



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:

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David C. Kovac

This study explores the lived experiences of first-year, rural, Oregon students in their initial entry to college. Through qualitative research involving one-on-one interviews with 10 participants, the author examines the transition of rural students into higher education, common experiences of rural students in their first term of college, and perceived barriers to postsecondary education for this population. Collective narratives resulted in six themes of an unexpected emotional and social transition to college, motivations for enrolling in college, lack of social and co-curricular involvement, new exposure to diversity and consciousness of a rural identity, prioritization of labor over education in rural communities, and rural secondary school systems as both a barrier and a catalyst for college success. The results of this research provide insight into the experiences of this somewhat unknown social identity in higher education. Implications for future studies and suggestions for improving the college transition for rural students are discussed.

*Keywords:* rural college students, first-year students, rural America, rural education, rural youth out-migration

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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural Student College Transitions

by  
Karen M. Ast

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APPROVED:

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Major Professor, representing College Student Services Administration

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Dean of the College of Education

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Karen M. Ast, Author

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## Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural Student College Transitions

### CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Recent data indicate that 20% of all secondary public schools in the United States, constituting of about 10 million students, are located in rural communities (Provasnik et al., 2007; M. Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Enrollment in rural school districts has increased by more than 1.7 million students over the past decade (M. Strange et al., 2012). Rural enrollment is greatly outpacing urban enrollment, as between 1999 and 2009, the rural secondary enrollment growth rate was over 22 percent, with non-rural enrollment increasing by only 1.7 percent (M. Strange et al., 2012). Within Oregon, about one in 10 students attends a rural public school (M. Strange et al., 2012). As enrollment in rural school districts continues to rise, rural students must be considered in discussions about the college-going population (Maltzan, 2006). In 2004, the college enrollment rate in rural areas of all 18 to 24 year olds was 27%, compared to 37% in cities, 37% in suburban areas, and 32% in towns (Provasnik et al., 2007). While the high school completion gap is narrowing, the college completion gap of rural areas to urban areas is growing, and few adults in rural communities are attaining college degrees (Kusmin, 2011). This disparity in higher education enrollment between students from rural and urban areas is an increasing area of concern in the United States (Gibbs, 1998, 2003; Goreham, 2008a; M. Strange et al., 2012). As shown by increases in the rural student population and low college enrollment statistics, rural student issues must be determined for the educational success of these students.

Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) encourage further investigation into the experiences of rural youth in higher education, specifically into what factors shape college enrollment among

rural students. Similarly, other researchers (Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, & White, 2007) highlight the need for continued investigation on perceptions, goals, and motivations of rural youth when entering college. In Tinto's (1988) original theory on student transitions into college, he specifically mentions rural students' inability to transition well into institutions of higher education. Little research has been done since this was published to see if rural students are still facing the difficult transition that Tinto describes, yet the lack of rural youth enrolling in higher education highlights that there is still a transition problem. In response to the lack of data surrounding rural students' lived experiences and literature already written regarding rural students' barriers to entry into higher education, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of rural students who have recently transitioned from high school into a college or university.

### **Researcher Background and Subject Interest**

Coming from a rural background myself (specifically from Monte Vista, Colorado), I am interested in discovering other rural students' experiences in American educational systems. I understand how the culture, economy, and educational resources of those individuals who have grown up in a rural community might affect transitions into college, and I am interested in discovering how such transitions are manifested. Reflections on my path to college have led me to investigate the experiences influencing rural students' postsecondary aspirations. Specifically, my transition between a very small undergraduate institution to a mid-sized university for graduate school increased my curiosity in the vast differences in population size. From 2009 to 2012 I served as an enrollment counselor for a college in which I often visited rural high schools for recruitment purposes. My interactions with these students, few of which articulated a desire to enroll in higher education, furthered my interest in issues of rural education. It is my hope that

discovering the answers to fundamental questions of how to successfully transition rural students from high school to college, as highlighted in this research, will help more rural students achieve their goal of attending college.

As a researcher I also understand that my social identity, background, and values as an individual from a rural community (as well as other identities that I hold) show up in this study, a concept often referred to as relational competence (S. R. Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). I acknowledge the ways in which my values and background influence this research and the benefits and cautions that accompany this. My experiences as a rural student and current student affairs professional provide me with lived knowledge on the topic at hand, which will help to understand the experiences of rural students during interviews and draw accurate conclusions from the qualitative data.

### **Research Topic**

In student affairs today, much emphasis has been placed on ensuring all students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds are allowed access to higher education (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Although rural students have received little attention, this population has lower entrance rates into higher education than urban students and according to several researchers, requires the resources and expertise of student affairs professionals (Byun et al., 2012; Gibbs, 1998, 2003; Johnson & Strange, 2005; Maltzan, 2006; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Although much attention has been paid to educational issues facing inner city schools, equal or greater difficulties facing rural students are often overlooked (Collins, 2003). To meet educational goals set by policy makers, the Oregon University System (2012) advocates that intentional pathways to higher education for the rural student population must be created.

The education of rural students across the United States is a top priority for the U.S. Department of Education and the current Obama administration, as well as the state of Oregon (Oregon University System, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). National reports highlight that rural students as a population are struggling to enroll in systems of higher education (Lumina Foundation, 2013; M. Strange et al., 2012). Guiffrida (2008) advocates that further research is needed to better understand the experiences of rural students enrolled in college, specifically citing a need for more rich, qualitative data. Therefore, as an underrepresented population with unique needs, rural students must be included in student affairs discussions of inclusivity and open access to higher education.

### **Research Problem**

Although research has been done in various geographical areas related to rural student populations (Anderson, 1974; Davies, Crow, Hamilton, & Salois, 2006; Doyle, Kleinfeld, & Reyes, 2009; Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Lapan & Aoyagi, 2007; Lathrop, 1960; Maltzan, 2006; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2009; Parsons, 1992; Schonert, Elliott, & Bills, 1991), little literature exists surrounding the lived experiences of rural students in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. As states vary greatly in the economic and social characteristics of their rural communities (Gibbs, 2003; Hardre et al., 2007; Johnson & Strange, 2005), specific studies must be done in each area to discover characteristics of rural students in that culture (Guiffrida, 2008). A report by M. Strange et al. (2012) compares rural issues across states and highlights that rural Oregon students face tangible barriers when entering postsecondary institutions. Although early studies on rural students' barriers to college have been conducted (Anderson, 1974; Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Bayer, 1968), information regarding changes to the rural student experience from the 1970's to today have only recently

been revisited. More recent literature (Byun et al., 2012; Gibbs, 1998, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; M. Strange et al., 2012) focuses on quantitative studies regarding rural students, while few qualitative (Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Maltzan, 2006; Schultz, 2004) studies have been done to describe the college transition period from the students themselves. Some sources have begun to explore rurality as an identity, highlighting that, “some identity dimensions, like geography, are not developmentally grounded yet play a critical role in self-definitions” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 244). Being from a rural geographical area as a facet of identity is just beginning to be explored in depth in student affairs, meriting further research needs.

A recent article surrounding the college decision-making process highlighted that growing up in a rural environment affected the study participants’ college choice (Bergerson, Heiselt, & Aiken-Wisniewski, 2013). Specifically, the authors mention that, “The rural-urban dichotomy is not largely reflected in the literature on college choice. Our data indicate that these nuances in the backgrounds of students should be explored in further research” (Bergerson et al., 2013, p. 200). Although this study did not look specifically at rurality as a factor in the college decision process, the results emphasized that growing up in a rural environment did have tangible implications on these individuals’ educational future. As shown, there is a need to look further into the experiences of rural students as related to their path in higher education.

As college students become increasingly diverse, the rural student population will continue to be a group with specific needs related to rural culture, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, racial and ethnic identity, and college preparedness differences to be addressed by student affairs professionals. Growth in rural secondary school enrollment is outpacing urban enrollment growth in the United States and rural student needs are becoming increasingly

complex (M. Strange et al., 2012). By exploring these unique needs through the lived experiences of rural students, educators will be better equipped to respond to these issues.

This study focuses on rural student college entrance and early retention, as opposed to high school graduation rates or college graduation rates, since lower college attendance rates are the single most important factor in lower rural college completion rates (Gibbs, 1998). Rural students' entrance into higher education is a key point at which change can be made to improve the low college-going rates of this population. Kusmin (2011) highlights that the college completion between rural and urban areas is increasing, while high school completion gaps are showing improvement. Increasing research on college entrance rates for rural populations must be done to discover ways to close this gap. Researchers (Byun et al., 2012; Hardre et al., 2007), emphasize the need to investigate the motivations of rural students in transitioning into college, which this study explores through qualitative analysis. Given this information, this research focuses on the experiences of first-year, rural, Oregon students, who have recently transitioned from high school to college.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge and understanding about the experiences of first-year, rural, Oregon students upon recently transitioning from high school into a four-year institution. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do rural students describe their transition from high school to college?
- What are common lived experiences of rural students in their first term of college?
- What perceived barriers do rural students face when entering a postsecondary institution?



Through a series of one-on-one interviews related to these questions, this study intends to provide a better understanding of ways to improve the experiences of rural students in higher education and present best practices for working with this population.

### **Research Significance**

Rural students are considered as a part of Oregon's 40-40-20 goal, which states that by 2025 all adult Oregonians will have a high school diploma, 40% of which will have an associate's degree, and 40% of which will have a bachelor's degree or higher (Oregon University System, 2012). Currently, only about 29% of adult Oregonians have a bachelor's degree, 27% have an associate's degree, and 11% have not completed their high school education (Oregon University System, 2012). To move from these current statistics to goals of this initiative, rural areas must be taken into consideration. According to the Oregon University System (2011), rural Oregon includes 26 of Oregon's 36 counties, equivalent to about 80% of the state's land mass and 20% of its population. Therefore, the education of rural Oregonians is imperative to the attainment of the 40-40-20 goal and in a recent report, the Oregon University System (2012) specifically cites this population as at-risk of not enrolling in higher education. At the national level, rural students are considered an essential population to engage in college as a part of goal 2025 by the Lumina Foundation (2013), which strives to have 60% of Americans with some type of college degree by 2025. Specifically, this report cites that Oregon's economic future depends on producing more college graduates, which involves closing achievement gaps based on geographic region (Lumina Foundation, 2013). As shown, on the state and national level, success factors of rural students must be determined to reach educational and economic goals.

Experts predict that by the year 2020, 65% of all jobs will require postsecondary education and training (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Within Oregon specifically, it is

estimated that 70% of all jobs will require a college degree by this same time (Georgetown University, 2013). Without intentional pathways into college, rural populations will be unqualified for the future of the Oregon and national workforce. To meet the demands of tomorrow, success factors for rural youth must be determined today.

The outcomes of this study assist secondary and higher education professionals in learning the nuances of the rural student college transition from the students themselves. A better understanding of the experiences this population faces when leaving their hometown allows secondary counselors and teachers to encourage postsecondary aspirations in rural high school students. Qualitative research in this area also helps higher education professionals to tailor their educational practices to this population. Furthermore, results reveal new information for a broader population of students in the Pacific Northwest.

### **Definition of Terms**

**First-year student.** For the purposes of this study, first-year students are defined as those students who entered college in the fall following their attainment of a high school diploma and are considered freshmen according to class standing. Following host institution regulations, first-year freshmen have attained 44 credits or fewer (Oregon State University, 2013b).

**First-generation student.** First-generation students are defined as those whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or below (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). First-generation students do include those individuals whose parents enrolled in college initially, but failed to complete an associate's or bachelor's degree. This definition is commonly used in higher education research and is used in this study to describe background factors and demographic information of rural students.

**Full-time student.** A full-time student for the purpose of this research follows the definition of a full-time student by the Office of Financial Aid at the host institution, which is 12 credits or above per term for undergraduate students (Oregon State University, n.d.).

**Lived experience.** As the title and research questions suggest, the focus of this study is on the experiences of rural students as they are lived (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Specifically, this means that research emphasizes the stories of participants as they happen, in their first term of college, paying attention to time, context, and place (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

**Oregon resident.** As this study focuses solely on Oregon students, residency is determined by the records of the institution the student is attending. Residency from this source is based upon the Oregon Board of Higher Education administrative rules (Oregon University System, 2006).

**Rural.** For the purposes of this study, rural is determined based upon public school characteristics used by the National Center for Educational Statistics, which delineates three categories within a rural population as fringe, distant, and remote (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013b; Provasnik et al., 2007). For the purposes of this study, in order to eliminate high schools near urban centers, only distant and remote categories are utilized (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013b). Distant (locale code 42) consists of rural areas that are more than five miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as territories that are more than two and a half but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster (Provasnik et al., 2007). The second qualifying category within rural, remote (locale code 43), includes territories that are more than 25 miles from an urbanized and 10 miles from an urban cluster (Provasnik et al., 2007). These definitions are based off of public schools. Therefore, this study defines rural students based upon the secondary school they attended, not

their physical home address. A full list of all public schools for the state of Oregon can be found online through the Common Core of Data (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013b). Other categories as determined by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Provasnik et al., 2007) include city, suburban, and town, which are used for comparison methods throughout the research.

**Rurality.** Throughout this thesis, rurality is used as an comprehensive term to describe the contrast between rural and urban life (Goreham, 2008b). Specific to the research project at hand, rural has been defined earlier, yet rurality includes the ecological, occupational, and sociocultural definitions of rural and is a more broadly used (Goreham, 2008b). Rurality includes these multidimensional concepts in addition to an individual's beliefs of rural America based upon their personal values and knowledge of rural areas (Goreham, 2008b).

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As this study seeks to describe the lived experiences of students from rural high schools in their initial entry into higher education, past research regarding this population must be considered. As early as the 1960's (Bayer, 1968), researchers discovered that being from a small high school has tangible effects the completion of a college degree. Further research on students from rural areas (Anderson, 1974; Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976) was completed in the 1970's, yet there has been a large gap in literature on this population from this period until the 2000's. This literature review describes the most recent research regarding rural student populations, as recent studies are most relevant to this topic. In addition, research regarding first-year student experiences and entry into higher education are discussed, as this study looks specifically at rural first-year students. Described below are trends, barriers, and experiences that have been cited in the literature for rural first-year students entering college.

### **High School Graduation and College Entry**

Gibbs, Swaim, and Teixeira (1998) edited one of the most comprehensive studies on rural education, offering a detailed look at issues facing rural students across the United States. Chapters provide a thorough description of the challenges faced by rural students. In this book, Paasch and Swaim (1998) challenge past claims that rural students are graduating at lower rates than their urban peers. Decades ago, rural student high school graduation rates were lacking as compared to urban counterparts, yet recently more rural schools have similar graduation rates to urban schools (Gibbs, 1998, 2003; Goreham, 2008c). Recent data highlight the average rural high school graduation rate is 77.5% (M. Strange et al., 2012), yet this varies depending on geographical region (Gibbs, 1998). Nationally these rates are slightly lower, with 76.3% of all

high school students attaining a high school diploma (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Within Oregon, in 2009 78.2% of students graduated from rural Oregon high schools, while all public high schools in the state averaged a 76.5% graduation rate (Snyder & Dillow, 2012; M. Strange et al., 2012). As shown, rural youth are showing comparable high school graduation rates to other public school students, both nationally and in Oregon.

Although rural students are graduating from high school at equivalent rates, this population is less likely than non-rural students to pursue and enroll in postsecondary education (Gibbs, 1998; Goreham, 2008a; Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Oregon University System, 2011; M. Strange et al., 2012). Most early studies (Anderson, 1974; Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976) and recent studies (Holmes & Dalton, 2008; M. Strange et al., 2012) are consistent in highlighting that rural students are not enrolling in college at the same rates as urban students. Recent data indicate that although the national college enrollment rate is 37%, this statistic is only 27% for rural students (Provasnik et al., 2007). One report specific to Oregon cites that students from rural Oregon high schools are 24% less likely to participate in a four-year college than their urban counterparts (Oregon University System, 2011). Retention rates of this student population while in college is difficult to determine, as rural student populations are not often tracked after college enrollment, yet Gibbs et al. (1998) advocate that few differences exist between rural and urban students in degree completion, despite large differences in entrance rates. As shown, although rural students are completing high school and college at comparable rates to their urban peers, they are significantly lacking in college entrance rates.

Not all sources are consistent in claims that rural students are lacking in college aspirations or enrollment. One study based on an Iowa youth sample highlights that rural students were actually more likely to enroll in college than their urban peers and more likely to

successfully complete a degree (Schonert et al., 1991). This study was limited based on a small, geographical sample size, but is informative in highlighting benefits of attending a rural school that may lead to more confidence interacting with professors and more academic preparedness due to personalized attention in small high schools (Schonert et al., 1991).

A few select studies show no statistical difference between the college-going rates of urban or rural students (Bayer, 1968; Hardre et al., 2007). Bayer (1968) highlights there is little correlation between high school size and college completion, yet this study holds little validity given the time context in relation to today's students. Looking strictly at academic motivation differences between rural and urban students in entering college, Hardre et al. (2007) determine that all students, regardless of geographical background, seem to be influenced by the same motivational factors of classroom climate and quality of instruction.

A comprehensive report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (Provasnik et al., 2007) highlights details of all academic trends in rural America. Statistics from these reports are used extensively throughout this research and have proved helpful in looking at national trends of rural students. Other recent studies compare the issues of rural education between states (Beeson & Strange, 2003; M. Strange et al., 2012). Strange et al. (2012) in their most recent report cite the South, Southwest, and parts of Appalachia as areas in which rural education should be a top priority, based on factors such as poverty, high school graduation rates, funding per pupil, and enrollment trends. Rural education in Oregon is considered as notable in terms of the national importance ranking, with a high percentage of rural ethnic minority students and increasingly high rural poverty rates (M. Strange et al., 2012). M. Strange et al. (2012) ranks Oregon 28<sup>th</sup> out of all states in terms of the priority of improving rural education. This indicates that in comparison to other states, Oregon is facing important, but not extreme challenges with

rural communities. As shown, rural education is a national priority, and the state of Oregon is facing certain issues in educating the rural student population that must be addressed.

Some sources have broken down rural youth into more detailed categories, highlighting the diversity within this group. McGrath, Swisher, Elder, and Conger (2009), delineate rural individuals by professional-managerial youth, farm youth, and lower-status youth, highlighting that not all rural youth face barriers, but select groups do. Results show that overall, rural youth are lacking in college enrollment, but those children from farm families and higher socioeconomic statuses are enrolling at rates comparable to urban students (McGrath et al., 2009). Both this study and a study with the Iowa Youth and Families Project (Elder & Conger, 2000) highlight that farm youth tend to have higher social and financial capital, which makes college entry more accessible for these students. Both of these research studies were based in Iowa, an area in which rural youth have been fairly successful in enrolling in college in comparison to other areas. Similarly, Schultz (2004) in his dissertation looks only at first-generation, rural students from agricultural backgrounds, highlighting that this specific population has many problems early in their college careers. Past and current studies on rural education vary greatly in terms of their focus, scope, size, and purpose, with most highlighting the poor state of rural college student enrollment, warranting more research in this topic in secondary and higher education.

### **Cited Reasons for Low Rural College Student Enrollment**

Reasons for the low enrollment rates of rural youth into colleges and universities are complex and varied across geographic regions, yet certain trends tend to permeate this population. Many of these factors deal with an intersection of identities outside of rurality, which have a direct effect on this population's future goals. Highlighting the complexity of rural



student issues, M. Strange et al. (2012) state, “rural education frustrates some who wish it would conform to its image of simplicity. Its geographical dispersion, its small and decentralized institutions, its isolation, and the cultural conservatism of many of its communities make rural education a conundrum” (p. 21). As shown, the barriers rural students are facing in college enrollment are very complex. This literature review highlights the main trends facing rural first-year students, including cultural constraints, first-generation status, low socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic identity, rural labor markets, secondary college preparation, and geographic isolation.

**Cultural constraints.** Understanding the barriers rural students face must be considered in terms of the culture of rural communities. Geert Hofstede (1991), a pioneer in cross-cultural communication research, defines culture as mental programming, highlighting that, “every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime” (p. 4). For rural students, this indicates that values, ways of thinking, and behaviors are determined by the experience of being raised in a rural area. In many ways, the culture of a rural community hinders post-secondary aspirations in the youth of these areas due to a variety of family and historical implications (Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Maltzan, 2006). Parents have a great influence on students in rural areas and are often less inclined to encourage educational attainment (Legutko, 1998; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1993). One qualitative study that focused on the college decision making process for women indicated that the participants themselves were able to identify that education was not a top priority for most adults in their community (Bergerson et al., 2013). In addition, Blackwell and McLaughlin (1999) highlighted that overall, rural students tend to desire less education than urban students.

This indicates that many rural students are the first to attend college in their family, limiting college aspirations.

Rural Americans also tend to be committed to their communities and have little desire to leave (Holmes & Dalton, 2008). Ties between generations, extended families, and community members are often strong because of the close proximity of these individuals (Elder & Conger, 2000). Especially in farming communities, Elder and Conger (2000) highlight that rural communities tend to have a general value consensus, or shared set of cultural norms. Strong social ties along with these value sets create a set culture that can be more resistant to change.

Rural culture tends to be more religious and conservative than urban communities (Evans et al., 2010), leaving rural students to experience greater culture shock when entering colleges in more highly populated communities. Rural means more than just small and remote, it means these individuals are separated from modern progressive influences (M. Strange, 2011). Students who consider enrolling in college must be willing to make the cultural and mental shift into a new and diverse progressive environment. Pizzolato (2003) even highlights that rural students may face social isolation when their college aspirations become known in their communities. Although it varies between communities, many rural communities do not have a strong college-going culture, hindering the ability of these students to resist cultural norms (Pizzolato, 2003). Due to cultural constraints, many rural youth will stay in their local area instead of traveling to attend college.

Cultural capital can be described as, “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2). In this, rural students tend to struggle entering higher education because often they lack certain advantages due to intersections of

poverty, ethnic heritage, and first-generation status, as described in this literature review. For many rural students, college is a foreign culture, filled with great diversity, new technologies, and increased academic demands. Successfully transitioning to college means these students must adapt to this new culture, or return back to their home environments.

**First-generation status.** National data on students who are the first in their family to attend college has shown that these students are at a distinct disadvantage in accessing and succeeding in institutions of higher education (Chen, 2005). Generally, the greater level of parent education, the greater the educational aspirations of the student to enroll in higher education (Astin & Oseguera, 2012). Overall, first-generation students are less likely than students with college-educated parents to complete a bachelor's degree, even after taking into account student demographics, academic preparation, and college performance (Chen, 2005). As shown, first-generation students remain consistently disadvantaged in the college environment.

Rural students specifically are more likely than urban students to be the first in their family to attend college, resulting in a lack of parental support and knowledge regarding entering higher education (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Byun et al., 2012; Gibbs, 1998; Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Legutko, 1998; Maltzan, 2006; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Smith et al., 1993). Nationally, the percentage of adults with college degrees has been rising, with 30% having completed a bachelor's degree or higher in 2010 (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). In rural areas, about 15% of the adult population had attained a bachelor's degree by this same year (Gallardo & Bishop, 2012). Within Oregon, most recent data indicate that only 12% of adults over the age of 25 have achieved a bachelor's degree in rural counties, while 19% of this same age group has their bachelor's degree in urban counties (Oregon University System, 2012). Although nationally the percentage of adults in rural areas with college degrees has increased substantially

over time, the gap between urban and rural areas has widened between 1970 and 2010 (Gallardo & Bishop, 2012). As shown by statistics and cultural nuances, rural youth are often in environments where few adults, including their parents, have earned bachelor's degrees, limiting those individuals encouraging the pursuit of higher education.

Parental involvement, or lack thereof, in rural youth contributes to students' performance on entrance exams and perceptions of higher education (Smith et al., 1993). One study cites low priority among parents for academic achievement as one of the greatest challenges of motivating students to attend college (Holmes & Dalton, 2008). First-generation students often face a lack of support from their parents in transitioning to college, as their parents are not familiar with the process (Stoll, 2012). Specifically, looking at students who were both from rural areas and considered to be first-generation students, Schultz (2004) found that rural students' college motivations were influenced greatly by parent attitude. For those students who lacked parent encouragement of college enrollment, overall college goals were less clear. In addition, research done in rural Pennsylvania communities looked at both parent and sibling educational attainment, showing that students who had a parent or sibling who attended college were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education themselves (Legutko, 1998). Elder and Conger (2000) indicate that parenting in rural areas is more of a community enterprise and many adults other than direct guardians greatly influence youth aspirations. With so few adults in rural areas with college degrees, rural students who greatly rely on adults for guidance are often not encouraged to enroll in higher education.

Family members often have a persuasive impact on the decision of a student to stay in their rural community, whether this is positive or negative (Holmes & Dalton, 2008). Shamah (2009) indicates the aspirations parents have for their children has great implications in

determining the goals of rural youth. In one study by the Higher Education Research Institute, first generation students were shown to desire more involvement of their parents in their lives than other populations (Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2007). In this, rural, first-generation students may desire to be supported by their parents in their decision to attend college, yet this support is lacking from some rural parents unable to provide this guidance. Even those parents who encourage their students to enroll in college may lack knowledge of the process.

Stoll (2012) highlights that college campuses are designed for individuals who possess familiarity with the values of higher education. Rural students, because of their family background, tend to be less familiar with these values. Using cross-cultural adaption theory, Orbe (2008) indicates that first-generation students may face additional stressors in transitioning from an environment where education is not shown as important, to being immersed in a college environment. Parents, who are such an integral part of a secondary students' cultural environment, have a great influence on their students' college aspirations. As shown, a low priority of academic achievement or lack of knowledge on the college process by parents in rural areas is one of the greatest challenges in encouraging rural youth to pursue higher education.

