receive a quality education. Every child is entitled to an equal opportunity to receive a quality education; to determine their own pathway in life, rather than be constrained and limited by the arbitrary social class or physical location that they were born into. Consequently, to provide for every child, it is crucial that the diverse educational environments and the

specific challenges and realities of these environments be examined.

I rest the significance of this research on the reality that education matters. As highlighted, in our society, education is a determining factor in one's life trajectory. Therefore, the degree of equality in opportunity present in our public education system is a direct indication of how democratic our society is. If we wish to pursue democracy and equality, it must begin with providing all students, regardless of zip-code, the equality of opportunity to receive a quality education. This begins with recognizing the diverse educational environments that our students learn within. Moreover, with that recognition must come respect and the willingness to learn not only the challenges posed by that environment, but the strengths and values that are upheld within it. Only a comprehensive and inclusive evaluation, which includes and equally considers rural spaces, will lead to policy and programming that is effective for all students.

Furthermore, this research has implications tied to the political dynamics resulting from the 2016 presidential election. In the aftermath of the presidential election, the political voice of rural America has received increasing attention. Sparked by the geographic voting trends, the experiences and influences of rural America are of growing interest. In the days following the election, numerous articles were published examining the relationship between population density and partisanship, and rhetoric on the emergence of "blue islands" amongst red seas captivated the media. A simple Google search reveals a seemingly never-ending stream of media headlines featuring variations of the question, "Two Americas?" that question the increasing political polarization of rural and urban counties. Although many analyses since 1980 have depicted rural voting trends leaning towards the Republican party (Prasad et al. 2009; Teixeira and

Abramowitz 2009), the geographic patterns of the 2016 election were seen as further pronouncing this trend, with more rural counties swinging right. (“Urban and Rural America...” 2016; Badger and Bui 2016). *The Washington Post* reports that, “In counties with fewer than 100,000 people, which make up 80 percent of counties in the country but contain only about 20 percent of the population, 9 out of 10 voted more Republican than they did in 2004” (Urban and Rural America...” 2016).

Similarly, in an article published by the *New York Times* in the week following the election, Wallace reports that although the counties that voted for Clinton represented 54% of the population, the blue counties correlated with only 15% of land area. In contrast, the counties that voted for Trump, which were home to 46% of the population, covered a vast 85% of American land area (Wallace 2016). Wallace visually depicts these statistics in two maps, pictured below in Figure 1.1 and 1.2, which were manipulated to demonstrate the geographic voting trends.

Figures 1.1 and 1.2: Maps of Voting Trends in 2016 Presidential Election



Wallace refers to Clinton’s voter-base as an “island nation” with “small island chains of liberal cores” among a red sea of republican-majority counties. The contrast of the geographic concentration of republican and democratic primary electorate base has led to questions regarding the influence of rural America and the implications of a growing

geographic divide.

The significance of this research is again amplified within the frame of this growing conversation. I do not comprehensively engage with the post-election rhetoric and research, but I do wish to draw attention to the geographically patterned voting trends. Regardless of the political preferences and party loyalty correlated with geographic patterns, I draw attention to the simpler acknowledgement that there is a geographic difference. That is, this election draws attention to the argument that geographic place may correlate with political preferences and political participation.

Although this research does not specifically engage with rural political preferences, an analysis of rural education is intimately connected. This analysis is connected because of the relationship between education and political engagement. Hillygus (2005) cites a positive correlation between education and political engagement. She argues that higher education shapes the political participation of the citizenry and promotes the continuation of democracy. Higher education provides citizens not only with the training to succeed in the workforce, but with the skills to participate meaningfully politically (7). Given the lower rates of educational attainment rates among rural communities and the emerging political focus on rural America, this argument is particularly relevant. If political participation and engagement with democratic principles is positively correlated with educational attainment, scholars should seek to improve the educational achievement of rural students. Achieving that begins with first understanding the specific challenges and strengths of rural education and how those effects affect student perspectives of higher education and their pathways to attaining it. Furthermore, it requires innovative thinking to consider how the strengths of the rural community and

the values upheld within it can be leveraged to further empower students.

Collectively, these complementary arguments, that education matters and that the political voice of rural America is increasing, frame the significance of this research. In light of these arguments, it is essential that supporting rural education and rural students be prioritized in the educational research agenda. This research responds to these arguments by specifically exploring the effects of rurality on education and the influence that the rural environment has on student perspectives of higher education. In the following chapters, I further these arguments by highlighting the challenges and strengths that are specific to rural education and I theorize models that would more effectively support rural students and rural schools.

In Chapter 2, I present a review and synthesis of relevant literature. In this review, I discuss the influence of place and provide data on the influence and scale of rural education nationally. I integrate existing research on the realities of rural education with research which has examined the influence and potential of outreach programming of institutions of higher education. This chapter serves to further frame the significance of this research and grounds this research in theories of previous scholars.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology and research design. The methods employed in this study include surveys conducted with junior and senior high school students as well as semi-structured interviews with educators, administrators, guidance counselors and community leaders. In this chapter, I define rurality as it is used in this research, provide justification for the case-study structure and describe the methodology used in data analysis. This chapter is supplemented with resources in Appendix A. I conclude this chapter by providing demographic and background information on the three

rural communities and school systems included in this study.

In Chapter 4, I present my theory and concept map which synthesizes each component of this research and the questions explored here. I theorize that there is a disjointed relationship between the K-12 system and the system of higher education. I argue that the challenges structured by rurality amplify this disjuncture and intensify the effects that this broken link between systems has on student attainment and achievement. This can be observed in difficult rural student transitions into higher education and diminished rural attainment rates. I build this theory by identifying both student and administrative effects and draw on student surveys and interviews to demonstrate this. I engage with each piece of the theory individually in the following chapters.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the first fundamental theme which explores the effects of rurality and the challenges structured by the rural community. This chapter serves to identify the challenges that I found to be specifically structured or amplified by rurality. Emerging themes discussed in this chapter include the effects of distance and isolation, the lack of resources available in rural communities, and negative effects of the rural community. At times, this chapter may serve to confirm or build on previous literature, for example, on the importance of mentorship in promoting a college-going culture. However, in this chapter, I additionally engage directly with the scholarship of Hektner and Howley, challenging their theory that the rural community hinders rural student aspirations and diminishes the value that students attach onto higher education. Using the survey results, I argue that the rural community does not influence the *values* students attach onto higher education, but rather their knowledge of higher education.

In Chapter 6, I draw on literature to suggest a disjuncture between the higher

education system and the K-12 system. I argue that this disjointed relationship is amplified due to challenges of rurality. In this chapter, I use this research on rural education as a lens to observe and understand this disjointed relationship between these systems. This chapter teases out how the specific challenges of rural education interact with the problematic broken links between higher education and the K-12 system. I conclude that this disjuncture has significant effects on student perceptions of higher education, which leads to diminished rural attainment rates and rocky student transitions.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I acknowledge and explore the strengths of the rural community and the involvement observed of third-party community actors engaging with the schools to provide college preparatory exposure and programming. This chapter recognizes positive examples of how rural communities are investing in programming and initiatives to build a college-going culture. I discuss strategies that these local agents have pursued, or have suggested in interviews, as innovative solutions to combat the challenges posed by the negative effects of the rural community and the disjointed relationship between K-12 and institutions of higher education. This chapter presents potential strategies that scholars and policy makers could continue to explore to effectively and feasibly support rural students and rural schools. The goal of this chapter is to encourage agents of higher education to think creatively about how outreach programming may be designed to use the strengths of the rural community and to appeal to the values and experiences of rural students, families and educators.

In Chapter 8, I provide a brief summary and acknowledge the limitations of this research. I conclude with potential implications of this research and suggest avenues for further research.

II. Literature Review: Rurality and the Influence of Place

Historically, there has been an acknowledged lack of research on rural education. The high visibility of urban poverty and the isolated nature of rurality often renders rural spaces invisible. This has led to a historical tendency to prioritize urban education (DeYoung 1987; Herzog and Pitmann 1995; Lichtner, Cornwell and Eggebeen 1993; Silver 2003). DeYoung (1987) asserts that there has been a “century-long bias” towards urban-based issues, similarly, Silver (2003) notes that rural education is “grossly underrepresented” in education research literature (3). In this literature review I provide a brief justification for why including rural education is so critical. I identify how this research builds on and contributes to existing scholarship on rurality and its relation to higher education. Ultimately, this research seeks to bridge this gap and contribute to the growing body of research which examines rural education and the influence of rurality on student perceptions of and pathways to higher education.

Existing literature has emphasized that rural education is distinct from non-rural education as the rural environment poses unique strengths and challenges for education (Broomhall and Johnson 1994; Cushman 1954; Gibbs 2000; Hardre 2013; Herzog and Pitmann 1995; Lichtener et al. 1993; Monk 2007; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Dewey and Crowley 2006). Hardre (2013) quotes a rural teacher who humorously explains, “placing general research and theory into rural schools can be like seeing a lamp or a chair in a store and liking it there, but bringing it home and hating it” (2). This research begins with the assumption that rural education raises unique questions and is distinct from nonrural education. Grounded in this assumption, this research builds on this by further considering how the unique features of the rural community affect rural student

perceptions of and pathways to higher education.

One well established feature of rurality established by a multitude of scholars is the increased prevalence of poverty in rural communities (Fisher 2005; Herzog and Pitmann 1995; Hutchins 2012; Roscigno et al. 2006; Weber and Jenson 2004). The increased exposure to poverty experienced by rural students has been theorized to affect student achievement, aspirations and eventual educational attainment. This research begins with the assumption that incidences of poverty are heightened in rural areas. I further question how this increased exposure to poverty may influence student perceptions of and pathways to higher education.

The strong influence of place is a second phenomenon that has been cited repeatedly as a unique feature structured by rurality. Scholars have theorized that as identity development happens within the context of one's community, rural adolescents grow up within the context of an increased attachment to place. (Burnell 2003, Howley 2006; McDonough as cited in Alleman and Holly 2013). Howley (2006) asserts that a sense of place provides a sense of belonging and identity which leads rural students to internalize the values promoted within their communities (73). Rural students tend to place a high value on their local communities and on the relationships formed within that community. Consequently, Howley (2006) claims that rural student educational aspirations are shaped by "legitimate and conscious commitments to rural life" (63), explaining that rural children form their aspirations within the context of their conscious commitment to their rural communities and rural lifeways.

Drawing on Howley (2006), this research expands on foundational literature which establishes that rural students report lower levels of educational aspiration and

attainment. Sparks and Nunuz (2014) conclude,

Students from rural areas are less likely to (a) attend college than their urban or suburban peers (Adelman 2002; Hu 2003), (b) choose highly selective colleges than their urban and suburban counterparts with similarly high levels of academic achievement (Holsapple and Posselt 2010), and (c) complete college degrees at the same rate as their non-rural peers (Byun, Meece and Irvin 2012, 2).

Using these conclusions as a foundation, this project draws on the theory by Howley (2006), who theorizes that given the declining state of rural labor markets, the strong influence of place mediates the aspirations of rural students and requires students to negotiate their aspirations to reflect the opportunities available in local communities (76).

Howley concludes “rurality structures children’s worlds in such a way as to limit both their aspirations and expectations” (72). She draws this conclusion because of her theory that the rural community and labor market limits student exposure to professional opportunities and higher education, and their conscious commitment to place encourages them to form aspirations in alignment with their commitment to their community. I accept Howley’s conclusion that rural students report lower levels of aspiration for higher education and that this effect is partially result of the influence of rurality. However, I seek to expand on Howley’s conclusion that rurality structures the expectations of rural students. I further this by questioning how features of rurality influence student exposure to higher education and how this limited exposure may influence expectations and complicate pathways to higher education navigated by rural students.

In particular, I explore why rural students hold lower educational aspirations and report lower attainment. How does rurality influence students’ exposure to, value of and

perceived access to higher education? This research expands on previous research which has established that rural students face unique obstacles and reflect lower educational aspirations and rates of attainment. Primarily, I consider how the unique features and challenges of rural education relate to the lower rates of educational aspiration and attainment of rural students.

In brief, existing scholarship has overwhelmingly established that rural education must respond to unique problems. Yet, there appears to be a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between the effects of rurality and the perceptions and beliefs rural students hold of higher education. Consequently, this research seeks to expand the existing literature by applying established theories specifically onto the relationship between rurality and higher education. I focus primarily on how the isolated nature of rurality intersects with the lower rates of educational attainment and aspirations to explore how rurality structures student's exposure to, value of and perceptions of access to higher education.

Below, I synthesize the dominant existing literature to demonstrate how my proposed theory contributes. This research begins with the established assumptions that rural education poses a unique problem, rural communities reflect higher incidences of poverty, and that rural students hold lower educational aspirations and report lower rates of attainment. First, I explain why the lack of research on rural education is problematic and suggest why rural education is a critical piece of educational research. I then explore theories which identify specific challenges of rural education that may collectively explain the gap in rural aspirations and attainment. After synthesizing these challenges in my model, I examine rural migration theories as a specific feature created by rurality that

rural students and educators must navigate. The rural migration theory identifies a tension rural students must negotiate between their dual commitments to educational attainment and place. I then discuss the theorized strengths of rural communities. I then transition to explore literature which has examined the influence of pre-collegiate access and outreach programming of colleges and universities to demonstrate the potential of such programming. I conclude by questioning how institutions of higher education can capitalize on the strengths of the rural community to create outreach programming which is inclusive of the values and experiences of rural students.

Ultimately, this research seeks to integrate existing research on the realities of rural education with research which has examined the influence and potential of outreach programming of institutions of higher education. The goal of this research is to apply existing research on the influence of outreach and pre-collegiate access programming to the specific realities of rural education to explore how such programming may be tailored to leverage the strengths of the rural community to effectively reach rural students.

Why Rural? Acknowledging the Role of Rural America

There has been a recognizable gap in the literature on rural education. In recognizing this historical bias in the research towards urban education systems, the immediate reaction is, so what? Given that there is an immensely greater proportion of students enrolled in urban school systems, is it not expected that research would focus on areas where the majority of students are impacted?

At first, this logic may seem rational; but, given the established relationship between education, social mobility and intergenerational poverty, this line of reasoning is simply not acceptable. The link between education and intergenerational poverty signifies

the importance of providing equal access for all students to receive a quality education. Thus, every student, regardless of their zip code, is worthy of a quality education, which indicates that every student's interests should be of equal worth and consideration. Every school district, regardless of its physical location, should be represented in the movement for educational equity.

Although rural education may not constitute the majority, it is not a trivial aspect of the national educational landscape. The following data, produced by the Rural School and Community Trust Foundation, in the 2014 "Why Rural Matters" report, demonstrates that rural education plays a significant role. Nationally, nearly 9.7 million students are enrolled in rural school systems, that is 20% or one in five students nation-wide that attend rural schools. Similarly, rural schools constitute 33% of public schools nationally. However, this figure varies significantly by state. For instance, in Massachusetts, only 6.5% of schools are categorized as rural, yet, in Montana approximately 75.3% of schools are identified as rural. In over fifteen states, over half of the public schools are rural schools and in an additional fifteen states, over one-third of public schools are rural schools (Johnson et al. 2014, 6-7).

In Michigan, over 305,000 students attend rural schools, creating one of the largest absolute rural student enrollments in the nation. This is one in five students in Michigan. Approximately, 30.5% of schools are classified as rural schools. Despite the reality that 20% of students in Michigan attends a rural school, only 8.7% of in-state students at the University of Michigan originate from a rural county (Enrollment by Geographic Location..., 2015). As the University of Michigan is a leading institution in the Michigan, it is troubling that rural students are so disproportionately represented.

Rural schools have demonstrated increasing rates of impoverished and diverse student populations. Approximately 46% of rural students qualify to receive federally subsidized free or reduced lunch (Johnson et al. 2014, 16). To qualify to receive free or reduced lunches, the student's family must be at or below 185% of the federal poverty line (United States Department of Agriculture). This criterion includes families who are classified as "near poor", who although above the poverty line, may still not have the capacity to properly feed their children. This statistic is commonly relied on as an indication of student poverty, and it shows that more than 2 in 5 rural students live near or below the federal poverty line (Johnson et al. 2014, 16). In Michigan, nearly four in ten students live in poverty, with 44.8% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Furthermore, Michigan reports the highest rural adult unemployment rate at 10% which is severe compared to the 6.6% national rural average (63).

Johnson et al. (2014) notes that 26.7% of rural students are of minority racial or ethnic identities. This statistic signifies that one in four rural students is a minority student, totaling 2.6 million rural minority students. Although again, this statistic varies by state, with states such as New Mexico serving a rural minority population as great as 82.5% (10). Michigan differs from national statistics in this regard, reporting a significantly lower rural minority population with 10.3% of rural students of minority identities (63).

The data provided by the Rural Community and Trust Foundation demonstrates that rural education is a significant feature both within the State of Michigan and nationally. These statistics, regarding both the size of the rural population and the socioeconomic, racial and ethnic demographics of students, demonstrate why it is

important to include rural education in the education research agenda.

Rural schools and students are often invisible to policymakers, due to the greater visibility of urban education and the vast geographic terrain of rural America (Johnson et al. 2014, 9). The high visibility of urban education in the media and the isolation of rural communities makes it difficult for the media or policymakers to adequately comprehend the challenges and realities of rural education. The persistent invisibility of rural education presents a challenge in envisioning the significance of rural education. It is critical that education research explore all educational environments, rather than falling to the challenging, invisible nature of rurality. Johnson et al. (2014) concludes that it is problematic for policy makers to “ignore the challenges faced by rural schools and the students they serve” (28). This failure to acknowledge these challenges has “implications for state and national goals of narrowing achievement gaps between advantages and disadvantaged groups” (Johnson et al. 2014, 28). Silver (2003) echoes that it is highly improbable to reach the goal of providing an equal education to all children if the rural student population continues to be neglected (3). This research seeks to bring awareness to the experiences and values of rural students and rural educators by refusing to accept the invisibility of rural spaces.

Now that I have established that rural education is worthy of and in need of exploration, I transition to summarizing the unique challenges of rural education established in current literature.

Challenges of Rural Education

As briefly mentioned, the unique challenges for rural education frequently cited in existing literature include: lower rates of student educational attainment and aspiration (Burnell 2003; Howley 2006; Sparks and Nunez 2014) increased incidences of and

exposure to poverty (Fisher 2005; Hutchins et al. 2012), underfunded schools (Broomhall and Johnson 1994; Roscigno et al. 2006; Herzog and Pitmann 1995), less-qualified teachers and subsequent lower teacher salaries (Gibbs 2000; Monk 2007) and lower rates of educational attainment among the rural community (Fisher 2005; Herzog and Pitmann 1995).

I synthesize these identified challenges into three dominant themes central to rural education. The themes include: the lack of exposure to higher education as a result of rural isolation, the theorized diminished value of education in rural communities and a skewed perception of self-efficacy and access to higher education. I consider each theme individually and conclude by highlighting how this research synthesizes these themes in my model.

Lack of Exposure to Higher Education

Echoing Howley's (2006) conclusion that rurality structures students' understanding of the world, I add that rurality affects the manner that rural students are exposed to higher education. I theorize that due to the isolated nature of rural communities and the low rates of educational attainment in the rural community (Fisher 2005; Herzog and Pitmann 1995), rural students often lack adequate exposure to higher education. Consequently, I theorize that this lack of exposure hinders student educational aspirations and eventual attainment. Exposure refers to the knowledge that a student has regarding the purpose and value of higher education, norms of higher education and the application, financial aid, and transition processes. In this research, I explore what rural students believe the purpose of higher education to be and question if their beliefs align with what institutions of higher education claim their purpose to be. Reising, Schell and

Vance (1992) reference the concept of acculturation, which they describe as a process in which the student gains the “knowledge necessary for career success in societies dominant institutions” (298). I narrow this definition to specifically consider how students gain the knowledge and social capital necessary for success in institutions of higher education. Drawing on this concept and on the existing literature, I theorize that rural students lack this specialized knowledge as a result of the specific challenges posed by the rural environment (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon and Perna 2009; Alleman and Holly 2013; King 2012). I synthesize the existing literature to identify this lack of exposure as: affecting knowledge about the purpose, benefits of and norms of higher education, a lack of community role models, a lack of adequate college preparatory curriculum and resources and a limited understanding of the link between educational attainment and occupational choice upon graduation.

Bell et al. (2009) found that, “[rural] students lacked knowledge about college, especially about financial aid, and they frequently didn’t receive information until senior year” (21). Similarly, King (2012) notes that many rural students and their parents did not know that financial aid was available and consistently overestimate the cost of tuition (23). Venezia, Kirst and Antonio add that fewer than 12% of the students they surveyed were knowledgeable about admission requirements of postsecondary institutions (32). They criticized that information that was received was poor quality, “glossy and superficial” (p 39). This finding is aligned with the finding that a student’s degree of awareness of college norms is positively correlated with socioeconomic status (King 2012, 21; Loza 2003, 54; Venezia, Kirst and Antonio, 2003). Venezia et al. (2003) add that poor information disparately impacts low-income and minority students and creates a

stratified possession of knowledge (28). Given the enhanced incidences of poverty in the rural community, this correlation is troubling and indicates that rural youth may be at the highest risk for lacking awareness of college norms. This lack of information and knowledge about important college processes such as financial aid is an effective barrier for low-income students or first-generation students, for whom, considering the world of higher education can understandably be complex and overwhelming.

More than lacking exposure to the norms of higher education, existing literature asserts that rural youth have a limited understanding of the link between education and occupational choice. Hutchins, Meece, Byun and Farmer (2012) conclude that rural students lack access to adult role models whom model professional or managerial positions. As a reflection of the rural economy, rural youth are exposed to a restricted view of occupational opportunities and a lack of effective role models within the community (8). Similarly, Howley (2006) maintains that this limited perspective on the relationship between educational attainment and occupation is problematic because it directly impacts student expectations and the value that rural students attach to higher education (63). Burnell (2003) echoes this, concluding that the students who participated in their focus groups who could not envision how higher education connected to their real life held a lower value of the further education (108). This lack of exposure creates a dangerous “unknown” in which higher education represents uncertainty. Given the high expenses of higher education, it is understandable why rural students may view this unknown, expensive education as risky and unnecessary (Burnell 2003; Corbett 2005; Howley 2006).

Finally, the existing literature finds that rural students lack exposure to a diverse

curriculum or college preparatory classes or programs. (Byun et al. 2012). The reality that rural schools are frequently underfunded negatively influences the curriculum offered and the resources available for students to pursue college or career preparation (Hutchins et al. 2012). Hutchins et al., conclude that this financial disadvantage harms students by providing a poor exposure to the purpose and norms of higher education and failing to adequately prepare students for success on campus if they pursue college (8). The literature concludes that rural schools lack the mechanisms to effectively inform students of educational norms, such as processes of admission and financial aid, as well as the academic expectations of higher education (Alleman and Holly 2013, 21). With low rates of college persistence, it has become clear that providing genuine opportunities for students requires more than simply providing access. Rather, we must prepare our students for success after they have stepped foot on campus (Kirst 2004, 54; Venezia et al. 2003). Venezia et al. (2003) argue that we must foster awareness that being admitted to college is not the hardest part and that graduating from high school does not guarantee that one is prepared for college (7). Haveman and Smeeding (2008) echo this, arguing “policymakers overemphasize ‘access’ as opposed to ‘preparation’” (136). Preparing our students for success requires academic preparation with rigorous coursework that will provide students the skills to complete college-level work upon their admittance.

In sum, existing literature asserts that students lack exposure to a diverse, college-preparatory curriculum within school, to community role models, to the link between educational attainment and occupational choice and collectively, to the purpose and benefits of higher education. This lack of exposure and limited understanding of the purpose and benefits of higher education directly impacts students’ value of and

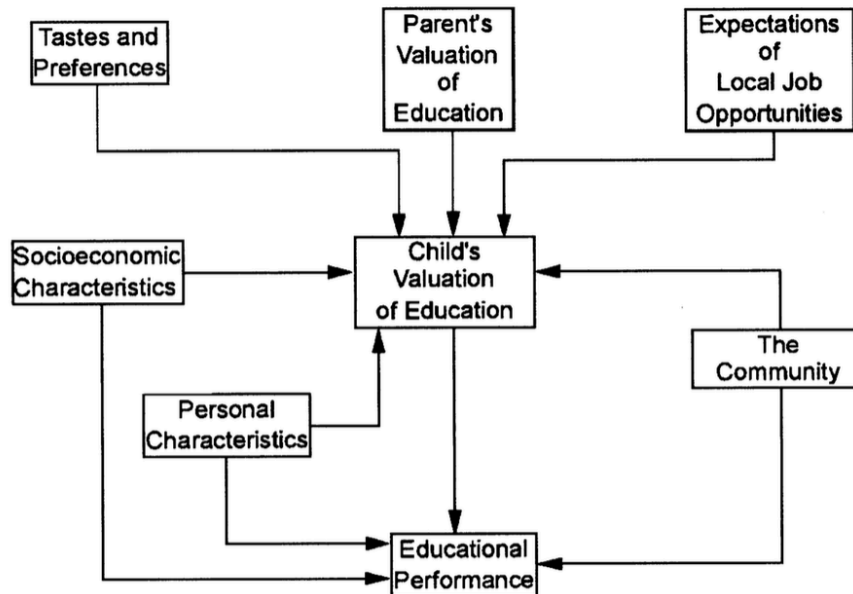
perceptions of access to higher education. I theorize that this lack of exposure is detrimental and serves to hinder the educational aspirations of rural students by framing higher education as a risky unknown. I apply this theory which acknowledges the importance of exposure to question how rurality structures exposure and how exposure influences educational aspiration and attainment. I posit that the degree of exposure directly informs the value that rural students attach to higher education.

The Influence of Rurality on the Perceived Value of Higher Education

What factors influence the value that a student attaches to education? Existing literature establishes that parental and community expectations and the perceived relevance of education to the student's life and life goals are the most influential in forming student values of education (Hendrickson 2012; Broomhall and Johnson 1994; Byun et al. 2012).

The expectations of the student, parents and the community play a major role in developing the student's value of education. Broomhall and Johnson (1994) theorize that, "expectations depend on the amount and quality of information received from a variety of sources, including one's family, community institutions, school and the media" (559). This concept map, presented by Broomhall and Johnson (1994) summarizes their model (560), pictured in figure 2.1. Broomhall and Johnson's theory suggests that expectations are a direct result of the exposure, the "amount and quality of information" (559) that one receives. However, the concept of "exposure" is not explicitly included in their model. As previously mentioned, by exposure, I refer to the degree that the student and the parents are aware of the purpose and benefits of higher education, the norms of higher education and the essential processes such as the admissions and financial aid applications.

Figure 2.1: Broomhall and Johnson Concept Map



I seek to incorporate the concept of exposure into their model to suggest that the degree of exposure is directly related to the values one develops of higher education. Jeffries (1993) adds that decisions to pursue education are based on beliefs on the institution of education and feelings of welcome or access to success (431). As previously discussed, notions of access or feelings of welcome are directly related to the self-efficacy of the student and the degree of exposure the student receives to higher education.

Parental expectations and values are thought to be the most influential factor influencing student values (Hendrickson 2012; Broomhall and Johnson 1994; Byun et al. 2012). Byun et al. (2012), suggest that as rural parents have lower attainment themselves, they form lower educational expectations for their children. Byun et al., found that “only 70% of rural parents expected their children to receive a bachelor’s degree, whereas 80% of suburban and 84% of urban parents expected this achievement” (421). Echoing this finding, Broomhall and Johnson (1994) conclude that students internalize the tacit beliefs

of their parents and that the child's perceptions are socialized through parent expectations and values (560). Consequently, the existing literature suggests that rural communities and students have a diminished value of education as rural communities reflect lower rates of educational attainment which is believed to coincide with lower parental and community expectations.

Second to parental and community expectations, the perceived relevance of the education to the students' life and life goals has been found to be influential in informing student values (Broomhall and Johnson 1994; Hendrickson 2012; Howley 2006). This concept of relevance connects to the previously discussed concept that rural students lack exposure to the link between educational attainment and occupational choice. Broomhall and Johnson (1994) found that student values were influenced by the perceptions the student held of the local employment opportunities (565). Students who hold less positive perceptions of local employment opportunities are more likely to hold ambivalent attitudes towards education and perceive education as irrelevant or unnecessary. Given the nature of rural labor economies, it is imaginable that rural students are significantly more likely than non-rural students to hold a negative perception of the labor market. Furthermore, as few employment opportunities in rural economies require post-graduate education, it is likely that students may perceive education as irrelevant to their life goals and their commitment to rural lifeways. Hendrickson (2012) found that students who did not believe their classes were relevant to their lives did not try (45). Similarly, she finds that students who question the purpose of school are more likely to engage in acts of resistance, signaling their lack of value for education. Hendrickson concludes that students are frequently alienated by schools as a result of the "divergence between school

values and home values” (43). Howley (2006) confirms this, suggesting that schools convey cosmopolitan values as normative which consequently positions rural values as retrograde (66). Thus, as rural students operate with a limited understanding of the link between education and their life goals, they are more likely to attach a low value onto higher education as a result of the perceived irrelevance of education.

Broomhall and Johnson (1994) summarize that if students have less exposure and diminished perceptions of access to higher education, they will not value education and are then less likely to perform well (565). This connection between value and achievement is important because the theories have suggested a positive correlation with a lower value of education and lower levels of achievement. Thus, if students are less aware of the purpose and norms of higher education, they are less likely to place a high value on it and more likely to report low levels of achievement –perhaps then rendering them ineligible for higher education.

Primarily, the existing literature on the importance of value focuses on the value that students place on high school education and how that value affects motivation and achievement. This research seeks to expand these theories by explicitly applying them to the perceptions that students hold of higher education. Moreover, this research seeks to build on the existing theories by explicitly demonstrating the link between exposure and value.

The Perception of Access

I conclude this discussion of the unique challenges of rural education by discussing the importance of perceived access to higher education and how perceived access is influenced by exposure and indirectly affects the value the student places on

higher education. The existing literature discusses the concept of self-efficacy. I seek to build on this developed concept of self-efficacy to demonstrate the link between exposure, self-efficacy and perceptions of access. Reising, Schell and Vance (1992) describe self-efficacy as “a person’s belief that he or she controls what happens in his or her life; that actions bring results; and that luck, fate, and external forces do not dictate success or failure” (298). Their study employs a self-efficacy test with questions designed to measure if rural youth feel that they have the autonomy to design their own respective futures. In accordance with the previously established findings that those with a higher value reflect higher achievement, Reising et al. found that students with the highest self-efficacy scores were the students who most wanted or expected to leave their rural community (301). I seek to expand on this finding by demonstrating the link between perceptions of self-efficacy and perceptions of access to higher education.

Furthermore, this research seeks to situate the link between perceptions of self-efficacy and perceptions of access within a greater discussion of why rural students report lower rates of educational aspiration and attainment. Indeed, Howley (2006) suggests that rural student aspirations are low because of low self-esteem (76) and Jordan, Kostandini and Mykerezi (2012) find that low self-esteem is a significant factor in high school drop outs (2). Similarly, Venezi et al. (2003) quotes a community college admissions officer who reflected, “I see students every day who don’t believe they belong in college” (7). Building on this, I theorize that student perceptions of their ability to succeed in college and benefit from higher education along with their perceptions of preparedness are essential factors that influence educational aspiration and attainment. Furthermore, I posit that the degree of exposure is directly related to the value a student

places on education and to their self-efficacy and perceptions of access.