**Low socioeconomic status.** Rural students tend to be from a lower class and face more financial difficulty than urban students, negatively affecting their entry into higher education (Byun et al., 2012; Goreham, 2008a; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Paasch & Swaim, 1998; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Sewell, 1963; M. Strange et al., 2012). Although low parent income and the rising cost of tuition is a barrier for many first-year students in entering postsecondary institutions (Astin, 1993; Crissman Ishler, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2004), much literature highlights that this issue is especially pressing for rural youth and communities. One press release (Mahaffey, 2012) indicates that two out of every five students enrolled in rural districts are living

in poverty, a rate which has increased rapidly in the past 10 years. Johnson and Strange (2005) cite that, “poverty is the single strongest and most persistent threat to high student achievement” (p. 6). Literature from as far back as the 1960’s (Sewell, 1963) highlights that rural students are not enrolling in higher education simply because they cannot afford the costs associated with college. A city administrator from one rural community in Oregon (Mathieson, Spencer, and Engricht, 2013) regarding this issue states:

There is a reasonable level of expectation for some students to go to college, however with the poverty rate, there is also a large expectation among the high school students that they won’t go to college, or if they do go to college, it’s going to be while they are working and on their own or through loans or grants or scholarships, or whatever else they can find because their parents aren’t going to be able to support them.

As shown, poverty places great pressure on rural youth to either struggle to gain funding, or choose to not attend college entirely. Few rural families plan on paying for their children’s education, and therefore do not have funding set aside for this purpose (Shamah, 2009). In one study, rural students experienced low levels of family financial support which led to them either not choosing to enroll in college, or choosing to apply very late in the process, often right before college began (Schultz, 2004). When parents are unwilling to cover college expenses, rural youth are then expected to cover costs of college on their own, yet many are unable to do so.

Comparing rural issues among states, the percentage of students who qualify for federally-funded free or reduced price meal programs is used to measure rural student poverty (M. Strange et al., 2012). This research highlights that 41% of rural students participate in this program, ranging from 7.2% in Connecticut to 80% in New Mexico (M. Strange et al., 2012). Almost half of Oregon rural students are considered in poverty, and the poverty rate has

increased in recent years (M. Strange et al., 2012). Due to the high costs of college applications, tuition, and transportation, many rural students are unable to afford to enroll in higher education.

As tuition prices continue to increase throughout the country, financial aid and scholarships become an increasingly important aspect of choosing a college (Higher Education Research Institute, 2013; Perna & Titus, 2004). Due to financial barriers, many students enroll and persist in specific colleges through scholarship and financial aid offers (Hossler & Anderson, 2005). As cost at public universities is often influenced by whether the student is a resident of that state or not, this also influences students' college choice process. As shown, not only can a lack of financial resources deter students from entering college, but the amount of financial aid and scholarships can be influential in determining which specific school a student chooses to attend.

Low socioeconomic status results in other negative trends surrounding rural students aside from the obvious inability to afford college expenses. College educators and professionals tend to be disproportionately from higher income backgrounds, leaving poor, rural students with a lack of mentors in higher education settings who can relate to their situation (Oldfield, 2007). Lower socioeconomic status also has a strong connection with underachievement academically, leading this population to face additional struggles in the classroom (Oldfield, 2007). The initial financial barriers to higher education, coupled with constraints caused by other working-class issues places additional stress on rural students who desire to attain a college degree.

**Racial and ethnic identity.** Racial and ethnic factors relating to rural students vary depending on geographical area, with many rural students identifying as a racial or ethnic minority (Byun et al., 2012; Goreham, 2008a; Khattri et al., 1997; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006; M. Strange et al., 2012). For the purposes of this study, the

terms race and ethnicity are used interchangeably. For first-year students in general, many studies have found it difficult to separate out the influences of race and ethnicity from other identity factors, yet minority students have been shown to face unique transitional issues that often lead to lower enrollment and persistence in college (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Astin, 1993). With increasing numbers of racially diverse students on college campuses today, these demographic issues continue to be of high priority for institutions of higher education (Lumina Foundation, 2013; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson III, 2012). The struggles of racial minorities to retain to their second year and beyond also affects degree attainment rates of these ethnic groups, with African American, Hispanic, and Native American groups all showing much lower degree attainment rates than White adults (Lumina Foundation, 2013). Nationally, for all first-year students, pre-college characteristics as related to ethnicity have tangible implications for enrollment and retention in college.

Trends highlight that rural America is becoming increasingly diverse, due in large part to an increase in the Hispanic population (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006). Between 1999 and 2009, rural Hispanic secondary student enrollment increased nationally by 150%, with only Massachusetts experiencing a decrease (M. Strange et al., 2012). In Oregon, there has been a growth of the English language learner Hispanic population, adding a cultural and language barrier to higher education (M. Strange et al., 2012). According to the Oregon University System (2012), it is expected that the high school graduating class of 2021 in Oregon will be about 23% Hispanic or Latino/a. Research on Asian and African American rural students are mixed, with many results highlighting that these groups are just as likely as White rural students to enter college (Gibbs, 1998; M. Strange et al., 2012). Through an



intersection of being from a rural community and a marginalized ethnic group, these students face additional barriers to higher education.

In rural communities dominated by White ethnic groups, the lack of opportunity of rural students to interact with people of different backgrounds can limit their development (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). Maltzan (2006) highlights that even White rural students are facing barriers to higher education related to transitioning into a more diverse college environment. Especially in those rural communities that are fairly homogeneous racially, rural students' lack of experiences with diversity may hinder their preparedness for a more diverse college environment, making this transition to college especially difficult for this population (Parsons, 1992). Through an intersection of rurality and ethnicity, both marginalized and dominant racial groups of rural students face complex issues when entering higher education. This is due to traditional racial barriers as well as developmental obstacles as related to diversity.

**Rural labor markets.** Rural areas tend to have more low-paying, labor-intensive jobs, many of which do not require a college degree, resulting in a lack of college-going culture for rural students (Bergerson et al., 2013; Goreham, 2008a; Paasch & Swaim, 1998). Shifts in rural economies due to globalization have changed the career landscape for youth in these areas (Shamah, 2009). A lack of job availability, as well as a lack of higher education opportunities in rural areas contributes to a movement of high wealth families into urban areas, keeping entry-level positions in rural communities. Low numbers of professional adults with college degrees to serve as role models for rural youth further hinders the number of students who aspire to go to college (McGranahan & Ghelfi, 1998; Smith et al., 1993). Due to the lack of educated college adults in rural areas, students are less exposed to roles that require bachelor's degrees (Smith et

al., 1993). These economic and social factors in rural areas are not pushing students toward college enrollment as they are in more urban areas.

One research study looking specifically at female students' motivations to enroll in college highlighted that career needs pushed participants to enroll in higher education (Bergerson et al., 2013). This article also highlights the differing motivations in female students from rural and urban areas to pursue higher education, with potential for a career playing a role in both, yet for rural females, they noted pursuing education for a career despite the lack of support they had from their rural communities. As shown, the opportunity to gain a career after college serves as strong motivation for enrolling in college, yet this motivation is not as strong for rural communities due to the demographics of rural labor markets.

In addition, those rural students who do manage to persist and graduate from college rarely return to their rural home communities, as few high-paid, high-skill jobs are available for college graduates in rural areas (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Elder & Conger, 2000; Greenberg, Teixeira, & Swaim, 1998; McGranahan & Ghelfi, 1998). Low-wage jobs that do not require college degrees tend to be found in rural areas, therefore, those rural youth without degrees tend to stay in their home communities, while those with college degrees leave to more populated areas (McGranahan & Beale, 2002). This phenomenon, known as the out-migration of rural youth (Mills & Hazarika, 2001), reinforces the cycle of low education levels and low college-going rates in these areas, as rural communities continue to lack in educational and social capital over multiple generations. The percentage of adults in urban areas with bachelor's degrees has increased substantially quicker than that of rural areas, partly because rural individuals often move to more populated areas once they get their degree (Gallardo & Bishop, 2012). One study found that although many rural youth hope to return to their rural communities as adults, lack of

economic opportunities often keep them from returning (Shamah, 2009). Shamah (2009) also found that many rural youth see returning home as a sign of failure. Rural communities, therefore, are faced with the dilemma that success of rural youth almost always accompanies educational levels or careers that remove rural youth from their home communities.

**Secondary college preparation.** Across the literature, high school grades and test scores have been shown to be the strongest predictors of academic success and degree attainment in college (Adelman, 2006; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). In general, the higher students' high school grades and standardized test scores upon entering a university, the better their academic performance (Adelman, 2006; Astin, 1993). Therefore, those first-year students with high academic scores in high school tend to enter and persist in higher education. In order to best prepare students for college success, adequate academic preparation must occur at the secondary level.

In rural communities, many of the difficult issues facing students are a result of their high school education (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Holmes & Dalton, 2008). Due to the diversity of rural school systems across the United States, it is difficult to pinpoint specific downfalls in rural districts. Academic preparation due to low diversity of courses, especially advanced courses, a lack of funding, and few college partnerships tend to lead to additional enrollment struggles for this population. Adding to the complexity of this issue, there are many benefits of attending small rural schools, which must also be taken into consideration when analyzing rural students' higher education aspirations.

**Academic preparation.** A lack of secondary academic preparation and educational resources has traditionally been cited as a barrier to rural student college enrollment (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Doyle et al., 2009; Greenberg et al., 1998). Rural schools tend to be smaller,

less specialized in terms of unique academic programs, and offer a less diverse curriculum than urban schools, resulting in a lack of educational resources for these students (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998). In general, students who attend underfunded high schools, which are often found in rural communities, are less likely to have the academic preparation needed to attend college (Perna, 2000). Often rural students have fewer opportunities to take college coursework and Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Oregon University System, 2012). Since teachers must have at least a master's degree to teach AP courses, rural school districts are often unable to offer these courses due to lack of educational attainment by rural educators (Oregon University System, 2012). Recruiting and retaining quality teachers in rural school districts can be difficult due to high living costs, low salaries, and the challenge of luring teachers to a small community with limited amenities and few college-educated peers (M. Strange, 2011). Therefore turnover of teachers in rural school districts is high (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b), resulting in teaching inconsistencies that hinder students. Due to a lack of diverse coursework and an inability to employ quality teachers, rural students often suffer academically.

Many rural schools are using distance education courses to satisfy the need for more qualified teachers and increased advanced coursework (Hannum, Irvin, Banks, & Farmer, 2009). A Canadian study found that rural students who enrolled in multiple online courses during high school were significantly more likely to persist in college than their peers who did not take distance courses (Dodd, 2009). Online coursework has been shown to help prepare rural students for the academic rigors of college. Challenges still exist, as one study highlights that rural schools lack teacher support, an understanding of distance education, and technical requirements such as internet access and updated computers (Irvin, Hannum, Varre, & Farmer,

2010). Although positive steps are being taken toward expansion in online offerings, many rural students are unable to take more advanced online courses due to financial, human, and implementation constraints. In response to issues, national policies and grants through the Rural Education Initiative have attempted to provide needed support and funding to rural school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Even with these national policies in place, many rural districts struggle to gain the fiscal, physical, technological, and personnel resources needed to empower students to pursue higher education.

***Lack of funding and college partnerships.*** A lack of funding for small and rural schools often leads to a lack of college-going resources overall. Although programs such as the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) have allowed rural schools additional opportunity to secure federal funding, many rural districts continue to struggle to provide the resources needed for student success (Collins, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Rural high schools students often suffer from a lack of college resources to aid them in navigating the college enrollment process (Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Paasch & Swaim, 1998). In one older study, rural high school students were often making college decisions with little assistance from high school administrators, as most participants had counselors who were less than half-time (Yarbrough, 1996). As shown, guidance counselors in rural areas are often responsible for much more than college counseling, hindering their ability to focus on educating students on college and financial aid (Paasch & Swaim, 1998; Perna, 2000). In addition, Holmes and Dalton (2008) mention how few college admission representatives visit rural schools, resulting in a lack of knowledge for those students about higher education. This leads to a lack of a college-going culture in rural high schools, as students are overall unaware of how to navigate the college enrollment process.

***Benefits to rural schools.*** There are also many academic benefits to a rural school environment, including small classes and personalized attention from teachers (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). Pupil to teacher ratio is normally lower in rural districts than in cities or suburbs, allowing for a more effective learning experience (M. Strange, 2011). Some sources (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Greenberg et al., 1998) cite that despite lacking in resources at the secondary level, rural students are just as academically prepared to enter the college environment as urban students. Rural high school students perform just as well academically, according to national standardized tests, as urban students (Gibbs, 2003). Academic preparedness of rural youth is one area which has shown improvement over time, resulting in comparable rates of high school achievement between urban and rural youth. These results highlight that there are benefits and not only weaknesses to rural secondary schools. The success of rural youth due to secondary educational factors varies between schools and rural individuals, indicating that rural youth are often just as academically prepared as their urban counterparts, yet still struggle to enroll in college due to other constraints.

***Geographic isolation.*** Rural areas by definition are known for small population sizes and large distance from urban centers. Previous research has shown the distance is a factor in enrollment and retention for first-year students in general, especially those from low income families (Long, 2004). Rural students face additional issues related to this geographic isolation in entering higher education due to financial and college resource barriers (Gibbs, 2003; Goreham, 2008a). As urban areas are typically the sites for colleges, it becomes more expensive for rural youth to travel. Costs increase since rural students often cannot live at home while attending college (Johnson & Strange, 2005). Most rural students live in counties without a college, resulting in a lack of concurrent high school courses and an overall college-going culture

(Holmes & Dalton, 2008). To overcome barriers of geographic isolation, educators have advocated for an increase in community colleges in rural areas (Greenberg et al., 1998; McGranahan & Ghelfi, 1998; Oregon University System, 2012). By bringing college-level courses physically into rural areas, students have greater access to advisors, computers, tutoring, and career guidance. The presence of community colleges in rural areas also creates an overall awareness of the benefits to college enrollment. Geographic isolation overlaps with many other issues, as this affects access to goods and services, and the ability to recruit quality teachers and informative college admissions representatives to these communities.

### **First-year Rural Student College Experiences**

In relation to the research questions, common experiences of students in their initial entry to college are essential to overall understanding. Since little qualitative research has been recently done surrounding the experiences of rural students in college, much of this literature review covers experiences of traditional-aged college students in their first term, not only rural students. The common disconnect between student expectations and actual realities of college are covered, as well as two factors that have significant impacts on student enrollment and retention: academic and social environments.

**The expectations-experience gap.** In many respects, what students experience in their first year of college is very different than what they had expected prior to enrolling (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Examples of misinterpretations of expectations often occur in hours needed to study outside of class, interactions with professors, academic rigor, and diversity experiences (Kuh, 2005). Known as the freshman myth, this concept highlights how first-year students often overstate what they plan to do in college, resulting often in a great disparity between professor and student expectations for academic workloads. Specific to curricular

involvement outside the classroom, many students expect to actively participate in student organizations, yet only a portion of these students actually end up being highly involved in college (Kuh, 2005). Similarly, most first-year students expect to receive higher grades in college coursework than they actually do, despite the fact that they anticipate needing to study more (Kuh, 2005). This may be partially due to grade inflation at the secondary school level, but may also be a result of low academic preparation for college-level assignments.

In one of the only qualitative studies conducted on the early experiences of rural college students, Schultz (2004) indicates that rural students also experience college differently than they had expected, specifically in a realization of the need to form social relationships and integrate into a new culture. In addition, this study indicated that only a few participants struggled academically in college, yet several noted the great affect that dimensions of a much large physical campus size had on their experience (Schultz, 2004). This study is limited in scope and focuses only those students from agriculture backgrounds who are also first-generation, but does provide some qualitative information on the experiences specific to rural populations. As shown, in many ways student expectations of what college will be like are inaccurate, resulting in an environment that is often much more difficult to adjust to than they had predicted.

**Academic trends.** Evenbeck and Jackson (2005) highlight that many students enter college and are placed in remedial courses due to a lack of academic preparation at the secondary level. Recent data indicate that during the 2007-2008 academic year, 21% of first-year undergraduate students at public four-year institutions were enrolled in remedial courses mandated by the institution to ensure students had the necessary academic skills to complete college-level assignments (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013a). In addition, students are more often citing being late to class often and most students are spending less than



six hours on homework per week (Higher Education Research Institute, 2006). As high school graduates continue to enroll in college at higher numbers, fewer of them have the preparatory work and study skills needed to succeed academically. Although, as high school grade point average and test scores continue to be the number one predictor of college success (Astin, 1993; Schilling & Schilling, 2005), those students who did well in high school have a greater chance of success in college. Entering students also tend to feel overwhelmed by the academic expectations in college, citing academic concerns to be their greatest area of stress in college (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). As shown, the academic environment of college tends to be sharply different than the secondary schools of traditional first-year students, causing an increase in need for remedial coursework and high stress as related to academic expectations.

**Social integration and involvement.** High student involvement, interactions with peers, and experiences in curricular activities have been shown to increase academic success and student satisfaction (Astin, 1984). Tinto (1988) indicates that college persistence arises from both the academic and social realm of college and that a lack of either puts students at risk of leaving the university. More recent literature surrounding the first-year student experience highlights a direct relationship between student engagement and academic persistence, both which lead to increased retention rates (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Kuh et al., 2005). These students who are engaged and feel a sense of connectedness to the university, through social experiences outside the classroom are more likely to persist and graduate, including rural students.

Kuh et al. (2008) in a national study finds, “student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes as represented by first-year

student grades and by persistence between the first and second year of college” (p. 555).

Although pre-college characteristics do influence student satisfaction and retention, once students enroll, social engagement becomes key to overall student well-being. Engagement can be found in a variety of activities, including sports, part-time jobs, student organizations, learning communities, casual friendships, internships, and leadership opportunities (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 2008; Tinto, 1988; Upcraft et al., 2005). In fostering student success, student affairs professionals should not only create opportunities for students to engage with peers, but with faculty and staff members as well. Interactions with professors, advisors, and student affairs professionals have been shown to positively influence student success in college (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft et al., 2005). Allowing for students to participate in activities outside of the classroom and form connections with others during their initial term in college creates a sense of belonging to the university. This includes a sense of fitting in to a college setting and feeling socially supported (Hoffman et al., 2002). For those students who feel as though they are cared for and a member of a social support group, they are better able to cope with stress caused by increased academic rigor (Hoffman et al., 2002). Research also shows that involvement and peer interaction in the first term of college predicts further involvement in subsequent terms and has significant positive effects on long-term social and academic integration (Berger & Milem, 1999). As shown, through supportive interactions with others, students perform better academically and socially in the college environment.

Not all students are entering college with the same prior experiences in terms of involvement, which affects ability to become involved upon enrollment (Astin, 1984; Larose & Roy, 1991). Larose and Roy (1991) claim that involvement in co-curricular activities in high school is a better predictor of college success than academic measure. Similarly, one study

looking specifically at women in college found that involvement in leadership activities in high school is a positive predictor of social adjustment and leadership involvement in college (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 1994). In addition, perceptions of the college environment has been related to level of student involvement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), with more positive perceptions related to increased levels and negative perceptions related to decreased levels of involvement (Astin, 1975). As shown, those students with prior involvement experience in high school and a positive perception of the college environment are more likely to continue their involvement in college.

Although the positive effects of students' social integration into the college environment is clear, the first year of college remains a stressful time for many students (Tinto, 1993; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). Tinto (1988) indicates that this is especially true for students who move to a college environment that is very different socially and intellectually from their home communities, which describes many students coming from rural communities. Upon entering college students face a drastic change in their social circle where they are suddenly challenged to make new friendships (Paul & Brier, 2011). Often this difficult transition causes serious academic and social problems for students, especially in regard to patterns of loneliness and isolation (Tinto, 1988; Wei et al., 2005). One recent study highlights that students often bring with them an established group of friends from high school into the college environment and that these individuals remain a part of their social group (Paul & Brier, 2011). Due to the nature of small rural schools, it is very likely that rural students are one of the only individuals from their high school entering a specific university, so they are forced to make new friends, which is a much more difficult process.

For those students who are unable to form a sense of belonging through involvement and social groups at an institution, they often face difficult emotional transitions. Recent data from the host institution indicate that 12.7% of undergraduate students had felt lonely within the past month and 14.5% had felt very sad during this same time period (American College Health Association, 2012). These data are pooled from all students, not just first-year students, yet highlight that loneliness is a common emotion for many students. Other studies highlight that although most first-year students express loneliness initially, over time students report higher levels of satisfaction and less loneliness (Nicpon et al., 2006; Wiseman, Mayseless, & Sharabany, 2006). Although, if students experiencing loneliness are unable to make friendships and become involved on campus, they are more likely to continue to feel lonely, face academic difficulty, and leave the university (Nicpon et al., 2006; Tinto, 1993). As shown, many first-year students are experiencing social disconnects early in their college careers. For those able to form social connections with others at the institution, these feelings tend to subside over time.

### **First-year Students Summary**

Astin and Oseguera (2012) indicate that students with the best chances to enroll and graduate from college tend to have, “good grades in high school, to come from intact families that are affluent and well educated, and to show a propensity to become highly involved or engaged in the social and academic life of the institution” (p. 134). As shown, first-year students have many pre-college background influences that determine their ability to succeed at a university. Upon entering college for the first time, many students face a disconnect between expectations and reality, difficulty adjusting to college courses, and a sense of loneliness overall. Yet those students with a stronger background leading to higher education tend to have a better chance of academic and social success. Involvement and social friendships play key roles in

creating a sense of belonging with the university, especially for first-year students. Although literature regarding the initial experiences of rural college students is sparse, trends of first-year students in general can assist student affairs professionals in better understanding the unique experiences of rural student populations.

### **Literature Review Summary**

As shown (Gibbs, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007; M. Strange et al., 2012), college enrollment rates for rural students are substantially lower than urban students. Various reasons for this gap have been cited in the literature, including low socioeconomic status, first-generation status, racial and ethnic identity, rural labor markets, secondary college preparation, cultural constraints, and geographic isolation. Rural students are facing tangible barriers to pursuing further education, yet this topic is rarely discussed in educational settings. As stated by Holmes and Dalton (2008):

It should not be necessary to argue “why rural matters.” But the truth is that rural schools and communities are increasingly invisible in a mass society that is fundamentally preoccupied with its urban identity, its urban problems, and its urban future. You do not have to go beyond images of rural life in the media to see that our society is confused and naïve about rural America and its institutions (p. 5)

In this research study, I will describe the lived experiences of one population of rural students in America. Through increased awareness of this population and their barriers to higher education, policy makers, secondary educators, and higher education professionals will be better prepared to ensure success for this population.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This study examines the lived experiences of rural students after recently transitioning from high school to a mid-sized, public institution. This chapter covers methodology used, research tradition, procedures, participant recruitment and selection, data collection techniques, data analysis, ensuring trustworthiness, and protecting human subjects. The methods have been intentionally structured and carried out to discover the answers to how rural students describe their transition from high school to college, what the common lived experiences are of rural students in their first term of college, and what perceived barriers these students face when entering college. Through these means, the researcher hopes to add to the literature surrounding rural students as an underrepresented population in higher education.

#### **Methodology**

As this study is intended to describe the experiences of rural students' initial entry into higher education from high school, a qualitative research methodology was intentionally employed. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe qualitative research as, "research about persons' lives, stories, behavior...organizational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships" (p. 17). This methodology will gain the most in-depth insight into the experiences of rural students in their first term of college as told through their personal stories. This research will capture the participants' view of their transition into college and explore perceived barriers as described by the rural students themselves, which is another key aspect of qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). Context is essential in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013), therefore this study includes rural communities, participant backgrounds, and a larger college environment in methods and analysis. In describing student experiences, participants will be treated as subjects,

not objects of research. The intent is not to generalize results to the entire population, but to explore the transition of rural students to higher education in one geographic area.

### **Tradition and Epistemology**

This topic of study employs an interpretive research epistemology and way of knowing. In this, truth is extremely difficult to separate from individuals' biases, yet general trends of truth can be discovered by piecing together truths from multiple participants (Neuman, 2003). Individuals assign their own meaning to events in their lives and a combination of these ways of knowing form an overall truth (Neuman, 2003). In relation to the experiences of rural students, each individual will construct their own interpretations of their rural experiences and trends of truth will emerge as a result of bringing these perspectives together. Gadamer (1975) highlights that in interpretive research, individuals have an internal consciousness that is a part of the culture and history that shapes unique truths. For rural students, culture and background cannot be separated from their experiences or interpretation of truth and knowledge.

Similarly, this research project is informed by concepts of constructivism. Constructivism, as a philosophy of education and research, argues that concepts, theories, and experiences are constructed by both the researcher and the research participants (Schawndt, 1988). These ideas relate closely to the design of this study, as the participants will be describing their stories as related to their college transition process, which is created by their perception of this experience. Jones et al. (2014) highlights that qualitative researchers are the instruments of their own analysis, indicating that researcher values and experiences influence data analysis. Therefore, a researcher interprets findings based on their own experiences and background (Creswell, 2013), while still keeping a focus on stories as told by participants themselves. This study presents the participants' views from their perspective, yet I

acknowledge that as a researcher, my views cannot be entirely suspended during this process. Thus, as the researcher serves as the instrument of data collection, knowledge and results are constructed by both the participant and the researcher.

Constructivism also emphasizes the importance of the participant's view in the research process (Creswell, 2008). Keeping this in mind, the researcher allowed participants to construct their own knowledge of experiences and incorporated this into data analysis and results. By focusing on participant stories as told by them directly, their viewpoints are expressed, yet inclusion and exclusion of data in this process is influenced by the researcher. Through the frameworks of interpretive research and constructivism, this study assumes that multiple perspectives can lead to the discovery of truth, knowledge is co-created by the participant and researcher, and the experiences of rural students are best told by the students themselves.

### **Methodological Design**

This study follows the research design of narrative inquiry, which emphasizes understanding lived experiences through stories of the narrators (S. R. Jones et al., 2014). Narrative inquiry experts Clandinin and Connelly (2000) indicate that, "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18). This study captures students' narratives in order to better understand how students from rural communities navigate transitions between educational experiences. Narrative inquiry looks at not only stories of participants, but the phenomena which is being investigated (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Thus, narrative inquiry is utilized to examine the experience of transitioning from a small, rural high school into college through the personal stories of those individuals who have recently gone through this experience.

This design has also intentionally been chosen because of narrative inquiry's focus on temporality, sociality, and place as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Temporality in



this case refers to an experience that is situated in a certain time frame and is applicable to the time frame of the participants growing up in a rural community, but specifically the temporary time in which participants transitioned from high school to college. Although this is a past experience for the participants, it is carried on to their future actions and an implied future. Sociality emphasizes that context is essential in determining how an individual tells the story of their experiences. Stories, when told, are situated in a specific historical and cultural context (Wells, 2011). In this study, the context includes the community the participants are from and the host institution in which they are enrolled. This also includes the relationship between the researcher and participant, as the researcher is an influential part of social context. Finally, place is essential to research methods and questions, as participants are encouraged to frame the differences in place that they have recently underwent in transitioning from a rural community into college. Through intentional conversations regarding this transition, participants reflect on events that have taken place in the past and are still occurring in their lives. This three-dimension model of narrative inquiry allows the researcher to discover participant connections to their previous experiences, their transition to college, and their feelings in their first term.