Rural Migration Theories: Tension between “Moving Up” and “Moving Out”

The tension that rural youth experience between “moving up” and “moving out” (Hektner 1995) is created as a result of both the unique strengths and challenges of rurality. The phenomenon that rural students experience dual commitments to their local communities and to their educational aspirations is one that numerous scholars have engaged in (Burnell 2003; Corbett 2005; Donaldson 1988; Hektner 1995; Howley 2006; Kirkpatrick et al. 2005). This research will explore how this theorized tension interacts with student educational aspirations and higher education attainment. I theorize this tension to be a central feature created by rurality and question how it influences student perceptions and attitudes towards higher education.

In my analysis, I will draw primarily on the theory presented by Hektner (1995) in his piece, “When Moving Up Implies Moving Out: Rural Adolescent Conflict in the Transition to Adulthood.” In this section I will first summarize Hektner and how my research will expand on his model. I will then discuss the additional scholars whom have engaged with this phenomenon to synthesize their theories. I will conclude by examining the presence of and the consequences of the rural brain drain and the contradictory position of rural schools (Alleman and Holly 2013; Broomhall and Johnson 1994; Corbett 2005; Donaldson 1988; Herzog and Pitman 1995; Roscigno et al. 2006).

Hektner: “When Moving Up Implies Moving Out...”

Hektner’s primary research question is, “What is the influence of community context on the attitudes and plans of rural and nonrural adolescents regarding their future geographic and social mobility?” (3). He hypothesizes that rural adolescents will

experience a conflict between their desires to “move up” socioeconomically and their wishes not to have to “move out” of their local communities. Hekter (1995) presumes that in order to “move up”, rural students will need to move away, as a result of the limited career opportunities in rural communities (5). Rural students are often required to leave their community permanently to realize their goals and potential, consequently, students who have higher educational aspirations are more likely to migrate (Hekner, 1995, 3). He concludes that rural youth are more likely than non-rural youth to report conflicting aspirations between educational attainment and place (Hektner, 12).

I will expand on this theory presented by Heknter. Primarily, I suggest that the language and definition of rurality employed by Hektner is now outdated. Heknter’s theory is now outdated because his research broadly questions the influence of the rural community on future plans and future geographic mobility of rural students. His theory focuses on the link between rurality and the career opportunities. He theorizes that as there are diminished career options in rural community, rural students will feel pressured to pursue outward migration in order to find meaningful careers. However, as the importance of receiving a college education has continued to increase since Hektner conducted his research in 1995, his theory is lacking in that it does not explicitly question how rurality affects student educational aspiration and attainment. Carnevale et al. (2010) state, “Between 1973 and 2008, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy which required postsecondary education increased from 28 to 59%” (1). Furthermore, they project that in the next decade, this share will again increase from 59 to 63%. I will expand his theory to consider specifically the link between rurality and higher education; how does the increasing importance of receiving a postsecondary education affect his theorized tension

between place and social mobility? Moreover, how does this tension affect student valuation of higher education? I theorize that this tension may mitigate student values of higher education as students are required to reconcile their aspirations within the local community.

In regards to methodology, my survey instrument is modeled after Hektner's instrument, I have updated his language to explicitly question the tension between aspiration to higher education and the commitment to the local community. Hektner does not explicitly appeal to higher education; rather his focus is broader and focuses on career aspirations and socioeconomic aspirations. My research will seek to explore how this theorized tension explicitly affects rural youth's educational aspirations and eventual attainment of higher education.

The Growing Conversation on Rural Outward Migration

Numerous scholars have joined this conversation and have acknowledged that rural students experience a tension that is created by rurality. Corbett (2005) terms this phenomenon the "learning-leaving" link as it is assumed that postsecondary education will lead one out of their rural community. This costly requirement that to attain higher education students will need to move away results in students feeling hesitant and conflicted. Donaldson (1988) notes that rural youth may be hesitant or ambivalent towards paths which will require outward migration (123). He describes the phenomenon as students holding nearly mutually exclusive desires between remaining in their local communities and near family with the growing sense that their futures may be more promising outside of the rural community (Donaldson, 1988, 100). Similarly, Kirkpatrick, Elder Jr., and Stern (2005) concede that rural students develop plans for the

future within the context of the common belief that opportunities for educational and occupational success exist elsewhere; effectively requiring migration to pursue these goals (99). However, Hendrickson (2012) complicates these conclusions in her assertion that rural students are more likely to prioritize family cohesiveness and well-being over individual achievement or personal goals (39). This theory coincides with Burnell's (2003) finding that rural youth tend to approach problem solving cooperatively rather than individualistically (105). While it may be increasingly true that ambitious educational and occupational aspirations will require migration, Hendrickson is quick to contrast that this requirement for migration may become lower priority under a competing commitment to family cohesiveness and well-being. Similarly, Howley (2006) explains that aspirations are shaped simultaneously by these competing priorities – the pursuit of economic prospects and attachment to local place (76). Thus, it is imaginable that rural student aspirations may be lower as a result of this costly negotiation required by this rural tension and incompatibility of desires.

Scholars have frequently questioned if rural students are “settling” their educational and occupational aspirations in an attempt to align their aspirations with the local opportunities within their rural communities (Hektner 1995; Howley 2006). Howley explains that, “rural youth must negotiate the tension between social mobility and geographic rootedness” (76). This tension between the dual commitments to place and to their educational attainment thus requires a costly process of negotiation that creates emotional distress and may result in rural students lowering their aspirations. Kirkpatrick et al., (2005) suggest that rural youth encounter high emotional distress in the realization that their educational aspirations may require them to move away from their rural

communities (101). Similarly, Donaldson (1988) contends that “the geographic isolation forces rural youth to choose one and makes development more treacherous than that of their nonrural counterparts” (121). Thus, not only do rural students experience this conflict in desires, but rural students are forced to negotiate this tension which understandably incites emotional distress. I theorize that this tension may prompt rural students to be ambivalent towards higher education and that this tension plays an influential role in shaping rural students’ value and perceptions of higher education.

Furthermore, my model will seek to explicitly link the relationship between exposure, value, and the student’s willingness to migrate from their rural community to pursue higher education. Existing literature has established that willingness to move was positively correlated with the value the student held of education (Broomhall and Johnson, 1994; Kirkpatrick, Elder Jr. and Stern; 2005, Reising, Schell and Vance, 1992). The theory confirmed by these scholars is that the higher value a student holds of education the higher achievement he or she is likely to report and the more likely he or she is willing to move to pursue educational or occupational goals. Similarly, students may come to value education as a vehicle to move away from their rural hometowns. Under this theory, students who wish to move away from their hometowns may come to value education after recognizing that education is a vehicle which would allow them to successfully migrate. Kirkpatrick et al., (2005) found that “residential preferences patterned academic achievement” and that those with higher grades or achievement levels were less likely to attach importance to remaining in their home community (121). They found that students who reported higher educational aspirations were more likely to migrate and have a bleak perception of the local employment opportunities (121).

Similarly, Hutchins et al., confirms this in their finding that “students who reflected a strong rural identity were more likely to be work-bound” rather than college-bound (15). These theories suggest that higher achievement leads to higher aspirations and that willingness to migrate reflect aspirations. My research will contribute by drawing the link between value and aspiration and synthesizing the previous research which has established that achievement is influenced by notions of value.

This research will apply rural migration theories specifically to the link between rurality and higher education. Furthermore, given that the importance of a college education continues to increase, I will seek to confirm these theories by utilizing updated language and situating this research within the context that higher education continues to be of increasing importance.

The Rural Brain Drain and the Contradictory Purpose of Rural Schools

The effects of this tension between “moving up” and “moving out” (Hektner, 1995) are not felt solely by the students but rather are burdened by the entire rural community. This is evident in the theory of the “rural brain drain” (Corbett, 2005; Donaldson, 1988; Roscigno et al., 2006) and the suggested contradictory function of rural schools (Alleman and Holly, 2013; Corbett, 2005, Howley, 2006).

As previously established, as a result of the opportunities available in the rural economy, often, achieving high levels of education and employment requires migration out of the rural community (Broomhall and Johnson, 1994; Burnell, 2003). Corbett (2005) eloquently contends that “migration is always fueled by opportunity elsewhere” (54). This is aligned with the previous discussion that rural youth must negotiate this tension with the reality that their futures may be more promising elsewhere. This required

migration takes form in the place of a brain drain from the rural community. Donaldson (1988) asserts that “migration draws the cream off of rural populations” (121). Similarly, Herzog and Pitmann (1995) reference this phenomenon as the “well-educated migration” (114). This research will seek to expand this research by exploring the effects of this rural brain drain and questioning how this brain drain is related to how rurality structures exposure.

Related to the theory of the rural brain drain is the question of the contradictory function of rural schools. Critics have contradictorily posed that rural schools are at fault for the rural brain drain. Corbett (2005) suggests that “a core problem is that by implicitly defining educational success in terms of a mobile population of youth exported to urban areas, rural schools tacitly promote erosion of their own human capital” (53). Similarly, Roscigno et al., adds that the migration of educated individuals to urban areas discourages rural communities from genuinely investing in education or in college-preparatory programs. The logic employed here, described by Roscigno et al., is that as the beneficiaries of such investment are the non-rural locales whom the educated rural youth migrate to and not the rural community directly. I push back against this logic and suggest that although rural schools may be frustrated with the increasing necessity for their students to migrate, I am skeptical that rural schools intentionally choose not to invest in college-preparatory programs as a result of this misalignment in the beneficiaries. Rather, I theorize that rural schools lack the monetary and systematic resources to provide such programming. The goal should always be to prepare every student to realize their maximized potential and to give each student the opportunity to forge their own life path. Thus, while it may be true that the rural school contributes to

the rural brain drain, I question the validity of this argument. In my research I will explore this theory further to create a more comprehensive understanding of the effect of the rural brain drain.

Exploring Strengths of the Rural Community

Now that I have explored the specific challenges posed by rurality in the existing literature, I will discuss the unique strengths of the rural community. Scholars have asserted that the rural community provides strong social capital that can be highly beneficial to the development of rural students. Furthermore, recent scholarship has consistently challenged the historically convenient notion that rural communities are “backwards” (Howley, 2006).

The Rural Advantage

The existing literature suggests that rural students benefit from the strong relationships and social resources embedded in the rural community (Alleman and Holly, 2013; Byun et al., 2012; Herzog and Pitmann, 1995; Howley, 2006). Rural communities provide community-based social resources and create strong intergenerational community ties that emphasize the importance of people and relationships (Hektner, 1995; Herzog and Pitmann, 1995). Moreover, the rural community creates a unique attachment to place that provides a sense of belonging, commitment and identity. (Howley, 2006). Byun et al. (2012) found that,

Rural students were more advantaged in community social resources compared to nonrural students, and these resources were associated with a significant increase in likelihood of bachelor's degree attainment. Yet results confirmed that rural students lagged behind nonrural students in attaining a bachelor's degree largely due to their lower socioeconomic background (413).

Thus, based on this conclusion, it appears that the challenge posed by the rural community is not the rural community itself, but rather the socioeconomic landscape of the rural community, a feature of the community. How can these social benefits be capitalized on to empower rural agents to offset the negative effects created by the increased incidence of poverty in rural areas? This question emphasizes how important it is to consider the strengths of the rural community and to resist the temptation to assume that rural agents are backwards or archaic. Furthermore, Alleman and Holly found that community relationships strongly influenced exposure and positive self-efficacy. They conclude,

These community experiences provide exposure to new places and new ideas, expanding students' imagination for future academic and professional opportunities, and contributing to self-confidence needed to function within new environments (4).

Thus, in acknowledging that the rural community provides strong social resources and benefits, it follows that these strengths should be capitalized on to uplift rural education attainment rates. These rural strengths should be a part of the solution – strategies to empower rural youth should capitalize on their community and family values. In order to imagine the shape of reform for rural education, we must fully understand not only the specific challenges but the unique strengths as well. (Cushman, 1954; Herzog and Pitmann, 19995). My research seeks to develop a more holistic understanding of these rural strengths by listening to the responses of rural educators and rural students – rather than assuming that rural agents are merely backwards.

Rural Agents are not “Backwards”

Following that rural strengths should be included in the conversation about how to empower rural students, is the consequential argument that scholars must stop framing rural actors as backwards. Historically, this belief justified the focus of educational research on urban spaces and allowed the challenges of rural spaces to slip into the background. Rural values and rural people have been criticized as “economically counterproductive and culturally unsophisticated” (Howley, 2006, 63) as “redundant rustics who resist modernization and block economic progress” (Corbett, 2005) and as disadvantaged and uneducated (Byun et al., 2012). Similarly, it has been assumed that rural students and parents do not value education or economic mobility (Howley, 2006, 66). Education theorists need to stop assuming that rural communities are “backwards” rather than going the extra mile to examine specific features that make rural communities unique from their non-rural counterparts (Broomhall and Johnson, 1994; Byun et al., 2012; Corbett, 2005; Herzog and Pitmann, 1995; Howley, 2006).

Byun et al. (2012), argues that it is time for education theorists to step away from the “rural disadvantage” perspective because that perspective unfairly overlooks the central features of rurality that are conducive to youth development (429). Similarly, Herzog and Pittman (1995) worry that the constant prejudice against rural values will lead students to internalize the criticism and develop an inferiority complex, effectively harming their educational aspirations and self-efficacy (114). This connects to the previous acknowledgement that rural students are placed in a vulnerable position where they must consistently engage in a costly negotiation or mediation to align their rural values within the modern values our society trumpets as ‘normal’. Given the increasing

importance of receiving a college education, it is essential that higher education be re-imagined and re-structured so as to be inclusive and respectful of rural values. Loza (2003) argues that, “the success of the program ‘hinders on the ability of a program to meet students’ localized needs by affirming their culture and identity, rather than ignoring or rejecting it” (as cited in Jun and Colyar, 2002, 206). — Therefore, in order for outreach efforts to be relevant to students lives, they must be culturally appropriate and tailored to mirror rural values and lifeways (46). This research utilizes the theories of these scholars to further this argument that rural agents are not backwards and rural values are worthy of equal respect.

Broken Links: The Relationship between K-12 and Higher Education

Scholars have repeatedly argued that there is a severe disconnect in our education systems (Bueschel 2003; Kirst, 2004; Venezia et al., 2003). There is a broken link between our high schools and institutions of higher education. Venezia et al., (2003) argues that historically, our systems have always been disjointed and that this is an American phenomenon, in that this disjuncture does not exist in most other nations (14). Bueschel (2003) concludes that there is a “near-complete absence of communication” between administrations of higher education and educators and administrators of primary and secondary education. The prevalence of remedial classes and the low attrition rates of colleges and universities serve as one proxy that suggests the disjointed relationship between exit and entrance standards of high schools and colleges or universities (Bueschel, 2003, 7; Venezia et al., 2003). Kirst (2004) and Venezia et al., (2003) have concluded that the exit standards of high schools and the entrance requirements of higher education are severely misaligned (51). This is amplified due to the politically volatile nature of K-12 education, left to the mercy of political forces which continuously reforms

educational standards and curriculum expectations. This creates a critical disjuncture in the curriculum between systems and discourages institutions of higher education from collaborating with high school educators and administrators (Venezia et al., 2003, 14, 25). There is no incentive or established accountability mechanism to encourage these systems to collaborate or support one another. Nobody is responsible or held accountable for ensuring a smooth transition between high school and college (27). Venezia et al. (2003), argue that these unnecessary barriers between systems undermine student educational aspirations and attainment by fracturing understanding of higher education. Moreover, this disjuncture disproportionately affects low-income students, which is problematic given the higher incidences of poverty in rural areas (6).

I draw heavily on the research conducted by Venezia et al. (2003), in “The Bridge Project: Strengthening P-16 Transition Policies”, a project conducted by Stanford’s Institute for Higher Education Research and supported by the U.S. Department of Education. The Bridge Project was a six-year national project which explored and encouraged opportunities to strengthen the relationship between higher education and secondary education systems. In regards to methodology, I have taken inspiration from and modeled several of my interview questions after the instruments produced by the Bridge Project. I expand on the work of the Bridge Project by specifically focusing in on rural systems. The Bridge Project acknowledged a limitation in that their research only included typical suburban and mid-level urban areas. This limitation is consequential as the realities of rural and urban systems are more dire than their suburban counterparts.

This research explores this relationship through the perceptions of rural high school administrators, educators and guidance counselors. I utilize conversations with

rural educators and administrators to explore existing relationships between rural high schools and institutions of higher education. The experience-based perspective of rural educators and administrators provide an invaluable perspective. I seek to validate these arguments that there is a broken relationship between our secondary and postsecondary systems and explore how this relationship functions specifically within the context of rurality. Furthermore, this research contributes to this gap by questioning how institutions of higher education can be more supportive of secondary education systems, specifically, in rural areas. Therefore, this research contributes by questioning the potential of relationships between high schools and higher education specifically in the context of rural education.

Scholars have increasingly advocated for the development of more P-16, or preschool through postsecondary, partnerships, arguing that these partnerships are essential for promoting equitable access and educational experiences (Gullet and Jan, 2003; Haveman and Smeeding, 2006; Kirst, 2004; Loza, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003). Loza (2003) argues that outreach programming can be a powerful tool for underachieving and at-risk students and may combat the information gap by providing these students with the social and cultural capital necessary for success in higher education (51). Similarly, Gullet and Jan (2003) argue that failure to integrate collaboratively with the PreK-12 system leads to long-term failure (15). For these scholars, collaboration and integration is essential. Models of successful P-16 partnerships are slowly emerging with the intention of bringing all stakeholders to the conversation. However, scholars have cautioned that these councils must be held accountable and given authority; it will be inadequate if they only serve a symbolic purpose (Venezia et al., 28). I theorize that

building these bridges between high schools and higher education will not only increase student access but the increased communication will translate to improved student achievement as well.

Preliminary evidence has indicated that the outreach programming of higher education can have sincere influence and effects (Glennie, Dalton and Knapp, 2014; Gullet and Jan, 2003). Glennie, Dalton and Knapp (2014) conclude that students who participate in such programming are more likely to apply to college and are more likely to apply for financial aid. (3). Gullet and Jan (2003) conclude that these outreach efforts have been “instrumental in illuminating barriers to equitable opportunity for higher education” (as cited in Jan and Gullet, 2: Fence, Geranios and Moore, 1995; Perna, 2002; Gander, Larson, Mehan and Rumberger, 1998). It appears that these programs have achieved initial success and have powerful potential that has yet to be fully embraced.

However, despite the initial success of such programing, there is a lack of longitudinal data and research that examines the sustained effects of these relationships and programs. The absence of evidence that demonstrates the genuine impact of such programming has continued to mystify the role of outreach in students’ college pathways. (Gullet, Jan, 2003, iv). There is a large absence of literature that explicitly explores the influence of partnerships between institutions of higher education and rural schools. This research seeks to contribute to this gap by specifically exploring the potential for partnerships between rural education systems and institutions of higher education. Although this research does not explicitly evaluate effectiveness of such programming, I contribute by further identifying key features that outreach strategies should pursue in order to effectively appeal to rural students and rural communities. Given my

hypothesized importance of exposure to higher education, I contribute by questioning how outreach programming can be designed to enhance rural student exposure to higher education.

The lack of research on effective outreach and pre-collegiate programming is apparent in the debate between scholars regarding the best practices of such programming. Scholars have identified three varying types of pre-collegiate programming and two implementation techniques. Gullet and Jan (2003) categorize pre-collegiate programming as either “informational outreach”, “career-based outreach” or “academic support” (16). Informational outreach provides information and advising to students. Career-based outreach seeks to identify student career aspirations and motivate students by linking those career aspirations with college majors. Finally, academic support provides tutoring and instructional services to increase student preparation for college-level coursework. Due to the lack of research, it is hard to decipher which approach may be most beneficial to students. Similarly, scholars have questioned if student-centered or school-centered implementation is the most effective (Gullet and Jan, 2003; Loza, 2003). Loza criticizes that student-centered approaches create a mindset that attempts to “fix the child” rather than critically examine the systematic effects of the environment (45). Furthermore, Loza criticizes that student-centered approaches tend to systematically exclude underachieving students, who may be at the greatest risk, but who may not fit the stringent eligibility criterion (46). I explore the potential of school-based outreach programs to consider how school-based efforts may transform the culture of higher education in rural schools. By engaging in conversation with rural educators and administrators, and identifying the features of rurality that most influence student

educational aspiration and attainment, my research seeks to inform the literature by identifying effective outreach strategies to reach rural students.

Effective Outreach Strategies

The existing literature identifies multiple strategies to enhance student exposure to higher education. King (2012) found that facilitating college visits, providing ACT preparation workshops and financial aid workshops had the highest degree of influence on increasing the percentage of students enrolling in college (23). Primarily, King (2012) notes the importance of involving parents in these outreach events and providing a space where parents can learn. (23). King (2012) found that by including parents in effective outreach strategies the disadvantage of low socio-economic status can be offset. Echoing the value in visits to college campuses, Alleman and Holly (2013) explain that visiting a college campus helps students to “imagine themselves in the role of the college student” and that this exposure positions college life to seem normal and accessible to them (5). Gullet and Jan (2003) add that personalized attention, the presence of role models, K-12 integration, long-term investment and intentional links to the “real world” are all essential to a successful outreach program (12). Programs are increasingly calling for an increased emphasis on translating access to success and genuine preparation (Venezia et al, 2003). Finally, the value of mentorship is referenced, with the finding that students who received extensive, sustained mentorships reflected higher self-esteem and a greater likelihood of enrolling in higher education (Curtis et al. 2012; King 2012). Curtis et al., emphasizes that the mentorship raises students’ identification in the “university ‘in-group’” and served to raise student perceptions of self-efficacy. (7).

In questioning if institutions of higher education are responsive to the unique

needs and experiences of rural students, I consider these effective strategies presented by these scholars and further the argument that outreach programming should focus on expanding student exposure. This research seeks to integrate research which has established key strategies of outreach programming with the growing research on the specific features created by rurality. Moreover, I question how these effective strategies can be employed specifically within rural education and capitalize on the strengths of the rural community.

Exploring the Responsibilities of Higher Education

Exploring the potential of relationships between high schools and institutions of higher education begs the question, are institutions of higher education responsible for equitable outreach and recruiting strategies? Should society expect institutions of higher education to assume these responsibilities to increase access and exposure for rural students? In answering this, two main arguments have emerged.

One argument to increase accessibility of higher education is based in the reality that higher education is growing in importance and in necessity. Scholars have theorized that institutions of higher education have increasing obligations to pursue equity as a result of the increasing importance of higher education. Haveman and Smeeding (2006) theorize that the increasing percentage of jobs that require a postsecondary degree position higher education as a detrimental component of labor market success (126). Similarly, Brennan (2008) argues that higher education has grown into a necessity for survival and success in the emerging “knowledge economy” (382). Brennan explains, “Credentials acquired through higher education are increasingly central to the determination of life chances... Therefore, the degree of social equity in the acquisition of

these credentials becomes an important indicator of social justice” (388). Furthering the arguments of these scholars, I directly consider the obligations of higher education to increase accessibility for rural students. The rural economy, as it exists today, is quickly eroding under the pressure of globalization. I question if the depressed state of the rural economy, which one may argue is an indirect result of the innovations achieved by intuitions of higher education themselves, requires a specific response by institutions of higher education. Thus, I rest on this logic employed by Haveman, Smeeding and Brennan and further it to specifically consider the reality of the rural labor market.

Secondly, scholars have argued that education functions simultaneously as both a private good and as a public good (Brennan, 2008, 383). This dual-function as both a private and public good raises a complication about who should finance higher education and who should receive access. Brennan (2008) explains that “the acquisition of education can be regarded as both providing a ‘positional advantage’ for those who possess them (hence, a private good) and as contributing to the creation of more productive workforce and a successful national economy (hence, a public good)” (383). In this argument, higher education functions as a public good because it lends to the creation of a more productive workforce which advances innovation. Furthermore, education leads to not only a more productive workforce but a more engaged citizenry. Hillygus (2005) cites a positive correlation between education and political engagement. She argues that higher education functions to shape the political participation of the citizenry and promote the continuation of democracy. Higher education provides citizens not only with the training to succeed in the workforce, but with the cognitive skills necessary to participate meaningfully politically (27). Given the lower rates of

educational attainment and aspiration among rural communities and the emerging political focus on rural America, this argument is particularly relevant. If political participation and engagement with democratic principles is positively correlated with educational attainment, it follows that scholars should seek to improve the educational achievement of rural students.

These arguments are amplified by Venezia et al. (2003) who argue that it is problematic that no institution has been held responsible for student transitions from high school to higher education (2). They argue that colleges and universities have not been held accountable for closing achievement gaps or pursuing equity in the same manner that has been demanded of K-12 systems (27). Should colleges and universities be held accountable to this? I further explore this question by applying the arguments for expanded access discussed previously.

I further these arguments for expanded access by directly considering the experiences of rural students. I expand these theories by exploring how the isolated nature of rurality and the lack of exposure to higher education affects rural student perceptions of the link between education and the labor market. I build on these questions, which regard the importance of access and financing, to explore the responsibilities of higher education to support primary and secondary education systems. Beyond asking who is responsible for paying for higher education and beyond arguing why access to these institutions is essential, I consider if institutions of higher education should play a stronger role in developing disadvantaged students prior to their arrival on campus. In questioning if institutions of higher education have a moral obligation to pursue equitable outreach programming and recruitment strategies, I hope to contribute to

research that questions the purpose and responsibilities of higher education.

Concluding Discussion

In this literature review, I have presented a discussion of the unique challenges and strengths created by rurality. I have asserted that my research contributes to this growing conversation by synthesizing much of the disjointed existing literature into one theory that explicitly links exposure to value and perceptions of access. This research begins with the presumption that historically there has been a lack of research on rural education and that rural students report lower educational aspirations and rates of attainment. This research seeks to apply the literature which establishes the unique strengths and challenges of rural education to understand why rural students report lower educational aspirations and rates of attainment. I use the existing research to question how rurality structures educational attainment and how our growing knowledge of rural strengths can inform strategies to improve the relationships between high schools and higher education. Furthermore, this research seeks to build on Hektner (1995) and Howley (2006) to further understand the influence of the rural migration tension and to question how this phenomenon can be addressed in creatively designed outreach programming. In considering the potential of outreach programming, I explore the moral obligations and responsibilities of higher education; specifically asking if higher education has an obligation to pursue equity. This research not only adds to the growing knowledge of the influence of rurality but contributes to our understanding of the responsibilities of higher education and the benefits that can be achieved when institutions of higher education effectively support and partner with secondary education systems.

III. Methods and Project Design

In this chapter, I describe my research design and methodology. This research is structured as a case-study of three rural communities in the northern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The methods employed in this study include surveys conducted with junior and senior high school students as well as semi-structured interviews with educators, administrators, guidance counselors and community leaders. When conducting the research, I traveled to each respective school to spend a full day in the school. While in the school, I conducted the student surveys, wrote field notes from observations and conducted the community-specific interviews. As I was present in each school all day, I was able to have conversations with students and participated in structured question and answer sessions answering student questions about college. Similarly, being present in each school allowed me to observe school culture.

In the following sections, I provide details for each component of the research design. I first offer a justification for this case-study and provide information on the study population. I then define rurality as used in this research. Following this, I describe the design for the methodology used, that is the study surveys and the semi-structured interviews. Next I describe the approach used in data analysis. Finally, I conclude this chapter by providing demographic and background information on the three rural communities and school systems included in this study.

The Study Population: A Case Study of Northern Michigan

This research is structured as a case-study of the State of Michigan. This research design is aligned with prior research on rural spaces because the immense size of rural America has led scholars to the argue that “rural America defies generalization” (Monk

2007, 27). Beynon, Crawley and Munday (2015) reference rurality as elusive and multi-dimensional. Beynon et al. states, “complex patterns that exist in contemporary human geography lack the presence of one single variable that can ‘capture’ rural-urban dynamics” (Beynon et al. 2015, 5). Echoing this, Weisheit (1999) notes, “Like concepts such as ‘truth’, ‘beauty’, or ‘justice’; everyone knows the term rural, but no one can define the term very precisely” (213). The elusive nature of rurality has complicated policy and posed challenges to research designs on rural spaces. Thus, due to the elusive nature of rurality, in order to have a focused scope and for logistical feasibility, this research is structured as a case-study of the State of Michigan.

As discussed in the literature review, the prevalence of rural spaces varies significantly across states. For example, in Massachusetts, only 6.5% of schools are categorized as rural, yet, in Montana approximately 75.3% of schools are identified as rural. In over fifteen states, over half of the public schools are rural schools and in an additional fifteen states, over one-third of public schools are rural schools (Johnson et al. 2014, 6-7).

This variance notwithstanding, the demographics of rural Michigan reflect the greater national statistics, positioning Michigan as a reasonable case-study. Nationally, one in five students attends a rural school — this statistic is mirrored in Michigan. Similarly, rural schools constitute 33% of public schools nationally, and approximately 30% of rural schools in Michigan. Thus, the strong reflection of greater national statistics within the Michigan population make Michigan an interesting and a relatively representative case-study of rural education nationally.

The research is designed to include only rural schools, as the experiences of rural

students are the focus of the study. As this is not a comparative study, including non-rural schools would distract from a deeper analysis of rural spaces¹. Thus, in order to focus in on the experiences of rural students and the influence of the rural environment, non-rural schools were excluded from the study population.

The study population consists of junior and senior high-school students, high school administrators and community leaders in three selected rural communities. The schools selected are located in rural counties in northern Michigan. Balancing logistical feasibility as well as time and resource constraints with representativeness and variance, three communities in the northern part of the Michigan's Lower Peninsula were chosen.

The partner schools were identified by the study team through a personal network of counselor recommendations. The respective schools were not engaged as research sites and school administrators were minimally involved. The school guidance counselors who aided in the logistical facilitation of this research are referred to as the "school contact" of each respective school. The school contacts had limited involvement and did not have access to raw survey data, completed consent forms or further confidential information. The school contacts were involved in three primary ways: communication with students and teachers, the distribution of informed consent forms and the organizing of building logistics. Additionally, each school contact participated as an interview subject to provide complementary data on school programs and school climate.

This research includes only junior and senior students in the student survey. Freshman and sophomore high school students were excluded from the study population because of the broad belief that freshman and sophomore students have yet to genuinely

¹ For further discussion of this, please reference the preface.

think about higher education or post-graduation plans. To explore concepts such as perceived access and exposure, it is important that students have considered higher education and have had conversations about pursuing higher education with their families or in the classroom. For this reason, underclassmen were excluded from the study. Similarly, interview subjects were selected for their investment in this topic and for their professional responsibilities. Using these criteria, school and career guidance counselors, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders were selected.

Defining Rurality

Historically, the definitions used to define rural and urban spaces have been ill-defined, vague and inconsistent (Issermen 2005). This inconsistency and lack of a precise definition has proven problematic in understanding rurality. The challenge of generating a concrete definition has resulted in a wide range of definitions used in the dominant literature. In 2006, due to this problematic lack of a consistent definition, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) partnered with the United States Census Bureau to release a revised set of definitions of school locale types. This classification system has since become the standard definition that is relied on in defining ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ spaces for educational purposes. This research uses that classification system.