It is important to note that narrative inquiry is more than simply telling the stories of those involved in a shared experience. Through stories, narrative inquiry explores the social, cultural, and institutional narratives in which individual's experiences are based (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This study investigates the influencing cultural and social factors of a rural community and high school on college ambitions, abilities, and perceptions. It focuses on the institutional structures in place in education systems for the rural student population. As these rural participants recently underwent a drastic social, cultural, and institutional change in leaving

their rural communities to enter higher education, their first-hand accounts of this transition can help to inform both secondary and higher education practitioners on their experiences.

### **Researcher Background**

In co-constructing knowledge, the background of the researcher is important to keep in mind, as narrative inquirers reflect not only on the experiences of their participants but on themselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As an individual from a small community of around 5,000 people and a high school graduating class of 63, I have experienced first-hand the influences that growing up in a rural area had on my educational path. I am interested in discovering this transition of other rural individuals from high school to college because I have my own story on this process. This interest was furthered during my experience as an enrollment counselor for a small, public institution. Often, I traveled to rural high schools for recruitment purposes and observed the rural school systems and interact with students who rarely expressed an interest to continue their education after high school. These experiences influenced who I am as a person, a researcher, and a practitioner, and furthered my interest in rural education.

I argue that my perspective as a rural student allows me to provide a valid lens from which to view this study, as what Strauss and Corbin (1990) would refer to as “theoretical sensitivity.” My personal and professional experience, as well as analysis of existing literature and the research process has a tangible, valid effect on interactions with participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through this experience, I have an enhanced ability to give meaning to the data and better understand how to convey the experiences of this population. In this, I allow participants freedom to tell their stories, while using my personal background to help give meaning to the data. As questions related to personal background may include sensitive topics, the interview type allows flexibility in avoiding potentially harmful subjects.

**Procedures**

Research procedures follow methods appropriate to narrative inquiry as suggested by experts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007; Creswell, 2008, 2013; Wells, 2011; Wertz et al., 2011). Data collection techniques and analysis are based on narrative inquiry models and were followed to ensure effectiveness of the study. Other procedures as related to participant recruitment, ensuring ethical standards, and promoting trustworthiness were dependent upon the host site and regulations of the researcher's graduate program.

**Site selection.** The host institution has been selected as the research site for several reasons. As a public institution, the university seeks to serve the educational needs of the state's residents, including rural students (Ray, 2003). The university also has popular programs in agricultural sciences, public policy, higher education, and rural studies, which promote increased scholarship surrounding this issue and potential for support of rural students in the future. With a population of more than 20,000 undergraduate students, a desired sample size is obtainable. As a mid-sized institution, this host also allows the researcher to better study rural students at a school with a larger population size, as rural students perform more poorly at large institutions as compared to small colleges (Guiffrida, 2008; C. C. Strange & Banning, 2001). This allows the researcher to better determine barriers and success factors for rural students in this environment.

**Participant criteria.** Participants were eligible for the study based on criterion sampling methods. Criteria used to select participants included the following:

- First-year student
- Oregon resident
- Full-time student
- Graduate of a rural, Oregon high school

- Enrolled at the host institution

Definitions of these terms can be found in Chapter One of this document. 10 individuals were interviewed. This purposeful, criterion sampling served to best understand the phenomenon of rural student transitions from high school into higher education.

**Data needs.** To identify potential participants, it was essential to determine which students were considered to be from rural backgrounds. In this research, rural is defined according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) as much of the research in the literature review uses this definition and it is a reliable, national data source. NCES determines rural students based off of school district and public schools in every state according to census population data (Provasnik et al., 2007). Rural areas are also determined based on distance from highly populated areas (Provasnik et al., 2007). This study utilizes the categories of distant rural and remote rural, to ensure that high schools near urban areas are excluded from the sample (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013b).

Rural students are defined based on the high school they attend, as opposed to their physical address, for several reasons. First, literature has shown that high school preparation affects rural student college aspirations (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Greenberg et al., 1998). This study will capture the experiences of rural students attending rural high schools, not simply students who live in a rural community. Only those students who attend public schools will be included, as this population tends to be more at-risk of not attending college (Provasnik et al., 2007). Special education, vocational, and alternative schools are omitted, as well as homeschooled students, as this research will capture the experiences of typical rural students. Also, only public schools at the high school level (those which include 12<sup>th</sup> grade) were included to insure that high school student voices are captured. According to NCES data (National Center

for Educational Statistics, 2013b), there are 297 public, Oregon high schools, 90 of which are considered rural based upon this definition. A full list of these high schools can be found in Appendix A.

Participants were recruited for this study through data generated by the Registrar's Office at the host institution based upon the following conditions:

- All freshmen students according to class standing information.
- Students who have not withdrawn or cancelled their registration at the university.
- Full-time students according to the Office of Financial Aid, which is 12 credits or above per term.
- Students enrolled at the main campus, not branch campuses or enrolled solely online.
- Current mailing address, to verify the status of the participants as residents of the state of Oregon as determined by the Registrar's Office.

Data were requested from the Registrar's Office in fall of 2013 and provided to the researcher shortly afterward. Once data were received, the researcher eliminated those participants who were not from the rural high schools determined earlier. This resulted in a full list of 102 individuals in the population. Forty three of the 90 high schools included in the parameters were included in this population, due to demographics of these first-year students. Only those participants who met the above criteria were contacted for recruitment.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Once the list of eligible participants was finalized, recruitment occurred through a series of email communications. Stratified sampling was employed in dividing the sample according to high school (Creswell, 2008). This method ensures a diversity of participant voices in the sample, as it allows for participants to be selected from different high schools. For those high

schools in which there were multiple individuals from that high school, simple random sampling was used to draw one individual from each stratum, which equates to one individual from each high school (Creswell, 2008). A total of two recruitment emails were sent to participants. A copy of these emails can be found in Appendices B and C. The initial 43 individuals (one from each represented high school) were sent the first recruitment email. This email, which can be found in Appendix B outlines the purpose of the study, how to participate, and indicates participants will receive a \$15 gift certificate. After individuals indicated their willingness to participate by sending an email response back, they received an email to confirm their eligibility in the study, found in Appendix D. This email served as another way to confirm the participants did indeed meet study criteria, asking them to indicate if they were an Oregon resident, a full-time student, enrolled at the host institution, and currently in their first year. If participants answered yes to each prompt, they were sent a confirmation email, found in Appendix E. One week after the first recruitment email was sent a follow-up email (Appendix C) was sent to those individuals who had not responded, as the preferred participant recruitment number had not yet been attained. The approved Institutional Review Board protocol indicated a sample of 8 to twelve individuals. This second email yielded additional responses and new participants were sent the same email to confirm their eligibility and schedule an interview. After the second series of emails, eleven individuals agreed to participate. Each participant received a reminder email of their specific date and time a week before the interview, found in Appendix F.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Creswell (2013) highlights that narrative inquiry “begins with the experiences as expressed in the lived and told stories of individuals” (p. 70). To gather these narrative stories, data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants, which is

widely used in narrative inquiry research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through this method an accurate description of the early experiences of rural students transitioning into higher education was recorded in their words, without disturbing their daily life activities. Interviews were conducted in the location of choice by the participants. Of the 10 participants interviewed, eight of them chose to conduct the interview in the researcher's office and two chose to interview in a study room of the host institution's library. Although eleven participants initially agreed to participate, one individual opted to not continue with the interview process.

Questions were intentionally created to answer the research questions and can be found in Appendix G. These questions were in an open-ended format allowing participants the greatest degree of flexibility in their answers, as is common to narrative inquiry (Wells, 2011). Questions were asked in several different ways to ensure the participants were given the opportunity to accurately describe their experience. Participants chose their own interview time based on their availability. Most interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. One of the interviews lasted more than an hour, with the final time ending closer to an hour and a half after the interview had begun. All interviews were conducted during the seventh and eighth week of the first term, when students were new to the university. Participants each filled out a demographic questionnaire prior to the interview, found in Appendix H. This paper questionnaire was administered in person immediately before the interview began. The questionnaire was used to gather demographic information to structure the questions in a personalized way and assist in data analysis. Participants were explained their full rights as participant in an overview of the consent form, found in Appendix I. Although each participant was allowed to withdraw from the study at any point during the interview, each stayed for the duration of this activity.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of making sense and meaning out of data as related to the initial research questions (Merriam, 2009). To analyze data collected through interviews, information was first transcribed from recorded interviews into electronic format by the researcher. Wells (2011) highlights that transcription is more than simply noting participant voice in physical form; it is an interpretive act in itself of the data. Although no initial notes or coding occurred during this phase, the researcher became more familiar with participant stories and experiences through this process. This allowed the researcher to gain an overall sense of data meaning, which is the first step in analyzing narrative inquiry research (Wertz et al., 2011).

Each transcription was read multiple times to better understand not only how different participant responses related to one another, but also how different stories within the same narrative related to the story as a whole. Wertz et al. (2011) highlights that the researcher should “do multiple readings to identify different ‘voices’ of the self and to create a view of how these selves are in dialogue with one another” (p. 228). In this, the researcher began to identify how difference participant narratives related to others. At this point, the researcher began the open coding process by noting items of interest in the margins of each electronic transcription. In addition, an overall summary memo was created for each participant to capture a broad picture of their experience and to assist in coding.

Throughout this iterative process, patterns began to emerge that were common between participants, which brought together the disconnected stories into a more coherent unity (Wertz et al., 2011). The researcher began to group these open codes into groups, similar to Corbin and Strauss’ (2008) process of axial coding. The researcher then searched these codes for similarities and differences, condensing several similar codes into the same theme. For example, a lack of Advanced Placement courses in high school and the inability to enroll in community college



courses in high school were placed together in a code entitled, “lack of academic offerings and college preparatory courses.” These new categories, encompassing many codes were placed in a separate memo to ensure category clarity, which can be found in Appendix J.

At this point, specific patterns became clearer, and the researcher began to connect the themes to outside literature and already existing research. This led to broader categories such as “description of home,” “low quality secondary school system barrier,” and “benefits of rural schools” as also shown in Appendix J. This ensured the focus on the structure of the participant lived experiences in terms of time, society, and context (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Demographic information was also taken into consideration in this process to further determine differences and commonalities among participants.

The iterative analysis of narrative inquiry resulted in eight (Appendix K), and after further constant comparison, six themes (Appendix L). The inclusion of “consciousness of a rural identity” into a theme involving exposure to diversity came about because of the intrinsic relationship between ways participants compared themselves to others in the college environment. In addition, the theme of “physical dimensions of size and distance as an educational barrier” became split into two other themes. Participants related great size increases in school population directly to their lack of involvement and social connections; therefore this became grouped with “lack of social and co-curricular involvement.” Since geographic distance was mentioned as a barrier only by a portion of the participants, this became a part of discussions surrounding geographic distance as related to financial difficulty in enrolling in college. All themes are organized according to the research questions of the transitional experience of rural students, their perception of barriers they may have faced when entering college, and descriptions of their first college experiences (Appendix L).

**Ensuring Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness of research, member checking, iterative questioning, pilot interviews, audit trails, and peer review were utilized. Pilot interviews were conducted with three individuals, who were members of the researcher's graduate program, in order to strengthen validity. These participants had taken a course in research methods and were familiar with the qualitative research process. Interview questions were not drastically altered but were made clearer due to feedback from the pilot interview participants. In member checking, each interview was recorded, transcribed into text, and provided to participants via email to ensure that it was accurate and their views were expressed correctly (Creswell, 2008). At this point participants were given the opportunity to interview with the researcher again or document in writing any changes or additions to this transcript. Participants were given nine days to get any changes back to the researcher before data analysis began. Of the participants, two had minor changes which involved grammatical errors.

In creating codes, categories, and themes to analyze data, the researcher worked with the principal investigator to ensure experiences are being placed in their appropriate corresponding category. In the actual interviews, the same questions were asked in several different ways to make sure the researcher understood what the participants were describing (Creswell, 2008). Peers in the College Student Services Administration (CSSA) graduate program assisted in improving interview questions through the pilot interview process members, yet the researcher and the principal investigator were the only individuals with access to participant data. Documentation of work done throughout the process of this study was provided in great detail to ensure audit trails (Creswell, 2008). This documentation has been noted in the results section as

well as attached appendices. Through these intentional methods, the accuracy of the results was validated.

**Reliability.** Merriam (2009) notes that the purpose of qualitative research is not to isolate human behavior so a study can be repeated, but to describe the world as those experience it. Instead of the traditional definition of reliability as being able to repeat the study and garner the same results, this research seeks to ensure that the results are consistent with data collected. Throughout the analysis process, the researcher constantly referred back to the participant descriptions of their experiences, so as to best convey these words accurately into corresponding categories and themes. Through this process, findings are consistent with data presented and results are dependable.

**Credibility.** To a great extent, validity and reliability of a study depend on the qualifications of the researcher (Merriam, 2009). Personally and professionally, the researcher is qualified to study this subject matter for various reasons. Growing up in a rural community provides myself as the researcher a sense of camaraderie with and understanding of participants, allowing me to gain more accurate data and interpret this data correctly. In addition, my experience as an enrollment counselor who often visited rural high schools provided me with a greater knowledge base of unique situations facing these secondary institutions. As a second-year graduate student in a student affairs program, knowledge I have gained regarding student development theory, underrepresented student populations, and trends in higher education provided deeper context to this study. In addition to major coursework, I am involved with the rural studies department, which allows for greater knowledge of rural Oregon educational issues specifically. As shown, the researcher in many ways is knowledgeable, credible, and qualified to conduct this study surrounding rural student populations.

**Protecting Human Subjects**

In planning and implementing this research study, it is essential to consider and protect against potential harm to participants (Patten, 2009). The researcher planned for and minimized potential harms to participants through procedures of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. The Institutional Review Board at the host institution approved this study. The notice of approval and protocol can be found in Appendixes M and N respectively.

**Ethics training.** To ensure participant confidentiality and safety, both the researcher and the principal investigator have completed the Course in the Protection of Human Research Subjects through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) and are certified to conduct research on human subjects. The principal investigator has taught a graduate level research methods course for eight years and is extremely knowledgeable about research ethics. The researcher has taken a research methods course and understands the importance of this issue.

**Benefits.** Although this study is not designed to benefit participants directly, through participation in this research, rural individuals will be a part of a greater cause to assist in the success of students from rural geographical areas to enroll in higher education. It is also a hope that participants benefited from the opportunity to reflect upon their student experiences in understanding their individual growth and development in the college transition process. Each participant received a \$15 gift certificate.

**Risks.** There was little to no risk for participants in this research; however as this study involved personal history, background, upbringing, family life, and other emotional subjects, there was minimal potential for mental or emotional harm to the subjects. Questions were designed to minimize potential for emotional reactions and participants were allowed to withdraw from the study for any reason at any point.

**Explanation of research.** All participants have a right to knowledge of the purpose of the research before they choose to participate (Patten, 2009). Verbal consent was provided through an explanation of research, which can be found in Appendix I. This includes a description of the purpose of the study, activities that will occur, audio recording methods, benefits, risks, compensation, confidentiality, voluntariness, and contact information. Participants were emailed an electronic version of this form attached to the confirmation email when they agreed to participate, as well as the reminder email. Before the actual interview, participants received a printed, paper copy of this agreement to keep for their records, yet actual consent was done verbally.

**Anonymity and confidentiality.** To protect for participants' identity and right to privacy, certain confidentiality measures have been put in place (Patten, 2009). Although subject names were known to the researcher, pseudonyms were used in the final report to protect anonymity. Actual names and email addresses were used for participant recruitment but nothing further. The only individuals with access to participant data were the principal investigator and researcher. All data were kept in a password-protected computer in a locked office, accessible only to the researcher. Information will be kept for three years after completion of the study. Through these confidential methods, participants' right to privacy were protected.

### **Methods Summary**

To discover the lived experiences of rural student transitions into college, a qualitative research methodology was utilized. This study, based in an interpretive, constructivist tradition, utilized narrative inquiry to illuminate the lived experiences and told stories of rural students in their first term of college. In this, views of the participants themselves are important as their experiences will be used to inspire new ways of looking at rural student transitions and the

contextual influence of being from a rural area. Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews of 10 participants, resulting in various themes describing rural student experiences in college. Intentional methods were put in place to ensure accurate results and the protection of human subjects.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this study gains an understanding of the experiences of first-year students from rural areas of Oregon. Specifically, this research adds to the body of student affairs literature by discovering answers to three main questions:

- How do rural students describe their transition from high school to college?
- What are the lived experiences of rural students in their first term of college?
- What perceived barriers do rural students face when entering a postsecondary institution?

Table 1 presents a summary of the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. As shown, two overall themes for each of the three research questions arose as a result of one-on-one interviews with 10 individuals from identified rural high schools.

Table 1

*Summary of Major Themes*

Research Question	Corresponding Theme	Subtheme
How do rural students describe their transition from high school to college?	1. Unexpected emotional and social transition to college	Disclosed emotions surrounding transition
		Disparity between expectations and reality
		Social disconnects and changes in peer relatability
	2. Motivations for enrolling in college	The role of mentors as essential to college enrollment
		Inspiration and personal goals as college motivation
		Desire to not be “stuck” in a rural town

What are common lived experiences of rural students in their first term of college?	3. Lack of social and co-curricular involvement	Exponential increases in size of classroom, campus, and community
		Inability to form friendships
		High school over-involvement to college lack of involvement
	4. New exposures to diversity and consciousness of a rural identity	Increasing diversity of identities
		Increasing diversity of values, viewpoints, and experiences
		Rural culture as a marker of difference
What perceived barriers do rural students face when entering a postsecondary institution?	5. Prioritization of labor over education in rural communities	Lack of a college-going culture
		Lack of economic and financial resources
		Geographic distance as a factor in enrollment
	6. Rural secondary school systems as both a barrier and a catalyst for college success	Poor academic quality of rural secondary schools
		Early academic difficulties in college
		Hidden benefits of rural secondary schools

In descriptions of each theme, participant quotes have been used to ensure preservation of the true lived experiences of these rural students. Discussion arises from comparisons between these results and that of rural student trends according to the literature review, as well as that of the general first-year student population.



**Demographic Information**

A list of demographic information for each participant can be found in Appendix O. Information presented includes participant pseudonym, the distance of the high school from the host institution, graduating high school class size, age, marital status, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, mother's highest level of education achieved, father's highest level of education achieved, high school grade point average, and parent's annual household income. First-generation status is defined by having neither parent having attained higher than a high school diploma (Upcraft et al., 2005). A summary of demographic information is as follows:

- Seven of 10 participants travel over 100 miles from their hometown to get to college.
- The smallest high school graduating class size for a participant was 11 while the largest was 52.
- Participants were all within the age range of 17 years old to 24 years old.
- All participants were single and had never been married.
- Eight of 10 participants identified as female.
- Nine of 10 participants identified as White, while one identified as Native American.
- Four of 10 participants identified as non-religious, while the other six identified as either Christian or Roman Catholic.
- Three of 10 participants are considered first-generation college students (Upcraft et al., 2005).
- All participants had above a 3.5 cumulative high school grade point average, while six indicated they had above a 4.0.

- Three of 10 participants indicated their annual household income as between \$40,000 and \$59,999, with four indicating an income above this level and three indicating below this level.

**Narratives of Home.** To ensure participant privacy and anonymity, all hometown and high school names have been omitted from results. Yet to preserve the lived experiences of these rural students, as well as emphasize the importance of context in narrative inquiry (Wells, 2011), understanding how participants describe where they consider home is essential to their stories. When asked to describe their hometown, participants responded with statements such as Gillian indicating her town is, “in the boonies,” or Molly mentioning that she is from, “the middle of nowhere...there’s no service...the only thing there is a few houses, a tiny market, [and] a post office.” As shown, participants are very aware that they are from rural communities with few amenities, generally referred to in more comical terms. Heather specifically made a joke about where she is from, highlighting:

The joke is you hit the Columbia River and when you hit [another town], you drive south about four grain bins and then you will run into [my hometown], but around here they don’t really get the joke. I have to explain what a grain bin is first.

Not only does Heather knowingly explain how most individuals are unaware of where she is from, but she indicates differences in what is considered common (such as a grain bin) between where she is from and her college environment. Early in the interview, Heather has already framed a sense of a rural identity and notice of differences in college. Through the telling of their stories, it is important to understand the context and frame of reference from which these participants base their knowledge. As this study does reference many comparisons between their pre- and post-transition environments, recognizing where these students are from, and how they describe home, is essential to understanding.

**Question One: Transition from High School to College**

The first research question seeks to answer how rural students describe their transition from high school to college. Through the interview process, two main themes arose in regard to this question:

- Participants describe their experience as different than they had expected, often citing emotional descriptors in transitioning between these different environments.
- Participants describe motivational reasons for enrolling in college as a part of their narrative regarding the transition from high school to college.

Descriptions of both the emotional transition into college and reasons for choosing to enroll highlight the experiences rural students have in entering a postsecondary environment.

**Unexpected emotional and social transition to college.** This first theme highlights how participants describe their emotional and social transition into higher education. Although this varied for each participant, common was the sense that the move was anything but smooth, such as Calvin stating that the transition has been, “definitely a roller-coaster. There’s been a lot of ups and downs.” Similarly, many participants cited emotional feelings of fear, difficulty, and social disconnects upon entering college. This indicates that the difficulty of the transition came as an unexpected surprise, as many of them felt fairly ready and prepared to enroll in college. Participant stories indicate they felt prepared academically as well as socially upon entering college. Comparisons to high school classmates who chose not to attend a four-year institution arose in many of the interviews as well, which seemed to amplify the disconnects that rural students face in transitioning socially to a new college environment. Although many diverse populations of students have some difficulty transitioning into the collegiate environment (Schilling & Schilling, 2005), rural students experience this transition somewhat differently.

***Disclosed emotions surrounding transition.*** Various phrases came up during the interview process in which participants disclosed their feelings regarding moving from high school to college, including how the transition was scary, difficult, crazy, and weird. Molly indicated that the move, “was scary honestly...I was really scared” and that college is, “just totally different.” Specifically, much of Molly’s emotional reaction stemmed from thoughts of moving in with a roommate who she had never met and a fear of not knowing anyone in college. Similarly, Gillian mentioned that, “The adjustment has actually been kind of hard” in relation to both social and cultural changes in college. As shown in these examples and throughout, participants were experiencing emotional responses common to personal issues faced by many first-year college students (Schilling & Schilling, 2005). Rural students, like other first-year students, experience difficult emotions in this new environment.

***Disparity between expectations and reality.*** The expectations-experience gap has become a common description of the difference between what first-year students expect college to be like and what it actually is when they arrive on campus during their first term (Kuh, 2005). Often, this term is used to describe how students expect to engage in more academic and co-curricular activities compared to what they actually report at the end of their first year (Kuh, 2005). In this study, participants cited that the transition into college was much more difficult than they had originally anticipated in many regards. For example, Gillian highlighted that the transition has, “been a big adjustment. I didn’t really know what to expect.” This not only shows that she faced a large disconnect in entering college, but also that she had little knowledge of what to expect.

Many participants noted difference between their expectation to make social connections in college and the reality of their first term. Victoria, although she had the largest graduating high school class of any of the participants at 52 students, noted:

Honestly I didn't think the transition would be just in general as hard as it was...because I'm so used to knowing the same people since pre-school and I come here and I don't know anybody. Naturally, I'm a very outgoing person, but when I came here I kind of just closed off in my own little bubble and I just didn't really know what to do...it was just weird.

Here Victoria faced great social changes in her ability to know others and be known by others in college. She also later noted that this unexpected social transition, “[during] the first two to three weeks, it was terrible...but it's slowly been getting better. It's not what I expected...because it's so different.” As shown, Victoria's ability to transition socially into college has improved over time and was the most prevalent during the first few weeks of class.

Those participants whose hometown was relatively close distance-wise from the host institution seemed to struggle less with the emotional and social transition to college. Molly, whose hometown is approximately 70 miles away, indicated that:

[the transition] wasn't really that hard for me because I know I'm not that far away from home...I think if I did live a lot farther away...that would make it a lot harder but, I mean it's really easy to go back and forth.

This statement highlights the factor of physical distance in determining rural student's ability to transition into higher education. Similar research findings emphasize distance as a factor in enrollment and retention, especially with students from poor backgrounds (Long, 2004). As shown, rural students face disconnects between expectations and reality, similar to other first-year students, but more specifically focused on social transitions and relationships with peers.

***Social disconnects and changes in peer relatability.*** Additional information on the social transition of rural college students arose during questions related to relationships with high

school peers, specifically individuals who chose to attend a community college or not enroll in college, as opposed to those who enrolled in a four-year university. In discussing her interactions with high school peers who are not in college, Sara Lee highlighted:

[high school classmates] see college as a really, really big deal and so they see me as like ‘now you’re so smart and you are an adult and you like to do all these things’ and they, I think...they’re impressed but intimidated sometimes and they definitely don’t talk to you the same way that they used to because there’s that separation that ‘I’m going and I’ve gotten out and they are still there.’

This phenomenon of how students navigate connections between home, or friends and family from home, and college has been highlighted in relation to first-generation students (Orbe, 2008; Stoll, 2012). Orbe (2008) argues that a dialectic tension exists between first-generation students’ ability to be independent in college, while interdependent on friendships and family connections from home. Although not all students in this study are first-generation students, they also highlight an inability to relate to those individuals who have not enrolled in college.

Tinto’s (1988) theory on the stages of student departure specifically mentions rural students’ inability to transition well into higher education. In relation to all students, this theory argues that to successfully integrate into college, students must separate from their old community and connections (Tinto, 1988). Although this theory has been critiqued due to the assumption that home and family are negative influences on students’ transition to college life, it does appear as though several participants in this study felt disconnected from their high school peers upon entering the collegiate environment. When describing how it felt to go back home, Victoria highlighted:

It didn’t feel like I was supposed to be there. I don’t know, it was just awkward a little bit. I mean my friends who I know...it was nice, but then the people I don’t know, it was kind of like ‘this is weird.’