The revised definitions rely on the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definitions of metropolitan spaces, by using geocoding technology. The essential revision in these definitions is an enhanced emphasis on a communities’ proximity to an urbanized area, and a diminished reliance on the previous standard that relied on population size and county boundaries. This emphasis on the proximity of a community to an urban center has been classified as an “urban-centric” classification system, which has replaced the previously accepted “metro-centric” system. The “urban-centric”

approach allows for the differentiation between rural schools in remote areas and school districts that are located just outside of an urban cluster. This is essential, as “a community might be small but densely settled. The term rural then, might imply small, but small need not imply rural” (Monk 2007, 156).

Four categories of locale are recognized in the system: city, suburban, town, and rural. This classification system allows for the identification of subtypes within the categories, labeled as large, midsize and small within the “city” and “suburb” categories, and fringe, distant and remote within the “town” and “rural” categories.

Student Surveys

This research uses survey methodology to survey the perspectives and experiences of rural students. As noted above, the population included in this study includes junior and senior high-school students at three participating rural high schools. Participation was voluntary and students were given the option to opt-out at any time of the research process. Collectively, 323 students completed the “Student Perspectives on Higher Education” survey, which was developed for this research.

The “Student Perspectives on Higher Education” survey was designed to measure students’ exposure to higher education, value of higher education and perceived access to higher education. Moreover, the survey was designed to explore whether students experience a tension between competing desires to pursue higher education while simultaneously wishing to remain in their local communities or near their families. A section of the survey was modeled on Hektner’s research, “When Moving Up Implies Moving Out” (1995). The language in Hektner’s questions was modified and updated, as discussed previously in the literature review, but the concepts behind those questions relied on Hektner’s theory and model.

Survey questions did not ask personal or sensitive information. The survey did not ask students to reveal their name or identity. However, the survey did ask generic demographic questions, in order to control for identity factors in the data analysis. Questions were designed in a neutral way, taking care to ensure that rurality was not stigmatized.

The survey drew inspiration and modeled questions after a number of previously validated sources. Primarily, Stanford University's "The Bridge Project" (2003) provided a toolkit of student survey and interview resources which served as inspiration and a model for the development of the survey used in this research ².

Surveys were created and administered electronically via the online survey tool Qualtrics. Student completion of the survey took approximately ten minutes and controls were included to measure response attention. An electronic link was used to administer the survey via an email to the junior and senior student listservs of each school.

Surveys were completed during the school day, in school facilities. The study team elected to complete the surveys during the school day in school facilities because of the concern that not all students may have access to a computer or internet necessary to complete this survey at home. The voices of these students, who may not have the ability to take the survey at home, are critical to this study and in providing a representative subject population. Furthermore, conducting this survey during the school-day allowed the study team to speak to the students beforehand, thereby enhancing the informed consent and understanding. Surveys were conducted in the library of each respective school. Attendance of participating students was not taken and school staff did not

² The survey is included in full in Appendix A and further information of these sources is provided.

engage in any form of monitoring or surveillance. As this was a highly populated area of the school, it was not apparent which students were or were not participating in the survey. Students who chose not to participate were asked to use the ten minutes to quietly work on additional classwork. Therefore, student participation was voluntary, with caution taken to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the students, and no student was identified for not participating. Furthermore, survey data was analyzed in the aggregate and individual responses were not assessed when analyzing the data.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to the student surveys, I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, school administrators and community leaders. Interviews included community members from each participating community as well as teachers or administrators from each participating high school. The interview subjects are guidance counselors, current or previous school administrators who are invested in this topic, or current or previous teachers who teach a college preparatory course. Additionally, the interviews were conducted with community members who have experience in preparing rural students for higher education. In total, fourteen interviews were conducted in six communities across rural Northern Michigan.

The aim of these interviews was to enrich the data gathered in the student surveys and to gain a more comprehensive overview of the school climate. Interviews sought to explore the school and community climate regarding higher education, the influence of the local community and the challenges and strengths of the rural environment. Additionally, the interviews served as a place where I could learn about college preparation programming that currently exists in the school and the relationships that the school has with institutions of higher education. Finally, in the interviews, I asked school

administrators what they would envision if institutions of higher education were truly responsive to and inclusive of the realities of rural education.

The interviews were semi-structured, with prepared questions to explore in each school; however, the goal of the interviews was to have a conversation with the interview subjects and learn about their perspectives according to their experiences. When developing questions for the interviews, I drew inspiration from and modeled questions from Stanford University's "The Bridge Project" (2003) in a toolkit of student survey and interview resources. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recording device and were transcribed. Interview subjects' identities are masked so that their identity cannot be inferred when their interview is referenced. Furthermore, no sensitive or personal information was asked – questions focused only on their professional responsibilities and opinions. As the teachers, school administrators and community leaders are the ones on the ground, fighting with and for the students every day, the interviews were an invaluable component of this research.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, I used a comprehensive approach to thematically integrate the data collected from the student surveys and interviews. Thus, this research does not present separate results and discussion sections, but rather, uses both the survey and interview data to present thematic chapters.

When analyzing the data, descriptive statistics are used to present the data visually; correlations between variables are examined primarily through crosstabs. Most of the visualizations and tables are produced directly by Qualtrics. In a few cases, descriptive visualizations were produced from the raw Qualtrics data with R. The data from the student surveys was analyzed in the aggregate and the identities of the interview

subjects were coded. All interview subjects are referred to generically and all data presented is in the aggregate.

Partner Schools

In concluding this chapter, I provide demographic data of each of the respective partner schools to paint a snapshot of the rural communities included in this research. As described above, the study team identified three rural school districts in Northern Michigan that constitute the study population. In an effort to protect the identity of these schools, I have re-named them as: Inland High School, Oldbridge High School, and Highland High School. The schools are similar in their demographics, with a vast majority of students in each school identifying as white, and with similarly large percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Here, I provide information on rural locale classification, the size of the junior and senior classes, the percentage of graduating seniors who have enrolled in college in recent years, community education attainment rates, and an overview of the academic opportunities of each respective school. I further engage with specific features of each community in Chapter 5. I draw data primarily from the State of Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), as well as from the 2010-2014 American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau reports. In presenting this data, I refer to the sources as CEPI and the ACS.

Inland High School is classified as "rural fringe" according to the NCES classification system. In the 2016-2017 school year, Inland had 87 11th graders, and 72 12th graders. CEPI reports that in the Fall 2015, 69.1% of students in the high school qualified for free or reduced lunch. Similarly, data from the 2010-2014 ACS five-year estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau report that 24.7% of the community population live

below the poverty line.

According to CEPI data, 43%, or 34 of 79 students, of the Inland graduating class of 2015 were enrolled in college within six months of graduation. Specifically, 19 students or 24% enrolled in a four-year institution and 15 students or 19% enrolled in a community college. In the past five years, that is the graduating classes of 2011 to 2015, the mean percentage of Inland graduates enrolling in college was 50.6%. Similarly, a mean of 26.7% percent of graduates have enrolled in a four-year institution and 23.9% of graduates enrolled in a community college. Statewide approximately 61.2% of high-school graduates enroll in an institution of higher education within six months, 38.5% of students enroll in a public four-year institution and 22.7% enroll in a public two-year institution. This demonstrates that Inland enrolls a lower percentage of students to higher education compared to the state average. Inland has experienced a decline in recent years in the percentage of students enrolling in college. With regard to the community at large, data from the ACS and the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that 8.3% of the population that is twenty-five years and older hold an associate's degree and 13.3% of that population hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

Inland high school offers a two to four advancement placement (AP) courses each year and students may enroll in online courses through Michigan Virtual University (MVU). An opportunity for dual-enrollment is offered through a nearby community college that is approximately forty minutes away. All juniors are required to take a course titled "the Junior Experience," which includes a SAT preparation component as well as post-secondary planning.

Oldbridge is classified as "rural fringe" according to the NCES classification

system. In the 2016-2017 school year, Oldbridge High School had 84 11th graders, and 94 12th graders. CEPI reports that, in the Fall 2015, 64.14% of students qualify to receive free or reduced lunch. Similar to Inland, the 2014 ACS estimates indicate that 18.9% of the community-population live below the poverty level, with 28% of those under the age of eighteen living below the poverty level.

Oldbridge reports a higher percentage of students enrolling in college than Inland. CEPI data indicates that of the 2015 graduating class, 64.4% of students enrolled in college within six months of graduation, with 27.4% enrolling in a community college and 37% enrolling in a four-year institution. Similarly, the average percentage of students enrolling in college of the past five years is 60.4%, with 28.74% enrolling in community colleges and 31.72% enrolling in a four-year institution. Oldbridge enrolls a percentage that is similar to the statewide enrollment averages, but still reports a higher proportion of students enrolling in two-year rather than four-year institutions. The greater community of Oldbridge reports similar educational attainment rates as Highland and Inland. In the population of twenty-five and older, 4.7% have an associate's degree and 9.8% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Oldbridge does not currently offer advanced placement courses, but students have the opportunity to through Michigan Virtual University. Oldbridge students have the opportunity to dual-enroll at a nearby community college, that, similarly, is approximately forty minutes away. Oldbridge has made an effort to integrate a curriculum of college knowledge and postsecondary preparation into their English 12 courses. This has served as a platform for students to learn about postsecondary options and norms. I further discuss this innovative curriculum integration in Chapter 7.

Finally, the third partner school, Highland High School is a much smaller rural community when compared with Inland and Oldbridge. In contrast to the “rural fringe” classification of Inland and Oldbridge, Highland is classified as a “rural remote” locale according to the NCES classification system. In the 2016-2017 school year, Highland high school had 41 11th graders, and 25 12th graders. In Fall 2015, CEPI data indicates that 58.15% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Similar to Oldbridge, Highland enrolls a percentage that is similar to the statewide enrollment averages, but still reports a higher proportion of students enrolling in two-year rather than four-year institutions. ACS and the U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2014 that 18.9% of the population lived below the poverty line, and that 38.2% of those under the age of eighteen lived below the poverty line.

The CEPI data indicates that of the graduating class of 2015, 17 of the 25 students, or 68% were enrolled in college within six months of high school graduation. This represented 11 of the 25, or 44%, enrolling in a community college, and 6 of the 25 students, or 24%, enrolling in a four-year college or university. In the past five years, the mean percentage of Highland graduates enrolling in college was 67.94%, with 32.4% enrolling in four-year institutions and 35.4% enrolling in a community college. Although these statistics are higher than that of Inland or Oldbridge, it is difficult to compare percentages due to the significant difference in class sizes. It is not unusual for the percentage of graduating Highland students enrolling college each year to vary significantly. Therefore, the average reported is not highly representative. With regard to the Highland community, of the population that is twenty-five and older, 9.1% hold an associate’s degree and 9.6% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Like Oldbridge, Highland high school does not currently offer advancement placement courses but does offer students the opportunity to take courses online through Michigan Virtual University. Students do have the opportunity to take dual-enrolled credits offered by a nearby community college that is approximately forty minutes away. There is no SAT or required postsecondary preparation course available on site.

I now transition to a thematic analysis of the data. I further engage with the specific features of these communities in the following chapters.

IV. Presentation of Theory and Concept Map

In this chapter, I paint an overview of my argument by presenting a concept map of the theory. The broad argument and concept map demonstrate the visual story of the data. In this chapter, I present the overarching theory, I then engage with each piece of the theory individually in the following chapters. I identify and describe the three broad themes that collectively build the theory. In the following chapters, I build each theme individually and provide evidence to engage in thematic discussions by integrating the qualitative data collected in interviews with the statistical data of the student surveys. Broadly, the three dominant themes that build this argument are: the effects and challenges of rurality, the disjointed link between K-12 systems and higher education, as amplified by rurality, and the strengths of the rural community and the involvement of third-party rural community agents.

I draw on previous literature, as presented in the literature review, to theorize that there is a disjointed relationship between the K-12 system and the higher education system. This disjunction is observed in rocky student transitions with a high proportion of students enrolling in remedial courses and low retention rates among non-highly selective colleges and universities. Moreover, I argue that the specific challenges structured by rurality amplify this disjunction and intensify the effects that this broken link has on student attainment and achievement. I argue that rural communities do not have the supplemental buffers, as suburban or urban communities may, to diminish the effects of this systematically broken relationship. Suburban communities supplement the educational experience with community resources, which are available as a result of the higher average of parental incomes within suburban communities. Suburban students are

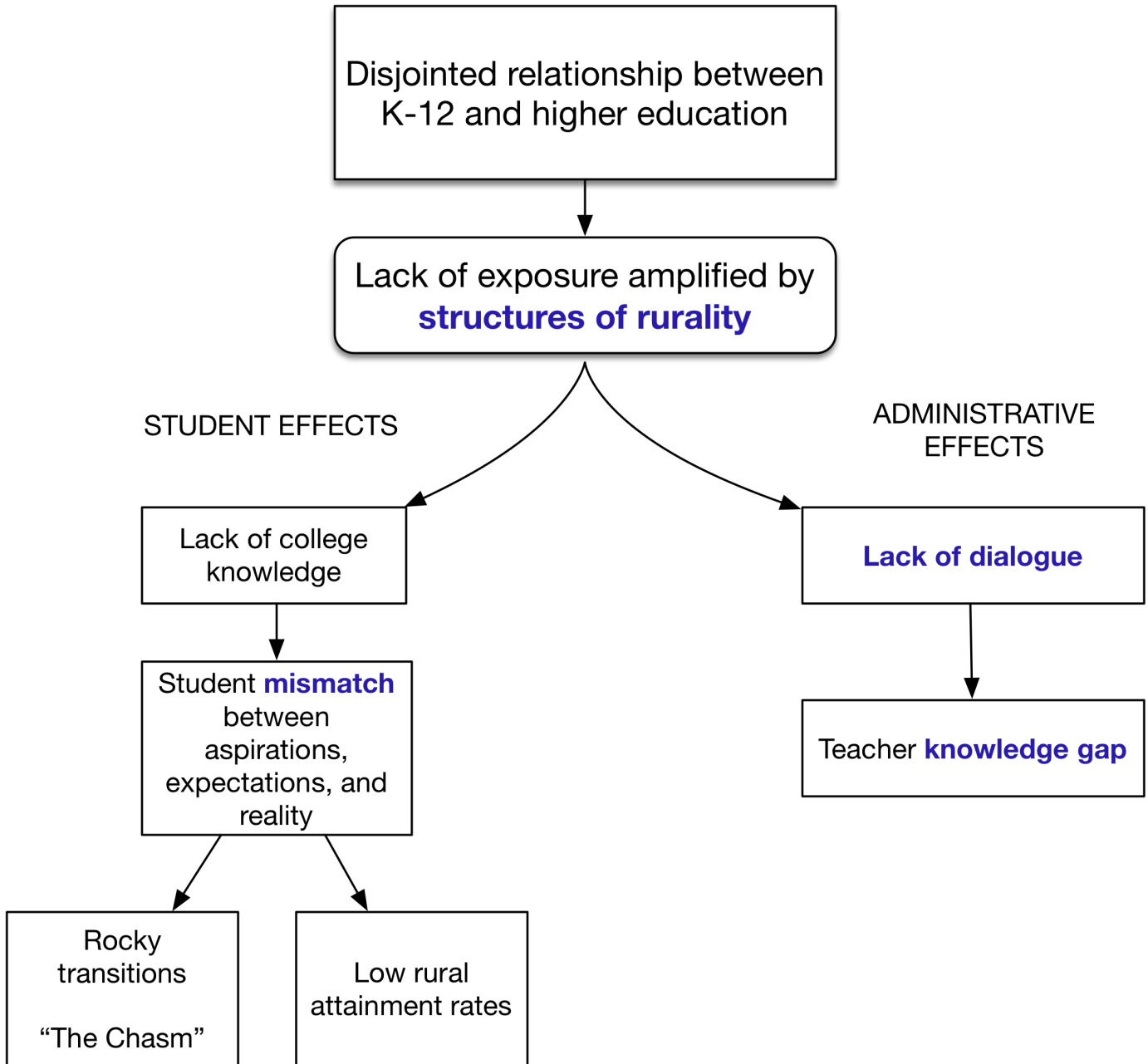
exposed to a greater diversity of professions and receive heightened resources. Similarly, I demonstrate that urban communities, such as Detroit or Ypsilanti, are more likely to be the beneficiaries of currently existing outreach programming sponsored by institutions of higher education. These outreach programs operating in these underserved urban communities then serve as a buffer to hinder the negative effects of this disjuncture. In contrast, rural communities, which are challenged by higher poverty rates, are not able to supplement students with community resources and they are often excluded from outreach programming of higher education due to the challenges posed by the distance and isolation. In light of this, I argue that the challenges of rurality intensify the effects of the broken systematic relationship between K-12 and higher education. As a result of this amplification, I suggest that rural education may be used as a lens through which scholars can observe and identify the effects of this systematic disjuncture.

I draw on the data collected in interviews and student surveys to demonstrate that this disjuncture affects two primary groups within rural education: students, and administrators and educators. The disjuncture affects these groups similarly, but is manifested differently. Administrators and educators experience a lack of dialogue between systems which consequently allows the creation of what I refer to as the teacher knowledge gap. This gap refers to teachers who are not aware of the expectations of higher education as well as the processes of admission and financial aid. This lack of dialogue affects agents from both systems and leads to the perpetuation of policy which is not responsive to the realities of rural education. These administrative effects then cycle back to further indirectly intensify the effects of this disjuncture experienced by students.

I argue that as a result of the interaction of this disjuncture with realities of rural

education, students experience a lack of exposure to higher education norms and processes which then hinders the degree of college awareness and knowledge of the students. I theorize that this lack of college knowledge then generates a phenomenon, which I refer to as the student mismatch phenomenon, in which students develop a mismatch between their aspirations, their expectations, and reality. I suggest that a classic case of “you don’t know what you don’t know” has significant effects on student attainment and student pathways to success in higher education. This mismatch of aspirations and expectations from reality then skews the students’ knowledge and hinders the students’ ability to access a pathway to realistically pursue their aspirations. Ultimately, this then leads to low educational attainment rates among rural students and rocky transitions for those students who do pursue higher education. In the following chapters, I build on this argument and build each piece of it with evidence from my interviews and student surveys. My argument is depicted visually in the concept map in figure 4.1 on the following page.

Figure 4.1: Concept Map



V. The Challenges of Rural Education

“I might as well have a conversation with them about going to school in Ireland as going to Western Michigan University, you know, because it’s so far out of their realm of experience” - Guidance Counselor of Oldbridge High School

Rurality poses complex challenges for education. In this chapter, I discuss the specific challenges that are created, structured and amplified by rurality. This chapter draws heavily from the interviews to frame the structural effects of rurality. The student survey responses do not highlight these structural effects; however, I integrate survey data when relevant. I present an argument in Chapter 6 that explains why the story that is painted in the survey data varies so significantly from that of the interviews. This discussion both supports and challenges previous literature. In numerous ways, this chapter builds on and confirms the literature discussed in Chapter 2. However, I conclude this chapter by engaging with the scholarship of Hektner and Howley, and challenge their theory that the rural community hinders rural student aspirations and diminishes the value that rural students attach onto higher education. I use the student survey results to suggest that the rural community does not influence the *values* students attach onto higher education, but rather their knowledge and expectations of higher education.

As demonstrated by the quote at the beginning of this chapter, rural students form their perceptions of higher education in reference to their realms of experience. For an Oldbridge student, Western Michigan University, approximately four hours from the community, may as well have been across the Atlantic Ocean, because it was so far removed from that student’s reference point and experiences. When student experience is limited and is structured by the isolation of rural spaces, student perceptions are

impacted. Hubbs (2014) eloquently describes this subjectivity of experience here, the players here, referred to by scholars as “agents” or “subjects” are not only objectively seen and classified differently according to their differing positions; they subjectively see the game and playing field differently according to them. They ‘have points of view on this objective space’, in Bourdieu’s words, ‘which depend on their positions within it’ (15).

I draw a parallel between Hubbs’ argument and the perceptions of rural students. Rural students, just as urban or suburban students, subjectively see the game, the playing field of higher education, differently, according to the realm of education they have experienced within their rural upbringing.

I argue that the rural community shapes and limits students’ exposure to higher education in a way that intensifies the disjointed relationship between the K-12 and the higher education system. I further theorize that this hinders rural student attainment rates, and for those who do pursue higher education, I suggest this creates difficult transitions for rural students. This lack of exposure is collectively created by three primary themes: the effects of distance and isolation that rural communities are geographically structured within, the opportunity and resource gap experienced by rural communities, and the negative effects created by rural communities.

Shrinking the Distances: The Detrimental Effects of Distance and Isolation

The challenges created by the distance and isolation of rural communities is continually emphasized in the interviews with educators, school administrators and community leaders. The geographical remoteness of these communities limits the opportunities available to students to be exposed to higher education by visiting college

campuses. Moreover, the isolation of these communities structures their opportunity to experience diverse cultures and ideas. In conducting this research, I personally experienced the challenge of the distance, driving over 1,500 miles and nearly twenty-five hours to travel to the three rural communities. The interview subjects consistently said that the complicated effects of isolation are frequently unacknowledged and misunderstood.

A community leader in Oldbridge, who serves as a regional recruiter for the University of Michigan, concluded that all challenges of rurality are related to the distance, noting,

Nearly every challenge of rurality relates to distance. It comes back to the geography and the distance between places. You know, you can't just beam people back and forth. The distance makes things more expensive and it makes things take more time. The distance structures the entire rural community.

He then referenced the distance as crafting a notion of unfamiliarity that frames higher education to be unknown, impersonal and risky. When I asked him how we might combat the effects of the distance, he emphasized concepts of personalization and familiarity:

We have to gain familiarity, and we have to shrink the distances. We shrink the distances by carrying the kids to the places and we increase the familiarity by having face-time with students. The formula is to shrink the distances and to personalize the schools so they don't seem far away and indifferent and impersonal.

He emphasized the importance of "giving a face" to universities and colleges to help students connect with higher education in a meaningful way and to increase notions of

welcome and belonging. Furthering this, the Oldbridge guidance counselor emphasized how powerful it is for students to set foot on a college campus. She explained that this is powerful because when that student thinks about college, they will now have a concrete experience and not just pictures that they saw on some brochure. Instead, that student will be able to envision themselves there, living in the dorms and studying in the library.

It was emphasized that providing opportunities for concrete, personal experiences with higher education is essential to breaking the perception of higher education amongst rural communities as distant and unknown. Unfortunately, this isolation and distance creates a unique challenge that leaves rural families and schools grappling with how to get their students to campuses in a feasible way. For many rural districts, the nearest four-year college or university is more than two hours away, and often, the nearest community college may be over forty minutes away. Consequently, access to transportation to visit college campuses emerged as another theme that reoccurred throughout the interviews. One guidance counselor shared,

I have a lot of students who tell me that they really wanted to check out this college or that college, but then mom couldn't drive them there because it's too far. So transportation really is a big issue. If it's not from home to school or from school to home, there really is a lack of transportation available.

Similarly, another guidance counselor explained that because of the high rates of poverty amongst their students, student transportation must be considered as a number one priority when developing opportunities for campus visits. It cannot be assumed that students or families have the resources to visit college campuses on their own.

In addition to the difficulty experienced by individual students to visit colleges,

the distance makes it extremely difficult for schools to plan and organize school-wide visits, for example, for an entire junior or senior class. The miles stretched between these remote communities and college campuses leads to expensive busing costs that schools cannot easily accommodate for. In addition to the expense, it is difficult for schools to organize the transportation to campus visits, due to time and resource constraints. One counselor expressed frustration with the time commitment, noting,

We don't have like a fleet of buses to take students on campus tours, because the bus has to leave when school starts and be back by the time school ends, because we need that bus to take students home at the end of the day.

In these examples, the distance complicates these opportunities both due to the added expense and because of the time commitment it takes to travel to and from college campuses.

Similarly, these challenges can operate in reverse, hindering college recruiters and admission representatives from effectively and regularly reaching these remote communities. The guidance counselor of Highland High School remarked that the smaller class sizes are a challenge because there is a smaller population of students interested in four-year institutions, which disincentives college recruiters from visiting. She empathized,

I don't get as many schools that come in and do visits, it's hard to schedule. It is important to our kids, but of course the bottom line is they won't get the same enrollment from us as they will from bigger high schools.

Similarly, this complication was emphasized in an interview with a professor at a private four-year institution in rural, central Michigan. She explained that even when outreach

efforts have the best intentions, there is often a recruitment agenda simultaneously operating. When boosting enrollment and applications is the motivation that institutions of higher education rely on to motivate funding outreach programming, it is easy to identify why rural communities are typically not included as primary beneficiaries of such programming. When the strain of the distance is paired with a smaller population of interested students in the rural community, it is understandable that for colleges it may not be enticing to invest in these rural communities. Thus again, we see the distance and isolation negatively effecting the opportunities and options these students are exposed to.

In the surveys, when students were asked if they felt they would be more aware of college if they lived closer to college campuses, 40.7% responded that they agreed or strongly agreed, with a large remainder responding neutrally. For these students, the distance is perceived as a negative influence hindering their knowledge of higher education. When asked if they have visited a college campus, 76% of students responded that they had visited a college campus. However, when analyzing which college campuses they reported visiting, we again see that the distance was a significant influence on which campuses these students visited. Students were significantly more likely to visit Central Michigan University or Saginaw Valley State University than the University of Michigan or Michigan State University. As Central Michigan University and Saginaw Valley State University are located more centrally within the state, they are both less than a two-hour drive from each of the three schools studied here. The distance makes visits to Central Michigan University and Saginaw Valley State University more feasible and accessible for students than a visit to the University of Michigan, which is four hours or more from each of the schools. Furthermore, of the 76% of students who had visited a

college campus, 41.6% reported only visiting one college, and 15.5% reported that they had only visited community colleges. If students are only visiting one or two colleges, and they are community colleges, how can students be expected to select a college that will be a good match with their personality, interests and learning style? It is essential that if the “match and fit” system for college selection continues to be used, then students must be provided with an opportunity to visit multiple campuses. I revisit this problematic lack of exposure to campuses and the question of “match and fit” when I discuss the causes of rocky rural student transitions into higher education in Chapter 6. This data highlights the problematic effect of distance because it again influences both the number of college campuses that these students are able to feasibly visit as well as which college campuses are most frequently visited by students.

Collectively, the distance manifests itself by straining students’ and families’ ability to individually pursue campus visits, it complicates school-wide visits due to financial, time and resource constraints, and it serves to discourage institutions of higher education from investing in these communities who can offer a significantly smaller enrollment incentive. This three-pronged effect of the distance these communities are structured within then consequently limits students’ exposure to higher education.

Exacerbating this problematic lack of exposure, the second primary way in which the distance and isolation affects students is by structuring the opportunities that students have to engage with and experience diverse ideas and cultures. This is demonstrated by the frustration expressed by an educator at Oldbridge High School, who explains,

When you are in a more urban environment, when things are closer, when you have access to field trips and things like that, libraries, bookstores, where you are

outside of the school environment, and you are exposed to people working in their professional life, there is very little of that up here, limited opportunities for that exposure.

The lack of bookstores, libraries and further community resources amplifies the influence of the school environment and limits the realm that rural students are exposed to. The experiences of rural students remain largely within those that the school provides. Similar to the challenge of transporting students to college campuses, it is difficult to plan meaningful field trips, due to the expense and time commitment required for the transportation to such opportunities. Echoing this, a guidance counselor identified one primary challenge of rural communities as a lack of opportunities for “incidental brushes”:

There are not those consistent opportunities for exposure. Students in urban settings have more opportunities for incidental exposure to cultures and to brush up against different cultures, for example, students in New York City are still going to walk by the MET and see it. Our students don't get those incidental brushes.

It is difficult to place a value on this concept of “incidental brushes,” but it is clear that for those invested in rural education, the lack of such exposure to diversity is a clear challenge that disadvantages rural students. This lack of exposure is directly structured by the remoteness of these communities.

I have demonstrated that rurality poses a unique dilemma in the effects of the distance and isolation that these communities are structured within. The distance hinders students' exposure to higher education and complicates students' opportunities to visit

college campuses. Moreover, the isolation of these communities intensifies this by limiting the realm of experience of rural students and their opportunities to engage with diversity. Now that I've described the challenges posed by the distance and isolation of rural communities, I turn to the opportunity and resource gaps that rural schools must navigate.

Strained Resources

The challenge of strained or stretched resources or the lack thereof is the second theme of challenges that emerged in the interviews. Ranging from a lack of funding, to outdated technology, a lack of a fully staffed counseling office, to a lack of a diverse and rigorous curriculum, the strained nature of these resources, or the complete absence of them, was repeatedly emphasized as challenging. Although strained resources are not a challenge unique to rural school systems, I suggest that this lack of resources interacts with the distance and isolation of rural communities in a manner that complicates their effects and directly affects students.

The lack of funding to adequately support students is the umbrella resource that consequently affects all other resources. As state funding is tied to pupil count per district, rural schools are systematically disadvantaged in the proportion of funding they receive from the state. Moreover, as rural schools are situated in communities with higher poverty rates and smaller populations, the tax-base available to supplement state funds with local revenue is limited. This frustration with the limited ability to supplement with locally-based revenue was emphasized in numerous interviews. Intensifying this, rural districts have to spend a much higher proportion of funding on transportation and busing costs in order to cover their geographically vast districts. This consequently hinders the proportion of funding available for student instruction. One community leader said,

You've got limited resources and a limited student population, and so how do you on a shoestring budget, how do you provide the range of opportunities that can prepare students for the qualities that competitive colleges want?

She argued that the funding available for schools barely allows schools to meet state accountability measures, let alone that there would be funding available for post-secondary preparation initiatives. Oldbridge High School, which demonstrated the strongest effort at creating a college-going culture in their school, is a recipient of a Michigan College Access Network *Reach Higher* grant. This grant has allowed the school to invest in initiatives to support a college-going culture and has been a “dynamic vehicle for change” in the district. The concern is, if Oldbridge needed a supplementary grant in order to invest in preparing students for postsecondary, how are disadvantaged schools without the grant funding expected to do so?

Although this research did not substantially engage in school financing, the interviews demonstrate that the funding structure surrounding these schools fundamentally shapes all other available resources. Moreover, it is complicated by rurality, due to the smaller and less wealthy tax bases available to locally support rural schools as well as the increased expense associated with student transportation. It is evident that the rural community interacts with funding in a unique and complex way.

One consequence of the lack of funding is the lack of, or the constrained use of outdated technology. In each partner school, I observed the computing resources available to students to be limited and, when available, frustratingly outdated. In one school, students took the electronic surveys on computers that appeared to be more than twenty years old. In each partner school, students complained of slow and faulty internet

connections, random computer shutdowns, sticky mice and keyboards and poor screen resolutions. Similarly, in each school, a significant proportion, as high as one-third, of available computers were defective or out-of-order and could not be used. In one school, the students were in the midst of taking the survey when an entire row of computers randomly shut down. It was obvious that these resources were strained as the guidance counselor and I strategically swapped mice and keyboards from defective computers to functioning monitors to maximize the number of available computers. Moreover, the strain was obvious in the anxiety that the unreliable technology brought to the guidance counselors and teachers.

Beyond the technology available in the school is the question of the percentage of rural students who may not have access to internet or a computer at home. As rural communities have a higher number of economically disadvantaged students, the guidance counselors repeatedly explained they have to be cognizant of what students have access to at home. This lack of access complicates students' ability to pursue online courses or to conduct independent research on higher education. Again, although this lack of technology or use of outdated and faulty technology is not necessarily specific to rural communities, it was a challenge that I observed as adding to the stress of rural guidance counselors, educators and students.