Similarly, Molly indicated that it was difficult to maintain her friendships with people she knew in high school simply because she was so physically distant from them. For various reasons, several of the rural participants expressed feeling socially and physically distant and unable to relate to their high school classmates as they had in the past.

In terms of what classmates were doing after high school, participant responses varied. Several indicated that a few classmates were enrolled at the host institution with them, while several highlighted that most of their class either went to a community college or pursued a career in the military. Due to myriad of factors of distance, lack of common interests, and social changes, rural students expressed being socially disconnected from their high school peers and unable to relate to them fully after enrolling in college.

**Motivations for enrolling in college.** The second way in which participants described their transition to college was through their personal motivations to enroll in college. Several factors became apparent across participants in relation to *why* they chose to enroll in higher education, including the role of adult mentors, personal goals, and the desire to not be “stuck” in their hometown. It became apparent that the motivation and process involved in choosing to go to college was intrinsically linked with the transition itself. Through a combination of motivational factors, these rural students achieved what many rural students do not: they enrolled in a four-year university.

***The role of mentors as essential to college enrollment.***

In speaking about their college transition journey, many rural participants cited the importance of mentors in encouraging them to enroll in higher education. As most participants in this study had at least one parent who enrolled in college, support from parents was expressed by several students. Sara Lee indicated that her parents, “really encouraged me to do whatever I

wanted to do...don't get held back staying in [my hometown]. If you want to go pursue education, you should be able to do that." Both of Sara Lee's parents went to college, with her father receiving his master's degree at the host institution. As such, she felt very supported by her parents as mentors to enroll in college. Several other participants indicated feeling supported by their parents. Heather, who had her mom as a teacher in her classes for several years in high school, joked that:

It was pretty much you either go to college and get a job or you're disowned. Anyway my parents really stressed...they saw that they weren't going to be able to get a good job and have the life that they wanted unless they got a college degree, so they really taught us that growing up.

Not only did Heather feel encouraged to go to college by her parents, but there seemed to be little choice for alternative option after high school. Not all participants felt pushed to go to college by their parents, citing difficulty in being able to explain their college lives to their parents, which is more indicative of first-generation students (Stoll, 2012). These observations, based on demographic data, mimic first-generation research, as those students who did not have a parent graduate from college also seemed to be less encouraged to enroll.

Community mentors, especially those who had completed bachelor's degrees, were also found to be inspirational for rural students in enrolling in college. Victoria described that she formed a relationship with an individual who had already graduated from and was working at the host institution who was originally from her hometown. She described this experience as:

[She] actually kind of got it, because it's like they went through that whole like, 'I was from a small town, I took the big leap and went to a larger, public university' and so 'here are the things that you may not know that you actually need to do or need to be prepared for.'

Hearing from this mentor regarding transitioning from a rural environment into a much larger university helped Victoria to alleviate her concerns and prepare her for the transition. In



communities where few rural adults have bachelor's degrees (Provasnik et al., 2007), lack of these type of individuals often poses a problem in connecting students with mentors. Other participants mentioned that it was helpful to have someone from the community, outside of school and home that was encouraging their college journey, yet this was not a common experience for all participants.

Rural high school teachers tended to have a great influence on participant motivations to enroll in college and often, their decision towards a specific major. Calvin spent a great portion of the interview describing a particular high school teacher's positive influence on his college path. He mentioned this teacher as, "inspirational for me, because I don't know, I never really thought that I could enjoy learning but, you do" and indicated that this teacher, "actually shifted me from architecture to engineering because he went to [college]...got his master's degree [in engineering]." Calvin also mentioned the academic rigor of this teacher's course as helpful in preparing him for college-level work. Several other participants mentioned benefits that arose from their teachers being critical of their work and helping them to prepare academically and emotionally for college.

The positive role of mentors, both before and upon entering higher education, is beneficial for many other underrepresented populations including international students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ students, women in the STEM fields, racial minorities, and first-generation students (Harper & Quay, 2009). Mentors provide students with important information about the college admissions process, financial aid, and college life before a student actually enters college (Gandara & Mejorado, 2005). Students from various backgrounds report that mentoring helped to give them a clear understanding of college and how to plan for college (Gandara & Mejorado, 2005). Mentoring can be from parents, high school teachers, counseling

staff members, or community members and has been shown as beneficial in demystifying the college enrollment process. The stories of these rural participants are similar to findings from other studies (Harper & Quay, 2009), yet they cited an increased need to connect with other rural individuals who stressed academic importance and had achieved college degrees themselves.

***Inspiration and personal goals as college motivation.*** Participants' personal goals played a large factor in motivating them to enroll in college. Multiple individuals mentioned their ability to be a self-starter and a desire to better themselves personally. Although Calvin highlighted many difficult aspects of his first term of college, in reflection he stated:

Knowing that you're...doing something for your future, every single day and you're just, you're living the best possible life you could be living essentially, for yourself, looking towards your future, and that's an uplifting feeling and that's really...the only thing...that keeps you going when you're in my position.

Despite difficulty in his first term, both socially and academically, Calvin here identified why he is in college, why he took the leap and made the transition. He also hints at reasons why he plans to continue with his college education to graduation.

Several participants described their transition to college as motivated by career plans that necessitated a college degree. Victoria indicated that enrolling in college was, "just something I wanted to do personally and a lot of jobs that I'm actually interested in you can't do without a degree or you have a better opportunity with a degree." Career goals were often associated with financial goals, as rural students revealed their belief that better-paying careers could generally be found in more urban areas. A couple participants also mentioned the poor state of the economy in encouraging them to enroll in college. In these instances, participants used motivation stemming from career goals to facilitate the transition to college.

***Desire to not be "stuck" in a rural town.*** Perhaps the most unique motivation for rural students, as compared to the general first-year student population, was a desire to not be "stuck"

in their rural communities after high school. Specifically, the term “stuck” is used by Victoria when she mentioned, “I didn’t want to be stuck in my hometown. I wanted to get away and move out and have new experiences.” Similarly, Heather described that a rural community, “is a good place to be from, but not a good place to be at.” In both instances, participants highlighted their desire to get out of their home communities. In this, college became a viable way for participants to escape their small communities and high schools.

Questions related to other individuals in rural communities that failed to enroll in college after high school propelled participants to go to college in order to avoid a similar life path.

Darla depicted this well in her description of a vast majority of individuals in her hometown:

It just seems like everybody [in my hometown], they were born there, they live there, they’re raised there, they go to school there, then they go to college, then they come back, or they don’t even go to college and they stay there and they live there, have kids, and do it all over again. It’s like they never get out of there and that’s the only thing they know. And I want to branch out and see different places and just expand.

Not only did Darla identify that she has no desire to end up like several other individuals in her home community, but she indicated specifically that she wants to see new places and expand her knowledge base. Paige also expressed her desire to gain new experiences outside of her home community, partially based on the lack of activities available to her in her hometown:

When you grow up in the same town your whole life...you kind of want to go branch out and try something new, go somewhere else, because there’s not a lot to do in [my hometown] for someone that’s young unless you plan on going to work on a ranch right away.

Not only were these rural students self-motivated to leave their home communities, but they recognized the benefits of expanding their experiences by enrolling in college. Molly specifically stated that college is often the only escape route for students wanting to leave these tight-knit rural communities. In this, college became an educational aspiration, but more so it became an opportunity to leave their hometowns for greater diversity of activities, people, and

careers. As shown, rural individuals describe their transition into college through motivational descriptors such as mentors, personal goals, and a desire to leave their home community.

**Summary of findings: Transition from high school to college.** Through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, this study uses narrative inquiry to understand the experience of rural students transitioning to college (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The first research question seeks to answer how rural students describe their transition from high school to college. As shown, rural participants tend to describe this transition in terms of the unexpected emotional and social differences, citing troublesome emotions, a disparity between expectations and reality, and social disconnects with high school peers. Rural students also described their transition in terms of the motivating factors that led to their college enrollment. Specifically, participants cited the influence of mentors, personal goals, and a desire to not be “stuck” in their rural communities as descriptors of the motivational move into college.

### **Question Two: Common Lived Experiences of Rural Students**

To further discover the nuances of rural student college transitions, the second research question seeks to identify common lived experiences of rural students in their first term of college. Lived experiences consider the context of these individuals in their initial college experience as it is happening (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Participants were interviewed during their seventh or eighth week into their first year of college and were able to reflect upon their initial experiences in the college environment. Through rural student stories, two additional main themes emerged to answer this question:

- Although rural participants indicated strong social connections and high levels of involvement in high school, they are experiencing an inability to form friendships and

lack of co-curricular involvement in college, due in part to the large size and student population of their college environment.

- Overall, participants' stories revealed experiencing large shifts in diversity between their hometown and new college community, resulting in a new awareness of the influence of rurality in developing identity.

Participants revealed that rural student experiences early in their college careers are fairly unique as compared to other student populations, as highlighted through friendships, co-curricular involvement levels, and new exposure to diversity and identity.

**Lack of social and co-curricular involvement in college.** Throughout this study, several students mentioned their lack of social connections in the form of peer friendships during their first term of college. Students indicated that size, both physically and in regard to increased populations of people, is a difficult environment to navigate. Although participants varied in their degree of making friends, several individuals highlighted a significant and noticeable difference in instances of loneliness and lack of social connections. In addition, while all 10 participants indicated being highly involved in activities outside the classroom in high school (sports, clubs, community service), few participants indicated the same high level of involvement in college, often tying this to their lack of friendships. Multiple times instances of lacking social connections were tied back to size-related differences in comparison to their home communities.

***Exponential increases in size of classrooms, campus, and community.*** Differences in size, including physical size and numbers of people, were mentioned several times in participant interviews. As is typical in rural areas, participants were used to small classes, schools, and communities. Participants' high school graduating class ranged from 11 to 52 graduates, making for small class sizes in high school. Hailee described the difference as:

It's crazy, because the population of our town is maybe 300/400 people, so I come to a college where that's like your average class size, and I'm like 'this is nuts' so it's taken some adjusting. Walking up the sidewalks and brushing elbows with everyone, but it, it's not too bad, I haven't had any major breakdowns.

In another comparison to his hometown, Calvin highlighted that in college, "it's like you...are overloaded with faces when you're walking. I could walk down the street in my hometown and every car that drove by I could tell you who was driving it." These rural students indicated their awareness of being now involved in a much larger community than they have been accustomed to previously. This size difference illustrates not only an awareness of difference, but highlights the overwhelming feelings faced by these students in the collegiate environment of a medium-sized university. Similar to earlier descriptions of the difficult transition improving over time, Sara Lee highlighted that the campus, "feels big, it feels huge...[but] definitely it feels smaller than it did at the beginning." As shown, although rural students do face an initial shock and feelings of difference upon entering a much larger populated area, some adjust over time.

***Inability to form friendships.*** Forming friendships with college peers and getting connected in a social group during their first term of college proved to be difficult for several participants. Many times, this lack of friends was tied to increases in population of students. Participants indicated being fairly inexperienced in terms of seeking out friendships, as they have never had to intentionally make social connections before to a large extent. Gillian indicated these emotions in her description of making friends:

It's so weird like I almost don't know how to make friends because...you grow up with...your class and everybody and everyone knows you and you have friends...so coming here and not knowing anybody, and nobody knowing you...like I don't know where to begin, how to make friends, who to make friends with.

With small schools and communities, it is common for rural students to know the same individuals for most of their lives. The difficulty then, as highlighted by Gillian, occurs when

these students enter college and have never before experienced seeking out friendships. Calvin illustrated the sharp contrast in his social group in high school and in college by highlighting:

In high school I was...popular and I played sports and I knew everyone's name and everyone knew my name and that's how it is in a close high school...I can name everyone in my classes, I can spell their first and last name. And when I got to college, I didn't know anybody and I hadn't not known anybody my entire life. I didn't know how to make friends, and I didn't know how to be social, I still don't.

Calvin narrated not only his inability to form friendships upon entering college, but acknowledged that he has yet to discover how to make strong social connections. Coming from an environment where he was popular and known, college for Calvin is proving to be more lonely and overwhelming than he anticipated.

In Gillian's comments, she indicated that she came to college with her boyfriend, but has yet to find any friends outside of his social circle. Specifically, she cited strong feelings of loneliness in her statement, "Actually the other day I was thinking about how often I...seriously spend like every day all by myself." While Gillian also indicated that this experience is a result of her inability to know how to make friends, Heather cited that she was unprepared for college socially due in part to a lack of technological communication in rural areas, stating she was:

Not prepared academically but socially either...I barely knew that Facebook existed if that tells you anything. I grew up, never got on the computer or anything you know when to me, when you have conversations with people you talk to them face-to-face. I get here and everyone's contacting via Facebook, Twitter, all this, I guess there's a lack of technology that really inhibits those people from communicating.

Although Heather did admit to an inability to be socially successful in college, she indicated this as a result of technological, and to some extent, cultural nuances. For most participants, although they have entered a larger environment with much greater numbers of potential people to connect with, they cite feeling lonelier than they ever have in the past.

Several participants did recognize their lack of social skills and ways in which they could improve in this area. Victoria indicated that making friends, “has been hard, I’ve noticed I’ve had to do a lot of the reaching out versus people reaching out to me which is a little, something I’m not used to, but it’s slowly building and getting there.” As Victoria showed, this is another area in which the initial transition to college may be the most difficult and that social connections will form over time. Hailee similarly showed evidence of attempts to make friends and stated, “I’m trying to be as social as possible and go to all the events and that but, it’s just, it’s been difficult.” Multiple participants indicated an awareness of loneliness and ways in which to alleviate this emotion, yet few seemed to have found a solid social group in their first term.

Although the majority of participants indicated trouble making social connections, a few students cited having no problems finding friends in college. Paige indicated that solidifying friendships has been, “easier than I thought...everyone’s trying to make friends so people are really open and welcoming so that’s been really nice.” Here Paige identified that the newness of other first-year students to college has allowed for friendships to be made easily. Sara Lee and Paul also noticed little difficulty in forming friendships, with Sara Lee in particular noting that she feels like she fits in better socially in college than she did in high school. Sara Lee, as the only non-White participant in the study, also indicated a sense of belonging in college due to greater acceptance of her identity as Native American. Each participant’s experience is different, with several of them finding the friendship-making process easier than others.

***High school over-involvement to college lack of involvement.*** Related to social skills, but more specifically to involvement in co-curricular activities, all participants described high levels of involvement outside the classroom during high school. Involvement for the purposes of this study follows Astin’s (1984) definition as, “the amount of physical and psychological energy



that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297). For this theme specifically, involvement includes time spent on activities outside of the classroom. Many participants were student athletes (some playing multiple sports), involved in music ensembles, leaders in student council, and a part of honor societies. Membership or leadership in Future Farmers of America (FFA) was also a common activity. Paige described her high school involvement as:

Because it was a really small school I was involved in, well I played basketball and track for all four years...and then my junior and senior year I was involved in student body so I was the secretary my junior year, president my senior year. I was on the annual staff all four years. There's just, it's so small that everyone is involved in everything.

Here Paige highlighted not only her high levels of co-curricular involvement, but directly tied her involvement to the small size of her school. Strange and Banning (2001), in their discussions of physical dimensions of involvement, indicate that isolation can become an occasion for participation. Although their framework is utilized specifically for college environments, it can easily be applied to better understand the high involvement levels of rural high school students. In a small environment, even a school lacking in co-curricular activities, these students have multiple opportunities to be involved. Many participants also indicated feeling more needed by their peers in high school to take on leadership roles than they were experiencing in college.

Levels of involvement for most participants were sharply different during their first term of college, with many citing that they had not gotten involved at all. When asked about her hesitation to join co-curricular organizations in college, Gillian noted being overwhelmed with the hundreds of clubs available at the host institution. She described how not knowing what to choose or how to join a club can be confusing and suggested having a full list on the institution's website. Other students indicated their plans to join organizations, but were unable to describe exactly why they hesitated in taking that step. For example, Calvin indicated:

I tried to be involved...there was this huge ag meeting where all the different clubs showed up and I signed up for the mailing list...and then each time I get the email they're like 'okay, the pre-vet/med students meeting, club meeting is this night' and I'm like 'okay, I'll go' and then...when the time comes...I'm not able to go because I don't want to...talk to anybody. And that's like, it's really biting me in the tail because...that's what will fix my loneliness.

Not only did Calvin express intentions to become involved, but he directly linked involvement to ability to make friendships, yet he still is unable to push himself to join club meetings. During this same conversation, he stated that, "I don't know whether it's insecurity or lack of confidence. I just am afraid, I don't know why." Although Calvin was highly involved in high school, fear, possibly related to a lack of friendships, deters him from becoming engaged in college. Darla also mentioned fears of joining a collegiate organization, highlighting that:

I wanted to get used to my college experience before I took on too much. So I'm sure that I will join clubs or you know, do different activities like that but it's just like I didn't want to overwhelm myself.

Here Darla anticipated being overwhelmed, along with a desire to become more involved later in her collegiate career. As the first six weeks of a student's college experience are essential in terms of involvement (Tinto, 1988; Upcraft et al., 2005), these students may have already missed a connection in college, as interviews were conducted during the seventh and eighth weeks of the term. This lack of involvement may lead to lower satisfaction and retention of these students in college (Astin, 1984). As shown, this hesitancy to become involved seems to be hindering rural students in limiting social connections and may affect retention at the university in the future.

A few rural participants indicated they had joined clubs and organizations in college and directly cited social benefits to these efforts. Victoria, in discussing advice she would have for other rural students, indicated:

I would encourage [rural college students] to try to get involved in other things besides just kind of their dorm life, right away. Because I know that's helped me is I got

involved in three different clubs just so I can meet people that way and I can also form study groups and actually just kind of get out...and do stuff.

Victoria continued to elaborate on how she became involved in organizations, two in her major and one in her residence hall, which have greatly assisted her in making friends and have increased her overall satisfaction with her first term. Sara Lee also intentionally involved herself in collegiate activities, indicating that her parents pushed her to do so, and is involved in her residence hall, her major, and a multicultural center on campus. Both Victoria and Sara Lee indicated social benefits from these activities. As shown, rural students face a very different environment in college than they were previously used to in high school, in terms of size, friendships, and involvement, which has the ability to hinder their successful transition.

**New exposure to diversity and consciousness of a rural identity.** Today's college students are more culturally diverse and increasingly from different disadvantaged backgrounds (W. T. Jones, 2005). Specifically, in discussions related to diversity, W. T. Jones (2005) notes that "many first-year majority students come to campus with limited understandings of diversity" (p. 145). In discussions with rural participants, it became clear that many of these individuals are experiencing, many for the first time, interactions with diversity in various forms. Rural communities tend to be fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity (Evans et al., 2010; Richardson, 2005). Although this is not true for all rural communities, participants in this study did identify sharp contrasts in diversity shifts from their home environments in terms of race and ethnicity, politics, religion, sexual orientation, and physical clothing. Overall openness to different values, viewpoints, and experiences in a college community also appeared in participant responses. In speaking about their experiences with diversity, participants were able to identify personal feelings of difference due to their upbringing in a rural community. Instances of difference resulted from stories of interactions

with other students from diverse backgrounds and reflections on their personal definition of rural culture. Overall, it became clear that although most students face an increase in diversity upon entering college (W. T. Jones, 2005), due to the demographics of rural communities, rural students may face this experience to a greater extent.

***Increasing diversity of identities.*** When asked about diversity, most participants responded with their observations as related to racial and ethnic diversity. Many cited the lack of diversity present in their hometown, with Victoria indicating that, “[my hometown], it’s not very diverse. It’s basically a bunch of loggers and we’re very rural and so we have just a lot of Caucasians.” Gillian specifically noted the lack of ethnic diversity in her home community when asked about being from a rural area:

There’s not much diversity, even like, ethnicity-wise...I think the entire time I ever lived in [my hometown] there was one African American that was there as a student, one, and no Asians ever, unless they were a foreign exchange student. No, no like Indian, or Native American, either one, like never. We had some Hispanics, like two maybe.

Although the host institution is considered a predominantly white institution (Griffin & Hurtado, 2011; Oregon State University, 2013a), students coming from these homogeneous communities still faced a difference in ethnic and racial identities in their college community. Although most participants identified as White, they were still entering environments more diverse than their previous communities in terms of race and ethnicity.

Other indications of shifts in diversity highlighted differences in political views, religious options, sexual orientation, and clothing style. Participants’ views of difference varied on subject matter, with most citing moving from a few options (in dress, views, or identities) to multiple options in college. Specific to politics, Calvin mentioned that, “[my hometown] is really conservative, farmers are conservative...[here] you can see little niches of Republican here, Democrat here for this reason...but where I’m from, the entire population is Republican.”

Heather, although she went to a rural high school on the opposite side of the state from Calvin, mimicked this viewpoint, highlighting, “I met my very first liberal my first week of school here.” For several rural students, exposure to different political views for the first time is a common experience in their first term of college.

In terms of religious diversity, participants overall noted the strong presence of Christian religions in their rural communities, with recognition of many more religious options in college.

In her response, Molly stated:

Basically everyone, almost everyone where I’m from is Christian or that you know, just aren’t religious at all...[in college] there’s a lot of Muslim, Christian, Jewish. I mean even during Orientation week when you go to the quad and you go to all the booths and stuff there’s different organizations for so many different religions.

A few other participants mentioned the presence of Mormon religious denominations in their home communities in addition to other Christian religions. Although Gillian noted that she hasn’t noticed any difference in religious or faith diversity in comparison to her hometown, all other participants cited at least subtle differences.

Among noted differences in diversity, a few participants mentioned drastic shifts in the clothing style of rural individuals versus people they met in a college environment. Calvin, when asked about cultural differences that he observed in college, noted that he can tell differences between individuals based on their clothing choice:

[Some people] are like ‘I’m a little farm boy, I wear the boots’ and you can see all these people and they’re like ‘oh that guy is totally decked out in Nike’...and you’re like ‘wow, I only see those type of people when I go to Portland.’ No one from where I am from dresses like that. We dress like a rural community dresses.

Although Calvin does not elaborate on what constitutes of rural dress, other participants commented on the physical indication of rural community members. Paul mentioned that rural

dress is, “standard country kind of things you know, everywhere, a lot of people wore romeos and carharts.” In addition, Gillian described people in her home town as:

Kind of hicky, we’re going to hunt and stuff and ride in our jeeps...I mean that’s not me, but that was a lot of people there...they wore camo and...the John Deere shirts and hats...it was very simple, and one-way, there’s not much diversity at all.

In these examples, rural students equated diversity with physical appearance and dress. Changes in diversity of identity based on outward factors are experienced as tangible differences from their previous environments. One of the participants mentioned noticing differences in sexual orientation views, highlighting that individuals along the LGBTQ spectrum were rare in her hometown and seem much more common in the college environment.

*Increasing diversity of values, viewpoints, and experiences.* Related to increases in diverse identities, upon entering college rural students face new diversity of values, viewpoints, and experiences different from their home communities. Often referring to the close-minded nature of their previous rural towns, participants described how people in their hometowns generally have similar values and experiences. In reflecting upon ways she has changed since enrolling in college, Victoria indicated:

I’m a little more open to different kinds of people...I think I was maybe a little sheltered or more geared towards thinking a certain way about certain people, not necessarily in a bad way but just, opinion-wise and then I came here and I’m like ‘hey not all these people are actually like this’ or that kind of thing.

Similarly, Sara Lee mentioned, “I’m more open to embracing new things since leaving for college.” In both instances, rural students indicated that enrolling in college has broadened their perspectives of people and values. Sara Lee continued in comparing college and her hometown:

I feel like most of the people that I have interacted with [in college] are much more open-minded. Just from what I have seen in talking about different things and...something that I’ve really noticed is people where I grew up...don’t experience a lot before they leave and so while they are in high school, a lot of them never left [my hometown]...and so they know the world is very limited and when something is different that it causes

problems in school because people didn't know how to handle it...I think all of the kids that moved to our school from [larger communities] had a lot of difficulty coming into all of it because people were like 'you're not from here, you don't do things the same way, this is weird.'

In college, Sara Lee better understands the differences between rural communities and other areas based upon diversity of viewpoints. In comparison to her high school peers who chose not to attend college, she explained why their worldview is fairly limited. Gillian, in looking toward her future indicated that, "once you...get more introduced to a more diverse culture, going back to such a...one-minded culture can be really frustrating." In this, Gillian has already recognized the changes in herself as a result of her new exposure to diversity, and is concerned with how it will affect her ability to return to a rural community in the future.

Most participants described their enjoyment of diversity in college and relate positively to this experience. Molly observed that, "here...there's huge diversity...there's a little bit of every culture I feel like, lots of different languages being spoken, lots of different, you know styles and ways of thinking, and...I like it, I think it's interesting." Multiple participants indicated that interacting with others of different cultures and backgrounds has been positive.

Higher education literature regarding moral development indicates that students' exposure to diverse climates leads to higher-level moral thinking (Evans et al., 2010). Due to the lack of diversity present in many rural communities, rural individuals have been identified as having lower levels of moral reasoning in comparison to urban cultures (Evans et al., 2010). Arguments have been presented opposing this viewpoint, indicating that differences exist not in moral development, but simply in what is considered normal for rural and urban societies (Ast, 2013). Regardless of the argument, rural students have been shown, both in the literature and through this study, to face increasing levels of diversity in identity and thought upon entering a university setting. As higher education professionals seek to develop students from increasingly

diverse backgrounds (Harper & Quaye, 2009), an intentional focus on how rural students are experiencing diversity and a method to include rural students as an underrepresented population is warranted.

***Rural culture as a marker of difference.*** In several instances, rural participants identified a feeling of difference from their college peers due specifically to their familiarity with rural culture. Through intentional questions as well as general conversation, each student identified to a varying extent their feelings of fitting in or not in college because of their rural identity, or just a greater sense of difference overall in the collegiate environment. Many participants identified difference between themselves and others specifically as a result of their upbringing in a rural community, separate from general diversity discussions.

Several participants seemed to experience feelings of difference when interacting with peers from more urban areas, often their college roommates. Gillian, whose roommate is from Seattle indicated:

[My roommate] treats people who aren't from Seattle, like inferior to her, it's really weird. It's like everyone from where she is, is like a genius and smart and they have the best music and you know all this stuff and I'm from a town of 2,000 and I am dumb...subtly, but it's there.