The challenge of adequately providing a diverse or rigorous curriculum to accommodate for all students was another challenge that each partner school struggled with. One community leader summarized that rural schools are only able to provide the bare minimum that the state requires because of how difficult it is for rural schools to meet all of the state requirements without the same resources available in wealthier

school districts. She theorized that if we were to allow rural school districts to figure out their own best practices, their own model, rather than conforming to a cookie-cutter model that was developed for wealthier suburban districts, that perhaps rural schools could more adequately provide rigorous and diverse curriculum. She identified the requirement of fitting within this model and the lack of flexibility for rural systems to be a significant challenge to rural schools. Smaller class sizes and smaller faculties are two characteristics of rural schools that directly affect the ability to offer a diverse curriculum.

Smaller class sizes are understandably correlated with fewer students interested in pursuing higher education and consequently with less demand for advanced courses. This is not because rural students are less interested in higher education, but relatively speaking, there are fewer students there. Thus, even if it's the same percentage of students who are ultimately interested in higher education, the smaller class size makes it difficult to provide those students with extensive options. Similarly, smaller faculty sizes complicate the ability of smaller schools to offer electives or diverse courses, both as a result of a smaller faculty base to draw from as well as the reality that it is not efficient or feasible to support courses which only a small number of students may be interested in. One guidance counselor spoke of how rural students are subject to an experience gap when you consider the course opportunities available to students in more metropolitan areas. She noted,

When you look at what's available at the tech-centers down in major metropolitan areas, sure we have automotive, culinary and nursing assistant, but there are programs in Michigan that are public school programs that are doing robotics, engineering, aviation, and these amazing things. So that disparity, again it comes

back to those incidental encounters, there are not even the community supplemental resources up here that you have in more urban areas, so there is a huge experience gap for our students.

The disparity between hands-on and experiential learning is then identified as a further gap in the curriculum available to rural students. Echoing this, a community leader shared a similar frustration with this disparity,

As a parent, and particularly as a parent with siblings who live in metropolitan areas, I've watched my own children go through the educational system and I've compared their opportunities and expectations with my nieces and nephews, and it is a drastic and dramatic contrast. I can barely get two and half years of Spanish for my kids.

She added that although she is of course glad for the opportunities available to her nieces and nephews, it is immensely frustrating. The effects of the limited curriculum are felt by educators, parents, and students and are complicated because of the numerous financial and resource constraints of small districts, such as small class sizes and faculties.

As highlighted previously, only one of the three partner schools offers advanced placement courses on site. Inland high school offers between two to four advanced placement courses each year, and attempts to increase the availability, but has to adjust annually in alignment with student demand and interest level. Oldbridge and Inland both reported that they are not able to offer advanced placement courses on site, but do offer the opportunity for such courses online through Michigan Virtual University. The limited opportunities to enroll in advanced placement courses is reflected in the student surveys, in which only 18.17% of students reported having taken an advanced placement course.

Furthermore, all three of the partner schools offer Spanish as the only option for foreign language, and each school is only able to offer two years of Spanish. Again, students are able to take alternative languages online through Michigan Virtual. However, the lack of course options is a significant barrier to student exposure to diverse topics and cultures. One community leader emphasized this barrier, noting, “It’s not just the absence of opportunity, with these limited courses, but it is the environment and structure that is surrounding the kids.” She emphasized that it is not only the absence of such opportunities, but it is the reality that students are unaware of this lack of opportunities and the community appears to be content with the limited curriculum available in the schools.

In each partner school, the guidance counselor emphasized the prevalence of online courses and how online courses are a tool they can use to offer advanced or rigorous courses or diverse electives. One guidance counselor explained,

I am not able to offer the same rigor here. But I can offer classes online, and I have students doing them and it’s really exciting for them. But I’m not sure it’s the same thing. Is it the same experience of being in a classroom with all of those advanced students who have your same high-achieving ambitions? There is no match for that, and I wish there was a fix for this, I really do, but I don’t see one in the near future.

This refers to the individualistic nature of the vast majority of online courses, which do not currently allow for students to engage or collaborate with like-minded students. This question of the efficacy of online courses will reemerge in the following section, in which I present the difficulties rural schools face in enrolling students in dual-enrollment

courses. On the one hand, the availability of online courses can be a real resource that is an exciting expansion of opportunities available to rural students. The same guidance counselor told me that her first experience enrolling a student in an online advanced placement course was just this previous semester, and she explained she was so excited because she believed it was because of a lack of knowledge. She argued that students genuinely did not know they had online courses available to them, that it was even a possibility, because in the past, the school did not have a faculty member in her position who could monitor the courses and encourage them to take advantage of them. However, on the other hand, another guidance counselor critiqued that,

Online classes have become kind of a catch all for the flaws in the master schedule here in the building or for lack of elective opportunities as staffing members are cut. We have fewer electives to offer in the building, so it becomes a catch all.

She warned that viewing the technology of online courses as a "catch-all" neglects more serious conversations about the efficacy and effectiveness of such courses, conversations which she believes are long overdue.

Similar to the challenge of providing a diverse, rigorous curriculum is the difficulty that rural schools face in legitimately participating in dual-enrollment courses. The stress and strain that is associated with complying with the dual-enrollment requirements was the challenge and frustration that was most frequently referenced by the guidance counselors and school administrators. In each school, a deep frustration was expressed when the topic of dual-enrollment was brought up. Rural counselors are essentially bending over backwards to appease the transfer requirements for dual-

enrollment credits to transfer, but it continues to be a consistent challenge. As a result of the isolation and distance that structures rural communities, for each partner school, the closest community college that students could dual-enroll in was thirty to forty minutes away. When this distance is paired with the already limited budgets and high expenses associated with transportation, it becomes difficult for schools to commit to providing transportation to campus for students who are dual-enrolled. Similarly, it would not be efficient or feasible for schools to provide transportation for only the few students who are interested in dual-enrolling. Yet, as these communities have higher rates of economically disadvantaged students, it is not common that students would have reliable access to personal vehicles to transport themselves to campus. Furthermore, the distance requires a larger time commitment - which then significantly affects the student's class schedule and regular coursework. Thus, the complications of enrolling students in dual-enrolled courses on campus are evident and intimately related to the challenges posed by the geographic and economic landscape of these communities.

In light of these challenges, rural schools have opted to partner with community colleges by hosting community college courses on-site in their high school buildings. Typically, this will be in the form of an online course or will involve a professor of the community college traveling and instructing the course in the high-school building. Unfortunately, many institutions of higher education, particularly more selective institutions such as the University of Michigan, have created policies that do not allow credits taken on a high school campus to be transferred. Multiple guidance counselors expressed their frustration with the University of Michigan, among other institutions, and their failure to recognize that offering courses on-site is the only efficient and feasible

way that these rural schools can offer dual-enrolled college courses. One guidance counselor remorsefully explained that this barrier is unfortunate, as it was an attempt to genuinely enhance the rigor and course opportunities available in their school. She noted, “It's hard to sell these courses, or promote them, when the kids know, nothing from our school is going to transfer.” The reality that these credits may not transfer discourages students from enrolling, which hinders student interest and demand — which then cyclically affects the rigorous opportunities available. Unfortunately, she reported that students who do take the courses often feel cheated and as if there was no alternative way for them to prepare for higher education.

Similar to the question of efficacy of online courses, it is understandable that institutions of higher education are doubtful of the effectiveness and quality of these courses. The fear is that in these courses, due to the high-school environment, the rigor is compromised. This is a legitimate doubt, but the rigidity of the dual-enrollment system has continued to challenge rural schools' ability to offer rigorous curriculum and opportunities for their students to participate in dual-enrollment.

Finally, the last resource that I argue is stretched and strained is the staff resources and counseling resources available in rural schools. In each partner school, it was evident that the guidance counselor was extremely over-burdened with a vast range of responsibilities. The responsibilities of rural guidance counselors have been overstretched, and it poses extreme limitations on the time of these counselors. Responsibilities ranged from coordinating course schedules, to monitoring student progress and student audits for graduation, to scheduling standardized testing. There is no staff member who is able to be wholly devoted to postsecondary preparation.

Unfortunately, postsecondary preparation is often unintentionally neglected due to the numerous and demanding responsibilities of each counselor.

Of the counselors I interviewed, two of the three were the sole guidance counselor in the entire district. In Oldbridge, the counselor explained that she is the district counselor, which means she is responsible for all students in the district; however, due to the time constraints, her primary responsibilities are in the 7-12 building. When only this building is considered, it still adds up to approximately 580 students that she is responsible for. This case-load is not unusual for a rural guidance counselor, the Oldbridge counselor stated, noting that, “there are fewer and fewer counselors all the time, and they are being asked to work with more and more students in their case-load.” The lack of a fully staffed counseling office serves as a significant challenge to these rural schools. Once again, this challenge is intimately related to a lack of funding, as well as the challenge of attracting qualified staff members to work in rural communities.

The primary effect of this challenge is that counselors are constantly pressed for time and are consequently not able to invest in postsecondary preparation. When asked what they thought of when they heard the word college, one student responded, “how unprepared I am when it comes to knowing how to go about the college thing. My counselor has NOT helped.” Of course this is just the experience of one student, but it does relate to the challenge that rural counselors do not have time to actively engage in preparing students for postsecondary, and that this administrative strain has a direct effect on students. The following quote from an interview with the Highland guidance counselor expresses the frustration that is caused by these time constraints. I quote her extensively because of how well this quote demonstrates the constraints that rural

counselors are operating within:

I could easily do just the career and college advising piece as a full time job. I wish I could. I'm not talking student audits and getting them to graduate – I'm talking about, creating the programming and prep planning: the college nights, the FAFSA nights, designing the curriculum so there are things that will look good on a transcript, going to college visits – I haven't even delved into that, we don't have the means to do that right now nor do I have the man power to set that up. I would love to set up a program. I would love to be able to do that. I wish I had the ability to get them to campus. But I know I don't have the time or resources to do that. I probably only do maybe half of what I would really like to do. At this point, I would love to be more of the planning piece, you know, more meetings, more bulletin boards, maybe even have a planning committee where students are making decisions with me. It's a dream.

It would be a dream to invest in the postsecondary preparatory events. It would be a dream to get students to campus, to plan extensive postsecondary programming and initiatives.

When students were asked if they had attended a college preparation event or workshop, 66.7% of students reported that they had not attended an event. Although only 13% of students reported that their school had not hosted an event, this question suggests that more could be done to increase the percentage of students attending such programming. Perhaps there was only one college workshop offered throughout the year, and due to time-conflicts a certain group of students was unable to attend. Or perhaps students were unaware of the event because there were not the proper strategies to market

and frame the event in a way that would be beneficial to the students. Although these are just speculations, it is arguable that if guidance counselors had more resources and time at their fingertips to invest in such programming, a higher percentage of students would have the opportunity to engage the preparatory events.

Moreover, of the 33.3% of students who did report attending a college night at their high school, only 14% reported that their parents attended the event with them. This lack of parental involvement is problematic, given the vast influence that parental expectations have on the students' aspirations. Similarly, it is imaginable that if there was a counselor who could be fully devoted to postsecondary preparation, that counselor might have a greater ability to connect with parents and plan a multitude of events that could appeal to a range of families.

Regardless of the intentions or interests of these counselors, these dreams cannot be realized because of the extensive responsibilities that the counselors are accountable for. Their time is in high demand and the reality is that post-secondary planning cannot take priority over handling logistical essentials such as student audits and course scheduling.

Counselors from all three schools remarked that comprehensive resources that made information more readily available would be invaluable given their shortage of time, because it would save them from individually searching and "hustling for the information." Counselors need well-designed tools and resources to serve as effective liaisons between the K-12 and higher ed systems — but currently, the lack of such tools only serves to amplify the time-constraints and challenges experienced by rural counselors.

In this section, I have discussed a number of resources that are either absent or strained in rural schools. As demonstrated, the absence of these resources are all intimately interconnected and effected by the geographical and economic structure of these rural communities. The lack of these resources has forced rural schools to creatively substitute with alternative resources, such as online courses and dual-enrolled courses on the high-school campus, which may appear effective but which generate questions of efficacy and effectiveness. This limited access to essential resources, such as funding, complicates the rural schools' ability to provide resources, such as a rigorous or diverse curriculum, to students and consequently serves as a primary challenge that rural schools must continually navigate.

The Influence of the Rural Community

The third theme that I discuss are the challenging effects structured by characteristics of rural communities. In Chapter 8, I highlight strengths of the rural community and explore how community strengths can be channeled to support rural schools. I do highlight the positive influences of the community, but first, in this broader discussion of the challenges of rural education, it is important to first identify the negative influences of the community. I draw attention to this double-edged role of the rural community by highlighting how the community serves as the greatest strength of rural spaces while simultaneously negatively affecting students due to the economic structure and community culture. Drawing on the interviews and survey data, I describe a lack of professional career models and mentors as a result of the depressed rural economy, low education attainment rates amongst the community, and higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, which leads to higher proportions of first-generation students and a lack of parental involvement in the school.

As demonstrated in the literature review, the depressed rural economy and lack of diverse careers are problematic because they limit the exposure that rural students have to potential careers. This lack of exposure to professional careers makes it difficult for students to recognize the link between higher education and career opportunities. Moreover, this challenge is amplified by the reality that Michigan reports the highest rural adult unemployment rate at 10%, which is severe compared to the 6.6% national rural average (Johnson et al. 2014, 63). Demonstrating this, one educator at Inland expressed that the large percentage of adult unemployment in their community is normalized to students. In addition to high rates of unemployment, he noted that in tourist economies such as Inland, there is a significant portion of the population in seasonal employment. An Inland community leader echoed this, voicing that the high-rates of seasonal employment and unemployment are normalized to students, which then leads some students to be content with a similar lifestyle for themselves when they grow up.

Furthermore, the rural economy structures the professional careers that students are exposed to. One educator explained,

Our challenge is the lack of mentors. Kids don't know what careers even exist.

We have so few employers, they just don't know, you don't ever see a

professional person. The exposure just isn't there.

This challenge was noted by a number of educators across the communities, all of whom explained that to combat this, they attempt to integrate class assignments that will require students to conduct research on professional careers and opportunities. Again, we see rural schools assuming the responsibility to provide students with experiences which could not be provided or supplemented by community resources. As was discussed in the

literature review, scholars have overwhelmingly established the powerful effect of mentorship on student esteem and student achievement (Curtis et al. 2012; King 2012). Thus, this lack of available mentors and professional models in the community is problematic because rural students are not exposed to the same professional career paths.

Intimately related to the declining rural economy are the higher rates of poverty and lower rates of educational attainment amongst community members. This was highlighted for each partner community specifically previously in Chapter 4. One specific challenge that is influenced by the higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage in the rural community is the way that socioeconomic status complicates parental involvement. For many parents, work schedules may make it difficult for them to engage in their child's education by attending school events such as college nights and parent-teacher conferences. Multiple guidance counselors and teachers referenced the challenge of connecting with parents and families on a multitude of levels. This disconnect makes it difficult for parents to be aware of the systematic loops their children are jumping through as they apply for higher education. For example, educators and guidance counselors repeatedly mentioned how vital it is to partnering with families to ensure that the FAFSA is filled out completely and accurately. Thus, the influence of higher rates of poverty then indirectly affects students because it complicates the parent's ability to be involved in their child's education. This disconnect between rural schools and families can be a significant challenge that guidance counselors battle daily.

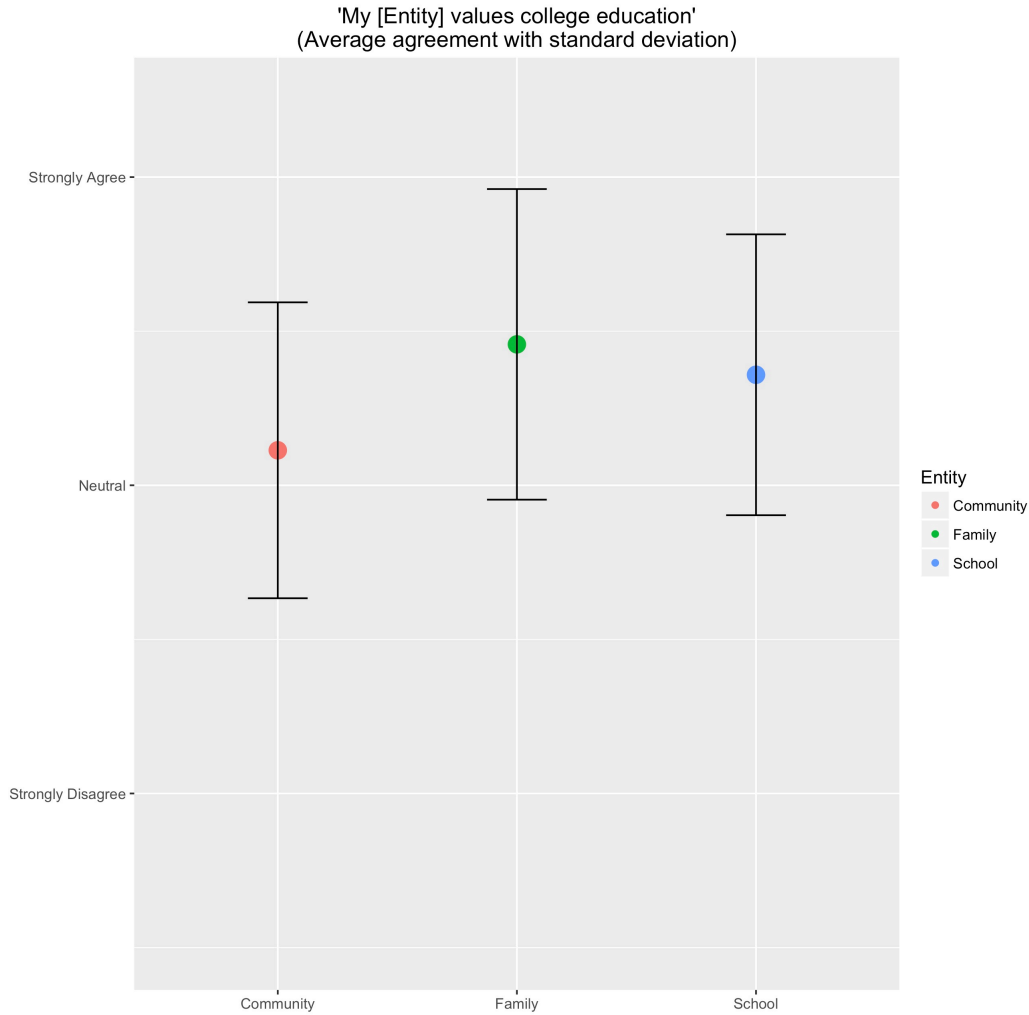
Collectively, between the three rural communities, the percent of the community that has an associate's degree ranges between 4 to 9%, and the percent that holds a bachelor's degree ranges from 9 to 13%. The implication of having less than 20% of the

larger community college-educated is that pursuing higher education is not normalized in community culture. This effect is demonstrated in the student surveys as well.

When students were asked if their community values a college education, if their community has encouraged them to pursue a college education and if receiving a college education was expected in their community, students responded neutrally with stronger rates of disagreement. This is in sharp contrast to the overwhelmingly positive responses received when students were asked similar questions regarding the values and expectations of their families and their high school.

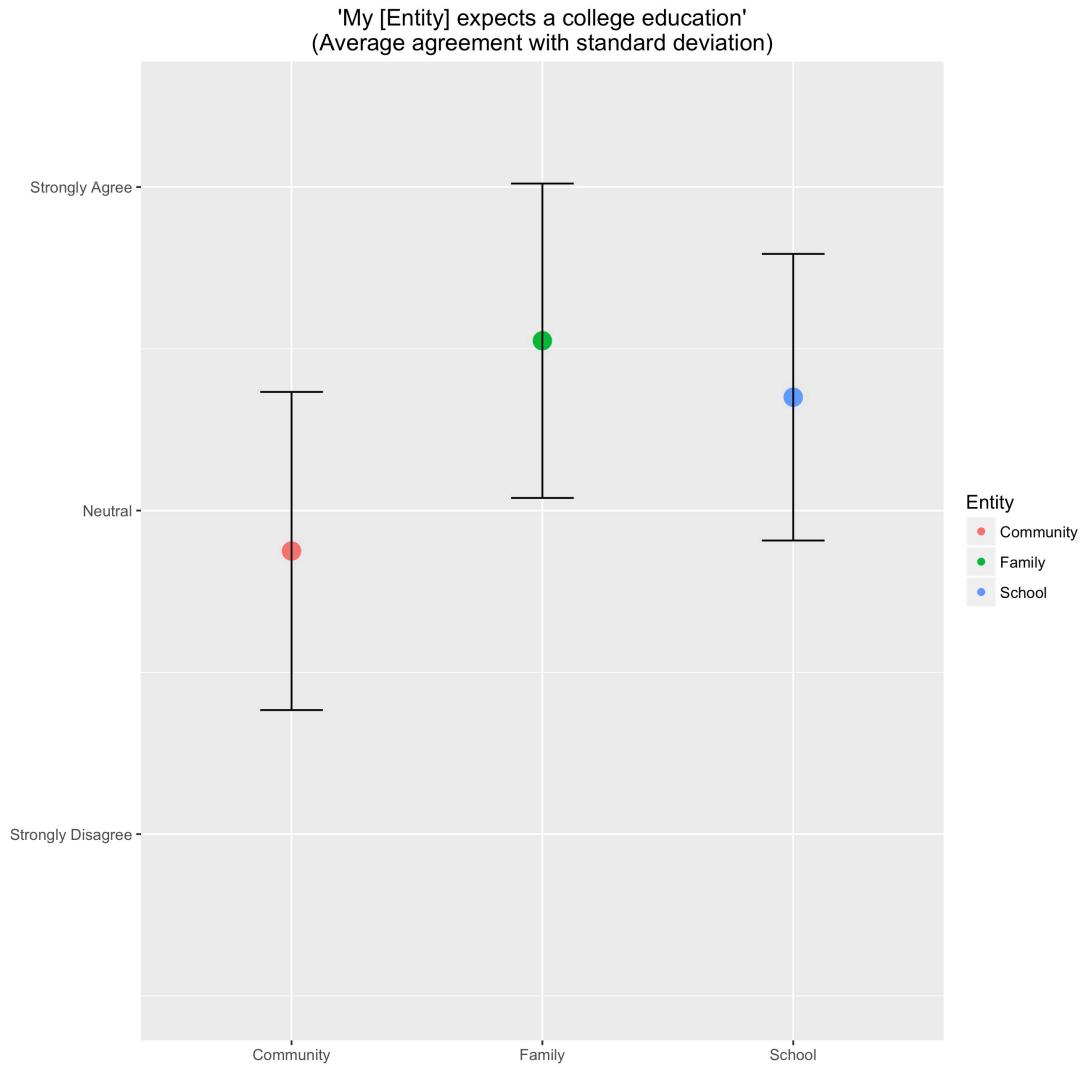
When asked if their family values a college education, an overwhelming 71.05% agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, when asked if their high school values a college education, 72.14% agreed or strongly agreed. In contrast, when asked if their community values a higher education, only 41.78% agreed or strongly agreed with 19.73% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and 38.49% selecting neither agree or disagree. This is demonstrated graphically in figure 5.1. This figure shows raw data that was statistically manipulated to create a net score indicator of the average responses of students. This net score demonstrates that the scores of the community appear neutral compared to those of the students' families and their high school.

Figure 5.1: Net Score Indicator comparing the Values of Community, Family and School



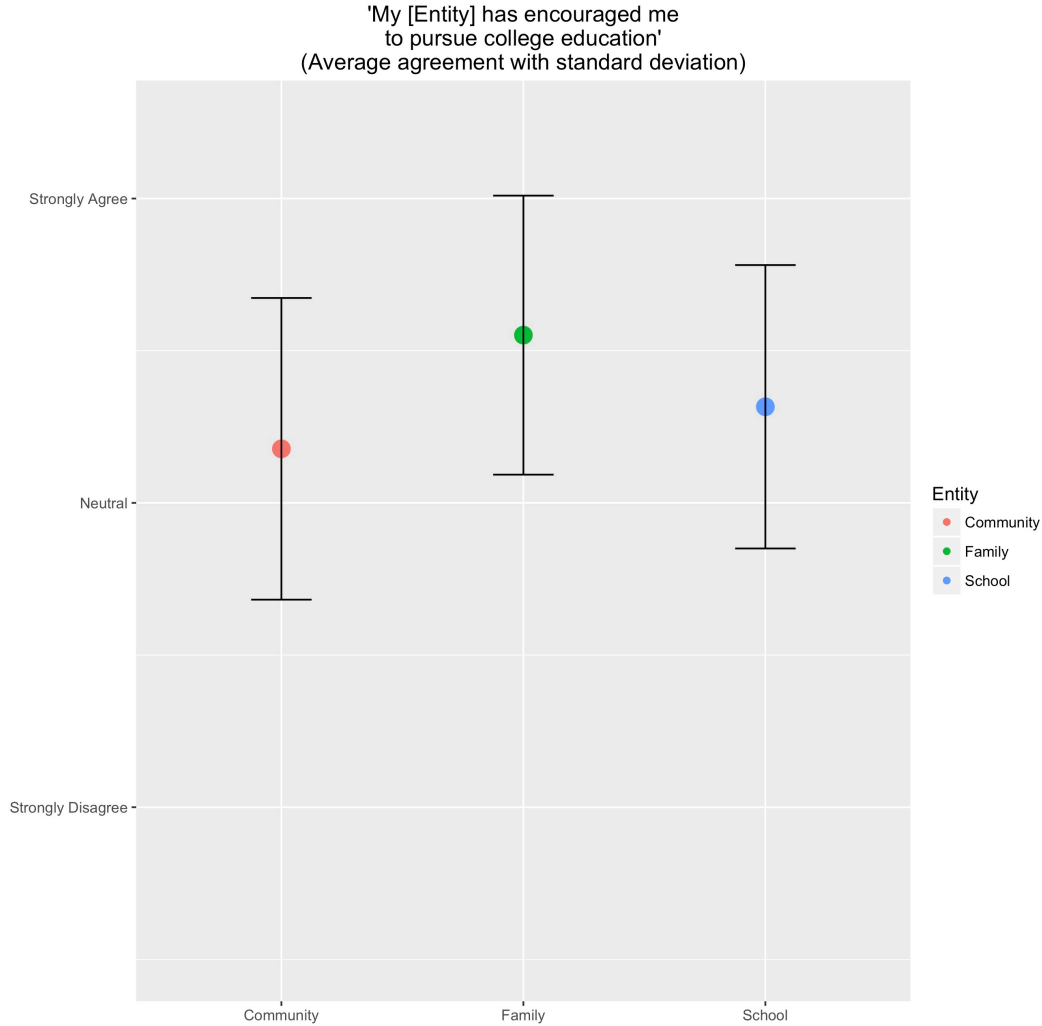
Similarly, when asked if their family expects them to continue their education after high school, 76.82% agreed or strongly agreed. When asked if their high school expected this, 64.15% agreed or strongly agreed. However, when asked if their community expected this of them, only 20.72% of students agreed. In contrast, 35.53% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed and 43.75% responded neutrally. This is demonstrated graphically in figure 5.2. Similar to 5.1, this figure shows raw data that was statistically manipulated to create a net score indicator of average responses of students.

Figure 5.2: Net Score Indicator comparing the Expectations of Community, Family and School



Finally, when asked if their family, high schools and communities encouraged them in their pursuit for higher education, 80.85% of students responded that their families had encouraged them, and 59.5% of students noted that their high schools had encouraged them. Yet, when asked if their community had encouraged them, only 48.69% agreed or strongly agreed and 18.43% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is demonstrated graphically in figure 5.3. Once again, this data was statistically manipulated to create a net score indicator of the average responses of students.

Figure 5.3: Net Score Indicator comparing the Encouragement offered by the Community, Family and School



The dramatic contrast between the students' perceptions of their community's expectations and values compared to the perceptions they hold of the expectations and values of their family and their high school is significant and reflects a lack of college-going culture in the community. The data indicates that students do not feel that their communities value higher education or expect them to obtain it. This perspective can consequently hinder student aspirations and inform a student's understanding of the value and purpose of higher education.

Furthermore, low rural education attainment rates lead to high proportions of first-

generation students originating from these communities. Similarly, high degrees of students who are economically disadvantaged increases student reliance on scholarships and financial aid to make higher education feasible, which adds the pressure of accurately completing the FAFSA. One community leader emphasized the prevalent connection between rural communities and first-generation students, explaining,

When you talk about rural communities, you are talking about communities where there is a higher percentage of members of the community who have not attained a college degree. So you have a higher concentration in those communities of first-generation college students. The national statistics on that are overwhelming, the overwhelming advantage it gives you when you come out of a degree-earning family is you know, well it's depressing, and it's really hard to refute.

She explains that students who have not grown up with pathways to understanding how to navigate the higher education system are the least likely to seek out help once they get to campus. As a result of the implicit privilege and advantage of continuing-generation students, it is important that first-generation students are supported through the college preparation and application process and onward to college graduation. Recognizing the higher prevalence of first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students in rural communities poses an additional challenge for rural education and it emphasizes the importance of providing resources to support rural students in their preparation and transition into higher education.

In addition to the structural barriers that are experienced by first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, many rural students who chose to pursue higher education experience emotional pain and separation from their family in this

transition. For many rural students, not only does this transition often require that the student move at least two hours away, but it will significantly alter their life trajectory and the class status that they will occupy in life. The reality of this often leads to the fear amongst rural students that one can be “overeducated.” A community leader of Inland spoke on this fear, stating,

There is quite a bit of fear in rural communities that you can be overeducated. You can get too much education and then you’re no good for anything and you’re overqualified for jobs. So there is a distrust of academia, being ivory tower and not applicable and so forth.

This distrust is a consequence of the lack of exposure that rural students and communities have to engage with higher education. The lack of exposure frames higher education as unknown and risky — which correlates with the fear that higher education will over-qualify students for jobs or that they will end up in overwhelming debt, working in a position that does not require a college-education.

Elaborating on the distrust of academia, the guidance counselor in Highland speaks of this emotional barrier many students experience, explaining,

In our community, there are not high standards, and you have this barrier that says, ‘What you think you’re too good to be a welder like me?’ from a parent perspective. It might not be said that way, but is it felt. Those comments aren’t propelling the students onward. I can quote words that have been said to kids, like, ‘What are you doing, trying to get smarter?’ and ‘Who do you think you are?’ Those comments will suppress a student so dang fast. The last thing you want to do is disappoint your parents. They don’t want to insult them, but by

wanting to do better and attend college, it implies that their parents are not good enough. So that is a huge emotional barrier. It's tough".

Echoing this, the Oldbridge guidance counselor, said,

Some people in the community see college as elitist, there is a whole anti-intellectual component in the culture that I think is incredibly dangerous. In some rural communities, the culture is that college is for somebody else, or that's what rich kids do. Some families have taken their students transitions to college as a backhanded condemnation of their lifestyle, so it gets to people's emotion and there is often pervasive judgment on both sides. There is so much we could do, there are lot of barriers to break down that are emotional barriers that people don't even necessarily acknowledge.