Here not only did Gillian distance herself from her roommate based upon a rural upbringing, but she noted feelings of inferiority placed on her by her roommate. In these interactions that she noted feeling more in touch with her background. Molly has a similar living situation, with her roommate being from Los Angeles. She described her experience bringing her roommate to her hometown as follows:

It's just totally different. My roommate is from L.A. so she's from a huge city and she'd never been in the country before so I told her where I was from and...she thought this [college town] was what the country was...so I took her on a road trip and she got to see everything. She was just so confused, she's like 'where is everything?' (laughing)...it was really exciting because I guess I didn't realize that there's a lot of people that...don't



get to see places like that and...they've lived in the city their whole lives, so it was just, it was cool to show somebody that...didn't know what the country looks like and just how pretty it is.

Although both Gillian and Molly more clearly identified as different based on their rural upbringing, Molly had a more positive experience in being viewed as a rural individual from her roommate. Several other participants noted that they thought about rurality as an identity more now than prior to coming to college. Possibly related to her roommate experience, Molly summarized this feeling in her narrative:

I notice [being from a rural community] more now than I used to, because...before I went to college it was kind of just 'oh this is the way things are' I guess, you know you don't really realize as much that where you are from is way different than the rest of the world. I mean, you realize that, but it doesn't really occur to you as much. But now that I'm here I totally noticed that it's a lot of difference.

Here Molly indicated that the development of thoughts of difference based on geographical background began upon entering college, not before. An early study by Chickering and McCormick (1973) describes certain students whose background sharply contrasts from their collegiate environment. They refer to those individuals as "misfits," highlighting that in these students the greatest change in personality and development occurs, yet they are also more susceptible to leaving the institution (Chickering & McCormick, 1973). Although the host institution is not located in what would be considered an urban community, the increase in population size and diversity has allowed these rural individuals to think of themselves as different from others in a unique way. While they may not be considered "misfits," these students do have the potential to change and develop to a great extent through college.

On the other hand, many rural participants noticed their rural identity when they began to realize that they relate better to other rural individuals. Paige claimed that she and her roommate get along very well, partially because they are both from rural communities, as shown when she

stated, “[my roommate] is from a small town too...she’s from a dairy farming background, I’m from a ranching, so we have a lot in common.” Here Paige mentioned both a commonality based on geographic upbringing as well as economic/cultural background. Some participants intentionally sought out opportunities in college where they would come into contact with rural individuals. Hailee indicated that in her attempts to continue to be involved in college she tried, “to be involved with...the FFA and try to stay around people that are comfortable to be around.” Hailee continued to describe the excitement she experienced upon running into another member of FFA on campus, as she knew she could connect with them. Paige intentionally sought out students from rural cultures through co-curricular involvement and academic courses:

Getting involved with Young Cattlemen’s [Association], I’ve met a lot of, and through [Agriculture] classes I’ve met a lot of the kids that I would be with, that...have a lot of similarities with me. So that’s been good, It’s helped...it’s been really nice to have someone to relate to.

Through interactions in their residence halls, their classrooms, and their campus organizations, these rural students are facing interactions with peers that make them feel different and cause them to identify more as a rural individual than they have in the past. Some individuals cope with this by intentionally seeking out friendships with other students from rural areas, while some notice their difference only in interactions with students from larger communities. This may be due to the fact that some participants had yet to discover other rural individuals who they could relate to, as rurality is more of a hidden identity than a physical identity.

Many participants pointed directly to rural culture in determining their difference from other students. As each participant is unique, some took more ownership in their personal rural culture, while others indicated an overall cultural shift. Paul noted feeling overall like he fits in in college, yet said that in comparison to his friends from urban areas, “I know my mentality is slightly different.” In a similarly broad fashion, Calvin, when referring to his roommate,

indicated, “he’s from a suburb and he’s sort of, he hasn’t been really exposed to...people of my culture.” As a part of a study investigating the experiences of rural students, participants’ awareness of rural cultural differences may have been slightly heightened. Since research questions specifically focused on rural influences, it is likely that participants emphasized rural differences. Heather cited very specific examples of cultural differences she has noticed:

I thought I was pretty ‘city’ [in my hometown] because I lived in town. But I didn’t realize just how different being in a small town makes you. Like everybody hunts, everybody fishes, everybody knows how to cook and sew and all that stuff...or like I drive a wheat truck, I’ve been working on vehicles since I was little with my dad because that’s what you have to do. And people are just floored by that.

Looking at culture as mental programming (Hofstede, 1991), Heather identified examples of differences in what she considered to be a normal occurrence based on her previous experiences, while other individuals she has met in college view these examples as different from the norm.

When asked about rural culture, Molly indicated that her community is filled with:

A lot of rednecks. I mean the main activities are hunting, fishing, going to the river...the guys drive their trucks around in the woods and think it’s the most awesome thing in the world to go mudding and camping and that kind of thing...just a lot of really simple people I guess.

Here Molly described her rural community culture without comparing it to her collegiate environment, yet still showed that she is aware of the difference in activities between the two areas. As shown through stories told by the participants themselves, they cite an awareness of difference based in rural culture and rural communities.

**Summary of findings: Common lived experiences of rural students.** To explore the experiences of first-year college students from rural high schools, the second research question seeks to discover common lived experiences of rural students in their first term of higher education. Participants highlighted facing an inability to form friendships and make strong social connections in college, due in part to the overwhelming emotions created by exponential

increases in size and a lack of co-curricular involvement. In addition, rural individuals experienced increases in diversity in their new community through interactions with people of differing backgrounds and exposure to new ways of thinking. Through a new awareness of difference, these individuals better identify the impact that being from a rural community has on their sense of identity. This discovery of a rural mentality stems from interactions with both rural and non-rural peers, as well as from reflections on rural cultural nuances.

### **Question Three: Perceived Barriers Faced by Rural Students**

The third and final research question seeks to determine what perceived barriers rural students face when entering a postsecondary institution. Specific to this study, this question includes barriers faced by rural students when entering a medium-sized, public, research institution. Through narrative analysis of the 10 rural student interviews, two final themes emerged regarding rural student barriers:

- Rural students indicate the prioritization of labor over education in rural communities to be a barrier to their college enrollment. Specifically, students highlight that the lack of a college-going culture, lack of financial resources, and geographic distance from college inhibited their college aspirations.
- Rural secondary school systems were portrayed as both a barrier to college enrollment and a catalyst for success. The poor quality of rural secondary schools and related early academic troubles were mentioned by many participants, yet hidden benefits of these same rural schools are also highlighted as important to college aspirations.

In these themes, participants focus on their academic and cultural upbringing in relation to ease or difficulty in transitioning to college. Although many barriers mentioned are common to large

populations of first-year students, these narratives highlight ways in which rural student backgrounds and educational systems may uniquely affect their ability to enroll in college.

**Prioritization of labor and finances over education in rural communities.**

Participants cited several barriers that hindered their ability to enroll in college. Many of these stories reiterate barriers in the literature review, while others are unique to this study. This theme highlights the commonalities of participants in the support of their rural community members of a college education. Demographics common to rural communities as related to economic and financial resources, as well as the great physical distance many of these students must travel to college affects their ability to attain a bachelor's degree. These resources then influence the cultural mindset of the local community, resulting in a lower level of importance placed on postsecondary education than in a larger or more urban community. Through cultural, economic, and physical factors, rural students face additional barriers that are unique to this population.

***Lack of a college-going culture.*** Although many participants felt like they were supported in their college decision by mentors within school, family, or the community, several indicated that the rural community as a whole encouraged trades and immediate employment over college enrollment. As highlighted in the literature review, previous studies have found that rural students, especially female rural students, have identified a lack of a college-going culture in their small communities (Bergerson et al., 2013; Holmes & Dalton, 2008). Often, education is not as high of a priority in rural towns as it is in more populated areas. Calvin highlighted the casual attitude that his hometown had regarding college enrollment:

As far as the town looks at [college] as a whole it's like, 'no one in the town went to college, we're still a town where everyone works at the mill, no one has any postsecondary education, we're just fine without college.'

Here not only did Calvin indicate that little importance is placed on the value of a college education, but he highlighted the lack of adults in his community who have degrees. Calvin's observation mimics national data, where only about 15% of adults in rural areas have bachelor's degrees as compared to 30% of adults nationally (Gallardo & Bishop, 2012; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). With so few adults with experience in college, it becomes increasingly difficult for rural students to connect with mentors, which was highlighted as important in earlier themes.

Although not many adults in rural communities seem to be encouraging students to attend college, many are pushing students to find jobs immediately after high school. Sara Lee, in responses surrounding students in her rural community, indicated, "I think there is a lot of pressure for some of the [rural] kids to stay and work rather than go to college." Heather highlighted that in her community, a similar cultural message was taught to high school students:

There were a lot of people stressing the trade factor and saying 'you know you don't have to go to college.' Like they felt that they were afraid that by pushing us to go to college we would get there, hate it, and then feel like we had to drop out. We wasted our money so we wouldn't be able to get a job. They are teaching us how to survive, not to go to college.

According to Heather, surviving in a rural community meant graduating from high school and getting a job immediately, not wasting money on college tuition. Depending on the community's economic base, rural students are often supported by the community to contribute to the local economy by working in a logging, fishing, ranching, or farming trade. A couple students highlighted the benefits many students had in staying to work on farms or ranches to make money, instead of leaving to college. Heather noted this directly when she said, "Half the kids in my class they inherited...thousand, hundred thousand-acre farms so they didn't have any need to go to college." As some rural students tend to be motivated by financial means to attain a college degree, many choose to pursue a career in a rural community if available instead of

enrolling in college. Similarly, Sara Lee indicated that “The three kids that did not go to college, [they] were all from a farming background and are staying on the farm or ranch.” In both instances, rural students who have the opportunity to stay in their rural communities and work often do so. Molly cited a perceived difference in gender expectations in terms of going to college. Specifically, she indicated that it is more expected for males to stay and work locally or go to the military, while it is more appropriate for females to leave to college:

I think it's just a generational thing, I mean that's what their fathers did, that's what their grandfathers did. It's just I know, kind of the way things are...it's not look down on to go to college...but I feel like [males] they're not looked down upon as much if they don't go to college as people in other [non-rural] places.

Here Molly cited not only gender differences, but the influence of tradition, family heritage, and rural culture on college-going aspirations. In previous studies, rural culture has been shown to inhibit college goals as a result of family and historical traditions (Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Maltzan, 2006). Overall mindsets of rural community members here tend to place less emphasis on students to enroll in college.

Not all rural students indicated that their community was unsupportive of their college dreams. Paul noted that he would consider his community as highly supportive of postsecondary education, while Hailee agreed in her statement that, “There's a lot of people [from my hometown] that say ‘man I wish I would have gone to college, I wish I would have done something more’ so a lot of those people have been really, really [supportive].” Due to a range of experiences and community types, students appeared to be experiencing a variety of supportive factors as related to their rural community cultures.

***Lack of economic and financial resources.*** Several resources have linked low socioeconomic status and high poverty rates in rural communities to lower numbers of rural students enrolling in college (Byun et al., 2012; Goreham, 2008a; Johnson & Strange, 2005; M.

Strange et al., 2012). In a similar but less specific way, participants cited a lack of economic resources as a barrier to college enrollment. As related to cultural nuances, Molly indicated that:

I guess everyone grows up to where you know, you graduate high school, you get a job, and you work your whole life...a lot of people really just don't have the money for it honestly...so I feel like most of the people, if they don't get enough scholarships they're not going to go and it's kind of a small portion of kids who try hard enough in school that are actually going to have to work hard enough to get there.

In this statement Molly not only cited a lack of a college-going culture, as mentioned earlier, but highlighted the difficulty in covering college costs. She also cited the availability of scholarships as key in overcoming this barrier, which was a common response. Darla stated that, "I was going to go to a community college...if I couldn't get scholarships to go [here] for all four years." Several other participants mentioned the role of scholarships in ensuring their decision to go to college, and to enroll specifically to the host institution. The financial feasibility of attending an in-state school was often mentioned as a factor for enrollment choice.

Poverty as related to schools and rural communities often came in student responses. Sara Lee, in speaking about her high school, mentioned that, "we were a really, really poverty-stricken school. Just like lots of people moving out there because they have nowhere else to go and farm hands...kind of in and out all the time in school." Others cited that a lack of funding in the school system inhibited the purchase of academic and technological resources. Family support was also noted as a difficult aspect to overcome in financing college. Molly indicated:

My parents definitely could not afford [college]. I mean I think they would find a way to let me go but it would be really, really hard for them...I've worked the last few years but it's not enough money to go here.

Calvin also mentioned working part-time while in high school in order to cover college expenses. Often this resulted in the inability to play sports or join other co-curricular activities. As shown, rural students face financial difficulty in enrolling in college. This is not an



experience unique to rural students, as many first-year students face substantial financial barriers in attempting to pay for their education (Crissman Ishler, 2005). However, nation-wide rural students do tend to have lower socioeconomic status than urban students (Byun et al., 2012; M. Strange et al., 2012), highlighting that rural students may experience financial difficulty more often than the general student population. This further perpetuates the importance of entering the work force immediately after high school graduation to earn money, instead of entering college and often acquiring debt, which is a common mindset in rural communities.

*Geographic distance as a factor in enrollment.* Participants' hometowns ranged in distance from 74 miles to 435 miles from the host institution (Appendix O). As such, narratives as related to geographic distance as a barrier varied. Especially for those students farther away from the host institution, physical driving distance was shown to be a barrier, both financially and emotionally. Financially, several participants mentioned the difficulty in not being able to afford travel costs associated with going home to visit friends and family. Emotionally, Heather, who has to travel almost 300 miles each way to get to and from college, notes that the distance has, "been hard. It's been hard just because I can't go home. And my parents are only a phone call away but sometimes you need more than a phone call." Although few participants mentioned experiencing homesickness, several of them did indicate the overall difficulty in being so far physically from their family.

Geographic isolation and distance from colleges affected many rural students while they were in high school as well. Sara Lee noted that she was unable to visit a lot of college campuses simply because her parents could not afford to travel the distances it would require to visit many of the colleges she was considering attending. Distance also negatively affected rural students who desired to take college courses at community colleges in high school. Unless these

courses were taught online, it was often difficult to drive to and from the community college back to high school. Calvin mentioned the difficulty in taking a technical course at a sister high school due to time and distance constraints:

Because it was a sister school [that offered technical courses] and the way we had it arranged is we had a 15 minute block between second and third period where we would have a little break...and we would drive 20 minutes to this sister school...we were always five to 10 minutes late.

Although distance seemed to be a factor in both secondary and postsecondary educational experiences, this distance was not detrimental to college aspirations. Each participant indicated that geography was not a barrier on its own to college enrollment. Instead, geographical distance is related closely to financial difficulty and to some extent, a continued lack of enthusiasm for college enrollment by rural community members. Due to a combination of cultural, economic, and geographic factors, rural students are facing additional difficulty in college enrollment.

**Rural secondary school systems as both a barrier and a catalyst for college success.**

Similar to the mixed reviews of rural secondary schools in terms of preparing students for college, which can be found in the literature review, participants had a variety of opinions regarding how their rural secondary schools did or did not prepare them for enrollment at a medium-sized, public institution. In many ways, participants cited that they felt ill-prepared for college-level academics due to the poor quality of their high schools, the inability to take college-preparatory work, and the lack of diverse courses. Due to these factors and personal nuances, most participants indicated that they experienced some academic difficulty in their first term of college. On the other hand, participants cited several benefits to rural schools such as scholarships and personalized attention of teachers. As such, rural students' academic preparation may depend on their specific school and personal background, with rural schools having both benefits and challenges in preparing students for college.

*Poor academic quality of rural secondary schools.* A lack of academic rigor and college preparation by rural schools has been traditionally cited as a barrier to rural college student enrollment, but has recently been challenged in various geographic areas (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Doyle et al., 2009). Specific to this study, participants cited the low academic quality of their education when describing their high school experiences. Although many participants did not specify an area of improvement for rural schools, they indicated not feeling challenged and therefore not being prepared for college-level work. Darla highlighted this feeling by stating, “my high school didn’t prepare me well at all I feel like [because] I wasn’t getting challenged there, and it was nothing like what it is here.” Calvin and Molly cited similar feelings, with Calvin mentioning that he could get high grades in high school while completing minimal work, and Molly mentioning that:

[College is] a lot harder because in high school I really didn’t have to try that much at all. You know, I hardly ever did homework or anything but now it’s like homework all the time and it’s a lot different.

Rural participants indicated the increase in academic difficulty of college courses, which was sharply different than their prior experiences. National data on student expectations in college indicates that students expect to work harder in college than they did in high school, yet actually study and read less than they had expected to (Schilling & Schilling, 2005). Specific to this study, students were asked about their experiences, yet not directly regarding time spent on academics. Therefore, participant responses indicated an expectation of more difficult work in college. Since many rural participants disclosed working very little outside of class in high school, this population may indeed be facing a fairly different academic environment in college.

In critiquing their high school experience, several rural participants mentioned the lack of academic and co-curricular offerings as a barrier to college enrollment. In reflecting on the ability to take a diversity of coursework his senior year, Calvin mentioned:

None of the seniors got to play in the band my senior year because scheduling is hard when you don't have any teachers so I didn't do band and then of course I took college-level government...my school offered chemistry that year for the first time in like four or five years.

Both in and out of the classroom, Calvin noted an inability to be more involved with specific academic and co-curricular areas. Heather, speaking specifically on out-of-class activities, stated, "We didn't really have any extracurricular activities. I mean we had FFA and band...and sports of course." Various factors play into the lack of co-curricular and leadership opportunities offered at many rural schools, including lack of funding, few teachers, and little interest. Yet as shown earlier, many rural students did manage to take advantage of the few co-curricular opportunities that were offered.

In his earlier statement, Calvin briefly mentioned the lack of teachers available, which several other students indicated as a barrier to academic success. Some students noted their awareness of the low academic quality of rural teachers, acting somewhat surprised when they had quality instruction. For example, Molly mentioned that "for such a small school we had great teachers and great classes," while Paige also stated that her hometown, "actually has a lot of good teachers for as small as it is and as hard as it is to get people to move there." Students seem to expect a lower quality education because of their attendance at a rural school and are surprised when they actually receive high quality instruction from rural teachers.

In terms of college-preparatory and advanced coursework at their high school, participants varied in their responses. Paul indicated, "there weren't a lot of advanced classes for me to take so I had to stick with...just high school basic courses." Darla, Gillian, and Victoria

also mentioned wanting more options for AP courses in high school, which were either not offered at all, or offered sporadically. A few participants indicated that they took courses at local community colleges, which proved to be beneficial in taking care of some general education requirements. Paige positively regarded her college credit opportunities, indicating:

We don't have AP credits, just because our teachers aren't certified for that, but we can take college credit, college classes online through [community colleges], so I took four college classes in high school and...the school pays for like nine credits, so that was nice.

Here Paige noted the benefits of being able to take college courses in high school and the financial feasibility of this option. These college offerings and funding for such initiatives varied greatly between school districts based on participant stories.

***Early academic difficulties in college.*** Participants connected their lack of academic preparation at the high school level to early academic difficulty in their first term of college. Some rural students indicated only an awareness of increased academic difficulty, while some participants faced dropping a course and potential for lower grades. Gillian indicated that:

I actually withdrew from my calculus class because I decided if I'm going to take calculus I should take it when I wasn't taking chemistry because...I'm majoring in biology and I've actually never taken chemistry before.

This highlighted not only Gillian's action of dropping a difficult course, but directly tied this action to the lack of science preparation. Other participants mentioned that academic difficulty occurred very early in the first few weeks of the term and that this has gradually improved over time. In relation to study habits, Heather noted that classes were difficult, "just in the first few weeks...It's just hard to adjust your study habits so that you aren't procrastinating as much. You could afford to do that in high school, and here in college it doesn't work as well." Paul also mentioned discovering after the first few weeks that he needed to shift his academic practices when he said, "at the beginning of the term, I'm not going to lie, I was messing up. I would be

doing my thing normally like it was high school, and then I would realize...I have to check...what's all due today.” In these several examples, students indicated facing an initial shock in academic rigor to college-level work.

Rural students, while indicating their difficult academic experiences early in college, did not always blame their rural secondary school for their troubles, highlighting that college was simply a different experience than high school. With increasing numbers of first-year students entering college less academically prepared and needing more remedial course work than ever (Crissman Ishler, 2005), it is not surprising that these students indicate facing academic trouble in their first term. Although, based on the high school grade point averages of participants, which are all above a 3.5 on a 4.0 scale, it is surprising that several rural students indicate academic difficulty, since high school grades are historically the strongest predictor of college student success (Astin, 1993). Looking only at these rural student responses and stories, not at actual first-term grades, it seems as though despite high academic achievement in high school, several rural students are struggling academically early in their first term of college.

***Hidden benefits of rural secondary schools.*** Although participants cited various gaps in their secondary education, they also highlighted many benefits of attending such a small, rural school. One main benefit that was mentioned by several participants was the availability of scholarships at rural schools. Calvin directly cited this:

One benefit I will say about going to a small town [and school] is the scholarship opportunities. I talked to some of my friends, my roommate is from San Francisco. He applied for all of the scholarships at his school, and he got one. I applied for all of my scholarships at my school, which was like twelve, [and] I got eight.

Simply due to numbers of students applying for similar scholarships, Calvin was able to fund a large portion of his college education through local scholarships. Several other participants

mentioned that local organizations, high school counselors, and community members helped them to find college funding sources.

In small schools with graduating classes of less than 50 people, rural students received highly personalized attention from teachers. Sara Lee beamed when discussing her high school educational experience, stating:

I really, really enjoyed [my high school experience]...I liked the individualized attention that we would get. I think a lot of my academic success was because I could go see my teacher after school and sit with them for hours and figure things out and I...did independent study courses so that I could take exactly what I wanted to take and make it work in my schedule.

As shown, Sara Lee actually received a more rigorous and personalized academic schedule due to the availability of her teachers in a small community. Hailee mimicked this enjoyment of individual attention, and especially small class sizes:

I loved it because you could get so much individual attention. A lot of extra help from the teachers and even fellow classmates. I think in my senior year my pre-calculus class, there was only three of us, so it made it very easy for us if the next morning we didn't understand the homework the night before we could just go in and talk about it and no one would be like 'well I understood it' and the teacher would be like 'well since he understood it.' So (laughing) you know, the individual attention is, I think really important.

In comparison to their current large class sizes in college, Sara Lee mentioned intentionally sitting in the front of the class to avoid distraction from other students. Hailee indicated that it has been an adjustment, but that she is getting used to the larger classes in college. Due to the close relationship between rural school benefits and detriments, the positive aspects of rural secondary schools must be considered in looking at the lived experience of rural students' educational transitions. Through personal stories, participants indicate that rural secondary schools can be both beneficial and detrimental to their desire to enroll in college.

**Summary of findings: Perceived barriers faced by rural students.** Exploring the experiences of rural college student transitions would be incomplete without an in-depth look at rural student barriers to college. Since increasing rural students entry into higher education is the main factor in pushing this population towards higher college completion (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998), an understanding of what the rural students themselves view as difficult is essential to improving college-going rates for this population. Stories regarding rural students' college journey indicate that an emphasis in rural communities to join the workforce instead of getting a college degree is a difficult culture to resist. This lack of a college-going culture in rural communities was related to financial, economic, and physical resources. In addition, rural students reveal many shortcomings as well as benefits to the education that they received in a rural secondary school. Specific to barriers, rural students cite being less academically prepared for college due to a low quality high school education which led to initial difficulty in college courses. As shown, rural students face barriers common to first-year students nationally, but to a slightly different extent based on rural community values and demographics.

### **Results Summary**

In response to three main research questions surrounding rural students' transition to college, common lived experiences in their first term of college, and barriers faced by these students in enrolling in college, six themes have emerged. First, rural students experience an unexpected emotional and social transition into the college environment as a result of drastic environmental and social changes. Participants also indicate that key motivational factors of mentors, personal goals, and a desire to leave rural communities led to their enrollment in college. Upon entering a much larger environment, rural individuals face a lack of social friendship connections as well as a lack of involvement outside the classroom in college. Due in



large part to the demographics of rural communities, these students are exposed to a much greater diversity of identities and thought, leading to a salient notice of difference based in their rural identity. In regards to barriers, the mix of cultural, financial, and geographical factors in rural communities and families hinders postsecondary aspirations. Lastly, rural secondary schools are both beneficial and harmful to those rural students enrollment in college. Overall, themes indicate that rural students are experiencing a variety of emotional, social, and transitional factors in moving into a medium-sized, public university and the unique needs of population is deserving of the attention of secondary and postsecondary educators.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study adds to scholarly knowledge and understanding of the experiences of rural students transitioning into a four-year university. Specifically, it reveals unique ways in which rural students narrate their transition to college, their initial experiences in college, and their identified barriers to enrollment. This final chapter presents a discussion of the results relating participant experiences to that of other rural students and first-year students nationally. Based on this information, suggestions for ways to improve the college transition process for rural individuals are presented, as well as limitations specific to this study and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The rural students in this study demonstrated an exceptional willingness to share their experiences of transitioning into a medium-sized, public institution. Through personal narratives, Darla, Sara Lee, Hailee, Gillian, Victoria, Molly, Heather, Paige, Paul, and Calvin, exposed their sense of rural identity, college struggles, and personal motivations for enrolling in college. Most indicated appreciation of the researcher's disclosure as a rural individual and appeared more willing to share their story because of this similarity in background. In these interviews, participants were able to affirm their identity as a rural individual and begin to understand relationships between their background and their first term of college.

Rendón (1994) indicates that validation is "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). In intentionally creating an environment for participants to reflect on their experiences as rural students, their struggles were confirmed by the researcher, enabling them to

develop personally as they better understood themselves. As such, participants were willing to share their stories, as they felt a sense of self-worth and empathy from me, the researcher.

Described by Rendón (1994) as interpersonal validation, through this research participants were affirmed, leading to personal development and social adjustment. In this, validation of rural participant upbringings led to a rich understanding of their lived experiences as well as a developmental activity for the participants themselves.

Through one-on-one interviews with rural participants, many findings reinforced rural student trends as indicated in the literature review, while other findings differed in this sample. The results of this study in relation to both rural student research and trends known about first-year students in general are important to consider in discussing implications. Through these similarities and differences, a more comprehensive picture of rural student experiences at a medium-sized public institution emerges.

**Anticipated findings.** To expand on the themes presented in chapter four, connections have been made between these findings and the literature review regarding first-year rural student trends and barriers to higher education. Many findings reiterated previous research done, which adds further validity to this study. In terms of barriers to college, results indicate that rural students face financial difficulty, a lack of a college-going community culture, a great physical distance to college, and an absence of college preparatory work in high school. As cited in the literature, rural students tend to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which greatly prevents these students from enrolling in college (Byun et al., 2012; Johnson & Strange, 2005; M. Strange et al., 2012). To overcome financial barriers, students chose to attend an in-state institution and many received substantial scholarships. Most participants also indicated that their communities in general did not greatly support local students in their college journey, which is

common among rural areas (Bergerson et al., 2013; Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Maltzan, 2006).

The great distance many students had to travel from their rural communities to college was seen both as a barrier to enrollment and a cause of difficult emotions surrounding the inability to go home and see their friends and family. In terms of financial difficulty and ability to retain in college, this distance can be a negative factor in rural student success (Gibbs, 2003; Goreham, 2008a; Long, 2004).

In terms of academic preparation, most first-year students indicate that they are unprepared to enter college (Hoffman et al., 2002; Kuh, 2005). Rural students in this study mimic not only these trends, but indicate that a lack of college preparatory work and specialized classes in high school led to their inability to adapt well to college-level work, which is common for rural students across the nation (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Doyle et al., 2009; Greenberg et al., 1998). The lack of assistance from high school counselors and college admissions representatives showed up in many participant narratives, indicating that this is a common experience for rural students in this area of the Pacific Northwest, as it is nationally (Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Perna, 2000). Therefore, findings from this study reinforce that rural students face financial difficulty in enrolling in college, a lack of resources at the community and high school level needed for college understanding, and a physically far distance to get to institutions of higher education.

In describing the transition to college many rural participants mentioned motivations to enroll, including financial and career goals. Recent data indicate that the most important reasons for enrolling in college are to get a better job, to gain a general education, to become more cultured, and to make more money (Higher Education Research Institute, 2013). Before 2006, students indicated that the main motivation for going to college was to learn more about interests

(Higher Education Research Institute, 2006). Several rural students in this study highlighted they chose to enroll in college because of financial and career goals, both of which match general trends of today's first-year students. Although participant descriptions of their high school experience were mixed, many of them did indicate that there are several benefits to attending a rural secondary school, including availability of scholarships, opportunities for specialized coursework, and personalized attention from teachers, which has been cited in the literature as well (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; M. Strange, 2011). These findings provide additional understanding into the unique experiences faced by rural students upon entering college, including their motivations and barriers they must overcome to reach their goals.

**Unanticipated findings.** Demographically, students in this study did not always match national data and research on rural students. Although rural student research indicates that this student population tends to be the first in their family to attend college (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Byun et al., 2012; Gibbs, 1998; Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Maltzan, 2006), only three of the 10 participants in this study were first-generation college students. In addition, while previous studies indicate that rural students are more likely than urban students to be from a racial or ethnic minority group (Byun et al., 2012; Goreham, 2008c; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006; M. Strange et al., 2012), only one of the 10 participants claimed to be Native American, while the rest indicated a White identity. As shown, rural participants differed from national demographic data, with most of them having at least one parent that attended college and most of them being White, not of an ethnic minority group.

In comparison to most first-year college students, these rural participants cited unique motivational reasons for attending college. First of all, these students indicated that through the nature of their town in cultivating a one-minded, non-college-going culture filled with

individuals without bachelor's degrees, they were motivated to not be "stuck" in this type of area. In comparisons with their high school peers who chose to stay in their small towns, they indicated that not wanting to be like these individuals motivated them to go to college. In addition, rural labor markets served as a catalyst to push participants to go to college, not a detriment as indicated in the literature review (Bergerson et al., 2013; McGranahan & Ghelfi, 1998; Shamah, 2009). Instead, these students cited lofty career goals that require at least bachelor's degrees and since these types of positions were not readily available in their communities, they reasoned that college was the best route to attaining their dreams. Due partially to economic conditions of their hometowns, only one of the participants indicated that they would consider returning to their hometown after completing college. This provides further supporting evidence of the out-migration of youth from rural communities to larger cities (Gallardo & Bishop, 2012; Mills & Hazarika, 2001). As shown, those rural students who do enter college cite using their small communities as a sense of motivation to enroll, as they do not desire to return to these towns and see college as a means of escape.

As shown in the literature review and results, previous academic success is the number one predictor of college success (Astin, 1993; Schilling & Schilling, 2005), yet increasing numbers of students are experiencing early academic difficulty in their first term (Crissman Ishler, 2005), including rural participants. Several participants in this study indicated that they were struggling academically in their first term and a few noted dropping courses, yet demographic data (See Appendix O) indicates that all participants achieved above a 3.5 cumulative grade point average in high school. With such high academic success in high school, it is surprising that these students noted struggling academically in their college courses. Since data were collected during the seventh or eighth week of the first term, students had yet to get

final grades, therefore actual college grades attained cannot be determined. Yet in a previous study, rural individuals were shown to have great academic difficulty in their initial terms of college, greatly due to their lack of rigor in high school (Maltzan, 2006). Rural students, despite their prior academic success, tend to be struggling in classes early in their college careers.

**Significant findings.** Through a comparison of results from this study to past research conducted on first-year students in general and rural students specifically, three significant findings have arisen within the themes presented in chapter four. These findings relate to participant narratives of this study as well as best practices from student affairs literature. Assisting with the understanding of rural college students, unique findings include the un-involvement of students in college activities despite their high involvement in high school, their inability to make social connections in college, and the implications associated with the large disconnect between their expectations and reality of the college environment.

***Drastic shifts in involvement levels.*** Research on college student development highlights that the time and energy students devote to involvement activities outside the classroom is the single best predictor of student learning and leads to higher satisfaction and retention rates (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Specifically, the first six weeks of college are essential in engaging a student with their university environment (Upcraft et al., 2005). In addition, those students with high levels of prior involvement in high school are more likely to continue their involvement in college (Berger & Milem, 1999; Larose & Roy, 1991; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 1994). Yet the rural student participants in this study described very high levels of participation in co-curricular activities in high school, yet fairly low levels during their first term and first few weeks of college. This contradicts national trends and findings from earlier research.

Several participants described a sense of being needed to participate in high school, as there were so few students that each student was necessary for success of a co-curricular activity. C. C. Strange and Banning (2001) indicate that dimensions of involvement can affect student involvement levels. In smaller environments, individuals are more likely to become involved when they feel this sense of urgency (C. C. Strange & Banning, 2001). This hesitancy to become involved in college may be due in part to the overwhelming number of organizations available and related large number of students to fill positions. In a sense, these students have lost the sense of urgency to join co-curricular activities.

In addition, negative perceptions of the college environment often lead to a lack of desire to become involved in activities outside the classroom (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In interviews, several participants described negative experiences in their initial term, such as lacking social groups, academic struggles, and an overwhelming sense of increased size, both in population and physical size. In these negative perceptions of their personal experiences in college, students continue to hesitate to become involved in clubs and organizations. In another qualitative study on rural student experiences, Maltzan (2006) suggests that rural college students, “may require high levels of involvement in *both* the college setting *and* their rural communities in order to succeed in their postsecondary endeavors” (p. 194). This indicates that in order for rural students to complete college goals, they must learn to engage in co-curricular activities in college. Although many rural students have substantial leadership experience in high school, their potential to become involved in college has not yet been channeled due to changes in their academic and social environment. To a greater extent than first-year students in general, rural students are lacking in involvement early in college, despite their substantial leadership experience prior to college.



***Inability to form social connections.*** Although first-year college students face a difficult emotional transition and experience forming social friendships initially (Paul & Brier, 2011; Schilling & Schilling, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Wei et al., 2005), the unique nuances of rural students cause the process of making social connections increasingly difficult. Coming from small, rural communities where higher education is often not valued and students grow up with the same core group of friends, entering a college environment that is very different in size, social norms, and intellectual values can be especially stressful (Tinto, 1988). Many participants indicated that they have never learned to form friendships, as they grew up with the same people since early elementary school. In addition, since there were so few individuals in their graduating class, few rural students bring with them a group of people they know from high school into college. Rural students are then placed in an environment drastically different from what they know and are expected to know how to approach others to form friendships, which they have no experience with, causing additional social difficulty.

In relation to both involvement levels and social connections, student perceptions affect experiences. Generally, negative perceptions of college environments lead to decreased social connections (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Several participants indicated that they were overwhelmed in this new environment, largely due to size increases. In mentioning the multitude of people walking around campus during passing periods, the large class sizes of their general education courses, and the many options of co-curricular organizations to join, rural students indicate feeling overwhelmed, not excited about these opportunities. These are students who have never before needed to reach out and form friendships or join organizations, therefore they indicate not knowing how to begin to do so. In descriptions of their lack of college friendships, participants indicate negative perceptions of peers, which leads to low levels of

academic and social integration (Berger & Milem, 1999). Where as in high school they felt supported and connected to their small graduating class and teachers, in college they are lacking in social support from any source. Schultz (2004) in his study on rural students in their first year of college indicates that, “participants found themselves unaware of the need to build new relationships, and to cope with a college environment and culture which proved to be dissimilar to that which they had known all their lives” (p. 49). The findings of this study largely reinforce this notion that rural students are facing a larger disconnect than most students in entering the college environment, resulting in an inability to successfully navigate new friendships.

It was interesting that several participants directly indicated that becoming involved in a co-curricular activity may help eliminate feelings of loneliness. Although many participants identified that joining a campus organization may help them to make friends, they still seemed hesitant to do so. This highlights that the potential of rural students to become involved and make friends in college is clear, yet without intentional pathways by student affairs professionals to engage them in the college environment, they face the risk of leaving the university.

***Disconnects between expectations and reality.*** Many first-year students face differences between what they expect college to be and what it actually is upon enrollment (Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh, 2005), yet rural students seem to be experiencing this to a slightly different extent. Rural students did reinforce first-year student research in explaining their disconnects in expectations of academic rigor, study habits, and curricular involvement, yet unlike most first-year students, rural participants indicated great disconnects between diversity levels and overall increase in size dimensions. In many cases, these differences resulted in additional surprises of the difficulty to form friendships with college peers.

In mostly homogeneous rural communities, participants faced greatly increased levels of diversity in many forms upon entering the college environment. This was viewed by most participants as a positive experience, yet not something they thought would be so noticeable. Similarly, Schultz (2004) discovered that rural students experienced differences mostly as a result of increased cultural diversity, as well as adjustment to living in a residence hall. Since most participants had lived in rural communities their entire life, they had not expected to be surrounded by such a great diversity of people, perspectives, and values in college.

Although participants were aware that they were entering a much larger collegiate and community environment, they still indicated levels of surprise surrounding interactions in large classes and walking around campus between classes. This again reinforces other rural student research indicating that “the dimension of ‘size’ seemed to prove the most discrepant in terms of the pre-first semester expectations” (Schultz, 2004, p. 49). Those students who indicated feeling comfortable with campus size had substantial prior experience on campus through high school trips or leadership opportunities. For others, they remained overwhelmed by the increased physical and population size increases, again inhibiting their ability to connect with peers and co-curricular activities. In dealing with the surprise and overwhelming feelings of this new environment, rural students were hesitant to reach out and form friendships, as discussed earlier.

To some extent, rural students may be facing a larger disconnect between college expectations and reality due to their lack of exposure to college prior to enrolling. With a lack of adults with bachelor’s degrees in rural communities, many participants had few role models to ask about the college experience. In addition, due to a lack of funding at the secondary level, few trips were offered to tour college campuses and college counselors were unable to provide the necessary resources. Financial barriers in general prevented many students from spending

time on a larger campus or community prior to moving to the campus. Overall, a lack of exposure to college life and larger communities resulted in an increased gap between expectations and reality for these rural students.

### **Recommendations**

Although this study does not seek to be generalized to the entire rural student population, it is transferable to current college transitions involving these students. What has been learned in this study can transfer to similar situations in other contexts (Merriam, 2009). The applicability of this research lies not in this document, but in the reader. For secondary school teachers, high school counselors, student affairs professionals, rural community leaders, parents, college professors, and all other individuals who may access this study, it is my hope as the researcher that you find this study to be of use in your daily work. Through my personal upbringing as a rural student, extensive knowledge of national and geographical rural student trends, and this in-depth research study, I offer several suggestions for improving the rural student experience.

**Track rural students into and through college.** Definitions of what is considered rural vary greatly depending on geographic region and source utilized. This study, as well as most recent national research, defines rural based on the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which is related to Census data (Provasnik et al., 2007). Yet many areas will base rural on county or other city demographics. Regardless of method used, I suggest that colleges begin to track rural students' entry, retention, and graduation at their institutions. Although this population has been shown to be underrepresented in college, few institutions consider rural students as an at-risk population. By first recognizing the unique transitional issues facing rural students and then tracking rural student trends, universities will be better able to understand this student population at their institution. This will allow for more data to be gathered on the

retention of rural students, as currently literature is sparse and mixed surrounding rural student college retention (Gibbs et al., 1998). As universities already have high school data on entering students, it may be most effective to track rural students based on high school attended according to NCES data. This would allow for programs and resources to be tailored to this population.

**Create rural student mentorship opportunities.** To assist rural students in successfully transitioning into higher education, I suggest that intentional mentorship opportunities be created for these students both prior to and upon enrolling in college. Mentorship is an effective strategy to provide students with the resources and support needed to attain a college degree, as mentors provide information on college as well as encouragement to enroll (National College Access Network, 2011). Although there are few adults in rural communities with college degrees, I suggest first that those few adults in rural areas who have gone to college are utilized in mentoring high school students. Several participants mentioned that a teacher or community member was highly influential in their decision to go to college and even in their choice of a specific major. I found it particularly interesting that Sara Lee found it helpful to speak to someone from her home community who was an alumnus of and worked at the host institution. Since many rural communities have few adults with degrees actually living in the community, encouraging these individuals to come back and speak at their rural high schools would be beneficial. Even setting up a mentorship program where participants communicate electronically can assist in encouraging these students to go to college, especially those who may be first-generation students and lack parent knowledge of the college experience (National College Access Network, 2011). By providing adult degree-holders as mentors for rural high school students, rural youth will be more supported to enroll in college, and may be more prepared for the environment once they enroll.

To prevent common rural student difficulties early in college, such as loneliness, feelings of being overwhelmed, and academic stress, I suggest that a peer mentorship program be created for rural students once they enroll in college as well. Peer-to-peer mentoring programs have been shown to be highly effective in easing the transition into college for underrepresented populations (Gandara & Mejorado, 2005; National College Access Network, 2011). Several participants mentioned that they had been able to form friendships by seeking out organizations where they would be likely to meet other students from rural communities. A more intentional mentoring program, created by student affairs professionals, would allow for incoming rural students to be connected with rural students who had already attended the institution for at least a year, allowing for social connections based on common backgrounds. More experienced mentors would be able to help incoming students to navigate the large university size and alleviate other common stressors such as loneliness and culture shock. This is also an opportunity for collaboration between rural high school administrators and college professionals to communicate information about students who may be from similar high schools or rural areas.

**Create intentional opportunities for rural student connections with one another.** In addition to a mentoring program, there are several other ways in which university professionals can connect rural students with one another to assist in social connections and co-curricular involvement. Kuh et al. (2005) indicates that student engagement includes the effort students put towards college activities as well as the way an institution allocates resources to encourage student participation in such activities. Therefore, it is pertinent that student affairs professionals intentionally create opportunities for rural college student engagement. There are several learning and developmental practices, such as freshman interest groups, first-year experience courses, and living-learning communities, that have been shown to be highly effective in

improving student retention, academics, and sense of student connection to the university (Kuh et al., 2005; Laufgraben, 2005). Specific to rural populations, this study highlights that the social connection is a key area which warrants improvement in the first-year rural student experience. Therefore, I would suggest that universities implement rural freshmen interest groups or a rural student living-learning community where these essential social bonds can be formed. A simple rural student mixer during orientation or welcome week programming may also be beneficial in allowing rural students to connect with one another. Depending on the institution, a first-year experience course focusing on rural communities may be helpful in allowing students to discuss their rural identity and learn more about other rural areas and backgrounds. I would encourage student affairs professionals to investigate best practices for their specific institutions in relation to rural student populations.

**Increase partnerships between colleges and rural secondary schools.** To prevent the large gap in expectations and college reality, more communication between colleges and rural high schools are needed. Improved communication from the colleges to high schools on what to expect in academic rigor, school size, and social atmosphere at their specific institution to high school administrators would ensure that these expectations got passed along to rural students. This could be accomplished through regular electronic communications or through college admissions representatives in visiting rural high schools. In general, rural schools in this study and nationally have experienced a lack of college representatives visiting their high schools (Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Yarbrough, 1996). To introduce rural students to postsecondary opportunities, high school guidance counselors must work closely with college admissions representatives to ensure consistency of college information.

In addition, low cost opportunities for rural high school students to visit colleges must be provided. Financially, this could be supported through a partnership of the high school and college admissions offices. Participants in this study who had been to the host institution several times previously seemed to be adjusting better to the overall size of the institution overall than those who had only visited once before. Partnerships between secondary teachers and college faculty members in terms of academic preparation expectations improve academic competence and promote a college-going culture (Holmes & Dalton, 2008). Specifically, I would suggest that college faculty communicate with rural high school teachers, especially within their discipline, to provide clear expectations on college preparatory work.

Existing high school and college partnerships such as Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP), Federal TRIO Programs, and College Assistance Migrant Programs (CAMP) should be continued and encouraged. Although these programs are not geared specifically towards rural students, often students in rural areas are served by these programs due to other criteria, such as first-generation, low-income, or a member of an ethnic minority group. Specifically, CAMP assists students who are members of families who are migrant or seasonal farm workers in enrolling in an undergraduate institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a). Funding for these programs are through the U.S. Department of Education (2012a) and programs include outreach to high schools as well as support in college such as tutoring, counseling, skills workshops, financial stipends, mentoring programs, and social events. Through these already existing programs, high schools and colleges can work to increase college success rates for at-risk students, including those from rural backgrounds.

**Invest in rural secondary school districts.** Ballou and Podgursky (1998) indicate that small secondary schools should be recognized as a cost-effective strategy of educating low



income and rural communities. Although funding for secondary education is limited, policymakers must continue to invest in these learning environments to create and sustain a college-going culture. Specifically, to prepare rural students for college academics, funding needs to be secured to enable small schools to recruit and retain quality teachers and guidance counselors (Johnson & Strange, 2005). Participants in this study indicated they had little support from counselors on the college enrollment process and high teacher turnover was difficult. More funding to recruit teachers that are certified to teach AP and college-level courses would help to increase the academic preparedness of these students for college.

Several participants seemed surprised by the high quality of education they received, despite attending such a small, rural school. Even when their experience indicated otherwise, participants tended to believe negative stereotypes of rural schools as lacking in educational credentials as compared to larger schools. I suggest that rural educators promote the benefits of rural schools to these students so they can take full advantage of the benefits of a small environment. Further research into the perceptions of rural school systems can assist in better understanding this phenomenon.

In addition, several participants highlighted the benefits of scholarship opportunities in small communities. I suggest that rural communities continue to invest in these local funding options, especially for low-income students. Providing intentional pathways for rural youth to enter college may result in more of these individuals returning to rural communities after graduation, increasing the mentorship possibilities without the detrimental effects of youth out-migration. In order for rural students to have the same educational opportunities as youth from urban areas, individuals, communities, and states must invest financially in rural high schools.

**Simplify college involvement opportunities.** This study highlighted the hesitancy of rural students to join co-curricular involvement opportunities, due in great part to feelings of being overwhelmed with the multitude of options available. These students are coming from high schools where student organizations are few in number, yet they were highly involved in several of them. Entering a drastically larger environment with hundreds of organizations was overwhelming for these students. To alleviate these concerns, student affairs professionals should create a synthesized list of organizations that may speak to rural student interests. This would include organizations that are often available both at the high school and collegiate level, such as Future Farmers of America or Key Club. I would suggest that each college tailor their list to common students' interests in their state or community. As students enter into college, they should first be flagged as from a rural community and then given this more manageable list of organizations, to encourage participation, alleviate feelings of anxiety, and provide intentional methods of successful pathways into college.

Another way to simplify co-curricular options for rural students would be to create an involvement plan with these individuals. In an advising setting, this could include a discussion of high school co-curricular activities that the student participated in, followed by a direct connection to similar organizations at the collegiate level. This plan could include other intentional rural student social events and could be revisited each academic term with the student. This would allow for the student to discover how their previous interests may be continued at the college level in a larger environment.

**Be considerate of rural student backgrounds in diversity discussions.** As shown by participants in this study and previous research, rural communities tend to be fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity (Evans et al., 2010; Richardson, 2005).

Participants highlight that rural culture tends to be more conservative, racially homogenous, and religiously Christian. These rural students faced a sharp transition into a college environment that is more liberal, with individuals from many ethnic groups, cultures, and religions. As student affairs offices value multiculturalism, diversity, and social justice and instills these values into first-year students, professionals should be considerate of the previous exposure of rural students to these conversations. Prior to entering college, concepts of social justice may not have been rural community or high school conversations, so this is often a new experience. It may even cause highly divisive issues regarding diversity to come up in conversations between students from rural and urban communities. In order to achieve the student development goals of universities and avoid conflict among students, student affairs professionals must be aware of the prior diversity experiences (or lack thereof) of rural individuals.

Due to their background, rural students may progress differently through moral and intellectual stages of development (Ast, 2013). This is not to say that rural students are less developed than other students, but that their understanding of diversity may be different than students from urban areas. This provides a unique opportunity for student affairs professionals to provide a space for rural students to explore rurality as a part of their identity. Little exploration has been done in geographic background as a part of identity, yet participants in this study show that it is something they are conscious of. Through utilizing rurality as a part of identity, professionals may provide a way to communicate issues of diversity to rural students.

### **Limitations**

Although the analysis, results, and recommendations of this study are useful for many areas of higher education, there are several limitations to this study that readers should be aware

of. This includes the small sample size, female gender bias, lack of ethnic diversity, geographical limitation, and researcher viewpoint.

**Sample size.** This study is limited in the ability to be generalized to a large population due to the small sample size of 10 participants. Although the experiences of these students are common in their rural upbringing, they each bring unique backgrounds. Since this specific population is small in comparison to the numbers of rural students nationally, it is not intended to represent the voices of all rural high school or college students.

**Gender demographics.** Although gender was not a topic of interest in this study, nor was gender data collected in recruiting participants, it is assumed that the rural student gender breakdown at the host institution was evenly split between males and females. However, due to which students agreed to participate in the study, the sample of 10 students was eight females and two males. Overall, studies have shown that females, who make up more than half of today's college students, tend to persist at higher rates than males (Astin, 1993; Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Therefore, it is not unusual that there would be fewer males in the sample, yet it is unusual that it would be this skewed. One study that takes into consideration the differences between male and female academic achievement in rural and urban communities indicates that rural males are facing additional barriers in enrolling in higher education (Morris, 2012), yet as gender was not a focus of this study, no conclusive gender implications can be made.

**Lack of racial and ethnic diversity.** Although studies have shown that rural areas tend to be more highly populated with racial diversity (Byun et al., 2012; Goreham, 2008a; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006), of the 10 participants in this study, only one identified as non-White racially. Therefore this study is limited in the represented voices of

ethnic minority groups and cannot be applied to rural areas with higher percentages of persons of color.

**Inapplicability to other geographical areas.** This study is specific in looking only at one, medium-sized, public institution in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Although findings may be applied to a certain extent to similar universities in this region, they are not applicable to other areas of the United States or to other countries. More specific information on rural issues in America can be found in the *Why Rural Matters* report, which is produced annually (M. Strange et al., 2012).

**Researcher viewpoint.** Researcher bias is inherent in qualitative research (S. R. Jones et al., 2014). Therefore, as a graduate student in the Pacific Northwest, from a rural community in Colorado, despite intentional methods to reduce bias, my viewpoint will still remain to some extent in the method, analysis, and presentation of findings of this study. As a graduate student, I acknowledge that I have much more to learn not only about rural education, but methods of qualitative research. Through intentional methods as described in chapter three, I have to the best of my ability presented research in such a way to best preserve the narratives of participants.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has only begun to research the unique transitional issues faced by students from rural areas entering higher education. It is my hope that these findings are found to be useful by a wide audience and that researchers in the future are able to build off these results. Due to my previous experience, my extensive knowledge of rural education issues, and the rural stories I have heard, I offer several suggestions for future research.

**Rural student retention.** Little research has been done on how well rural students retain and graduate from college after enrollment (Gibbs et al., 1998), partially due to a lack of colleges

that are tracking this population. Further research on whether or not these students are retaining and graduating at rates comparable to that of the general population or to urban students would help to determine where to focus resources. A longitudinal study looking at a cohort of rural students would be beneficial in assessing the issues of rural students over their college career.

**Mentors and rural students.** The role of mentors in encouraging college enrollment showed up multiple times in this study. Yet the correlation between rural community mentors and rural student college enrollment has not been determined. Specifically, differences in the type of mentor (teacher, counselor, community member) or whether or not that individual has a bachelor's degree may influence degree of motivation for the student. Further research on rural mentorships may also lead to suggestions on how to narrow the gap between college expectations and reality for rural populations.

**Distance and rural students.** A loose relationship arose in the research between distance from home and overall adjustment. Previous research suggests that the further from home a college is, the less likely a student will choose this college (Long, 2004). In relation to adjustment factors, students who were farther physically from home tended to express difficulty in not being able to easily go home when they wanted to. Yet, other students, who were closer to home and visited frequently, also indicated a lack of friendships in college. Results were mixed, but distance from the rural community to the college did seem to affect the satisfaction of rural students in their first term.

Similarly, the relationship between rural students and their family and friends from home should be further investigated in relation to initial college adjustment. It would be interesting to determine if there are benefits to disconnecting from previous social groups, as highlighted in Tinto's (1988) stages of student departure, or if there is an important support factor in keeping

close ties with rural friends and family, as recent research on first-generation students has shown (Stoll, 2012). For rural students, the relationship between distance and college integration has yet to be fully determined and warrants further research.