As these quotes demonstrate, there is emotional pain in the implication that because a student wants to pursue higher education, it may indicate that the lifestyle of the parent is not good enough. It can be extremely difficult for students to find the courage and motivation to pursue higher education when it appears that their communities or families do not support their aspirations. Moreover, even when families do support their aspirations, it can still be extremely difficult to navigate these emotional barriers. Rural students are more likely to experience these emotional barriers, due to the increased prevalence of first-generation and low-income students, but also because of how the distance and isolation of rural communities intensifies the student's physical transition to higher education. One guidance counselor emphasized the importance of encouraging students to rise above the standards and expectations of the community. She shared,

Don't expect this community to understand why you need Spanish 2, you need to

find it in your own heart to have the motivation to know it's for your own good and you should take it. The community will not be here when you want to go somewhere and can't. You'll just end up at the community college

The urgency in this quote demonstrates how influential community expectations, values and culture can be in affecting student aspirations. Students must find the motivation within themselves to battle these disadvantages, to navigate the emotional pain, and to pursue goals further than those that the community has assumed for them.

Collectively, the lower rates of educational attainment, higher rates of poverty and effects of the depressed rural economy lead to an absence of a college-going culture or higher-education ethic that may be strategically crafted in other communities. College-going culture is created when students are actively encouraged and provided resources to pursue higher education. When attending college is not a normal endeavor in a community, it can emphasize the notion of higher education as risky and unknown. Furthermore, it perpetuates the perception of higher education as the "ivory tower" world of elites. It further alienates the rural student from higher education because students are not receiving the critical information and exposure to accurately understand and prepare for the world of higher education.

In this chapter, I have presented a range of challenges that I found to be amplified or structured by rurality. I have demonstrated the detrimental effects of the distance and isolation that structures rural communities, I have broken down the numerous ways that rural communities lack resources or are operating with strained resources, and I have discussed the challenging characteristics of the rural community. Ultimately, these challenges hinder student exposure and limit student experiences, which ultimately

shapes student perceptions of higher education and the pathways they take to attain it.

Rural Migration Theories Reimagined

In concluding this chapter, I connect the challenges of the rural community I have presented with literature I synthesized in Chapter 2. Primarily, I engage with the theories of Hektner (1995) and Howley (2006). However, this discussion is relevant to all scholars discussed in the literature review who engage with rural migration theories or the learning-leaving link (Corbett 2005)³. This research did not appear to support the rural migration theories that are discussed in the literature review. When drawing on the student surveys and administrator interviews, the conclusions of this research were inconsistent with the theories of Hektner (1995) and Howley (2006). Student surveys revealed an ambivalence amongst students regarding the location of their potential college or university. Furthermore, while surveys demonstrated a heightened attachment to place amongst rural students, they demonstrated no evidence that rurality hinders the aspirations of rural students or the valuations they hold of higher education. Similarly, administrative interviews demonstrated a resistance to the notion that rural students must migrate to be successful.

In presenting this inconsistency, I first briefly summarize the theories of Hektner (1995) and Howley (2006). These theories were discussed in-depth in Chapter 2. I engage with these theories specifically because I originally theorized that this research may confirm and build on the research of these scholars⁴. Howley and Hektner both present rural migration theories, which recognize the phenomenon that rural students experience

³ Scholars discussed in the literature review who engage in rural migration theories include: Burnell, 2003; Corbett, 2005; Donaldson, 1988; Hektner, 1995; Howley, 2006; Kirkpatrick, Elder Jr., & Stern, 2005

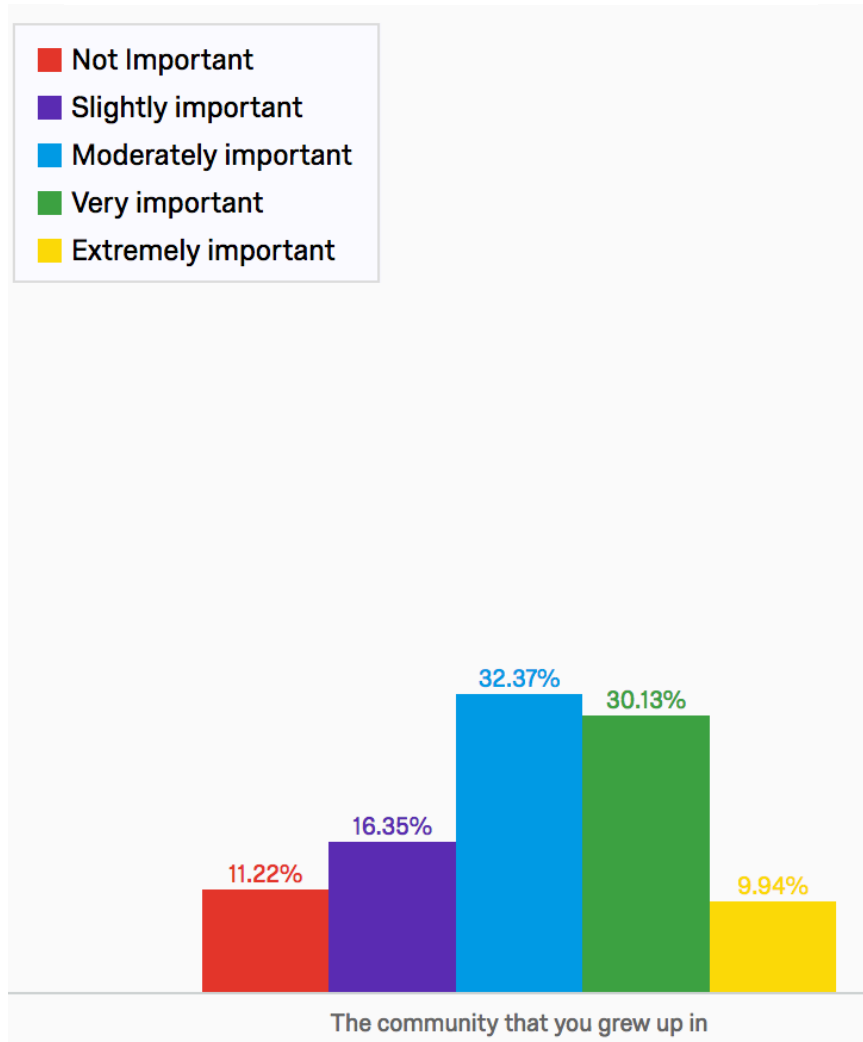
⁴ Furthermore, the survey instrument used in this research was modeled off of Hektner's instrument, so it is notable that the results appeared inconsistent.

dual commitments to their local communities and to their educational aspirations. They theorize that this dual commitment occurs because of rural students heightened attachment to place. Howley suggests this is because the sense of place in rural communities provides a sense of belonging for rural students. Hektner hypothesizes that rural students experience a tension between their competing desires to pursue higher education and to remain near their local communities. Similarly, Howley claims that rural student educational aspirations are shaped by “legitimate and conscious commitments to rural life”, and that their aspirations are formed within the context of the opportunities available in their rural community. Thus, she theorizes that due to declining rural labor markets, their attachment to place requires them to negotiate and limit their aspirations.

I found these theories to be inconsistent with the conclusions of this research. In student surveys, student aspirations and valuation of higher education did not appear to be compromised. Moreover, while students indicated an attachment to their community, the surveys did not present evidence that the rural community created a tension as Howley and Hektner suggest. Although, I recognize a limitation in that this research was not designed to be comparative, further research could expand research on these theories and further explore this inconsistency.

When asked how important to them the community that they grew up in is, students responded positively. Approximately 40% of students responded that it was either very or extremely important to them, and 32.37% said moderately important. Only 11.22% of students responded that it was not important. This is presented graphically below in figure 5.4. This indicates support for Hektner (1995) and Howley’s (2006) theory that rural students develop a heightened attachment to place.

Figure 5.4: Student Response to, “How important to you is the community you grew up in?”



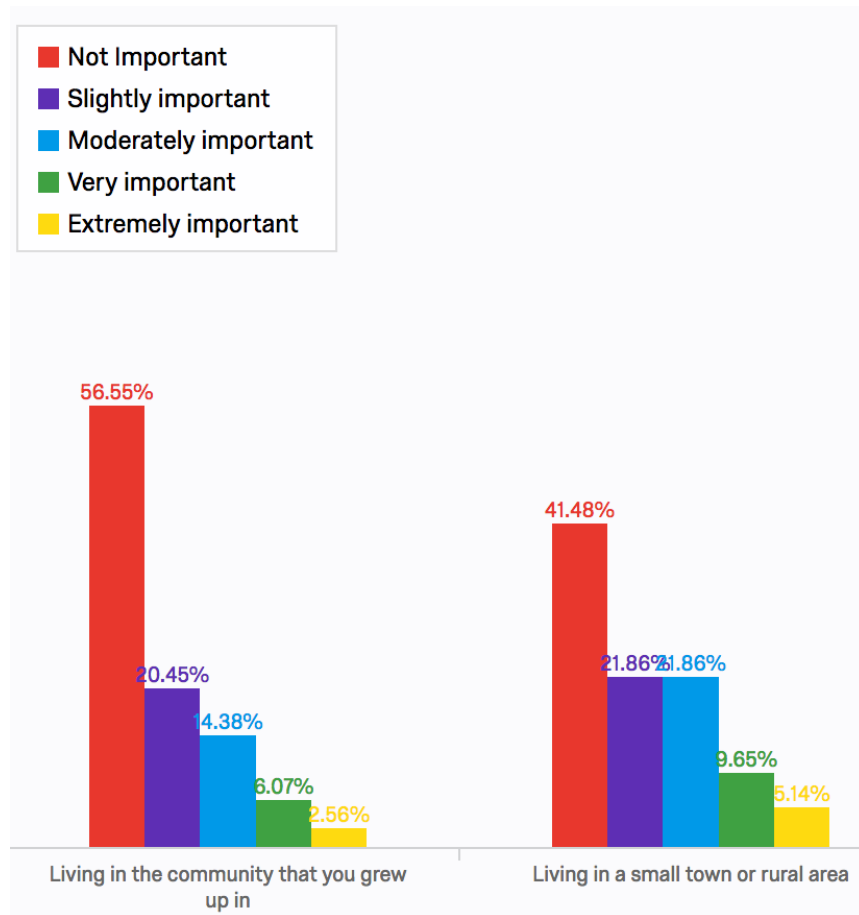
However, there was no evidence to support that rurality hinders student aspirations or their valuation of higher education. Student aspirations as reported on the survey are discussed in depth in the following chapter, but students reported plans for after high school were much higher than anticipated. When asked how important it is to them to continue their education after graduating high school, students responded overwhelmingly positive. More than 77% of students responded that it was either extremely or very important to them to continue their education, while only 2.56% responded that it was not important. This is presented in Chapter 6 in figure 6.2.

Similarly, students responded positively when asked if they believed a college education was valuable and relevant to their life goals. When asked if they believed a college education was valuable, 83% of students responded that they agreed or strongly agreed. Only 3% responded that they did not believe a college education was valuable. When asked if they believed a college education would help them achieve their life goals, again, 77.2% responded that they agreed or strongly agreed, with only 7% disagreeing. Finally, when asked if they believed a college education was not relevant to their life goals, 63% strongly disagreed or disagreed with 17% responding that they agreed or strongly agreed. These three graphs are presented collectively in Chapter 6 figure 6.3. Thus collectively, I conclude that these survey results do not offer support for the theory that rurality hinders the valuation students hold of higher education. I suggest that rurality does not alter student valuation or aspirations, but rather, the ability they have to accurately pursue those aspirations as a result of a lack of exposure to higher education and resulting skewed expectations of higher education and the steps it takes to attain it.

Finally, I did not find evidence in this research to support the theory that the rural community creates a tension prompting rural outward migration. Notably, when asked how important it is to them to live in the community that they grew up in, students responded negatively. A vast 77% of students responded that it was either not important or slightly important to them that they live in the community they grew up in. Meanwhile, only 8.63% of students indicated that it was very or extremely important to them. Similarly, when asked how important it was to them to live in a small town or rural area, student responses were similar, with 63.3% indicating that it was not important with 14.7% selecting that it was very or extremely important to them. This data is presented

collectively in Figure 5.7 below. Thus, while students demonstrated a valuation of their rural community, there was not an apparent desire to remain in that community after high school graduation.

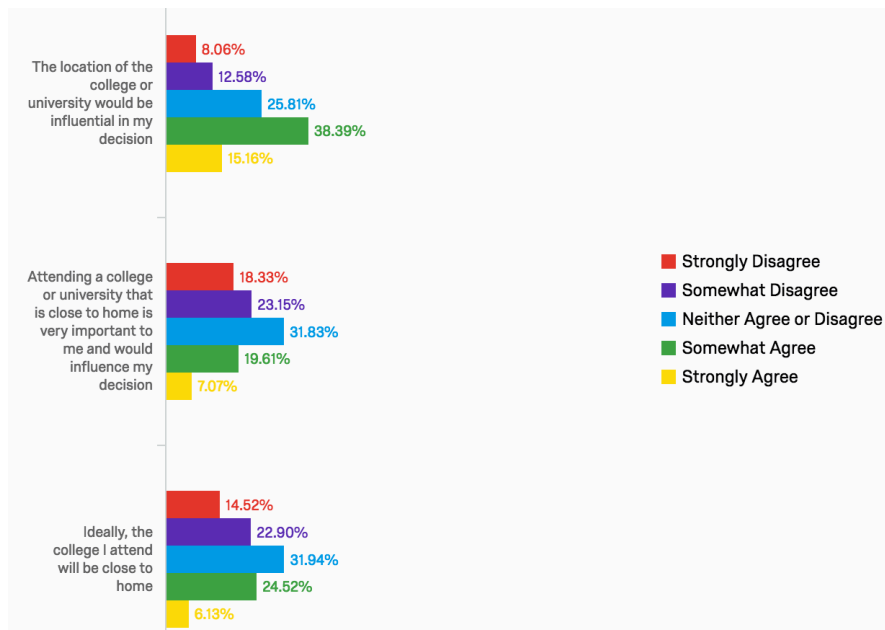
Figure 5.7: Student Responses to, “How important is it to you to live in the community that you grew up in?” and “How important is it to you to live in a small town or rural community?”



Furthermore, when students were asked questions about the influence of the location of their potential college or university, students responded with ambivalence. For example, when students were asked how far or close to home the ideal college would be, 90% of students selected an option greater than a couple of hours; with 10% selecting out-of-state, 10% selecting a day’s drive away, and 70% selecting a couple of hours. When students were asked if ideally, they would like to attend a college close to home,

37.42 responded strongly disagree or disagree, and 31.94% reported neither agree or disagree, with the remaining 30% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Furthering this ambivalence, when students were asked if attending a college or university close to home would influence their decision or would be important to them, nearly 42% responded that they strongly disagree or disagree and 31.83% selected neither agree or disagree. This data is presented graphically in Figure 5.8 below. This ambivalence towards the location of their potential college or university is inconsistent with the theory presented by Howley and Hektner that rural students would form their educational aspirations within the context of their heightened attachment to their rural communities.

Figure 5.8: Student levels of agreement to statements regarding the location of their potential college or university



Beyond the inconsistencies demonstrated in the student surveys is the notable theme in the administrator interviews to resist the notion that rural students must migrate in order to achieve success. Hektner hypothesizes that rural adolescents will experience a

conflict between their desire to “move up” socioeconomically and their wishes not to have to “move out” of their local communities. In this, he presumes that in order to “move up” rural students will need to move away (p. 5). In contrast to this, guidance counselors in all three of the partner schools responded strongly against this theory.

One guidance counselor of Oldbridge said,

I think there is a perception that if you go away to college, that you won't come back to your town, and I just don't think that is true, or has to be true for everybody. Obviously for some, but making sure that our students have access to higher education and achievement in higher education, that is work-force and economic development. These things can sustain our communities, not tear them apart.

In this perspective, higher education can be a tool to prepare students with the education to come back and prepare their rural communities for life amidst globalization and the modern information age. She shared an example of a woman she met at a conference, who is from Maine and involved in the lobster industry. She shared the mindset of how higher education can help students, instead of trying to take them out of lobstering, the industry of their rural communities, higher education can help train them as environmental scientists to create sustainable lobstering. Echoing this, another guidance counselor said,

I mean the degree that we are actually educating students for the skills that they need, and you know, the old economy is not coming back. So the degree to which we are providing students in these rural areas with the education they need to go back to their communities to create an economic infrastructure that will survive in the 21st century,

does in many ways go back to education. I think these things are so deeply interconnected.

This perspective aligns with the theory I have suggested that the strengths of the rural community should be leveraged to inspire and effectively reach rural students. This positive twist on rural migration theories, while certainly optimistic, leans into the high value that rural students have for their communities. It sees higher education as an avenue through which rural communities and rural lifeways can survive and evolve along with the forces of globalization and modern technology. I suggest that genuinely drawing on strengths of the rural community and partnering with rural communities in legitimate ways will be essential to breaking down the perception in rural communities that higher education is elitist and “ivory tower”. Fighting this perception and building a new perception that higher education can be a powerful and empowering tool will require that institutions of higher education first recognize, acknowledge and respect rural communities for who they are.

VI. The Chasm: Misaligned Systems and Rurality

“We sort of just launch them out into the chasm, and we hope that higher ed catches them” – Oldbridge Guidance Counselor

The broken relationship between the K-12 and higher education systems has vast and complicated implications that directly affect student achievement and educational attainment. In this chapter, I demonstrate how these systems are misaligned and emphasize why this disjuncture is so critical. Drawing on the literature discussed in Chapter 2, I demonstrate the broken relationship between these systems. I argue that the challenges created by rurality amplify the effect of this broken relationship between systems. I therefore suggest that rural education can be used as a unique lens through which scholars can understand and witness this disjointed relationship between our educational systems.

I theorize that this disjointed relationship between systems has both administrative effects on teachers, school administrators and university policies, as well as a direct effect on students. I suggest that the administrative effects cycle back to then further affect students. In demonstrating this, I draw on the literature presented in Chapter 2 as well as the interviews to demonstrate this disjuncture and to present how this disjointed relationship is manifested. Once I establish this disjointed relationship between systems, I transition to highlighting the numerous administrative effects, emphasizing the lack of dialogue between agents of both systems, the lack of vertical alignment in curriculum and expectations and the teacher knowledge gap on college-knowledge. I argue that as a result of how the disjointed relationship interacts with the challenges of rurality, rural students lack college awareness and cultural knowledge about the norms and processes of

higher education. I theorize that this lack of exposure to college knowledge creates a mismatch between the aspirations and expectations of rural students, which consequently significantly hinders the rural students' ability to realistically pursue those aspirations and bring them into reality. I conclude by theorizing that this phenomenon of student mismatching is partially responsible for low rural student educational attainment rates and difficult transitions for those rural students who do pursue higher education.

The Disjointed Relationship between K-12 and Higher Education

Scholars are increasingly arguing that there is a broken link between our high schools and institutions of higher education (Bueschel 2003; Kirst 2004; Venezia et al. 2003). The “near-complete absence of communication” (Bueschel 2003, 7) between systems, the prevalence of remedial classes and low retention rates of colleges and universities all serve as proxies that suggests a disjointed relationship between the exit and entrance standards of high schools and institutions of higher education. Scholars theorize that the politically volatile nature of K-12 education has created a significant misalignment in curriculum standards and expectations between systems. Venezia et al. (2003) identify unnecessary barriers between systems which serve to fracture understanding of higher education and resultantly undermine student educational aspirations and attainment. Furthermore, they conclude that this disjuncture disproportionately affects low-income and first-generation students, which is problematic given the higher incidences of poverty and higher proportion of first-generation students in rural communities (6).

Moreover, there is no institutional body that is responsible or held accountable for ensuring smooth student transitions from high school to higher education. The guidance counselor in Oldbridge High School voiced concern over student transitions, saying,

“We talk about college readiness, but I feel like there is a big gap. We sort of just launch them out into the chasm, and we hope that higher ed catches them.” Students are launched into the chasm. She paints this chasm as a result of the lack of vertical alignment in curriculum between systems, and suggests that in an ideal world, there would be increased dialogue to structure the systems in vertical alignment. However, in the current system, there is no incentive or accountability mechanism to encourage educational systems to collaborate or provide support to one another. As a result, student attainment rates, attrition rates and transitions have suffered and the divide between our educational systems has increased. The effects of this disjuncture are problematic because they disproportionately affect disadvantaged students and undermine student exposure and access to higher education.

I apply the theories of these scholars specifically within the context of rural education and draw on my research on rural spaces as a lens to understand the implications of the disjointed systems. Although this disjointed relationship significantly affects all students and all schools, regardless of location, I argue that the challenges of rurality intensify this disjuncture. Rural communities are not able to buffer the adverse effects of this disjointed systematic relationship. Wealthier districts, primarily suburban districts, are able to buffer these effects by supplementing the educational experiences of students with community resources. These community resources come in the form of an expanded local tax base, a broader range of opportunities in the community for professional exposure and mentorship, and a strategically crafted college-going culture which encourages and inspires students. As discussed in Chapter 5, rural communities are challenged by both a smaller and a more economically disadvantaged tax-based, and

depressed rural economies offer little opportunities for students to engage in professional mentorship or leadership opportunities.

Meanwhile, while urban school systems experience in many ways a parallel of those challenges experienced in rural systems, I suggest that urban schools are to a degree buffered from this disjointed relationship as a result of the extensive collegiate outreach programming that institutions of higher education have historically engaged in within urban communities. When you examine the outreach programming hosted by the University of Michigan, every single program is geographically focused in Detroit, Ypsilanti, Southfield or a nearby suburb of those communities⁵. Thus, the outreach programming serves as a bridge to these communities and allows students to come into contact with the world of higher education. Rural communities have not historically been the beneficiaries of such outreach programming because the distance between rural communities and institutions of higher education complicates the feasibility of such programming and increases associated expenses. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 5, the smaller class sizes of rural schools may serve to discourage institutions of higher education from investing in these communities due to a smaller return in enrollment numbers than they would otherwise receive from a more populated district. Thus, while this outreach programming may be extremely beneficial to the urban and suburban communities that it targets, rural communities have historically not been included in these efforts.

In contrast to urban and suburban systems, I suggest that rural communities do not have the community resources nor are they the beneficiaries of such outreach

⁵ When you examine the outreach programs hosted by the Center for Educational Outreach of the University, all programs are targeted at these communities. Details on all programs are available at: <https://ceo.umich.edu/k-12/>

programming, which consequently renders rural students subject to the full effects of this disjointed relationship. There is no buffer for these rural communities. Rather, the geographic challenges and economic challenges that structure these communities serve to amplify this disjuncture in a manner that skews student perceptions of higher education and ultimately hinders rural student attainment rates and leads to difficult student transitions into higher education for those who pursue it.

In interviews with teachers, school administrators and community leaders, I asked if they felt that institutions of higher education were aware of the specific challenges and experiences of rural schools and rural students. The negative responses given to this question demonstrate the effects of this disjointed relationship in action. The Highland guidance counselor concluded,

Unless you have been in a position in a school like this, you wouldn't know. I would suppose there are a few, for example, in admissions at Michigan, there may be one person working there who understands. But I would say that maybe less than five percent of the people in those offices actually have a clue. There are a lot of rural circumstances that are so far removed when you think about high-level institutions of higher education.

Regardless of what percentage of admission officers actually “have a clue,” what is striking about this response is that she perceives that less than 5% of admission officers care enough about her community to genuinely learn and understand the challenges and experiences of her rural students. In her perspective, higher education is not aware of the day-to-day lived experiences of her students, and the agents of higher education do not care to take the extra steps to learn about the realities of rural education.

Similarly, the Oldbridge guidance counselor referred to the relationship between K-12 and higher education as a “dysfunctional relationship,” noting, “I feel like there is a disconnect between what we are experiencing and what people in higher education admission officers are aware of.” She demonstrated this by sharing an encounter she had at an MACAC conference with the admissions director of one of Michigan’s leading public universities. In a session at the conference that focused on helicopter parents, she shared that she is grateful for opportunities to interact with parents because parental involvement is a significant challenge for many rural communities. She reflected that her peers in the session all seemed shocked and resisted her comment. After the session, she had a conversation with the admissions director about how the experience gap between rural and non-rural students complicates student’s admission essays and how the experiences of the rural community make it difficult for students to write meaningful answers that can compete with the experience of students from communities with ampler resources available. As she reflected on this, she explained that it was a telling experience because it raised awareness of that director of rural challenges and the director responded by thanking her for reminding him of those intricate challenges that are often not acknowledged.

Consistent with this experience, a community leader of Oldbridge county responded that he believed institutions of higher education are probably more aware of rural experiences and challenges than they used to be. However, he conceded, “it is easy to forget rural people because of geography. We are far away. It’s not the mainstream.”

On the whole, these quotes demonstrate the reality that rural communities have not historically appeared to be of the same priority as their non-rural counterparts to

institutions of higher education. Furthermore, they highlight the commonly-held belief amongst rural teachers and community leaders that higher education is not aware or concerned with the experiences or challenges faced by rural schools and rural students.

This belief was further demonstrated when I asked the interview subjects how they would envision the relationship to be between K-12 and higher education in an ideal world. The responses given were relatively constrained and lacked imagination and creativity. For many of the participants, it was a laughable and absurd notion that institutions of higher education would intentionally support high school teachers. When I asked if higher education could be more supportive of rural schools, one teacher responded with a blank-eyed stare, “Wow, nobody has ever asked me that before. I just always have thought of higher education as this elite, ivory thing that is above us that doesn’t really care about supporting us.” Each time that I asked this question, the participants seemed awestruck at the thought that a stronger relationship may exist between the systems. The answers that they offered remained within the box that they had experienced this relationship to exist within, and I argue this tendency reflects how deep the disjuncture between these systems exists. The disjuncture is so great that rural educators and administrators cannot easily imagine a world in which higher education would seek to genuinely support their schools or their students.

Now that I have established the existence of and the significance of this disjointed relationship between our educational systems, I highlight the effects of the disjuncture and demonstrate how it is manifested within rural school systems. I first discuss the effects that it is as on teachers and administrators and school-wide policies, and then transition to demonstrating how it effects student perspectives, pathways and attainment.

Administrative Effects

The consequences of this disjointed relationship between systems can be traced back to one specific feature of the disjuncture: the absolute absence of dialogue between the systems. This lack of dialogue amongst administrators and faculty has a detrimental effect on students. When the agents of these systems are not communicating, there is a lack of understanding on both sides of the chasm of what the other is experiencing and expecting.

When high school teachers do not have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with agents of higher education, it creates a gap in their college-awareness knowledge and significantly hinders their ability to mentor students throughout the admissions and transition processes. This is problematic, as previous literature has documented the strong influence that teachers have on their students' educational aspirations and pathways. If teachers are not prepared and equipped to support their students in this process, then higher education has lost an ally who has the potential to make a significant and positive impact.

Similarly, when institutions of higher education and college faculty are not engaged in such dialogue with K-12 agents, it results in uniform policies that are not responsive to the experiences and challenges of rural schools and students. Furthermore, in the classroom, it leads to a misalignment in curriculum requirements and skewed expectations of what students should know when they begin their freshman year of college. This lack of vertical alignment is a further institutional barrier that results in high rates of students enrolling in remedial classes and low retention rates amongst disadvantaged students. Thus, the disjuncture between the systems has two primary administrative effects due to the absence of dialogue: the teacher knowledge gap and a

lack of vertical alignment in faculty expectations and in introductory curriculum.

The Teacher Knowledge Gap

The absence of dialogue and engagement between the K-12 and higher education system significantly affects administrator and teacher understandings of college readiness, college preparatory standards and their knowledge of college processes such as admission and financial aid. In my observations and conversations with teachers and school administrators, I observed that teachers are either misinformed or confused about the process of college admissions, including what students need to know to genuinely be prepared. This is not because these teachers do not care, but rather, similar to the challenging time constraints faced by rural counselors, as discussed in Chapter 5, teachers do not have time to engage in these topics in the classroom because they are pressed for time to meet curriculum deadlines and state standards.

In interviews with each of the guidance counselors in the partner schools, I asked them, “In your opinion, how informed or knowledgeable are teachers regarding college expectations or the admissions process?” The responses of the counselors significantly highlight this gap in teacher knowledge of higher education. The guidance counselor of Highland High School explained,

No, our teachers are, I would say 90% of them are so succumbed with the pressure of testing, they don't have time to even worry about that stuff. Some of them will ask me about a few things, but most of them don't have a clue what the common app is. It's not that they don't care, it's just that they are so busy. I do my best to communicate with them and reach out to keep them in the loop as much as possible, but most of them opt-out because they are so busy and just

can't take the time out.

This counselor draws attention to the extreme pressure and stress that teachers are under to meet state accountability standards. This has resultantly compromised their ability to invest in learning about higher education norms and processes. Echoing this, in an interview with a teacher from Inland High School, when I asked him if he tries to incorporate conversations about postsecondary plans into his classroom practices and daily conversations with students, he shared that he honestly does not typically engage with topics of higher education in the classroom. Throughout our conversation, he seemed remorseful that he had not engaged in further conversations about college prep with his students, and he explained,

I think it is a really tough thing to do, because I usually just feel so pinched for time to get through the content that I am accountable for. But it's good for me to re-think how I talk to my students, and you're right, maybe I should bring it up more. It's good to be challenged.

In the testimony of this teacher, the words of the Highland guidance counselor are brought to life. His experience, and pledge to challenge himself to integrate conversations on higher education into his daily classroom practices, demonstrate that this gap in teacher knowledge is not because teachers do not care. Rather, they, like the guidance counselors, are strained for time and are striving to meet the accountability and standards set by the state.

Further demonstrating this gap of teacher knowledge of higher education is the response of the Oldbridge guidance counselor when she was asked how knowledgeable or aware she believes the teachers are on college knowledge and admission processes.

Her frustrated response highlighted that despite all of their efforts to cultivate a college-going culture, as a result of the MCAN Reach Higher Grant, she still has teachers who regularly resist the emphasis on college-preparation. She notes,

Just this week, I have had probably three or four teachers say, ‘Well not all of our kids are going to go to college’. Well, yes, but unfortunately that is used to dismiss and minimize our responsibility. When it’s like, we don’t get to make those choices for kids, we need to prepare them for whatever it is they want to do when they leave here, too often that statement is used to deflect responsibility for having any kind of urgency about preparing or exposing kids. So that is a big barrier in our community, and unfortunately, I still hear that from teachers. So there is an information gap for sure.

There is a complex tension between the reality that “not every kid is going to college” and the responsibility of K-12 educators to prepare all students for higher education, so that it is an accessible option if they so desire. This lack of responsibility and accountability for student preparation and student transitions into higher education complicates the teacher knowledge gap because it may discourage teachers from proactively investing in learning college-knowledge to enhance their awareness of higher education.

The perception of higher education as elite or ivory tower was frequently mentioned with bitterness in the interviews with teachers, school administrators and community leaders. Similarly, teachers overwhelmingly shared in their interviews that they had no dialogue with institutions of higher education and that they wish there was a stronger connection or relationship there. Teachers commonly shared that they did not

feel confident in their knowledge about higher education expectations and requirements. Several teachers expressed that they try to structure their high school courses to resemble the structure of a college course, but that because they are unable to keep up with the fast-paced world of higher education, they are left questioning how to best teach their students to prepare for college. One teacher in Inland High School remarked that in an ideal world, he would love the opportunity to regularly sit in on college courses and have regular conversations with professors and faculty members to develop a better understanding of what is expected of his students so that he could better model his classes to resemble the higher education model.