**Ethnicity and rurality.** Although only one participant identified as non-White, her stories were unique and suggest further research be done investigating the relationship between ethnicity and rural places. For Sara Lee, the college environment with increased levels of diverse opinions and ideas has been liberating in comparison to her rural community. Coming from a predominantly White town, college has allowed Sara Lee to express her ethnic identity more and she indicated feeling much more welcomed. Although many rural students are also ethnic minorities, much of the research done on this population focuses on White rural students. As the incoming first-year class of 2013 came from the most diverse high schools and neighborhoods ever reported (Higher Education Research Institute, 2013), this population will continue to grow. To fill a gap in the literature, I advocate for further research into the experiences of ethnically diverse rural students entering college.

**Rural student identity development.** The idea of rurality as a component of identity and identity development has been proposed in the past by qualitative researchers (Deitrich, 1999; Maltzan, 2006). Consistent with tenants of narrative inquiry and other qualitative research methods, rural identity is situated in context and place, indicating that being from a rural context has tangible implications on values, worldview, and future experiences. In her dissertation, Maltzan (2006) proposes rural culture as a part of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, including family background, sociocultural conditions, and experiences (S. R. Jones & McEwen, 2000). In this, rurality is situated as a core part of rural individuals' identity and influences all aspects of life, including college perspectives. More research into this area would help to not

only solidify rural upbringing as a part of student identity development, but also to foster understanding of the unique cultural barriers these students face, and advocate for rural students as a recognized underrepresented population.

Several studies have broken down rural individuals into different groups, such as those who are first-generation, or from agriculture backgrounds (Elder & Conger, 2000; Schultz, 2004). Based on this research as well as my personal experience, I advocate for a differentiation in identity between those rural students who are from farming or ranching backgrounds, and those rural students who are simply from small communities, but different economic backgrounds. Often, I believe “rurality” gets confused with “country” and in terms of identity, the two are not one in the same. In discussions of identity and student development, it is important to keep in mind this distinction.

**Male rural students.** Due to the gender demographics of this study as well as participant observations, further research needs to be done regarding the unique needs of males from rural areas in terms of college aspirations. Although overall more females are enrolling in college than males (Crissman Ishler, 2005; Morris, 2012), a much higher percentage of females enrolled in this study than males. This could be a result of the recruitment methods of the study or it may be something much more complex. Molly, in her reflection, specifically mentioned that she believes it is easier for females from small towns to enroll in college than males, due to the culture and pressure for males to work instead of go to college. In a study comparing rural and urban high schools in terms of the gender gap in education, Morris (2012) indicates that for several cultural reasons, rural high school males are lower achieving academically and are less encouraged to enroll in college. Research expanding on the differences in rural male educational achievement in diverse geographical areas, ways to encourage this population to enroll in



college, and reasons behind low academic motivation would add to an understanding of the nuances of rural education in terms of gender.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Jones et al. (2014) notes that a qualitative research study is effective when individuals, “read the written account of the essence of a particular phenomenon and nod, thinking, ‘yes, I see myself in this depiction.’” (p. 91). As the researcher, it is my hope that through the structure and analysis of this study, readers are able to understand the stories of rural students in their transition to college. Especially for those individuals similar to myself, who identify as from a rural background, I trust that the stories of these participants resonated with your experiences as well. Although many of the themes described in this research are not unique to rural individuals, personal backgrounds and intersectionality of identities does indicate that being from a rural community has tangible implications on the college experience. For myself, this study has reaffirmed the struggles I faced as a rural student transitioning into the college environment, and has expanded my understanding of the uniqueness of the individual experience. It is my hope that readers are similarly influenced by this research and are called to further support rural student populations.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A: Oregon Rural High Schools**

The following table lists the rural-distant and rural-remote public secondary schools that were used for purposes of determining rural students for this study.

High School Name	County	City	NCES Category	Total Students	Senior Class	NCES School ID	Grades
ADRIAN HIGH SCHOOL	MALHEUR	ADRIAN	Rural: Distant	83	21	410102000756	9-12
ALSEA HIGH SCHOOL	BENTON	ALSEA	Rural: Distant	58	10	410120000019	7-12
AMITY HIGH SCHOOL	YAMHILL	AMITY	Rural: Distant	248	47	410123001263	9-12
ARLINGTON COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL	GILLIAM	ARLINGTON	Rural: Remote	38	16	410147000343	9-12
BALLSTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL	POLK	AMITY	Rural: Distant	50	6	410123001653	K-12
BANKS HIGH SCHOOL	WASHINGTON	BANKS	Rural: Distant	382	79	410183001180	9-12
BONANZA JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	KLAMATH	BONANZA	Rural: Remote	228	34	410702001466	7-12
BURNT RIVER SCHOOL	BAKER	UNITY	Rural: Remote	34	6	410174000013	K-12
BUTTE FALLS CHARTER SCHOOL	JACKSON	BUTTE FALLS	Rural: Distant	78	13	410258000426	8-12
CAMAS VALLEY SCHOOL	DOUGLAS	CAMAS VALLEY	Rural: Remote	150	11	410261000315	K-12
CENTRAL LINN HIGH SCHOOL	LINN	HALSEY	Rural: Distant	304	51	410291000729	7-12
CHILDS WAY CHARTER SCHOOL	LANE	DORENA	Rural: Distant	52	5	411158001677	6-12
CHILOQUIN HIGH SCHOOL	KLAMATH	CHILOQUIN	Rural: Remote	188	40	410702000508	7-12
CLATSKANIE MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL	COLUMBIA	CLATSKANIE	Rural: Distant	382	73	410326000178	7-12
COLTON HIGH SCHOOL	CLACKAMAS	COLTON	Rural: Distant	257	67	410327000110	9-12
CONDON HIGH SCHOOL	GILLIAM	CONDON	Rural: Remote	59	11	410333000346	7-12
COVE CHARTER SCHOOL	UNION	COVE	Rural: Remote	280	27	410354001139	K-12
CRANE UNION HIGH SCHOOL	HARNEY	CRANE	Rural: Remote	99	22	410363000378	9-12
CROW MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL	LANE	EUGENE	Rural: Distant	137	24	410378000627	7-12
CULVER HIGH SCHOOL	JEFFERSON	CULVER	Rural: Distant	211	52	410384000447	9-12
DAYS CREEK CHARTER SCHOOL	DOUGLAS	DAYS CREEK	Rural: Distant	167	32	410396000308	6-12
DAYVILLE SCHOOL	GRANT	DAYVILLE	Rural: Remote	51	4	410402000358	K-12
DUFUR SCHOOL	WASCO	DUFUR	Rural: Distant	282	25	410441001162	K-12
EDDYVILLE CHARTER SCHOOL	LINCOLN	EDDYVILLE	Rural: Distant	198	14	410750001582	K-12
ELGIN HIGH SCHOOL	UNION	ELGIN	Rural: Remote	137	47	410459001141	9-12
ELKTON CHARTER SCHOOL	DOUGLAS	ELKTON	Rural: Remote	215	11	410462000322	K-12
ENTERPRISE HIGH SCHOOL	WALLOWA	ENTERPRISE	Rural: Remote	188	44	410508001149	7-12
FALLS CITY HIGH SCHOOL	POLK	FALLS CITY	Rural: Distant	54	12	410000301062	9-12
FOSSIL CHARTER SCHOOL	WHEELER	FOSSIL	Rural: Remote	110	6	410525001375	K-12
GILCHRIST JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	KLAMATH	GILCHRIST	Rural: Remote	116	16	410702001467	7-12
GLENDALE HIGH SCHOOL	DOUGLAS	GLENDALE	Rural: Remote	193	26	410564000327	7-12
GLIDE HIGH SCHOOL	DOUGLAS	GLIDE	Rural: Distant	241	58	410567000305	9-12
GOLD BEACH HIGH SCHOOL	CURRY	GOLD BEACH	Rural: Remote	196	56	410576000257	9-12
GRANT UNION JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	GRANT	JOHN DAY	Rural: Remote	215	52	410678000350	9-12
HARPER CHARTER SCHOOL	MALHEUR	HARPER	Rural: Remote	63	6	410612000758	K-12
HELIX SCHOOL	UMATILLA	HELIX	Rural: Remote	172	9	410627001084	K-12
HEPPNER JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	MORROW	HEPPNER	Rural: Remote	213	33	410852000861	7-12
HUNTINGTON SCHOOL	BAKER	HUNTINGTON	Rural: Remote	70	4	410660000011	K-12
ILLINOIS VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL	JOSEPHINE	CAVE JUNCTION	Rural: Remote	336	92	410690000480	9-12
IMBLER CHARTER SCHOOL	UNION	IMBLER	Rural: Distant	343	26	410663001137	K-12

IONE COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL	MORROW	IONE	Rural: Remote	193	16	410004700862	K-12
JEWELL SCHOOL	CLATSOP	SEASIDE	Rural: Remote	161	18	410675000158	K-12
JORDAN VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL	MALHEUR	JORDAN VALLEY	Rural: Remote	35	8	410682000760	7-12
JOSEPH CHARTER SCHOOL	WALLOWA	JOSEPH	Rural: Remote	73	17	410687001145	9-12
KINGS VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL	BENTON	PHILOMATH	Rural: Distant	166	0	410960000021	K-12
KNAPPA HIGH SCHOOL	CLATSOP	ASTORIA	Rural: Distant	135	38	410004000179	9-12
LAPINE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	DESCHUTES	LAPINE	Rural: Distant	549	127	410198000272	9-12
LONG CREEK SCHOOL	GRANT	LONG CREEK	Rural: Remote	38	5	410753000360	K-12
LOST RIVER HIGH SCHOOL	KLAMATH	MERRILL	Rural: Remote	249	37	410702000511	7-12
LOWELL JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	LANE	LOWELL	Rural: Distant	125	18	410759000634	7-12
MAPLETON JR/SR HIGH SCHOOL	LANE	MAPLETON	Rural: Remote	82	15	410771000603	7-12
MCKENZIE HIGH SCHOOL	LANE	FINN ROCK	Rural: Remote	68	18	410798000629	9-12
MITCHELL SCHOOL	WHEELER	MITCHELL	Rural: Remote	71	10	410828001259	K-12
MOHAWK HIGH SCHOOL	LANE	MARCOLA	Rural: Distant	110	25	410774000639	7-12
MONROE HIGH SCHOOL	BENTON	MONROE	Rural: Distant	154	44	410843000050	9-12
MONUMENT SCHOOL	GRANT	MONUMENT	Rural: Remote	45	5	410846000356	K-12
MYRTLE POINT HIGH SCHOOL	COOS	MYRTLE POINT	Rural: Distant	328	52	410064000234	7-12
NEAH-KAH-NIE HIGH SCHOOL	TILLAMOOK	ROCKAWAY BEACH	Rural: Remote	222	63	410865001081	9-12
NESTUCCA HIGH SCHOOL	TILLAMOOK	CLOVERDALE	Rural: Remote	272	48	410870001082	7-12
NIXYAAWII COMMUNITY SCHOOL	UMATILLA	PENDLETON	Rural: Distant	48	17	410951001534	9-12
NORTH DOUGLAS HIGH SCHOOL	DOUGLAS	DRAIN	Rural: Remote	128	35	410435000317	9-12
NORTH LAKE SCHOOL	LAKE	SILVER LAKE	Rural: Remote	225	20	411140001381	K-12
NORTH POWDER CHARTER SCHOOL	UNION	NORTH POWDER	Rural: Remote	271	22	410894001135	K-12
OREGON CONNECTIONS ACADEMY	LINN	SCIO	Rural: Distant	2529	169	411104001680	K-12
PACIFIC HIGH SCHOOL	CURRY	PORT ORFORD	Rural: Remote	123	44	411002000247	9-12
PAISLEY SCHOOL	LAKE	PAISLEY	Rural: Remote	97	11	410943000521	K-12
PAULINA SCHOOL	CROOK	PAULINA	Rural: Remote	37	0	410372000241	K-12
PERRYDALE SCHOOL	POLK	AMITY	Rural: Distant	323	23	410953001060	K-12
PILOT ROCK HIGH SCHOOL	UMATILLA	PILOT ROCK	Rural: Distant	182	32	410966001086	7-12
PINE EAGLE CHARTER SCHOOL	BAKER	HALFWAY	Rural: Remote	160	10	410972000016	K-12
POWERS HIGH SCHOOL	COOS	POWERS	Rural: Remote	59	12	411008000227	7-12
PRAIRIE CITY SCHOOL	GRANT	PRAIRIE CITY	Rural: Remote	157	14	411011000352	K-12
PROSPECT CHARTER SCHOOL	JACKSON	PROSPECT	Rural: Remote	240	12	411020000111	K-12
SANTIAM HIGH SCHOOL	LINN	MILL CITY	Rural: Distant	185	58	410810000724	9-12
SCIO HIGH SCHOOL	LINN	SCIO	Rural: Distant	238	62	411104000718	9-12
SHERMAN JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	SHERMAN	MORO	Rural: Remote	114	18	411125001068	7-12
SILETZ VALLEY EARLY COLLEGE ACADEMY	LINCOLN	SILETZ	Rural: Distant	77	18	410750001660	9-12
SISTERS HIGH SCHOOL	DESCHUTES	SISTERS	Rural: Distant	525	128	411149000073	9-12
SOUTH WASCO HIGH SCHOOL	WASCO	MAUPIN	Rural: Remote	109	14	410002101167	7-12
SPRAY SCHOOL	WHEELER	SPRAY	Rural: Remote	42	6	411164001255	K-12
ST PAUL HIGH SCHOOL	MARION	ST PAUL	Rural: Distant	136	19	411176000824	7-12
TRIANGLE LAKE CHARTER SCHOOL	LANE	BLACHLY	Rural: Distant	159	11	410216000641	K-12
UKIAH SCHOOL	UMATILLA	UKIAH	Rural: Remote	45	6	411254001122	K-12
UNION HIGH SCHOOL	UNION	UNION	Rural: Remote	191	24	411269001133	7-12
VALE HIGH SCHOOL	MALHEUR	VALE	Rural: Remote	263	62	410001400761	9-12
VERNONIA HIGH SCHOOL	COLUMBIA	VERNONIA	Rural: Distant	205	55	411293000188	9-12

WALLOWA HIGH SCHOOL	WALLOWA	WALLOWA	Rural: Remote	109	29	411299001147	7-12
WESTON-MCEWEN HIGH SCHOOL	UMATILLA	ATHENA	Rural: Distant	161	39	410166001115	9-12
YAMHILL CARLTON HIGH SCHOOL	YAMHILL	YAMHILL	Rural: Distant	423	116	410001601288	9-12
YONCALLA HIGH SCHOOL	DOUGLAS	YONCALLA	Rural: Remote	99	25	411365000320	9-12

<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/index.asp>

**Appendix B: Initial Recruitment Email**

Subject: Research Study on Rural Oregon Students

Greetings,

My name is Karen Ast and I'm conducting a research study on about the experiences of college students from identified rural high schools in Oregon. The study is entitled "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural Student College Transitions." You are receiving this email because you qualify to participate in the study based on the characteristics of your high school, your residency status, and your class standing at Oregon State University (OSU).

As a current graduate student who is from a small, rural community in Colorado, I am very interested in examining the unique situations faced by rural students when entering college. Results of this study will assist secondary and higher education professionals in better understanding success factors for rural students.

To determine these experiences, I will be interviewing 8-12 individuals. This one-on-one interview will last between 30 minutes and one hour and will be conducted in a convenient location. For your participation, you will be compensated with a \$15 gift certificate to the OSU Beaver Store.

If you are interested in participating in this important research, please **respond to this email with your full name** indicating that you would like to schedule an interview. Please respond as soon as possible, as the interview opportunity will close once enough participants are included in the study.

If you have any questions about your possible participation in this study, feel free to contact me or the study's principal investigator, David Kovac. Our contact information is as follows:

Karen Ast  
Researcher  
[karen.ast@oregonstate.edu](mailto:karen.ast@oregonstate.edu)  
(719) 588-3009

David Kovac  
Principal Investigator  
[kovacd@onid.orst.edu](mailto:kovacd@onid.orst.edu)  
(541) 250-0677

If you respond with your desire to participate, a confirmation email will be sent with further directions. Thank you again for your time and willingness to explore the unique circumstances faced by rural students transitioning to college!

*Karen M. Ast*

Graduate Student | College Student Services Administration | Oregon State University  
(719) 588-3009 | Office: 121 West Hall | Mailing: 1152 West Hall | Corvallis, OR 97331

### Appendix C: Follow-up Recruitment Email

#### *Follow-up Recruitment Email*

Subject: Research Study-Earn a \$15 Beaver Store Gift Certificate

Hello again,

My name is Karen Ast and I'm conducting a research study on about the experiences of college students from identified rural high schools in Oregon. The study is entitled "**Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural Student College Transitions.**" You are receiving this email because you qualify to participate in the study based on the characteristics of your high school, your residency status, and your class standing at Oregon State University (OSU).

As a current graduate student who is from a small, rural community in Colorado, I am very interested in examining the unique situations faced by rural students when entering college. Results of this study will assist secondary and higher education professionals in better understanding success factors for rural students.

To determine these experiences, I will be interviewing 8-12 individuals. This **one-on-one interview will last between 30 minutes and one hour** and will be conducted in a convenient location. **For your participation, you will be compensated with a \$15 gift certificate to the OSU Beaver Store.**

If you are interested in participating in this important research, please **respond to this email with your full name** indicating that you would like to schedule an interview. Please respond as soon as possible, as the interview opportunity will close once enough participants are included in the study.

If you have any questions about your possible participation in this study, feel free to contact me or the study's principal investigator, David Kovac. Our contact information is as follows:

Karen Ast  
Researcher  
[karen.ast@oregonstate.edu](mailto:karen.ast@oregonstate.edu)  
(719) 588-3009

Dave Kovac  
Principal Investigator  
[kovacd@onid.orst.edu](mailto:kovacd@onid.orst.edu)  
(541) 250-0677

If you respond with your desire to participate, a confirmation email will be sent with further directions. Thank you again for your time and willingness to explore challenges faced by rural students transitioning to college!

*Karen M. Ast*

Graduate Student | College Student Services Administration | Oregon State University  
(719) 588-3009 | Office: 121 West Hall | Mailing: 1152 West Hall | Corvallis, OR 97331



**Appendix D: Confirm Eligibility Email**

Student,

Thanks for your interest in participating in this study on rural student transitions! In order to confirm your eligibility, please **indicate yes or no** to the following:

I am an Oregon resident-

I am a full-time student-

I am currently enrolled at Oregon State University-

This is my first year at Oregon State University-

After I receive your response, we can go ahead and get an interview scheduled. Again, thank you for your time!

*Karen M. Ast*

Graduate Student | College Student Services Administration | Oregon State University  
(719) 588-3009 | Office: 121 West Hall | Mailing: 1152 West Hall | Corvallis, OR 97331

### Appendix E: Confirmation Email

Subject: Confirmation of Participation in a Rural Student Study

(Name of participant),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study entitled, “Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural Student College Transitions.” As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of students transitioning to college from rural, Oregon high schools that have been identified as “rural.” Results will assist secondary and higher education professionals in better understanding the challenges faced by students from rural communities and ways to ensure success for students similar to yourself.

One-on-one interviews will be conducted, meaning that your responses to interview questions (by me) will be done in private. Your interview will last between 30 minutes and one hour. I would like to make this interview as convenient as possible for you, so *please respond with the following information*:

Desired location of the interview

- I do have a private office in 121 West Hall, on the OSU campus that we can use. I can also reserve a study room in the library. However, if you prefer an alternate location, let me know where that might be.

Availability

- Typically, which days and times work best for you?
- This interview does need to be completed as soon as possible and no later than XXXXXX.

Attached you will find an explanation of research outlining the conditions of your participation in this study. Please read it before attending the interview session. You will confirm your understanding of the consent form at the interview, where I will explain the research and answer any questions you may have. At the completion of the interview, you will be compensated with a \$15 OSU Beaver Store gift certificate.

If you are no longer interested in participating in this study, please let me know. If you have questions for the principal investigator of this study, David Kovac, please contact (541)-250-0677 or [kovacd@onid.orst.edu](mailto:kovacd@onid.orst.edu).

Thank you for your time. I look forward to speaking with you and hearing about your experiences.

*Karen M. Ast*

Graduate Student | College Student Services Administration | Oregon State University  
(719) 588-3009 | Office: 121 West Hall | Mailing: 1152 West Hall | Corvallis, OR 97331

**Appendix F: Reminder Email**

Subject: Reminder of Rural Student Interview

Hi (name of participant),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study entitled, "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural Student College Transitions."

As a reminder, your interview will be held on (date) at (time) in (location).

West Hall is located on the west side of campus on 30<sup>th</sup> street. I have attached a map to this email with an orange star indicating the location of West Hall and a smaller map highlighting the entrances in yellow. The main entrances (facing east and west) will be open during the time of your interview. If you are unable to get into the facility, please give me a call at (719) 588-3009.

Your responses to interview questions (by me) will be done in private and the interview will last between 30 minutes and one hour. You are not expected to prepare anything ahead of time. I am curious about your experiences as a rural student and this will be more of a conversation than structured questions and answers.

As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of students transitioning to college from Oregon high schools that have been identified as "rural." Results will assist secondary and higher education professionals in better understanding the challenges faced by students from rural communities and ways to ensure success for students similar to yourself.

Attached you will find an explanation of research outlining the conditions of your participation in this study. Please read it before attending the interview session. You will confirm your understanding of the consent form at the interview, where I will explain the research and answer any questions you may have. At the completion of the interview, you will be compensated with a \$15 OSU Beaver Store gift certificate.

If you are no longer interested in participating in this study, please let me know. If you have questions for the principal investigator of this study, David Kovac, please contact (541)-250-0677 or [kovacd@onid.orst.edu](mailto:kovacd@onid.orst.edu).

I will see you soon, thanks again for your willingness to share your story.

*Karen M. Ast*

Graduate Student | College Student Services Administration | Oregon State University  
(719) 588-3009 | Office: 121 West Hall | Mailing: 1152 West Hall | Corvallis, OR 97331

## **Appendix G: Interview Questions**

Study Title: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural College Student Transitions

Principal Investigator: David C. Kovac, Ph.D., College Student Services Administration Faculty

Student Researcher: Karen M. Ast, College Student Services Administration Graduate Student

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The following questions will be used to guide semi-structured interviews for this study. It is important to note that these questions provide a list of possible areas of semi-structured interview questions. The researcher will maintain the option to ask follow up questions for clarification of anything the interviewee has said. Questions may differ between participants based on the flow of the conversation, their comfort level in the topic, and their responses to the demographic questionnaire. The order of questions may change depending on the flow of the conversation. This interview is meant to be more conversational than structured, as the words and experiences of the participants from their personal lens are important.

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### **Interview Dialogue:**

The following dialogue describes the general flow of the interview conversation. Phrases may not be stated verbatim, but this script will be followed in a manner that ensures consistency among participants.

Student researcher: Hello, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study and understand that your time is very valuable. We are about to start an interview where I will ask you a few questions about your experiences coming to Oregon State University. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. I hope that this structure provides a way for us to have an in-depth conversation about your experiences adjusting to a new university setting. This interview should take anywhere from thirty minutes to one hour to complete. Before we begin, do you have any remaining questions?

### **General questions:**

The following questions have been placed in the order that the student researcher plans to address them. Depending on the flow of the conversation, questions may be reordered to facilitate a more effective dialogue.

Where do you consider home?

How would you describe your experience growing up there (in terms of your family life, culture, and schooling)?

Why did you choose to go to college?

How would you describe your experience transitioning from a small high school into college?

In your daily life, do you recognize or often identify as someone from a rural community?

How would you describe the interactions you have with family and high school friends when you return to your hometown?

What changes, if any, have you noticed in yourself since you enrolled in college?

How would you describe your hometown in terms of diversity?

Is there anything you wish you would have known before enrolling in college? If so, what?

What advice would you have for other students from rural high schools who wish to enroll in college?

After college, do you plan on returning to a rural area? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like to mention regarding your experiences transitioning from a rural high school into college?

**Backup questions:**

How often do you visit where you consider home?

How would you describe the college environment as compared to your high school environment?

Do you feel as though you fit in in college? Why or why not?

Why did you choose to enroll at this institution specifically?

What were some aspects of college that surprised you?

Do you experience any tension between home and school?

How do you believe others perceive you based on your rural background?

What was the easiest aspect of moving from your home community to college?

Can you describe any members of your home community who affected your decision to enroll in college, either positively or negatively?

What was the most difficult aspect of moving from your home community to college?

How supportive has your family or parents been in your pursuit of higher education?

When you reflect upon friends you had in high school, how would you describe their post-high school experiences? How does this compare to your experience?

How do you feel your high school courses prepared you for college academic work?

What type of activities were you involved with in high school? How does this compare to activities you are involved in now in college?

How do you feel your high school leadership roles prepared you to join college clubs and organizations?

What has your experience been forming new friendships in college?

Are you enrolled in any courses with more than 100 students this term? If yes, how would you describe this experience as compared to your class size in high school?

**Possible demographic questions:**

As a rural student who identifies as (non-White), how has this identity affected your college experience?

As a rural student who is over the age of 25, how has your age affected your college experience?

I see that neither of your parents attended college. How has this affected your college experience?

**Appendix H: Demographic Questionnaire**

Study Title: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural College Student Transitions

Principal Investigator: David C. Kovac, Ph.D., College Student Services Administration Faculty

Student Researcher: Karen M. Ast, College Student Services Administration Graduate Student

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To assist with the facilitation of this study, please indicate your response in writing to the following questions. You may decline to state your answer to any of the following questions without penalty.