One teacher of Oldbridge High School reflected that the only information she receives about higher education is filtered back through previous students. She explained that as she keeps in touch with graduated students, she will ask them questions like, “What did you need to know?” and “What was your beginning comp class like?”, in an effort to learn more about higher education. She emphasized that there is no direct interaction between the systems, which complicates her job as an educator.

Similarly, several teachers of Inland High told experiences of college admission representatives visiting the school to table in the cafeteria during lunch. In each visit, the college representatives come and set up in the cafeteria to talk with students. Their mission is to connect with students. However, the teachers said that this is frustrating because the college admission representatives never appear interested in talking with teachers. Again, this is problematic given the prior research that has demonstrated how influential teachers can be in guiding students throughout the college-transition process. In neglecting opportunities to engage with teachers, institutions of higher education are

losing an ally who would otherwise have the potential to have an extremely positive influence on student perceptions and pathways.

An Oldbridge teacher shared a similar frustration, reflecting on her own experience in aiding in the facilitation of an early-middle college program that is hosted by a nearby community college in their high school. She noted that the program is dysfunctional and has not been successful. When I asked her if she had the opportunities to engage with the instructors of that program, she reflected,

They come into our building, and we've never had a conversation instructor to instructor. I didn't even think about that really until right now, why have we not sat down and had that conversation. You know, this is what I see my students do in tenth grade, this is what you can expect, how can we prep them for you, how can you alter your expectations to fit reality. That would be awesome if we could have those conversations.

Throughout the stories shared by rural teachers and guidance counselors, the absence of dialogue between educational systems is apparent. Furthermore, it demonstrates that this lack of dialogue is frustrating and problematic because it leaves rural teachers and administrators piecing together college-knowledge. This fragmented knowledge creates gaps in the college awareness and knowledge of rural teachers and administrators, which then consequently affects rural students' awareness and knowledge.

As argued above, this is concerning, because teachers have the ability to be an influential force if they are equipped with the right tools and support. This bottom-up model for increasing college-awareness and college-knowledge would empower teachers to provide more information to their students by daily integrating conversations about

higher education into classroom practices. I argue that in pursuit of enhancing the exposure of rural students to higher education, it is essential that teachers and school administrators be a critical part of the conversation.

I now turn to how the broken link between our systems has led to a lack of vertical alignment across systems and how this misalignment poses further challenges for rural education by creating uniform, non-responsive policies.

Vertical Misalignment and Institutional Barriers

The second effect of the absence of dialogue between the K-12 and higher education system is manifested in institutional barriers. These barriers are a result of the misalignment in system expectations and curriculum. Institutional expectations are formed in response to the knowledge that each system has on the other. For example, the K-12 system forms their post-secondary preparation programming in response to what they know about the system of higher education. Similarly, institutions of higher education develop outreach programming within the context of their knowledge of the barriers that challenge disadvantaged schools. However, when the dialogue between these systems is missing, expectations can easily become skewed, leading to the creation of uniform and rigid policies which fail to flexibly respond the unique challenges and experiences of rural education. This misunderstanding fails to foster a greater understanding of the specific effects of rurality.

Curriculum is one significant space where this misalignment can be observed. A community leader and professor of a private-four year-institution expressed, “K-12 curriculum is not being designed or aligned with the collegiate curriculum - that’s where the most profound disconnect is. Because there are political agendas in both places”. The

political agendas that she refers to are political ideologies about who should and should not obtain higher education. She referenced the historical divide between the education for the factory worker in contrast to that of the executive. In a democratic society, this concept should be outlandish. As I have argued, it is essential that every student is given the opportunity to receive a college education. But this community leader voiced frustration that in reality, broken systems serve as a sorting mechanism to identify who should and should not be granted access to higher education. She theorized,

The deeper problem is the difficulty of finding a way to align the curriculum so that, not that every kid who goes to K-12 needs to go to college, that's a different issue, but every K-12 curriculum should have as an outcome the possibility of being ready for college. The ability to go. I think we do a really bad job, a really bad job, in aligning these two things - and because it gets political, it gets really difficult to solve these issues.

In this reflection, she identifies a tension between who should and should not have the opportunity to go to college. This tension relates to the tendency to use this argument, that not every student will go to college, to dismiss or minimize the responsibility of educators to prepare students for higher education and to ensure that they have smooth and successful transitions. It is used to minimize responsibility. However, as it becomes increasingly important that all students, regardless of zip-code or socioeconomic status, have access to higher education, this misalignment in curriculum expectations and models grows more severe. It is important that the purpose of the curriculum in the K-12 system align with the purpose of higher education to provide a better “on-ramp” for students to enter into and succeed in higher education.

Beyond the tension of who should and shouldn't be prepared for higher education, she highlights how dialogue between educational systems could significantly improve the curriculum and structure of introductory courses of higher education to strengthen student transitions. For example, she shared that students are not being rewarded in high school for the academic work that they will be rewarded for in college. In high school, students are given good grades for performing a form of obedience, for following the instructions, or for memorization. It is problematic that students are not evaluated for skills that are imperative to success in higher education, such as critical thinking. Emphasizing skills such as memorization will not prepare a student for higher education. Furthering this, she drew on her experiences as a first-year composition instructor to argue that it is essential the college professors critically examine their assumptions about the knowledge that their students come in knowing and to model their introductory courses with this thought-process in mind. She emphasized,

I mean, do you teach to the student that you think you have, or you wish you had, or do you teach to the student that you actually have? One of them gets you good results, and one of them makes everybody miserable.

This emphasis on recognizing the backgrounds of your students was critical to her. She argued that it is vital to actually get people talking and to facilitate dialogue between high school teachers and college professors. In this dialogue, conversations could arise that could enlighten the educators about how some methods used in one system may not work well in the other. For example, she explained, my method of providing feedback may not be feasible for a high-school teacher who simply has far more students in their classroom than I do. She questioned, "How do we begin to understand what we are each doing and

how can we re-align what we are doing? I think it begins by creating spaces where those faculty members talk, because we really do not". She concluded that this lack of dialogue is problematic, noting most college professors have not contact with high schools - and she critiqued that although outreach programs may bring students in contact with college faculty, they do not engage with high school faculty. Moreover, she further critiqued that when this interaction does occur, it tends to be "one-directional", in that the college-professors will tell the high school faculty what is best and what students need. This approach is problematic and flawed, because it resists dialogue and neglects the daily on-the-ground experience of high school educators. She concluded,

I have learned as much from the high-school teachers, and I understand my students so much more now. I mean, I don't blame anymore, why didn't you learn this?

This reflection that she shared with us is insightful because it proposes that agents of higher education could learn from high school teachers and administrators. Her conclusion that she understands her students better now as a result of her conversations with high school teachers is significant because it allows her to more effectively support her students learning and their transition into higher education. This is the dialogue that scholars should be striving for if they wish to really support student achievement. As discussed in Chapter 2, research is increasingly demonstrating the potential of P-16 partnerships and forming these equal partnerships across systems would have significant, positive effects on student achievement and on eventual educational attainment.

In addition to the challenges that the absence of dialogue poses to vertical alignment of expectations, instructional models and curriculum, the lack of dialogue

leads to the creation of rigid and uniform policies within higher education that are not realistic or responsive to the realities of rural schools. This can best be demonstrated in the previously discussed challenge for rural schools to engage in dual-enrollment. As I discussed in Chapter 5, the isolated nature of rural communities and the distance that the communities are structured within complicate rural schools' ability to provide dual-enrollment courses and opportunities. As the nearest community college may be forty minutes away and higher rates of economic disadvantage complicate student access to transportation, it is not realistic for rural schools to engage in this practice. As a result, rural schools have opted to host college-courses on their high school campus. Frequently, this occurs as an online college course or it may involve an instructor of a nearby community college coming to teach the course on the physical high school campus.

Unfortunately, selective institutions, such as the University of Michigan, have developed policies that will not accept dual-enrolled credits that take place on high school campuses. As a result, rural schools have limited options to provide opportunities for their students to engage in dual-enrollment - a critical experience to enhance the competitiveness of the student's application should he or she be interested in a selective four-year university. Rural schools must then take extreme measures in order to accommodate these policies. For example, one rural school that is near one of the partner schools has elected to send students to a four-year college that is over sixty miles away, in order to provide dual-enrollment opportunities for their students. The transportation to these college courses is over an hour each way by bus, which significantly affects student's daily course schedules. As a result, this school is paying for the bus to be equipped with Wi-Fi, so that students can take an online class while they are traveling to

and from the dual-enrolled courses on this distant college campus.

As is demonstrated by this example, the uniform dual-enrollment policies of institutions of higher education disparately impact rural areas as a result of their geography. This disparate impact is even more profound when you consider that as students from rural areas are more likely to be from a lower socioeconomic status, they, perhaps significantly more than non-rural students, would benefit from these dual-enrolled credits as they are free to the student. If these students are already struggling to finance higher education, it is a huge incentive for these students to have credits paid for with the hope of graduating early or saving money long-term. As I argued in Chapter 5, this policy, which makes it nearly impossible for rural students to legitimately receive credit for dual-enrolled courses, serves to discourage students from taking these courses and it discourages guidance counselors from investing in creating these opportunities. Moreover, the decision from selective institutions not to accept these credits may consequently incentivize students to enroll at less prestigious institutions who will accept their credits. Unfortunately, these less-prestigious institutions frequently demonstrate low retention rates and low graduation rates - demonstrating that student transitions and student success at such institutions may be compromised in comparison.

This thought experiment, in which I have extrapolated the challenges that rurality poses to participating in dual-enrollment, demonstrates how uniform policies may disparately impact rural communities. I argue that to support student access and educational attainment, institutions of higher education should re-imagine how these policies can be more responsive to the realities and experiences of rural students. How could dual-enrollment transfer policies be re-structured to ensure the rigor and efficacy of

these courses while simultaneously allowing flexibility for rural schools? Perhaps scholars could craft a policy to be tailored for rural schools who do not have a community college within a specified range of miles, that would make dual-enrollment feasible for students to travel to during the school day without harming their traditional coursework. Policies could be redeveloped to be cognizant of these intricate complexities to further support students and increase the range of opportunities available to rural students.

Now that I have established the administrative effects of the disjointed relationship between the K-12 and higher education systems, I transition to examining the effects of this disjuncture on students. I have argued that the absence of dialogue between the systems has created a teacher knowledge gap and vertical misalignment that disparately impacts rural schools as a result of the challenges structured by rurality. I now further this argument by theorizing that the administrative effects cycle back to further affect students. In the following section, I demonstrate how these administrative affects structure student opportunities and resultantly affect student's perceptions of higher education and their eventual pathways to attainment.

Student Effects: The Mismatch Phenomenon

As a consequence, for this broken relationship between our K-12 and higher education systems, students lack the college awareness and knowledge necessary to navigate the transition into higher education. As discussed above, unlike their non-rural peers, rural students have the added challenge of the isolated nature of their communities. Rurality serves to amplify this disjuncture, and as a result, rural students lack the exposure to college norms and knowledge that would prepare them to transition into the world of higher education. This lack of exposure resultantly skews the student's expectations and their ability to realistically pursue their educational aspirations because

it reinforces the perception of higher education as risky and unknown. The misalignment of expectations serves to further hinder rural educational attainment rates and for those student who do pursue higher education, it leads to a difficult transition for a vast majority of rural students.

In this section, I build this argument and begin by contrasting rural student attainment data of previous years and narratives of the interviews with the data of the student surveys. I demonstrate that there is a mismatch between student aspirations and expectations and reality. I draw on interview and survey data to demonstrate the lack of college knowledge amongst rural students. I argue that this lack of knowledge is manifested in a two-fold mismatch: the knowledge of processes to apply to and transition to college, as well as the reality of what college is actually like on campus. Ultimately, I argue that this lack of exposure is problematic because it complicates rural student expectations and hinders their access and pathways to higher education.

Puzzling Student Aspirations

When students were asked of their plans following graduation, an overwhelming majority of students indicated that they intended attend college. A notable 53% of students reported that they planned to attend a four-year college or university, with an additional 20% reporting that they intended to attend a community college. Figure 6.1 presents a visualization of the student plans for after graduation.

Similarly, when asked how important it was to them to continue their education after high school, 77.9% reported that it was very or extremely important. Figure 6.2 depicts a visualization of student responses of how important pursuing further education was to them. Moreover, students overwhelmingly reported that they believed higher

education to be valuable and as a tool to help them achieve their life-goals. When asked if they believed a college education was valuable, 83.22% either agreed or strongly agreed with only 3.02% selected disagree or strongly disagree. When asked if they believed that a college education would help them achieve their life goals, 77.22% of students selected that they agreed or strongly agreed, with only 6.93% of students disagreeing. Finally, when asked if they believed that a college education was not relevant to their life-goals, only 17.1% of students agreed. Figure 6.3 demonstrates these responses.

Figure 6.1: Student Plans for after High School Graduation

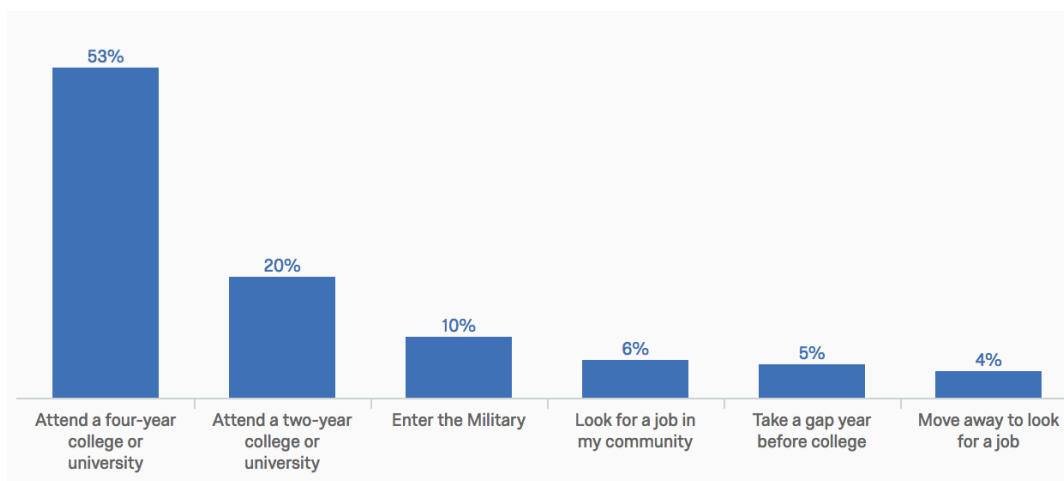


Figure 6.2: Student Responses to, “How important is it to you to continue your education after high school?”

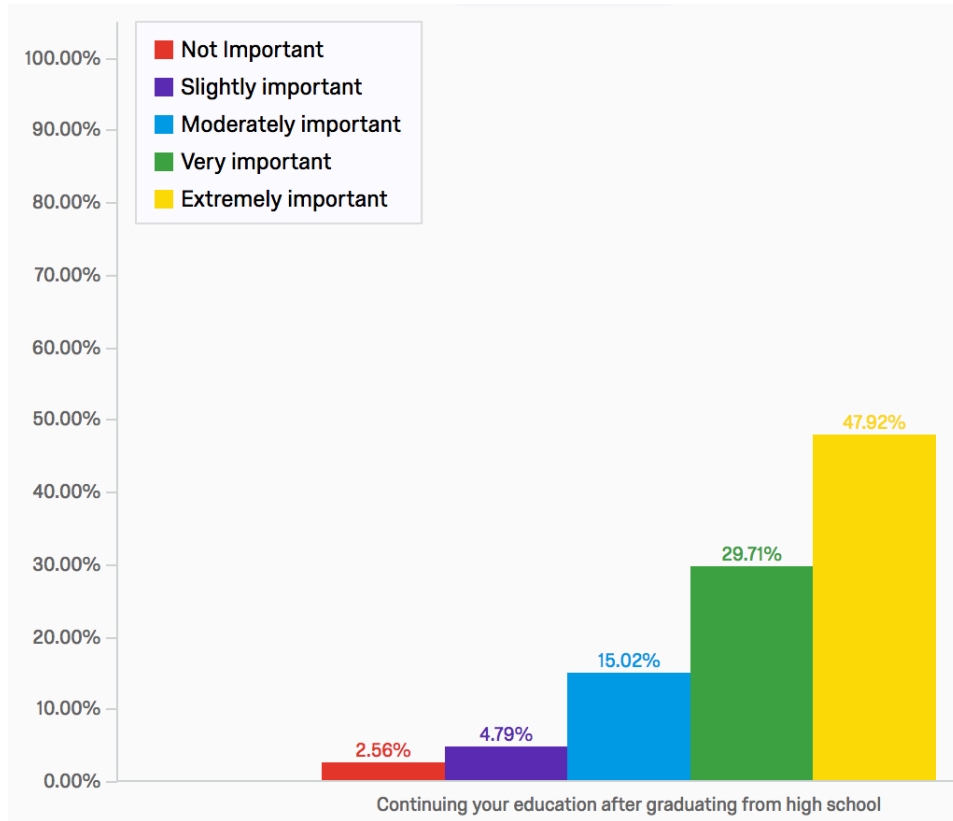
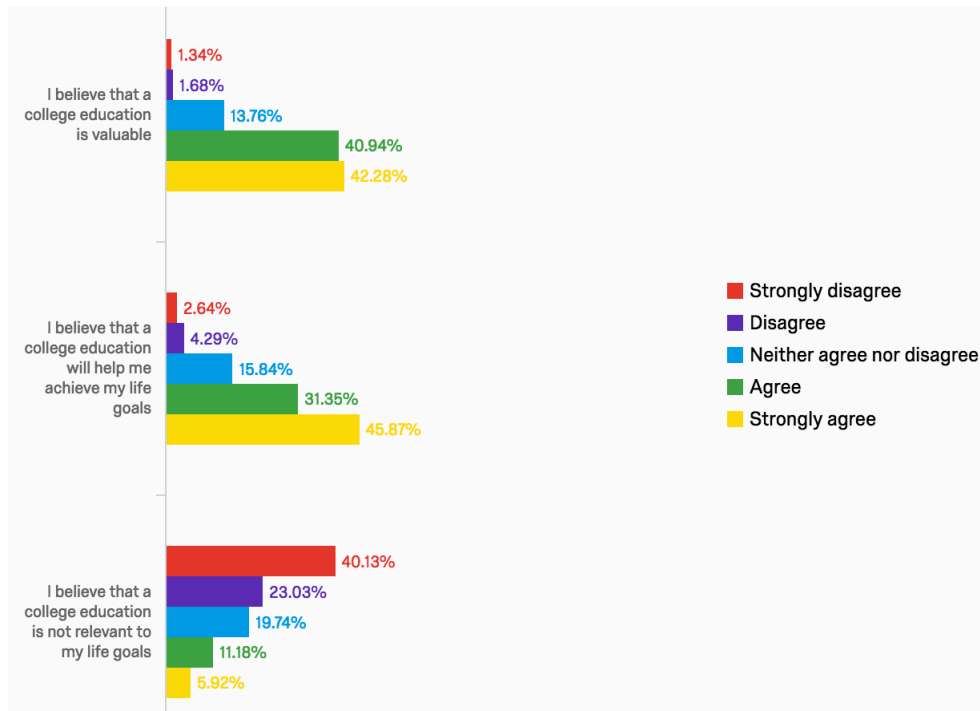


Figure 6.3: Student Responses to the Relevance and Value of Higher Education



As a whole, these aspirations and valuations were overwhelmingly positive. In Chapter 2, I presented literature which theorized that the rurality serves to hinder rural student educational aspirations and their valuation of it. Thus, I was puzzled by the overwhelmingly positive responses of students and their indication that higher education was valuable to them and that continuing education upon graduation from high school was important to them.

Furthermore, a comparison of these aspirations to attainment data of the partner schools in recent years further mystifies these responses. Data is collected by the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). As presented in Chapter 4, the attainment data of these partner schools is significantly lower than the reported aspirations and plans of students. Although 53% of students reported that they intended to enroll in a four-year college or university, of the 2015 graduating class, the percentage of students who enrolled in a four-year institution within six months of graduation from the partner schools ranged from 24% to 37%. The intentions reported by students to attend community college more closely resembled the attainment data. Approximately 20% of students report that they intend to enroll in a community college and similarly, the attainment data ranged from 19% to 35.4% amongst the partner schools. There is a significant discrepancy between the percentages of students who signaled that they intended to enroll at a four-year institution and the attainment data which indicates that a significantly lower percentage of students are enrolled in a four-year institution within six months of graduation.

Further complicating this is the discrepancy in the student responses between junior and senior students. Figure 6.4 is a cross-tabulation that demonstrates the

difference between junior and senior students and their postsecondary plans. When asked what their plans were for after graduation, juniors were significantly more likely to report that they planned to attend a four-year college or university. While seniors were more likely to report that they planned to attend a community college. This cross-tabulation suggests that aspirations and plans may change drastically between junior and senior year. I theorize that in their senior year, as it is closer to graduation, students’ aspirations more closely resemble eventual attainment because students are more aware of their options following graduation ⁶.

Figure 6.4: Cross-Tabulation Comparing Junior and Seniors Plans for after High School Graduation

| | | My plan for after graduating high school is to: | | | | | | | Total |
|------------------------|-------|---|---|--------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| | | Attend a four-year college or university | Attend a two-year college or university | Enter the Military | Look for a job in my community | Move away to look for a job | Live at home | Take a gap year before college | |
| What grade are you in? | 11th | 86 56.58% | 23 15.13% | 19 12.50% | 5 3.29% | 6 3.95% | 2 1.32% | 11 7.24% | 152 100.00% |
| | 12th | 63 48.84% | 33 25.58% | 9 6.98% | 13 10.08% | 7 5.43% | 1 0.78% | 3 2.33% | 129 100.00% |
| | Total | 149 53.02% | 56 19.93% | 28 9.96% | 18 6.41% | 13 4.63% | 3 1.07% | 14 4.98% | 281 100.00% |

Why is it that the student’s aspirations and plans vary so significantly from the attainment data? In the following section, I draw heavily from interviews to propose a theory for why this misalignment occurs.

The Mismatch Phenomenon

I theorize that as a consequence of the interaction of the challenges of rurality and the disjuncture between the K-12 and higher education system, rural students form skewed expectations of higher education. The lack of exposure to higher education affects the expectations and perceptions that students hold of higher education. This resultantly leads to a misalignment between student aspirations and reality. This then

⁶ It is worth noting that these surveys were conducted in January, so the seniors are only one semester away from graduation and at this point their aspirations will more closely resemble the outcome.

further challenges students by hindering their knowledge and the resources to legitimately pursue their aspirations. Furthermore, I argue that this mismatch between aspirations, expectations and reality serves to hinder rural educational attainment rates and, for those students who do pursue college, it leads to difficult transitions into higher education. I have termed this misalignment in perceptions to be the mismatch phenomenon. The mismatch is manifested in two primary ways. First, it affects student knowledge and perceptions about the processes of getting to college, that is preparation, admission, financial aid and transition processes. Secondly, it affects their perceptions of what higher education is actually like day-to-day, such as their expectations of course rigor and curriculum.

In demonstrating this phenomenon, I first draw on survey and interview data to discuss student perceptions of higher education and the meaning of the term “college”. I then transition to discussing how the lack of exposure and skewed expectations result in students not preparing well to pursue their aspirations or unknowingly not behaving in alignment with their aspirations. I then draw on the data to discuss student unrealistic understandings about financing higher education and skewed expectations about the daily experience of higher education and the academic rigor of collegiate curriculum.

The fundamental theme that re-emerged through-out the research was the question, what is higher education? What does the term “college” entail? One interview was conducted with a guidance counselor from a rural school in Northern Michigan, who was not associated with one of the partner schools. She was a member of the Michigan College Advising Corps, an AmeriCorps program that is designed to provide a guidance counselor into underserved schools who can focus solely on postsecondary and higher

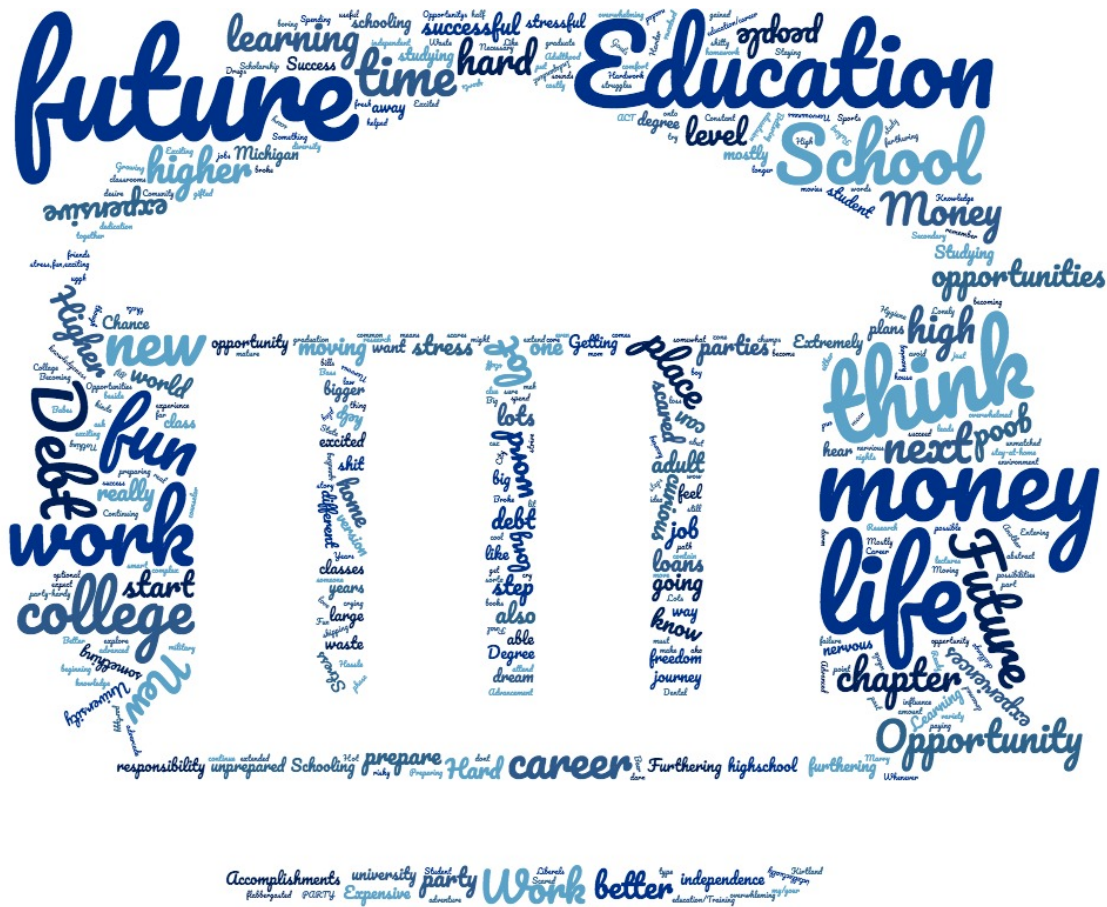
education preparation. In an interview with her, she emphasized that a core goal of her job is to redefine student's understandings of the definition of college. She shared,

Usually, when I go into a freshman classroom, the first thing I always ask them is, "What do you think college is?", and they always say like, "Michigan State" or "The University of Michigan", you know, just big four-year university experiences. So the typical definition is that college is a big-four-year experience.

She explained that in her role, she strives to shift focus to postsecondary education or training, which may include tech schools, the military, vocational education, two-year institutions as well as four-year institutions. In her experience, students assume higher education to be large, four-year universities which creates perceptions of expensive tuition and the reality that attending such a university would require the rural student to move far from home, eliminating the option of commuting.

When students were asked, In the student surveys, "What does the word college mean to you?", responses were diverse and revealed both positive and negative perceptions. Figure 6.5 is a word cloud of the responses by frequency, demonstrating the perceptions that students hold of what college is.

Figure 6.5: Word Cloud of Student Responses by Frequency



Themes of the responses include: references to the future and new opportunities, concerns over debt, loans and the expense of college, as well social aspects such as new friends, parties and fun. Responses ranged from excited, to stressed, to angry.

In order to further demonstrate the diversity of these responses, the responses were coded using a binomial system to analyze if responses appeared to be positive or negative, and if responses referenced finances, opportunities for the future, or social aspects. When coding responses as either positive or negative, only undeniably positive responses, such as “new opportunities” or “When I hear the word college I think about my future and what I’m going to do to influence the world” were coded as positive. Similarly, only undeniably negative responses, such as “waste of time and money” or

“more shitty education” were coded negatively. Finally, if the response was ambiguous or appeared to be neutral, for example, the response “education”, these responses were left un-coded. In this analysis, I found that 43.3% of responses were positive and 36.3% of the responses were negative. I chose to leave 61 responses, or 20.3%, to be un-coded as the students’ emotions were not obvious in their response. Thus, this analysis demonstrates that rural students, do have positive perceptions of higher education and value it, but perceptions are laced with negative concerns such as stress and finances.

Figures 6.6 and 6.7 are alterations of the previously displayed word cloud. These word clouds are separated so that the positive responses are in figure 6.6 and the negative responses are in figure 6.7. These word clouds further highlight the tension and range of student responses and demonstrate that rural students have both positive as well as negative perceptions of higher education.

When coding if student responses were financially-based or not, responses were coded as financial if the response mentioned the following words: debt, loans, money, expensive, financial aid, scholarships, or FAFSA. Notable responses in this category included: “something I would love to do, but don’t have the money for”, “money that I don’t have” and “expensive, risky, possible waste of time and money”. In this analysis, I found 14.89% of student responses reference finances. Although 14.89% does not seem to be significant, it is notable that when you ask students what they think of when they hear the word college, nearly 15% of them first thought of expenses. This is noteworthy because this perception is a significant hindrance to low-income and first-generation students applying. When students first think of higher education, I would argue that in an ideal system, students would first think of the opportunities, learning and research.

Figure 6.6: Word Cloud of Positive Student Responses by Frequency



Figure 6.7: Word Cloud of Negative Student Responses by Frequency



Similar to the financial analysis, responses were coded to examine if they were social responses. Responses were coded as social if they mentioned topics such as friends, fun, parties, alcohol, drugs, relationships or living in the dorms. Notable responses of this category include party-themed responses such as “parties and skipping class cuz school is for chumps”, “drugs”, “hot babes”, and “beer”, as well as friend themed responses such as “new friends”, “extremely fun, new experiences and freedom”. In this analysis, only 6.75% of students responded with a social-mindset.

Finally, the responses were coded to analyze if they focused on opportunities and the future. Responses were coded as “opportunity-based” if the response mentioned variations of the words: opportunities, new chapter, or the future. This analysis is a continuation of the positive responses. In this analysis, I found that 11.7% of responses directly engaged with the concepts of opportunity or the future. These responses are overwhelmingly positive and demonstrate rural students’ valuation of higher education.

Furthermore, when students were asked, “When thinking of your future plans, how do you feel?”, responses were mixed. Students were invited to check all emotions that applied. Students most frequently selected the following emotions: confident, nervous, curious, overwhelmed, worried and enthusiastic ⁷. This demonstrates again that rural students hold both positive and negative perceptions of higher education and that it is inaccurate to generalize the perceptions of rural students.

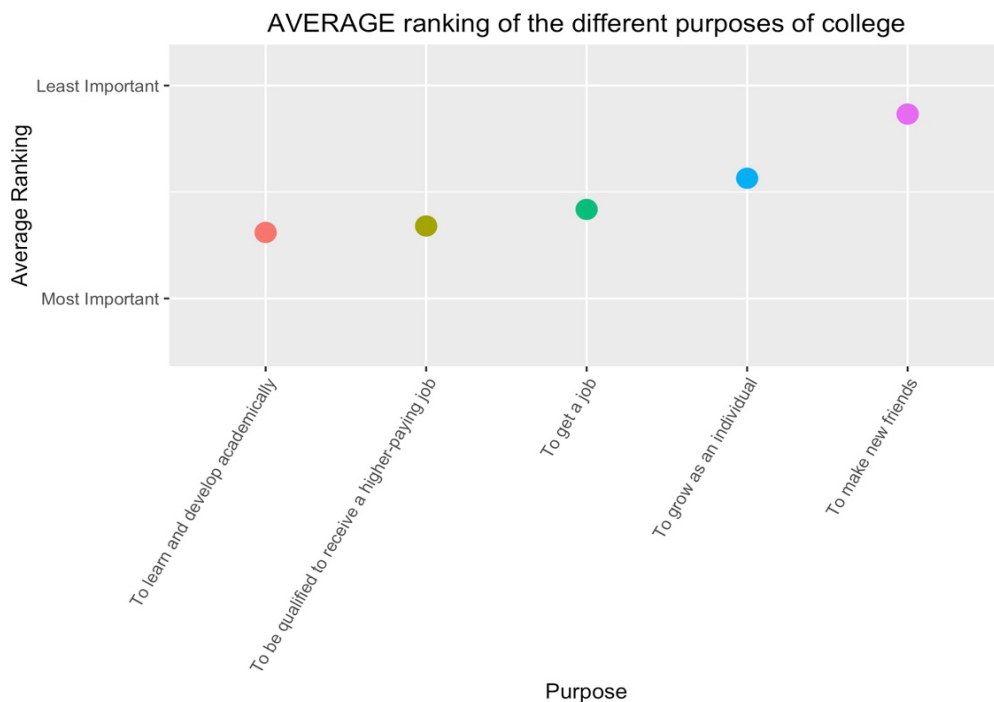
It is evident within the student responses that you cannot generalize the perceptions of higher education of a monolithic “rural student” - because the students in this research expressed a range of responses. The dominant literature, which I previously

⁷ This data is further discussed and presented graphically in Figure 6.8 in Appendix B, Section 1.

critiqued in the Chapter 2, too frequently conflates the values and perceptions of rural students and rural actors and applies stereotypes onto them as backwards or archaic. This rhetoric is not a comprehensive or accurate representation of rural students. Moreover, this rhetoric fails to cultivate a deeper understanding of how rurality shapes student aspirations, dreams and fears, and perceptions of higher education.

This argument is furthered when rural student beliefs about the purpose of college are examined. Students were asked to rank what they believed to be the purpose of college. Students were provided five available options: to learn and develop academically, to get a job, to be qualified to receive a higher-paying job, to make new friends, and to grow as an individual. Student responses were equally divided among to learn and develop academically, and to be qualified to receive a higher-paying job. Figure 6.8 is a graph that demonstrates an net score for each option that demonstrates the average rank students gave each option ranging from most to least important.

Figure 6.9: Average Score of the Importance for each 'Purpose' of Higher Education



As the graph demonstrates, students ranking of "to learn and develop academically" and "to be qualified to receive a higher-paying job" were nearly identical. This is notable, as scholars have previously theorized that low-income students, or students with less exposure to the norms of higher education, may view higher education solely as a necessary means for upwards class mobility. However, among these students, this narrative does not appear. Rather, students recognize the value of learning and developing academically and acknowledge higher education as a place where this development can be fostered.

Now that I have established that rural students have demonstrated that they do value higher education, and that they recognize it to be a place one can learn and develop academically, the question arises, why do rural student attainment and attrition rates remain so low? Why are rural student aspirations so misaligned with attainment data?

Interviews with teachers and guidance counselors suggest that due to the challenges of rurality and the disjointed relationship between systems, rural students do not have the college knowledge and resources to navigate the attainment of their expectations and aspirations. The guidance counselor of Oldbridge remarked, "Sometimes there is a huge gulf between expectations and knowing how to navigate that". This gulf is evident when students do not take appropriate steps or actions to meet their aspirations, or engage in behavior that would not align with their aspirations. A community leader of Inland explained, "We are seeing students not taking the right classes in high school, not knowing how to study, being afraid of the finances of college without ever even knowing what they are". Echoing this thought, that students are not taking the right courses to properly prepare for college, the Highland guidance counselor

adds, "Some students maybe didn't take advantage of putting more rigor in their schedule when they should have, now is the time when they start going, oh my gosh, I should have done that". Similarly, an educator of Oldbridge county emphasized this concept of the GPA and realizing its importance too late, explaining,

They just don't understand, and by the time they do understand, it's just too late.

A lot of kids do not understand how important a GPA is until their senior year.

Honestly, until they are seniors they do not understand the concept of a GPA,

they're mid-way, it's late October, and it connects that their GPA matters. I have

kids often that will say, 'What can I do to get my GPA up?', and the answer is,

not a whole lot, because you're turning in your college applications next week.

She emphasized that these realizations are happening too late, and by the time they occur, students have "dug their hole", in that they are not involved, they have poor grades and they have not committed to their education. In these experiences, it was not that the students explicitly were not taking the steps to prepare for college, but that students were not aware of all of the proactive steps they should have been taking throughout high school, perhaps as early as freshman year. This is a symptom of the lack of exposure to higher education and the lack of dialogue between systems. This demonstrates the misalignment between student understanding of what steps must be taken to prepare for higher education and their ability to legitimately pursue their aspirations.

Further mystifying this mismatch is student survey responses to a series of questions regarding their perceptions of their own college knowledge. Students overwhelmingly reported that they were aware of their options to continue their education after high school, were aware of the financial aid that may be available to them and were

aware of how the admissions process works. Moreover, students reported that they felt knowledgeable about the expectations and norms of college⁸. These positive student responses are puzzling, given the perspectives shared throughout the interviews. I theorize that this extreme inconsistency is further evidence that students have a mismatch between their expectations and beliefs, and the reality of higher education. When I suggested this in administrator interviews, several of them gently referenced this as a case of the students simply not knowing what they don't know⁹.

Similar to the misalignment of student expectations, there is a parallel to be made of parental expectations and parental involvement. The Oldbridge guidance counselor eloquently explained, "Many of these students don't have a lot of college knowledge, and their parents don't, you know their parents may have great expectations for them, but especially if they're first-gen, they may not even know the questions to ask". Again, we see that expectations are not enough to drive attainment. In the student surveys, when students were asked what their parents' expectations were for them following high school, 69.81% of students reported that their parents expected them to attend a college or university. However, this guidance counselor explained, a parent's expectations that their child should pursue higher education need not translate into the parent having the necessary skills and knowledge to guide their student through those hoops. Thus, similar to the students, the lack of parental involvement, a challenge discussed in Chapter 5, need not signal that they do not care about their student's success.

⁸ Due to time and space concerns, this data is not further discussed here. This survey data is discussed and presented in full and graphically in figures 6.10, 6.11 and 6.12 in Appendix B, Section 2.

⁹ Ironically, when I first began to develop the student survey, one of the school contacts gently reminded me to keep in mind that the students are not aware of the ways that their school may be disadvantaged or under-resourced and to be cognizant of that in the survey questions.

This misalignment in student perceptions is further demonstrated in interviews with teachers of Oldbridge and Inland. One teacher of Inland High School spoke of how he believes students will typically assume that they will go to college, because it is the norm demonstrated in mainstream media. However, he argued, these students do not take the steps to achieve these aspirations. For example, the thought-process of which courses they should take to be accepted, where to apply, how to apply for financial aid are all significant decisions which are not regularly considered or acknowledged throughout high school. He emphasized that student's genuinely do not understand the steps and effort that it takes to get to college, and then all of a sudden it is two months before graduation and nobody has ever sat them down to walk through options and now they have no idea what they're going to do after graduation.

Similarly, a teacher of Oldbridge High School confirmed that when you ask the students, nearly all of them will say yes, I want to go to college. But she explained the challenge is in actually getting the students through the steps and hoops to go to college. This conversation was further echoed by a teacher of Oldbridge High School, who reflected on a book study the high school faculty had done on teaching students of poverty. He remarked on a disconnect for low-income students, saying,

Our lower-income students knew they should say they wanted to go to college, but it was a completely abstract thing. You know, there was no reality to the statement, there was no consideration of what does it take to get there or what will you be doing, there was nothing there.

In the perspectives of these educators, again, it is not that the students do not value higher education or do not aspire to attend college. Rather, it is that the structural support is not

there to inform and guide students through the process. As a result, student aspirations may be overwhelmingly positive, but attainment and attrition rates remain low, because students have skewed perspectives and expectations of higher education.

One space where the mismatch between perceptions and reality can be observed is in student expectations about financing higher education. As discussed above, when asked what they think of when they think of the word college, nearly 15% of students referenced concerns of student loans and debt due to expensive tuition. This fear of the cost of higher education then serves to skew student perceptions of the worth of a college degree. The Oldbridge guidance counselor theorized that there has been an investment in a narrative that college is too expensive, because everybody has a story of somebody they know that is stuck in student debt and is working at Starbucks. She pushed back on this notion, arguing that student debt is not as paralyzing as it is often portrayed.

Similarly, an Oldbridge teacher said, "they believe the cost is extremely expensive, and that starts to carry the notion that it is more expensive than what you are getting out of it". Similarly, the Michigan College Advising Corps member referenced this as a barrier, reflecting that with the media releasing a new report every other day about the rising cost of college tuition, the students are concerned. She remarked,

That's why I love this position, because I can help to dispel, not necessarily rumors, but I'm always real with them and tell them they need to know the cost of education, but you need to know the worth of education.

Here, the fear of the cost of education compromising the worth of higher education is a perceptual barrier that these teachers and guidance counselors must fight. As a result of the lack of exposure rural students have to the norms of higher education, student

understandings of the value of higher education may be compromised under concerns over the expense of it.

Furthermore, the interview subjects repeatedly stated that students are simply not aware of the financial aid that is available for them. One Oldbridge teacher shared, "In almost every conversation I have with students, parents or community members - when we talk about the funding opportunities, they are always shocked and completely unaware". This is further supported in the student survey data. When the students were asked if they felt they had the financial funds or financial aid available to succeed in college, only 35.43% of students said they agreed or strongly agreed, while 35.09% selected disagree or strongly disagree.

As rural students are more likely to be from a lower-socioeconomic status or are more likely to be first-generation, concerns about the costs of higher education are likely to be more urgent to them. Thus, when this information is lacking, this can be a significant barrier and can further frame higher education as risky. This is further illuminated in that low-income students perceive the University of Michigan to be elite and expensive, and therefore not an option. In reality, because the University is committed to meeting the full-need of aid for in-state students, the University of Michigan tends to be one of the least expensive options for in-state students with high need. However, students are too frequently not aware of the extensive financial aid that may be available, which then frames institutions such as the University of Michigan to be elite and out of their reach. This is a symptom of the lack of exposure and dialogue between systems because it further skews student perceptions of the cost and worth of higher education.

The third primary way that this disjuncture affects student mismatch in expectations is in students' understanding of what college is actually like. For example, the academic rigor of the courses and the structure of the courses. This is problematic because it can often lead to students developing esteem issues, in which they do not believe they are smart enough to succeed in higher education. One community in Inland emphasized that these rural students may be afraid that they will not be able to compete with students from wealthier, suburban backgrounds or that they do not feel that their education will even allow them to get accepted into a college. An Inland teacher shared a story of one student who repeatedly told him that that he was not going to apply to college, because he didn't have the grades to get in. However, the student received a high enough score on the ACT to be accepted into a college, but he had already made up his mind to enter the military, because he had believed for so long that he wasn't smart enough. Here then is another gap in information that is hindering students from even applying or aspiring to attaining higher education.

Furthermore, this lack of knowledge leads to misunderstandings of the course structure and rigor of college courses. Numerous teachers from the partner schools emphasized that students do not understand the expectations of content knowledge to succeed in college. One Inland teacher explained that this is because high-school courses are tailored to reflect state content expectations. Another Inland teacher reflected on his own transition from Inland when he was a student into Central Michigan University. He shared that he was in total shock during his first semester of college, and he was so overwhelmed because he had no idea how to study or learn in that structure. As a result, now as a teacher, he strives to help students realize the academic rigor of college courses

and tries to be brutally honest with students about what to expect.

The Highland guidance counselor spoke of student's misunderstandings of the expectations for independence and autonomy of learning in higher education. She shared that when she converses with students, she reminds students, "If you think your college professors are going to sing and dance like I do, they do not. They will not put on a theatrical performance to get you to learn. It's up to you. It's your job". She says students do not want to hear that, but that they'll frequently return after their first semester of college and they'll say "I wasn't prepared", "Well, no kidding" she responds. The Oldbridge guidance counselor spoke of the shock student's encounter in transitioning to a learning model that emphasizes student independence. She explained, "We witness the gap when they go from a high-school situation, you know if the student doesn't turn in a major assignment, a lot of exceptions are made. So then it's a real-shock when they get to college and you know, "I'm sorry you missed the mid-term, but you missed the mid-term". Students are clueless as to what is actually expected of them to succeed in a college classroom. In combating this, an Inland teacher, suggested that campus tours should focus more on academics to help students understand real academic expectations, such as the level of discussion and the level of independence that is expected of college students. Without this exposure to genuine expectations, this teacher says that students are "buried" in the transition of learning to take responsibility for their own education.

All of the experiences shared by these educators and administrators demonstrate that the disjuncture between educational systems and the lack of exposure for rural students significantly skews student perceptions and expectations of higher education. I theorize that this mismatch in student expectations then resultantly serves to hinder rural

educational attainment rates and for those students who do pursue higher education, it negatively influences transitions. The effect on rural student attainment rates is a cyclical effect, because it reinforces low college attainment rates in the community and negatively impacts the college-going culture in the community and then affects future students.

The evidence of rocky transitions of rural students can most easily be demonstrated in the high rates of student attrition and high rates of students enrolling in remedial classes. The Center for Educational Performance and Instruction (CEPI) of the MI School Data reports data on the college progression of the graduating class of each of the partner high schools. The college progression data of the three partner schools are similar. Therefore, I only present data on the college progression of the 2009-2010 Inland High School graduating class. The graduating class of 2009-2010 had 120 students graduate, of those 80 students or 66.67% enrolled in college. It is worth remembering that the college enrollment rates of these partner schools has steadily declined in past several years, which is why this rate is significantly higher than the enrollment data of the 2015 Inland graduating class. Although 66.67% of students enrolled in college, 23.7% of those students that originally enrolled were no longer enrolled within one year following high school graduation. Furthermore, within five years, 53.74% were no longer enrolled. This indicates that more than half of the students that were originally enrolled in college were no longer enrolled five-years after high school graduation. After five years, only 25% of the 2009 Inland graduating class had earned a certificate or a degree. That correlates to only 37.5% of students that had originally set out to pursue higher education. These attrition rates are astonishing, and indicate that rural students are experiencing difficult transitions into higher education. I argue that these attrition rates are evidence that rural

students do not enter higher education with accurate perceptions or expectations of what higher education is actually like.

The prevalence of difficult student transitions is further demonstrated in the interviews. In response to the attrition data, two teachers at Oldbridge voiced that they have made conscious efforts to integrate more college-awareness curriculum into their classroom practices. One teacher explained,

I created the curriculum out of frustration from seeing students not being successful and from seeing their struggles, and feeling the need to address that like I had to do something to make it better. It just felt like kids were not ready for the next step, so they were returning home in large numbers.

Both teachers voiced that they see large numbers of students struggling to transition and that this challenge too frequently leads to students choosing to drop out. Challenging transitions are further complicated when students are at a college or university that may not be a good fit for their personality or learning style. The mismatch between student expectations skews students' awareness of college and affects their ability to select a college that will be a good match. As discussed above, scholars of higher education are increasingly advocating for a "match and fit" system that aligns student preferences with campus traits such as typical class sizes, campus size, and location among many other factors. When students are less aware of the options that are available to them, there is a smaller chance of their selected college being a good fit - which then leads to challenging transitions and increased attrition rates. This is problematic given the increased challenges rural students face in visiting college campuses, due to the distance and isolated nature of their communities. An Inland community leader emphasized the

importance of the match, noting,

Sometimes when students make a familiar connection, it's counterfeit. Like I'm going to school here because I like their football team, or I like their colors, or my boyfriend goes here. Those are counterfeit matches.

He emphasized that in a State such as Michigan, where we have fifteen State Universities, there are many great choices, and we should ensure that students are making genuine matches. Similarly, the Highland guidance counselor emphasized that students attend the colleges that they are exposed to, which also frequently happens based on the colleges that their teachers attended. She shared,

What is funny, is you can almost watch the kids who are really into science, for example, many them want to go to LSSU and one of the reasons they want to go there is our science teacher went there. It's a big influence. It's because they've not known any other options, for them, all they know is Lake State.

Similarly, in regards to peers, a teacher in Oldbridge noted that they see heavy trends of students attending one college, and then for several years, there will be a larger number of students attending that specific college. He attributed that this is "because that's what they know, and that is what they've been exposed to". Thus, students are influenced heavily by their teachers and their peers and they develop their plans for higher education within the context of the schools that they have been exposed to. Therefore, when students are not being exposed to diverse range of options for them to pursue, there is a higher chance that students will make a counterfeit match and experience a rocky transition into higher education.

In conclusion, I have argued that when the data from the student survey responses

is read within the context of the interviews and attainment and attrition data, it reveals a story of students mismatching their expectations and aspirations with reality. This mismatched phenomenon is a symptom of the broken relationship between the K-12 and higher education systems. This disjointed relationship is amplified by the challenges of rurality, and rural students suffer as a result of the lack of dialogue between systems and the lack of exposure they receive to the world of higher education. This reality has led me to suggest that the realities of rural education can serve as a lens to observe this disjointed relationship between systems. When students are not exposed to higher education, it skews their perceptions and their ability to navigate the bureaucratic hoops to pursue their aspirations. This disjuncture then disproportionately affects rural student attainment rates and poses further challenges for rural student transitions.

VII. Strengths of the Rural Community

“There is a high level of caring in the rural community, that is an advantage.

Students are more than just a number” – Inland Community Leader

The abundant strengths and potential of rural communities is apparent throughout this research. The community-aspect of rurality was consistently referenced as the greatest strength of rural communities. In this chapter, I discuss the strengths of the rural community I observed in this research as well as positive examples of how rural communities are investing in themselves to build a college-going culture in their communities. This includes a discussion about the influence of third-party community actors, such as religious organizations, service organizations and active community leaders. I draw on observations from the partner schools, as well as the interviews to demonstrate the influence of third-party community agents involved to support local schools and students. Furthermore, I discuss strategies that the partner schools have used to combat challenges posed by rurality and the disjointed relationship within our educational systems. In Chapter 5, I discussed the ways that the rural community structures challenges that may hinder student exposure and educational aspirations. I theorize that the rural community does pose those challenges. However, the community simultaneously serves to empower and support students by seeing students as more than just a number, more than just another student.

When I asked interview subjects what they perceived to be the strengths of the rural community, the responses overwhelmingly emphasized the support of the community and the ability to know students on a personal level. The Michigan College Corps member shared that she was astonished when she moved to the community, she

said, "the community is amazingly supportive... I am constantly everyday overwhelmed by the generosity of this community and how much the community focuses on the school." She emphasized that relationships formed in the rural community are a source of social capital for rural students.

One primary strength is the small nature of rural communities allows students to be more than just a number and to form personal relationships. The Oldbridge guidance counselor shared, "The advantage is we can get our arms around them. If that makes sense, it is a manageable group. With a senior class of 80-100 kids, we are able to connect with them." She emphasized that this level of personal engagement is vital in preparing students for higher education, as many students do not have those supplementary resources at home. Similarly, the Highland guidance counselor shared,

The strength is I know each and every student personally. When they come in to ask me a question, I have all of the prior knowledge in my mind, you know, where they come from, their family, their goals... The teachers have their back, the community has their back, everybody is supportive of student goals ... If they are setting their sights high, some of the community may not be able to relate, but they are ultimately still supportive. So that is a big perk these kids have.

Similar to the strength of personal relationships between guidance counselors and students, interviews repeatedly cited the personal relationships between teachers and students as a positive influence on student development. An Inland community leader emphasized that in his experience the relationships he has observed between students and teachers are much stronger in rural communities. He said, "There is a high level of caring in the rural community, that is an advantage. Students are more than just a number."

Nearly every teacher that was interviewed spoke at length about how they enjoy knowing their students on a personal level. One teacher spoke of how it is important to him that he can walk down the hallway and know not only nearly every student's name but something about them as well, for example, that kid is a really good soccer goalie. As a result of these personal relationships, in an interview with a college professor, she theorized, "...if we really did it right, rural school districts could be a model for how to not let people fall through the cracks," because students are known. There is power in being known, and in being known in full, not just as another student in class.

I observed a theme that many of the teachers that I interviewed had themselves grown up in that community. It is common for teachers of rural communities to have grown up there themselves. This leads to an authentic connection between the teachers and their students. One teacher of Inland spoke of how he may have considered other careers, but his goal was to return home and make an impact on his hometown. Similarly, one Inland teacher spoke of the joy of running into students and parents while grocery shopping or while out eating dinner. He concluded, "It is those little things that are hard to put a value on, you can't quantify that or put a value on that support. It certainly makes Inland feel special". The relationships formed and the support of the community promote positive development in students and show students that they are cared for.

The idea of community-wide investment is another theme that emerged throughout the interviews. In an interview with a college professor, she said,

The advantage is there is a lot of community-orientated buy-in. There is a lot of energy that could be tapped into. Rural communities tend to care about themselves, because they are small and nobody else cares about them.

Throughout this research, I observed this. The rural community demonstrated that it was willing to build and invest in itself. I observed a significant amount of third-party involvement from community actors and groups in an effort to support the local schools and students. There were numerous instances in which community organizations were significantly involved in providing information and resources to further expose and prepare rural students to the world of higher education. For example, one guidance counselor spoke of the influence of the Rotary Club, speaking of a program called STRIVE, which aims to mentor students and prepare them for higher education. She remarked that these community members come in and devote their time and resources and always go above and beyond in support.

Similarly, the Oldbridge guidance counselor spoke at length on how important the community is in aiding their initiatives to cultivate a college-going culture. She spoke of the importance of discovering gaps in programming and in resources, and referenced transportation to physically move to college as one gap that at-risk students experience. In combating this, she shared,

We are engaging with our community to help address their needs and we have community volunteers who will drive them and help them on move in day. We will deliver you to college.

This was a notable example of community-members engaging in supportive and tangible ways. Perhaps the majority of community members do not have a college education themselves, but that does not mean they are not capable of supporting students in other ways, such as this example of simply providing a ride.

A similar example is in the community-resources provided to generate

scholarships and financial aid for local students. In Inland county, there is a community foundation which substantially invests financially every year. Similarly, the Michigan College Advising Corps member emphasized the positive impact of their community foundation. She explained that the foundation provides scholarships, and that many scholarships are designated for her school only, rather than the entire area. She noted, "This year, of the 49 scholarships, 23 of them were for our community alone, and it just makes me want to cry every time I think about it. It's so wonderful". These scholarships serve to take down financial barriers and further encourage students to pursue higher education and further demonstrate the support of the community.

The Influence of Two

In further demonstrating this phenomenon of extensive community involvement, I briefly spotlight the efforts of two community leaders, and the impact that they have had on the lives of so many students. I refer to these community leaders as Tim and Kevin.

Tim is active in both the Inland and Oldbridge communities. Tim served as a pastor of a church in Inland community for more than thirty years, and has recently retired to Oldbridge, where he continues to impact student lives. Tim is an alumni of the University of Michigan, and he volunteers as a regional alumni recruiter for the University of Michigan. In his position, he has "adopted" the communities of Inland and Oldbridge, and his job is to help admitted students connect with Michigan. He strives to expand his role to ensure that both students and the University are getting a good match. His goal is to "put a face" on the University of Michigan, so that students realize that the University is not just an institution, but a family. Tim was referenced as a significant community partner and an invaluable resource in both the Inland and Oldbridge school systems. Tim is the community member, whom I quoted previously, who coined the

formula "shrink the distances", and he is passionate about helping students become familiar with higher education by personifying the institutions and shrinking the distances posed by rurality.

Echoing Tim's passion, Kevin is passionate about supporting rural students and expanding rural student access and exposure to higher education. Kevin has served as the youth pastor for a church in Inland and he now works as an admissions recruiter for the community college located near Inland. Kevin is also a University of Michigan alumni.

Together, Tim and Kevin have developed two initiatives that are active in three rural communities that have had an unmeasurable impact on student lives. The first is their unique "college-trips", which Tim began in 1976. College-trips are a thirty-hour excursion designed to take rural students to visit as many college campuses as possible within thirty hours. Students travel in vans, and leave their community at 1pm on Sunday. The group typically visits three campuses on Sunday, then stays over-night, and then visits three to four campuses on Monday. It is a whirlwind experience designed to help students dip their feet in the water and get a taste of college life. So that students can begin to envision themselves on campus.

As discussed in Chapter 5, it is difficult for many rural students to visit college campuses, as a result of the distance, increased expense of traveling and lack of transportation. These trips hosted by Tim and Kevin are free for students and happen twice a year with approximately twenty students on each trip. Although Tim and Kevin are affiliated with a church, all students, regardless of religious affiliations are welcome, and there is no religious agenda during the trips. Tim or Kevin guide every trip, and serve as a tour-guide for campuses and provide students with information along the way.

Campus admission tours and presentations are set up for each campus, when available. I would argue the most valuable component is that Tim and Kevin coordinate with current students on each campus, who have graduated high school from those same rural communities to come and speak to the students and share their experiences and answer questions. At each campus, Tim and Kevin draw on their network to connect with a student who is from a rural community, so that the student can speak authentically to the high-school students' fears and concerns. Tim and Kevin emphasize how important it is for rural students to see and meet rural students, like themselves, succeeding and thriving in college. It is this authentic connection that sticks for these students, Tim says.

When I asked Tim where the inspiration for the concept of the college-trip originated, he shared,

The first college trip was in 1976, I was actually at an urban church then, and I had something like 18 graduates. That year, 9 of them went to Michigan State, and 9 of them stayed home waiting for something to fall from heaven. And I thought, okay, good for the ones who went to Michigan State, but Michigan State is not for everyone. And as for the ones who stayed home, that is very very risky behavior. So that is when I decided, these kids don't know what's out there. So even the urban kids don't know. Then four or five years later when I moved to a rural community, I found that phenomenon of not knowing to be even more profound.

Thus, the concept of the college trip was born to help students learn what was "out there" and what opportunities may be available to them. In my observations in Inland and Oldbridge, I had numerous students share with me that they had been on a college-trip,

and that the trip had helped them decide the colleges they were interested in applying to.

To build on the college trips and further develop a “higher-education ethic” in the schools, Tim and Kevin collaborated to create the program, "Next Connect". Next Connect was implemented in 2011 in Inland High School, and in another neighboring rural high school. It is a forty-minute session that takes place once a week in the library during school lunch. In this program, Tim and Kevin teach skills to prepare students to succeed in higher education, such as study skills, budgeting, how to manage time and how to piece together financial aid. When I asked Tim where the idea for Next Connect began, he shared,

There is really only so much we can do on a college trip. As you know, we're rolling, we're doing three hour appointments. There is not enough time to talk about creating a higher education ethic ... It seemed to me that we would get more mileage out of the college trips if we could meet with these students before, during, and after and just went over basic things.

He added that it was natural for him and Kevin to team up, in their roles as recruiters, to help prepare students and to lead them to realize that higher education is in their reach.

Although I recognize that the presence and impact of Tim and Kevin may be a unique circumstance and not characteristic of all rural communities, I draw on their example to demonstrate the power that can be tapped into when rural communities invest in themselves. Throughout this research, the strength of the rural community was continually emphasized as a form of social capital that promotes positive development for students. Rural communities provide students with support and a high-level of caring that is invaluable. Despite the challenges structured by rurality, I theorize that the strengths of

the rural community offer great potential. I argue that in moving forward, the strengths of the rural community should be taken advantage of to craft effective outreach for rural students to further expose them to and prepare them for higher education. It is important to identify and acknowledge the challenges posed by rurality, in order to effectively combat and mitigate them. However, the conversation must not stop there. It is essential that in partnering with rural communities the strengths of these communities is recognized, respected and channeled.

VIII. Concluding Discussion and Limitations of the Research

In this chapter, I provide a brief summary to the theory that I have argued in this thesis, I acknowledge the limitations of this research, and I conclude by suggesting implications that this theory has for future research. I first begin by briefly summarizing main points of each of the chapters and components of the theory.

I have suggested that rurality structures student perspectives of higher education and pathways to achieving it in a way that is unique from their non-rural peers. I argue that the specific challenges created by rurality hinder student exposure to higher education. Moreover, I further the suggestion that there is a broken link between our educational systems with a disjuncture between the K-12 system and the Higher Education system. I theorize that the unique challenges structured by rurality interact with this broken link in a way that intensifies this disjuncture and disadvantages rural students because of an absence of dialogue between systems is amplified by the distance. This lack of dialogue affects agents of both systems and leads to the perpetuation of policy which is not responsive to the realities of rural education.

I draw on the administrative interviews and student surveys of this research to conclude that the students' lack of exposure to higher education skews students' perspectives of higher education and consequently affects their ability to pursue their aspirations. This mismatch between student expectations and reality then leads to low rural student attainment rates and rocky transitions for rural students. Similarly, the lack of exposure has created a teacher and administrator knowledge gap which impedes rural educators' abilities to support students as they begin to transition into higher education.

In recognizing the unique challenges and realities of rurality and acknowledging the specific experiences of rural students, I argue that scholars must be willing to legitimately partner with rural communities and leverage strengths of the rural community to empower students. It is time to move beyond the rural disadvantage perspective and begin recognizing rural students as multi-dimensional students who hold numerous values and aspirations. The abundant strengths of the community of rural spaces was apparent in this research, with the community-aspect consistently acknowledged as a form of social capital and a positive influence on student development. I conclude that the strengths of this community should be at the center of the conversation when considering how outreach programming can be designed to effectively reach rural students. How can we incorporate rural students' valuation for their community into their preparation for higher education? How can we acknowledge these valuations and frame their perspectives so higher education will not seem so unknown, scary and risky? I argue that to empower rural students, scholars first must recognize how their experiences are shaped by rurality and then respect the values held in the rural community. Drawing on the strengths of the rural community will be essential to strengthening rural student pathways to higher education.

I now transition to acknowledging and discussing the limitations of this research and suggesting how this research may be furthered in the future. Primarily, I discuss limitations in the research design, but I do suggest limitations in the theory as well.

The small sample size is the primary limitation of this research. Due to time constraints and in order to conduct this research in a logistically feasible manner, this research was constructed as a case-study of Northern Michigan and included in-depth

engagement with three communities. As discussed in the literature review, rural America is diverse and has been said to “defy generalization”. Furthermore, as this research included only three rural schools in Northern Michigan, there is a possibility that the conclusions of this research cannot be applied to the entirety of rural America.

For example, in Chapter 7 I discussed the theme of third-party community involvement and I featured two community members, Tim and Kevin, active community-members who are impacting student lives through their pre-collegiate programming. Tim and Kevin are both actively involved in the Inland and Oldbridge communities. However, the question does arise, is this a common occurrence across rural communities or are the efforts and passions of Tim and Kevin anomalies? Further research should continue to explore this phenomenon to further understand how the rural community can be a partner in preparing and empowering rural students to succeed in higher education. Thus, this research could further be considered on a larger scale and with a larger sample of rural communities.

Similarly, to further explore the idea of the student mismatch theory, additional research would be beneficial. One limitation of the research design is that the student surveys was at times have been constraining. In hindsight, I acknowledge that a methodology which would have allowed for more in-depth conversation with the students may have been ideal. For example, student interviews or student focus groups would have allowed deeper conversations and would be beneficial to contrast those conversations with the conversations had in interviews with administrators, educators and community leaders.

Moreover, it is possible that the survey results are skewed as a result of social desirability theory. Although the surveys were anonymous and students were not monitored while completing them, it is possible that students felt pressured to respond to questions in a particular way. For example, in reporting their educational aspirations in questions such as, “How important is it to you to continue your education past high school?”, it is plausible that students would feel the “correct” answer would be to select that it was very important, even if they personally do not see the value or meaning of higher education. Similarly, in responding to a question such as “What do you believe the purpose is of college?”, students may feel they need to give a socially acceptable answer such as, “to grow intellectually”, rather than the more commonly-held belief amongst lower-income and first-generation students, of “to get a job”. Therefore, a method such as focus groups or student interviews may allow for a deeper and more authentic engagement with students. Further research could advance this theory by engaging in methodologies that allow for this level of engagement.

Beyond these limitations in the research design, I acknowledge a limitation in a missing piece of the theory. This research did not actively engage with the influence of community colleges in rural communities or consider how community colleges could partner with rural schools to further improve student pathways to higher education. Although I intentionally chose not to include an analysis of community colleges in this research, due to time and space constraints and in pursuit of logistical feasibility, it is a noticeable absence in my theory. For many students, community colleges offer a pathway to higher education and in many cases, community colleges are partnering with rural schools in meaningful ways. Throughout this research, I consistently noticed the absence

of a meaningful consideration of the roles of community colleges in my analysis. I suggest that further research interested in the relationship between rurality and higher education should intentionally consider the influence and potential of community colleges.

The questions addressed in this research have implications which prompt questions to be explored in further research. I have identified rural education as experiencing unique challenges and barriers, and I suggest that the challenges of rurality amplify the disjointed relationship between our K-12 and higher education systems. It therefore follows that policymakers and scholars should explore how outreach programming could be more effective in rural communities. How can strategic programming serve to mitigate these specific challenges of the rural community?

I suggest that the conclusions of this research could be used to design best practices that would be effective in rural communities and would seek to leverage the strengths of rural communities. For example, how could pre-collegiate programming be designed to appeal to rural students' valuations of their local communities? How can educational programming be used to further empower community members and rural administrators to support students as they prepare for higher education? These questions of course require a consideration of distance, efficiency and scalability – as I have identified one of the greatest challenges of rural education to be the isolation and distance that is structured by rurality. How can we think innovatively and use modern technology to overcome these challenges and authentically connect with rural students?

Moreover, these thoughts beg the question – who should pursue these innovations? Who should be held accountable for student transitions from K-12 into

higher education? What institutions or agents could, or should, be responsible for pursuing strategies to empower rural students and rural communities? Should the State be concerned with this disconnect between our educational systems? Should institutions of higher education play a stronger role in developing and supporting disadvantaged students prior to their arrival on campus? Should society expect institutions of higher education to assume these responsibilities to increase access and exposure for rural students? Further research should continue to explore these questions and concepts – so that rural communities and rural students receive access to the support and resources necessary to genuinely prepare students to succeed in higher education.

The relationship between education, democracy, social class mobility, geography and the generational cycle of poverty is undeniable. If we genuinely wish to provide all students with the opportunity to receive an excellent education, it is essential that the experiences and realities of rural education be acknowledged and responded to. Rurality poses unique challenges for education which complicate rural student pathways to higher education. These challenges interact with our disjointed education system in complex ways. Scholars must recognize these interactions and acknowledge how the rural community has the power to structure rural student perspectives and pathways to higher education.

Rurality is not a one-dimensional concept. Rural agents are not backwards. Rural is not synonymous with disadvantaged. Rather, rurality should be recognized as a multi-dimensional influence that has the power to empower students. Moreover, rural students should be equally valued and respected and further supported so that they have the power to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

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Appendix A: Methodology

Complete Survey

Student Perceptions about Higher Education Survey

Consent Assent to Participate in Research Study:

Study: Examining the Relationship Between Higher Education and Rurality

Principal Investigator: Megan Taylor, Undergraduate Student, University of Michigan

Faculty Sponsor: Mika LaVaque-Manty, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Michigan

You are being invited to participate in a research study that is looking to explore the relationship between rural communities and higher education. The goal of this study is to understand how the rural environment shapes students' exposure to and value of higher education.

If you agree to be part of this study, at least one of your parents must first give their permission. You will be asked to complete an electronic survey that should take you approximately ten minutes. The "Student Perceptions about Higher Education" survey was made to learn more about your beliefs about college. Your responses will provide important information to help college become more available to all students. We have asked junior and senior students in four rural high school throughout Northern Michigan to participate. We are asking you to complete this survey because we are interested in your experiences growing up in a small, rural community and how this has affected your beliefs about college.

There are no right or wrong answers—this is not a test, we want to know your opinions and learn more about your experiences and values. At the end of survey, you will be asked a set of questions to provide the researcher with background information about yourself. If you feel that answering a question may reveal your who you are, you are welcome to skip that question or any other question. All of your responses will be completely confidential; your friends, teachers or family will not see your answers. All of your responses will be kept secure and will not be shared with anyone. Results from the survey will only be considered collectively.

Your participation is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences if you choose not to participate or if you choose to stop after the survey has begun. It is completely up to you whether you want to be in the study. Even if your parents say you can complete the survey, you do not have to do so. Even if you say yes, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may also choose to not answer a question for any reason. All questions are completely optional. Sometimes answering questions about your personal experiences may be uncomfortable. You can choose not to answer a question or to stop filling out the survey at any time.

You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation. We hope that this study will contribute to our understanding of how colleges and universities can more effectively

recruit and reach out to rural students. We hope that by your participation in this study, you will know that your experiences are valued and that colleges want to support you.

We plan to publish the results of this study. We will not include any information that would identify you. We will keep your information safe and will not share with anybody that you have participated in this study. The researchers will enter the study data on a computer that is password-protected. Your real name will not be used. We plan to keep this data to use for future use about the relationship between rural communities and higher education.

If you have any questions about this research, including questions about scheduling the interview or about your child's payment for participating, you can contact Megan Taylor, Undergraduate Student, University of Michigan at politicalscience493@umich.edu. You may also contact her faculty sponsor, Mika LaVaque-Manty, Ph.D., Associate Professor at the University of Michigan at mmanty@umich.edu.

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researchers, please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, 2800 Plymouth Rd., Bldg. 520, Room 1169, Ann Arbor, MI, 48109-2800, (734) 936-0933 [or toll free, (866) 936-0988], irbhsbs@umich.edu.

Thank you for your participation!

- I acknowledge that I have read this information and that by checking this box I hereby give my consent to voluntarily participate in this research study. (1)

Q1 What is the highest level of education or degree you hope to achieve?

- High School (1)
- Trade, Technical or Vocational Training (2)
- Associate Degree (3)
- Bachelor's Degree (4)
- Master's Degree (5)
- Professional or Doctoral Degree (6)

Q2 My plan for after graduating high school is to:

- Attend a two-year college or university (2)
- Attend a four-year college or university (1)
- Enter the Military (3)
- Look for a job in my community (4)
- Move away to look for a job (5)
- Live at home (6)
- Take a gap year before college (7)

Q3 When thinking of those future plans, how do you feel? (Please check all that apply)

- Confident (1)
- Worried (2)
- Enthusiastic (3)
- Doubtful (4)
- Lonely (5)
- Nervous (6)
- Prepared (7)
- Empowered (8)
- Curious (9)
- Confused (10)
- Angry (11)
- Overwhelmed (12)

Q4 In the following questions, the word, "community" may refer to your hometown, the town that you have grown up in or the town that you attend high school in.

Q5 How important is each of the following in your life?

| | Not Important (1) | Slightly important (2) | Moderately important (3) | Very important (4) | Extremely important (5) |
|---|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| The community that you grew up in (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Continuing your education after graduating from high school (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Living close to your family and relatives (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Living in the community that you grew up in (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Living in a small town or rural area (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Living in a city or urban area (6) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Attending a large college or university (7) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q6 Regardless of your future plans, please answer the following questions according to your beliefs and opinions about college and to what factors influenced you in your decision to attend or to not attend college.

Q7 In your opinion, how far or close to home is the ideal college campus?

- Only minutes away (1)
- A couple of hours (2)
- About a day's drive away (3)
- Out-of-state (4)

Q8 How much do agree with the following statements?

| | Strongly Disagree (1) | Somewhat Disagree (2) | Neither Agree or Disagree (3) | Somewhat Agree (4) | Strongly Agree (5) |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| The location of the college or university would be influential in my decision (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Attending a college or university that is close to home is very important to me and would influence my decision (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Attending a college or university that is far from home is very important to me and would influence my decision (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Please select "neither agree or disagree" for this question (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Ideally, the college I attend will be close to home (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q9 What do you think of when you hear the word, "college"?

Q10 I am currently enrolled in or have previously taken: (Please check all that apply)

- Technical or Vocational Courses (1)
- Community College Courses (2)
- AP Courses (3)
- ACT or SAT Prep Courses (4)

Q11 How much do you agree with the following statements?

| | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neither agree nor disagree (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly agree (5) |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I am aware of my options to continue my education after high school (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I am aware of the financial aid available to me to help pay for college (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I am aware of how the college admission process works (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I would be more aware of college if I lived closer to college campuses (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q12 When did you first get advice from your school about preparing for admission to college?

- 8th Grade or Sooner (1)
- 9th Grade (2)
- 10th Grade (3)
- 11th Grade (4)
- 12th Grade (5)
- I have not received advice from my school (6)

Q13 Do you have any older siblings?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To Besides yourself, who has helped you ...

Q14 Have any of your older siblings attended college?

- Yes (1)
- Yes, my sibling is currently in college (2)
- No (3)
- I don't know (4)

Q15 How frequently do you talk to your older sibling(s) about college or about your education?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Somewhat Frequently (4)
- Frequently (5)

Q16 Besides yourself, who has helped you most to make plans for the future? Please rank the following in order of influence:

- _____ Teacher (1)
- _____ Guidance Counselor (2)
- _____ Parent or Guardian (3)
- _____ Sibling (4)
- _____ Family Member (5)
- _____ Friend (6)
- _____ Other (7)

Q17 What are your parents expectations for you after high school?

- Attend a College or University (1)
- Receive Trade, Technical or Vocational Training (2)
- Work full-time (3)
- Work part-time (4)
- Join the military (5)
- Undecided (6)
- Attend college part-time (7)
- Other: (8) _____

Q18 How frequently do you talk to your parents or family about your education or plans for after graduating from high school?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Somewhat Frequently (4)
- Frequently (5)

Q19 How frequently do you discuss your plans for after high school at school, either with your friends or in your classes?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Somewhat Frequently (4)
- Frequently (5)

Q20 Have you ever visited a college campus?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To Have you attended a College Night or ...

Q21 Why have you visited a college campus? (Please select all that apply)

- I went to visit a friend or family member (1)
- I attended a sporting event (2)
- I attended a college day or campus tour (3)
- I'm interested in attending that college (4)
- Other: (5) _____

Q22 What college campuses have you visited?

Q23 Have you attended a college night or college information workshop at your high school?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- No, my school has not hosted one (3)
- No, but I plan to in the future (4)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Block

Q24 Did your parent(s) or family members attend the college night with you?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q25 Regardless of your future plans, please answer the following questions according to your beliefs and opinions about college

Q26 What do you believe to be the purpose of college? Please rank the following options in order of importance

- _____ To learn and develop academically (1)
- _____ To get a job (2)
- _____ To be qualified to receive a higher-paying job (3)
- _____ To make new friends (4)
- _____ To grow as an individual (5)

Q27 Please answer the following based on your beliefs about your community. Community refers to your home-town, the town you grew up in or the town you attend high school in.

| | Strongly disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neither agree nor disagree (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly agree (5) |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| My community values college education. (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| My community has encouraged me to pursue a college education (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Receiving a college education is expected in my community (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q28 Please answer the following based on your beliefs about your high school.

| | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neither agree nor disagree (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly agree (5) |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| My high school values college preparation (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| My high school has encouraged and supported me in the college application process (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| My high school expects me to continue my education after high school (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The teachers at my high school care about my success (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Most of my high school friends are attending college after graduation (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q29 Please answer the following based on your beliefs about your family and your personal beliefs.

| | Strongly disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neither agree nor disagree (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly agree (5) |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| My family values a college education (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| My family has encouraged me to pursue a college education (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| My family expects me to continue my education after graduation (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Please select "Strongly Disagree" (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I believe that a college education is valuable (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I believe that a college education will help me achieve my life goals (6) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I believe that a college education is not relevant to my life goals (7) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q30 Please select your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

| | Strongly disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Neither agree nor disagree (3) | Agree (4) | Strongly agree (5) |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I feel prepared for the college admissions process (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I feel prepared to succeed in college (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I feel I have the social support to succeed in college (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I feel I have the academic preparation to succeed in college (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I feel I have the funds or financial aid available to succeed in college (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I feel knowledgeable about expectations of college (6) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| College is a realistic option for me (7) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I feel I will be welcomed into the college community (8) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q31 Currently, how confident do you feel that your plans after graduation will help you reach your life goals?

- Not confident (1)
- Somewhat confident (2)
- Confident (3)
- Fairly confident (4)
- Very confident (5)

Q32 In your opinion, how prepared are you for the plans you have made for yourself for after graduation?

- Not prepared (1)
- Somewhat prepared (2)
- Prepared (3)
- Well prepared (4)
- Extremely well prepared (5)

Q33 What high school do you attend?

Q34 What grade are you in?

- 11th (1)
- 12th (2)

Q35 What is your race/ethnicity:

- White/Caucasian (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic or Latino (3)
- Non-Hispanic (4)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (5)
- Other: (6) _____

Q36 What gender do you identify as?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)
- Prefer Not to Answer (4)

Q37 Do you qualify for free or reduced school lunch?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Prefer Not to Answer (3)

Q38 What is the highest level of education achieved by your father?

- I don't know (1)
- Some High School (2)
- High School or G.E.D. (3)
- Some College (4)
- Trade or Vocational Training (5)
- Bachelor's Degree (6)
- Master's Degree (7)
- Professional Degree (Medical, Law, or Ph.D.) (8)

Q39 What is the highest level of education achieved by your mother?

- I don't know (1)
- Some High School (2)
- High School or G.E.D. (3)
- Some College (4)
- Trade or Vocational Training (5)
- Bachelor's Degree (6)
- Master's Degree (7)
- Professional Degree (Medical, Law, or Ph.D.) (8)

Q40 What is your GPA?

- Less than 1.0 (1)
- Between 1.0 and 2.0 (2)
- Between 2.0 and 3.0 (3)
- Between 3.0 and 3.5 (4)
- Between 3.5 and 4.0 (5)
- Greater than 4.0 (6)

Q41 Do you work outside of school?

- Yes, full-time (1)
- Yes, part-time (2)
- No (3)

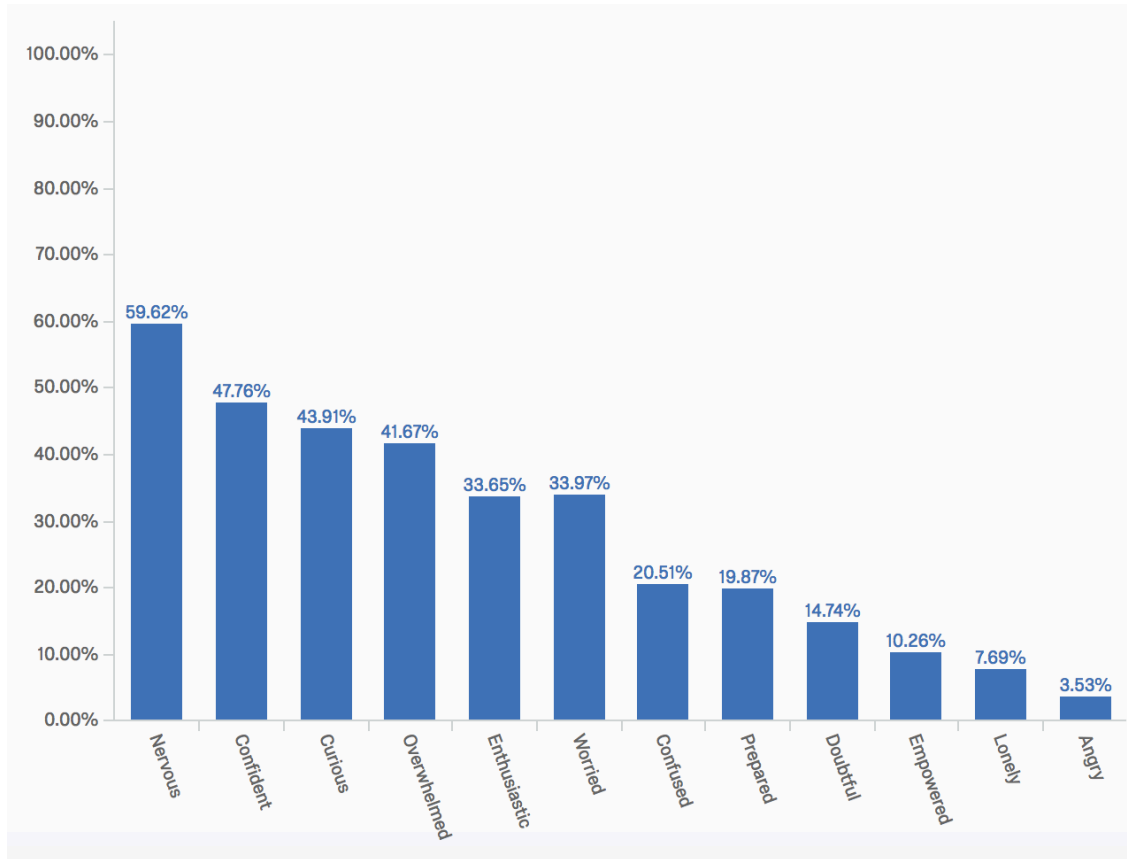
Administrator Interviews:

Interview transcripts are available upon request.

Appendix B: Supplementary Data and Figures

Section 1:

Figure 6.8: Student Responses to, “When thinking of your future plans, how do you feel?”, Students were invited to select all that applied.

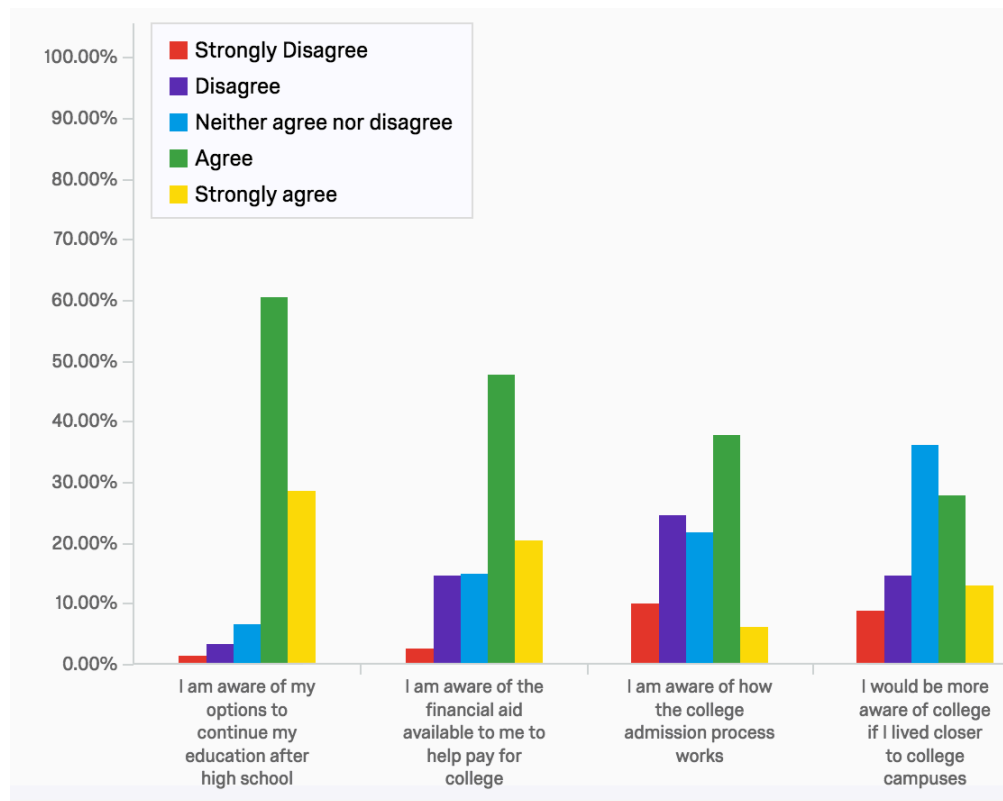


This figure reflects student emotions towards their future plans. As nearly 75% of students responded that they intended to pursue either a two-year or a four-year institution, this can be a proxy to students’ perceptions of higher education. This data demonstrates that rural students have both positive as well as negative emotions towards higher education – as is to be expected of nearly any high school student preparing to transition into higher education. It is normal and expected to feel both nervous and curious, or confident and overwhelmed.

When asked how they felt regarding their plans for after high school graduation, students were most likely to select the following emotions: nervous, confident, curious and overwhelmed. As students were invited to check all that applied and responses are so varied, it is likely that the same respondents may have selected a range of emotions themselves. For instance, one student may feel both nervous and curious. I draw on this data to argue that scholars cannot assume that rural students have negative perceptions of higher education or that they do not value higher education. Rather, scholars must recognize the diversity of rural student perspectives.

Section 2:

Figure 6.10: Student Agreement with varying Measures of College Awareness and Knowledge



This figure demonstrates student response to a number of statements that measure student perceptions of their own awareness of higher education norms and expectations.

This data provides further evidence for the student mismatch theory that is discussed in Chapter 6. It is puzzling that students reported such strong levels of awareness, given the perspectives that were shared by teachers, guidance counselors and community leaders in interviews. When students were asked if they felt they are aware of their options to continue their education after high school, 89% of students responded that they agree or strongly agree that they were aware of their options, with only 4.5% disagreeing. Similarly, when asked if they felt they are aware of the financial aid available to help finance their education, 68% reported that they agree or strongly agree, however, a notable 17% did indicate that they disagreed.

Students were fuzzier when asked specifically if they felt they are aware of the college admissions process. Only 43% of students reported that they agreed or strongly agreed, while 34.5% selected disagree or strongly disagree and 21.7% responded neutrally. Finally, it is striking that students tended to agree that they would be more aware of college if they lived closer to a college campus, with 40% selecting agree or strongly agree. When this data is contrasted with the attainment data and information shared in the administrator interviews, I suggest that it is further indication that students' expectations are skewed due to a lack of exposure, which consequently hinders their college knowledge.

Figure 6.11: Student Agreement with varying Measures of College Awareness and Knowledge

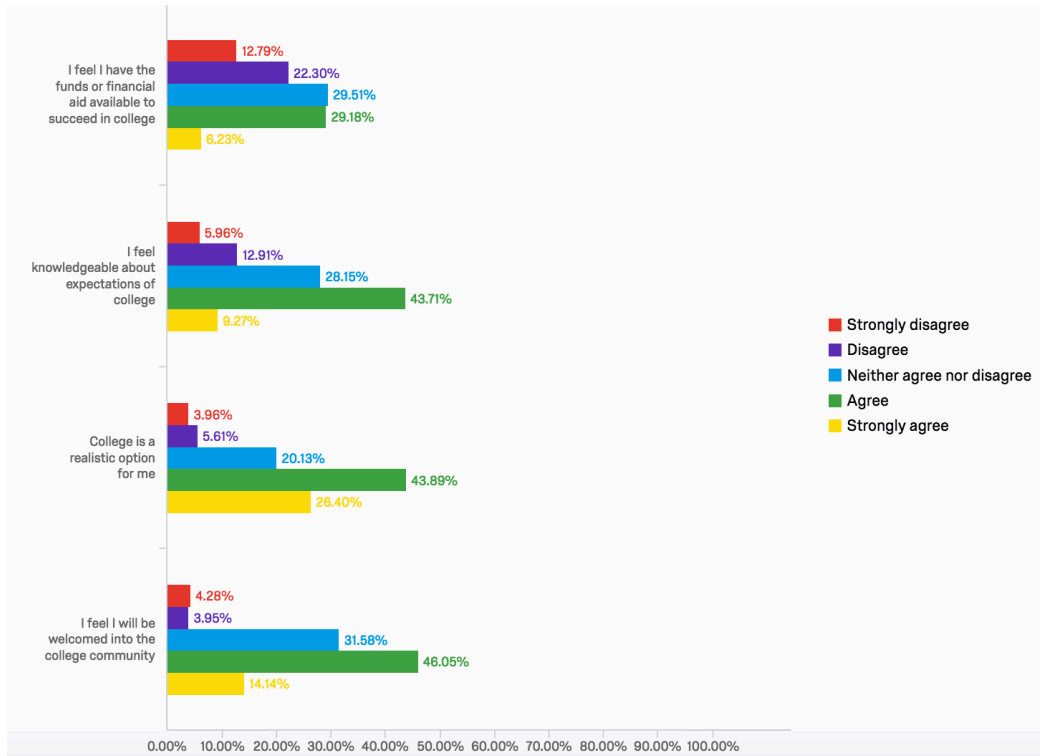
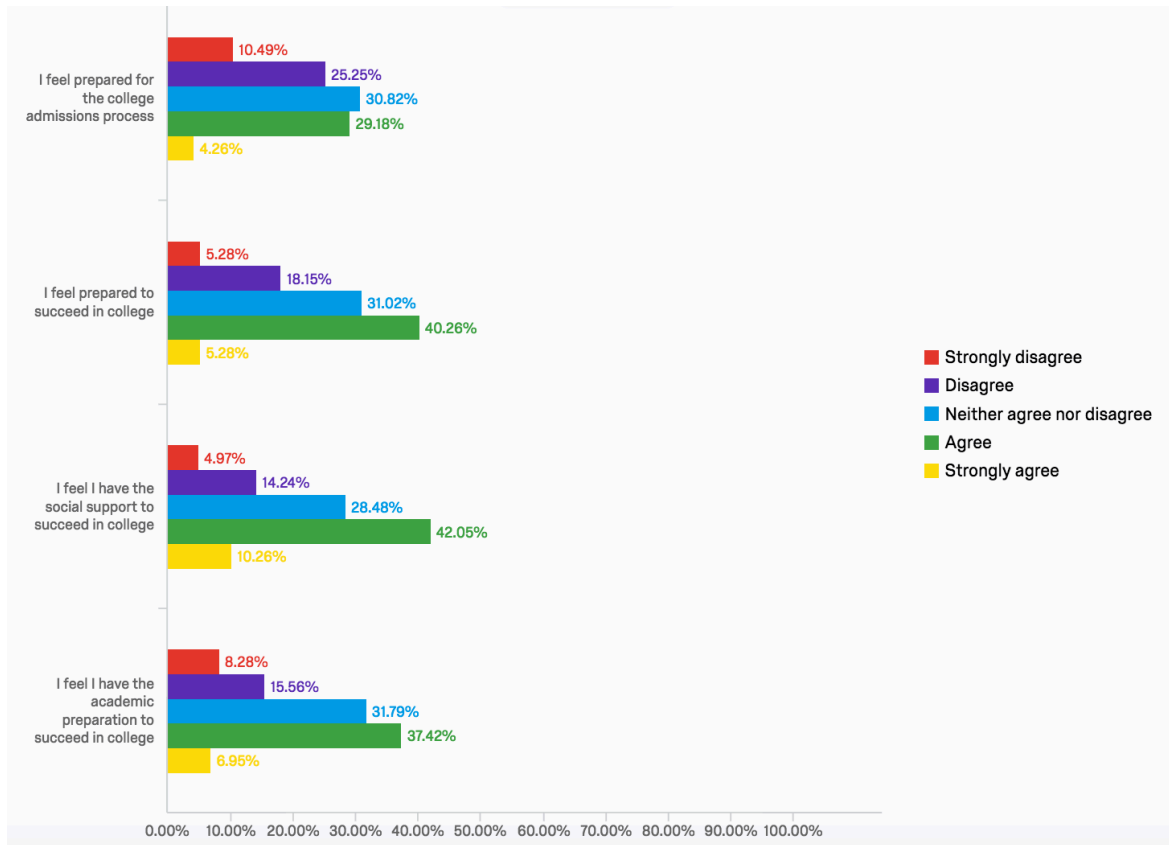


Figure 6.12: Student Agreement with varying Measures of College Awareness and Knowledge



Similar to figure 6.10, figures 6.11 and 6.12 demonstrate a number of student responses regarding their awareness and knowledge of higher education. Once again, student responses tend to report positive levels of awareness. When asked if they felt knowledgeable about the expectations of college, 53% of students selected agree or strongly agree, however, it is notable that 19% of student disagree or strongly disagree. Yet, it is still surprising, even puzzling, that a large percentage of students felt they are knowledgeable about the expectations of college. Similarly, a high 70.2% of students reported that they agree or strongly agree that college is a realistic option for them to pursue. This is in alignment with student aspirations that were discussed previously, but, is again surprising given the attainment data and stereotype that has come to be assumed of rural students. Furthering this, nearly 62% of students agree or strongly agree that they would be welcomed into the college community. This demonstrates that rural students, again, do value higher education and feel they are capable of succeeding.

However, it is notable that when asked if they felt they had the funds or the financial aid available to succeed in higher education, responses were varied with higher levels of disagreement. Approximately 35.09% of students responded that they agree or strongly agree, with 35.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and the remainder remaining neutral. This is significant, as discussed earlier, because skewed perceptions of the cost of higher education and lack of knowledge on the availability of financial aid tend to be significant barriers for low-income, first-generation and under-represented students. Thus, while student expectations may be skewed to underestimate the academic expectations of college, I draw on interview data to conclude that they overestimate the cost of higher education – both of which harm student attainment and student transitions.

When students were asked if they felt prepared and supported, in figure 6.12, responses were again varied but demonstrated higher levels of agreement. Students tended to respond positively that they had the social support and the academic preparation to succeed in college. Moreover, students tended to report that they felt prepared to succeed in college – even though there was a significantly lower level of agreement that they felt prepared for the college admissions process. Approximately 33.4% responded that they agree or strongly agree that they felt prepared for the college admissions process with 36% selecting that they disagree or strongly disagree and 31% responding neutrally. This is interesting again as it demonstrates that students’ expectations of what “college” looks like is skewed – and it begins to first reveal itself in their confusion of how the admissions process operates.

This data furthers the student mismatch phenomenon that is argued in Chapter 6 because of the high levels of agreement and notions of college awareness demonstrated by students. I draw on this data to contrast with the conclusions that are drawn from the administrator interviews to further argue that student expectations and knowledge of higher education is skewed as a result of their lack of exposure to higher education.