1. What is your age?

- ☐ Less than 17 years old
- ☐ 18-24 years old
- ☐ 25-34 years old
- ☐ 35 years or older

2. What is your marital status?

- ☐ Single, never married
- ☐ Married or domestic partnership
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Separated

3. What is your gender?

\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)

4. What is your ethnicity?

- ☐ White
  - ☐ Hispanic or Latino
  - ☐ African American
  - ☐ Native American or American Indian
  - ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
  - ☐ Mixed Ethnicity or Biracial
  - ☐ Other (please indicate)
- \_\_\_\_\_

5. What is your religious affiliation, if applicable?

- ☐ Protestant Christian
  - ☐ Roman Catholic
  - ☐ Evangelical Christian
  - ☐ Jewish
  - ☐ Muslim
  - ☐ Hindu
  - ☐ Buddhist
  - ☐ Other (please indicate)
- \_\_\_\_\_

☐ No religious affiliation

6. What is the highest level of education your parent(s) have completed?

Mother:

- ☐ Less than high school
- ☐ High school/GED
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate's degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree or above
- ☐ N/A

Father:

- ☐ Less than high school
- ☐ High school/GED
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate's degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree or above
- ☐ N/A

7. What was your final high school grade point average?

- ☐ Below 2.49
- ☐ 2.5-2.99
- ☐ 3.0-3.49
- ☐ 3.5-3.99
- ☐ 4.0 or above

8. What is your family's annual household income?

- ☐ Less than \$19,999
- ☐ \$20,000-\$39,999
- ☐ \$40,000-\$59,999
- ☐ \$60,000-\$79,999
- ☐ More than \$80,000
- ☐ Unknown



### Appendix I: Explanation of Research (Consent Form)

Study Title: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural College Student Transitions

Principal Investigator: David C. Kovac, Ph.D., College Student Services Administration Faculty

Student Researcher: Karen M. Ast, College Student Services Administration Graduate Student

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**All potential participants should be informed of and understand the below elements:**

**Purpose.** The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge and understanding about the lived experiences of first-year, rural, Oregon students upon recently transitioning from high school into college. The results of this study will assist higher education and secondary educators in learning about ways to further the educational success of this population. This study will be used in a thesis in partial completion of a master's of science degree in College Student Services Administration at Oregon State University.

**Activities.** As a member of this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to discuss your experiences as a first-year, Oregon student from a rural high school. Before the interview you will be asked to fill out a short survey that should take no longer than five minutes. If you agree to take part in this study, your estimated time commitment is no longer than one hour. This is during only one meeting during the fall term of 2013.

**Audio recording.** To ensure accuracy, this interview will be recorded. The recordings will be transcribed by the student researcher, Karen M. Ast, to insure confidentiality. Only the researcher and the principal investigator (David C. Kovac) will have access to the recordings and transcriptions. The transcriptions of the interview will be used in writing the thesis, but all personal information will be protected.

**Risks.** There are minimal risks involved in this study. The possible discomforts associated include possible emotional distress in exploring your experiences in transitioning into college. Subjects surrounding upbringing and family life may be distressing. A strong effort will be made to avoid deeply personal topics.

**Benefits.** As a benefit of participating in this study, you will be a part of a greater cause to assist in the success of students from rural geographical areas to enroll in college. In addition, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon your student experiences in understanding your individual development. This study is not designed to benefit you directly.

**Payment.** You will receive a \$15 gift card to the Oregon State University Beaver Store for your participation in this interview.

**Confidentiality.** The researcher will know your identity during this study and all information you provide will be kept confidential. There is a chance that we could accidentally disclose information that identifies you. All electronic materials will be kept safe on a confidential computer in a locked area of campus. Information from this study will be kept three years after completion of this study. Pseudonyms will be used as identifiers in the final version of the thesis. If the results of this project are published, your identity will not be made public.

**Voluntariness.** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. There is no penalty for choosing to not participate in this study or to leave the interview at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to not participate in this study. You may also elect to pass or decline to answer any questions.

**Contact information.** If you have questions about this research project, please contact: David C. Kovac at (541) 250-0677 or [kovacd@onid.orst.edu](mailto:kovacd@onid.orst.edu) or Karen M. Ast at (719) 588-3009 or [karen.ast@oregonstate.edu](mailto:karen.ast@oregonstate.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board at (541) 737-8008.

### Appendix J: Axial Coding Results

#### Description of Home

- Connection with friends at home/description of home (Calvin, lines 43-53)
- Missing home (Calvin, lines 808-809, 898) (Darla, lines 208-209, 340-341) (Gillian, lines 245-248, 541-550) (Hailee, line 79, 418-430)
- NOT homesick (Gillian, line 301, 464-465) (Heather, 475-476) (Paige, lines 188-190)
- Physical description (Darla, line 27) (Gillian, line 175) (Hailee, lines 42, 44, 52-53) (Heather, lines 33-38) (Molly, lines 41-43, lines 398-402 *also check out lines 391-393*) (Paige, lines 31-33) (Paul, lines 34-37) (Victoria 27-31) (Sara Lee 35-39)
- Friends still in hometown (Darla, lines 218-219) (Gillian, 345) (Heather, 144, 473, 514)
- Goes home often (Darla, line 335)

#### Low Quality Secondary School System Barrier

- Lack of funding
  - Secondary school SIZE contrast in relation to funding/quality (Calvin, lines 73-75)
  - Rural school lack of funding (Calvin, lines 106-107, 190-191, 235-237, 244) (Gillian 54-55) (Heather, lines 45-47)
- High Teacher Turnover
  - Rural schools-lack of quality, consistent teachers (Calvin, lines 239-241, 250-251) (Gillian, 54, 75-79, 84) (Hailee, 110-111) (Molly, 69-70, 429-431) (Paige, 283-284)
  - Lack of teachers in general (Gillian, lines 40-41, 44-45) (Hailee, 84-85) (Heather, 118-119) (Victoria, 42)
- Low Academic Rigor in High School
  - Secondary school SIZE contrast in relation to academics (Calvin, lines 81-82) (Darla, line 43)
  - Lack of preparation for college (Darla, 420, 426-427) (Sara Lee, 132-133)
  - Negative rural school academics (Calvin, lines 84-85, 88-89, 686, 688-689, 755-758)
  - Minimal work in HS for A's (Calvin, lines 100-101, 104-105, 166-169) (Hailee, 114) (Molly, lines 179-180) (Paul, 421-423) (Victoria, 62-65) (Sara Lee, 549-551)
- Lack of Academic Offerings & College Preparatory Courses
  - Rural school lack of academic offerings (Calvin, lines 110-111, 171-172, 174-178, 193-194, 255) (Darla, lines 40, 42-43, 53-54, 56-58, 61, 434-436) (Gillian, lines 44-45, 66-73, 187-188, 190-191) (Heather, lines 47-48) (Paul, lines 46-47, 49-51, 71) (Victoria 43-44 47-48, 50-52, 54-56)
- Lack of co-curricular offerings (Gillian lines 51-53) (Heather, lines 47-48)
- Rural School Politics

- Rural school politics, legal issues (Calvin lines 257-258)
- Lack of College Partnerships
  - Rural school-counselor is busy, no relationship (Calvin, lines 276-277, 279, 281) (Paul, line 200) (Victoria, 134-136).
  - No counselor help with scholarships (Darla 364, 366-368, 434-435) (Heather, 311-312)
  - Few college partnerships (Darla 371-372) (Sara Lee, 165-166)
  - Lack of college partnerships (Molly, 371-374)
- Attendance issues (Sara Lee, 562-565) during harvest

#### Benefits of Rural Schools

- Rural school benefits-scholarships (Calvin, line 396, 400) (Hailee 266-267, 276-277) (Paige, lines 240-243) (Sara Lee, lines 156-157)
- Small classes, personalized attention (Hailee, lines 69-70, 75-76, 144-149) (Paige, lines 258, 264-266) (Sara Lee, 68-72)
- Encouraging teachers (Hailee, 81) (Molly, 65-67)
- YES college prep offerings (Hailee, 119-124) (Paul, lines 55-57)
- Some AP/college courses (Paige, lines 251-254) (Molly, lines 82-84) (Paul, lines 180-182) (Sara Lee, 116-118)
- Positive HS counselor influence (Hailee, 278-281)
- YES college partnerships with HS (Molly, lines 98-103) (Victoria, lines 139-142, 145-148) (Sara Lee, lines 391-392)

#### Role of Mentors

- In school
  - Mentor in school-teacher (Calvin, lines 115, 120-123, 200-203, 219-220, 228-229, 233, 283, 285-287, 292-293, 296-298) (Hailee, 90-98) (Molly, 73-77) (Paige, lines 285-286) (Paul, 186-190, 196-198) (Sara Lee, 140-141)
    - Calvin-lines from major choice influence (228-229, 233)
  - Mentor-teacher, someone in the community who went to college (Calvin, lines 212-215) (Sara Lee, 518-521)
  - Mentor-coaches (Calvin, line 268)
  - Mentor-encouraging but not focused on academics (Calvin, lines 270-271)
  - Teachers-high involvement (Hailee, 77-79)
- In the community
  - Doctor (Darla, lines 289-293)
  - Mentor-community member (Heather, 311-312) (Sara Lee, lines 415-517)

#### Geographic Distance Barrier

- Geographic distance barrier between high schools (Calvin, lines 134, 140, 150)

- Geographical distance driving (Calvin, lines 734, 736, 1049) (Darla, 392-393) (Gillian, 535-536) (Hailee, 233, 436-437) (Heather, 464, 536, 540) (Paige, line 210) (Sara Lee, 390)
- Distance NOT a barrier (Molly, 133-134, 381) (Paul, 216)

#### Financial Barrier

- Financial barrier (Calvin, line 378, 432, 543-547) (Darla, lines 86-88, 410-413) (Hailee, line 365, 372, 499) (Heather, 138, 309) (Molly, line 237, 503-504) (Paul, 111-114, 139-140) (Sara Lee, 101, 209-212, 388, 553-556)
- Financial barrier, choice of Oregon public school (Calvin, line 380)
- College financially feasible (Calvin, 385-387)
- Financial barrier-overcome by scholarships (Calvin, 391, 421-422) (Darla, 388-389) (Heather, 301, 423) (Molly, 209-212, 229-231) (Paige, 51) (Paul, 124-125) (Sara Lee, 401-402)
- Financial barrier-overcome by working in school (Calvin, lines 407-409) (Molly, lines 233-235)

#### Size Barrier

- Difficulties related to large CLASS SIZE (Calvin, 965-966) (Darla, lines 97-98, 108-111) (Gillian, lines 217-219) (Hailee, 149, 158) (Molly, lines 354-357) (Sara Lee, 530-531)
- Large size of COLLEGE (Calvin, 980, 982-984) (Darla, lines 100-101, 237-238, 516-517) (Gillian, line 238) (Hailee, 160-163, 365, 372, 453-456) (Heather, 543) (Molly, lines 360-361) (Paige, lines 146-147, 334) (Victoria, lines 306-310) (Sara Lee, 539)
- Large size of larger COMMUNITY (Gillian, 531-533) (Paul, 209-214, 275) (Sara Lee, 592)
- Larger courses-not horrible, just a new experience (Heather, 551-553, 555-556) (Paige, lines 271-273) (Paul, 263) (Victoria, 242-244)
- College town doesn't seem big (Paige, lines 141-142)
- College itself isn't too big (Paul, 267) (Victoria, 254)

#### Emotional Description of Transition

- Description of transition-rollercoaster, ups and downs (Calvin, lines 446-447)
- Scary (Molly, 383-385)
- An entirely different world (Heather, 153, 320) (Molly, lines 144)
- Experience-difficult, missing HS friends (Calvin, lines 455-458)
- Difficult transition (Gillian, 117-118, 185) (Hailee 222-227) (Heather, 96) (Victoria, 152-156) (Sara Lee, lines 463-464)
- Transition description (Darla, line 96, 96-101) (Victoria, lines 192-196, 200-203)
- Easy transition (Molly, lines 169-172)

### Lack of a College-Going Culture Barrier

- Lack of college-going culture (Calvin, lines, 653-654, 660-663) (Darla, lines 127-130, 360-361) (Molly, 204-205, 207-213, 487-488) (Victoria, lines 331-332).
- Lack of college going culture-more stressing trades (Heather, 123-127, 135-136, 140-142, 342-343) (Sara Lee, 490-491, 507-509)
- Lack of college going culture, even ones who leave come back (Calvin, lines 697-698).
- In the school, lack of college-going culture (Darla, line 365)
- Lack of college-going culture-especially for males (Molly, lines 214-218)
- Supportive Community (Hailee, lines 261-264, 471-479) (Paul, 174)

### Desire to not be “stuck” in a rural town

- “stuck” in a small town (Calvin, lines 705-708) (Darla, lines 329-333) (Hailee 236-238, 289-290, 301) (Heather, 344-345) (Molly, lines 448-454, 461-462) (Victoria, 89-91, 98) (Sara Lee, line 260, 501-502)
- YES would return to hometown (Paul, 317)
- NO plans to return to hometown .(Calvin, line 711, 739-740) (Darla, line 317, 319) (Gillian, line 495) (Hailee, 313-314) (Heather, 480) (Molly, lines 250-252) (Paige, lines 121-123) (Sara Lee, 496)
- YES desire to return to a rural town (Calvin, lines 722-723) (Hailee, line 312-314) (Heather, 496) (Molly, line 264) (Paige, lines 122-123, 136-138) (Paul, 344) (Victoria, lines 294-295) (Sara Lee, 497)
- MAYBE desire to return to a rural town (Gillian, 521-523) (Hailee, line 310)
- NO desire to return to a rural area-no jobs (Darla, lines 320-321) (Gillian, 502-503) (Hailee, 283-285) (Molly, lines 264-265) (Paige, lines 133-134) (Victoria, lines 290-291)
- Most with degrees don’t come back (Victoria, line 298).

### Inability to Form Friendships

- Difficulty making friends (Darla, lines 96-97, 117-124, 231-234) (Gillian, lines 143-144, 350-357, 475-479) (Hailee, 385, 387-392) (Victoria, lines 161-163, 200-203).
- Experience-lack of friendships (Calvin, lines 446-448, 451-458, 570-571, 786-787, 793) (Darla, lines 462-465) (Gillian, lines 117-125)
- Experience-lack of social skills (Calvin, lines 552-553, 556, 1062-1064) (Heather, 152-154, 155-159)
  - In relation to his roommate and roommate’s friends
- Experience-lack of social skills, social media, connection ability (Calvin, lines 780-785)
- Relationships with classmates/classmates as family HS (Calvin, lines 743-748) (Darla, line 250, 467-468) (Molly, lines 645-67) (Sara Lee, 47-48)
- Getting better at making friends over time (Darla 235-237)

- Small group of friends is okay (Molly, lines 293-294)
- Everybody in a small town knows everybody (Gillian, 105-107, 108-109, 113)
- Inauthentic friendships (Gillian, line 140)
- Loneliness (Gillian, lines 134, 156-147, lines 312-315, 420, 467) (Victoria, line 207)
- NO problems making friends (Paige, line 169, 206-207) (Paul, 370-371) (Sara Lee, lines 318-324)

#### Experience-Inability to Relate to Non-College-Going HS Classmates

- Inability to relate to people in hometown who didn't go to college (Darla, lines 382-386) (Hailee, lines 256-257, 259) (Sara Lee, lines 373-374, 377-378)
- Weird to go back home (Gillian line 324, 326-327) (Victoria, lines 109-111, 127-129)
- Difficulty in maintaining HS friendships (Molly, lines 284-286)

#### Experience-Ability to Relate to other Rural Students

- Ability to relate to other rural students (Hailee, 445-448, 527-528, 537-539) (Paige, lines 116-117, 149-154, 157-158, 166-167, 224-225) (Sara Lee, 627-629, 632-633)
- Inability to relate to non-rural college students (Heather, lines 214-216, 339-340) (Molly, lines 413-418) (Sara Lee, 623-629)

#### Experience-Academic Difficulty Early in College

- Experience-academic difficulty (Calvin, lines 673-674, 677-679, 681-683, 963-964, 1056-1059) (Gillian, lines 185-188, 193-194, 197-198) (Heather, 75-76, 82, 243) (Molly, lines 433-436) (Paul, 251-255, 312)
- Feelings of academic challenge in college (Darla, lines 143-144)

#### Over Involvement to Lack of Involvement

- Experience-lack of involvement in college (Calvin, lines 890-896, 898-899, 901, 948-949) (Darla, line 252, 454-456) (Gillian, 153-156, 160-161, 166-168) (Hailee, 517-518) (Heather, 506-508) (Paul, 388-395)
- Experience-high involvement in high school (Calvin, lines 906-907, 942-928, 933-934, 940-941) (Darla, lines 443-447) (Gillian, 482-485, 489-490) (Hailee, line 197, 427-430, 505-511, 523) (Heather, 401-504) (Molly, lines 299-302) (Paige, lines 43-47) (Paul, 381-386, 403-405) (Victoria, lines 178-181) (Sara Lee, 340-343)
- Conscious of need to join orgs, make friends (Gillian, 470, 593-597) (Victoria, 172-175) (Sara Lee, lines 408-410, 412-414)
- Plans to become more involved in college (Molly, lines 310-314)
- Some college involvement (Paige, lines 55-57)
- High involvement in college (Victoria, lines 185-187) (Sara Lee, lines 356-358)

#### Lack of Parent Support

- Difference in family support BARRIER (Calvin, lines 543-546, 581-585)
- Inability to describe to parents college life (Molly, lines 479-481)

#### Strong Parent Support

- Experience-Mother's influence on college, positive (Calvin, lines 606-609)
- Parent support (Darla, 77-78, 83-87, 351-353, 359) (Gillian, 93) (Hailee, 186-187, 544-550) (Heather, 103-106, 527-528) (Molly, line 123) (Paige, lines 77-78) (Paul, 92-94) (Victoria 77-79, 391) (Sara Lee, 83-85, 88-89, 176-179, 431-436)
- Sibling support (Gillian lines 462-463)
- Parent as high school teacher (Heather, lines 108-111) (Paige, lines 62-62)

#### Consciousness of Difference

- Experience of difference from roommate (Calvin, lines 483-485, 487-488) (Gillian, 362-365) (Hailee, 403-406) (Molly, lines 144-149)
- Conscious of difference based on rural *culture* (Calvin, lines 485, 492-493, 531-532) (Heather, lines 166-167, 172-147, 196-209, 226-230, 372-374) (Paige, lines 356-357) (Paul, 160-165)
- Feelings of difference based on family upbringing (Calvin, lines 496-497)
- Overall feelings of difference (Calvin, lines 503-506)
- Feelings of difference in speech (Calvin, lines 516, 521-526)
- Conscious of being "rural" (Calvin, 1027-1029, 1033-1034, 1039) (Darla, lines 180-183) (Molly, lines 240-243, 391-393) (Paige, lines 230-233) (Paul, 352) (Sara Lee, 305-307)
- Overall notice of difference (Molly, lines 137-140) (Victoria, lines 232-327) (Sara Lee, lines 605-607)

#### Areas of Identified Difference and Transition

- Community
  - Small town culture-farming (Hailee, 172, 177) (Sara Lee, 189-191)
  - Small town-recovery community (Hailee, 172-173)
  - Small town-redneck culture (Molly, 109)
  - Small town-hick culture (Molly, 407)
  - Small town culture-ranching (Paige, 80)
- Political
  - Conscious of political differences from rural community (Calvin, line 614, 627, 629-631) (Heather, 205-209)
  - Political views of college, Ag School (Calvin, lines 618-621)
  - Importance of family reputation (Sara Lee, 209)
  - Small town culture: blood and money (Heather, lines 42-44)
- Ethnic and Racial Diversity

- Experience-lack of diversity in hometown (Calvin, lines 824-825) (Darla, lines 261-263) (Gillian, lines 367-370) (Hailee, 342-343, 350-351) (Heather, 389-390) (Molly, lines 330-332) (Paige, lines 293-294) (Victoria, lines 272-273) (Sara Lee, 279-280)
- Experience-diversity differences (Calvin, lines 851-852) (Darla, 265-267) (Hailee, 353-355) (Heather, 169-170) (Heather 393-397) (Molly, lines 342-343) (Paul, 280-281) (Victoria, lines 265-267, 279-281) (Sara Lee, line 288)
- Experience-diversity differences, positive (Calvin, lines 867-869) (Darla, 269-270) (Gillian, line 381, 390-393, 508) (Molly, line 248, 332-336, 336-338) (Paige, lines 329-331)
- Some ethnic diversity in hometown (Paul, 277-278)
- Overall Diversity
  - Diversity differences, more in college town (Calvin, lines 633)
- Religious Diversity
  - No noticeable religious diversity difference (Gillian, lines 402-403)
  - YES differences in religious diversity (Heather, 164-165, 253-267) (Molly, 525-530) (Victoria, lines 349-351)
- Sexual Orientation Diversity
  - Lack of in a small town (Gillian, lines 383-386)
- Dress
  - Rural culture dress (Calvin, lines 640) (Paul, 165)
- Diversity of activities
  - Lack of activities in a rural community (Calvin, line 646) (Gillian, lines 126-127) (Heather, 434-435) (Victoria, lines 98-99)
  - Presence of activities in college town (Calvin, lines 987-989, 991-993, 1007-1008, 1018-1019) (Gillian, lines 127-132) (Molly, lines 366-370) *Overwhelmed students*
- Difference in college attitude
  - Difference in college attitude (Calvin, lines 662-663)
  - Enjoying freedom (Gillian line 298) (Hailee, line 321) (Victoria, lines 364-365).
- Acceptance of diversity of opinions
  - Open vs. close-mindedness in college (Calvin, lines 779-780, 800-803, 827-831, 834-836, 844-887) (Gillian 498-499) (Heather 229-230, 246-249) (Molly, lines 275-276) (Paul, 451-543, 467-469) (Victoria, lines 258-262, 291, 293-294) (Sara Lee, 381)
  - Hometown-fairly diverse in opinions due to foreign exchange students (Paige, lines 300-301)
  - Small town-similar views/values (Calvin, lines 871-872) (Darla, lines 166-168) (Heather, 164-167, 177-181, 276-279, 376-379) (Molly, lines 111-114, 142-144) (Sara Lee, lines 196-200, 254-256)



- Small town-lack of exposure to diversity and difference (Calvin, lines 876-879) (Heather, 289-390) (Paul, 169-170) (Sara Lee, lines 223-231)
- Safety Issues
  - Experience-safety differences (Calvin, line 811) (Gillian, 553-554, 564-565) (Hailee, 321-323, 337-340) (Heather 450-453)
  - Differences in care, people vs. hometown (Calvin, lines 814-817)
- Family structure differences (Calvin, lines 855-856)
- Overall difference (Molly, lines 163-166) (Sara Lee, lines 246-250)

#### Motivations

- Inspiration for retaining in college: self-motivated (Calvin, lines 459-462) (Darla, lines 427-429) (Sara Lee, 333)
- Must be pro-active, self-starter (Calvin, lines 774-775) (Paige, lines 374-375)
- Intentional involvement in college (Hailee, 439-441) (Victoria, lines 209-213)
- Encourage others to go to college (Darla, line 276-279)
- Had to get a degree to get a career (Darla, lines 286-287) (Gillian 97-98) (Heather, 296-299) (Molly, 119-121) (Paul, 85) (Victoria, 88-91)
- Dad's bad influence (Darla, lines 481-482) AND other "losers" influence (Molly, line 467) and more losers (Victoria, 322-329)
- To experience a new environment, culture (Hailee, lines 188-189) (Paige, lines 93-96, 101) (Victoria, lines 89-91)
- College as agriculture school, similar cultural transition (Hailee, 178-181, 202-208).
- Prior familiarity with campus (Hailee, lines 199-202) (Molly, lines 105-106) (Paige, lines 98-99) (Sara Lee, lines 90-93)
- Desire for academic challenge (Victoria, lines 338-341)
- Suffocating socially in HS (Sara Lee, 74-77).

#### Characteristics of HS Class

- HS Class-most going to CC's (Calvin, lines 474-476) (Darla, line 137) (Heather, 351-353) (Sara Lee, 173)
- HS Class-many going to military (Darla, lines 273-275)
- A few at four-year schools (Darla, lines 279-280)
- Most went to college (Paige, line 178)

#### Other

- Some academic challenge in high school (Calvin, lines 160-161)
- Small school academics choices influence on major (Calvin, lines 300-302)
- Southern influence, maybe not rural influence (Calvin, lines 532-533)
- Goes home often to support her mother (Darla, lines 193-197)

- Motivations to go home often, relaxing (Darla, lines 201-202)
- Barrier of difficulty to leave family, pets (Darla, lines 343-344)
- Experience-confusion of which classes to take (Darla, lines 395-397, 400-401)
- Inability to balance time in college (Gillian, 163-164)
- Experience-loud at college (Gillian, line 241, 250-257)
- Transition-easy to be self-sufficient, not relying on parents (Gillian, lines 299-300)
- Environment-hates dorm life (Gillian, lines 302-303, 310, 590-594)
- Not a huge degree of differences because not enough time has passed (Gillian, lines 341-342)
- Changes-more independent now (Gillian, lines 421-422)
- Changes-more napping in college, exhaustion (Gillian, line 430)
- STRESS in college (Gillian, line 443)
- Lack of support overall (Gillian, lines 459-460)
- New loves in college town (Gillian, lines 574-575)
- Pride in small town (Hailee, 215-219) (also see Molly, lines 152-155) (Paige, lines 352-365) (Victoria, lines 101-102)
- High academic achievements (Hailee, 396) (Molly, lines 491-492)
- Many go to college, many unsuccessful (Heather, lines 148-150)
- Excited about school, new community (Heather, lines 330-333)
- Barriers: the rain, bicycles (Heather, 430)
- No trust of people in college town (Heather, 443)
- Rural women, not men, going to college (Molly, 202-203)
- Desire to still be involved in ranching (Paige, lines 111-112)
- Intentionally not going home (Paige, lines 192-196)
- Group of friends went to college together (Paul, 237)
- No culture shock (Paul, 357-358)
- Separation from the farmer culture in college (Sara Lee, 215-216, 218-220, 263-264, 447-448)
- FFA led to campus connections (Sara Lee, 328-330)
- Transition: The academics aren't as difficult as expected (Sara Lee, lines 466-468)
- College prep class in HS-beneficial (Sara Lee 474-475)

### **Appendix K: Eight General Themes**

#### **Question One: How Do Rural Students Describe Their Transition from High School to College?**

##### **Theme One: Unexpected Emotional and Social Transition to College**

- Subtheme: Disclosed emotions surrounding transition
- Subtheme: Disparity between expectations and reality
- Subtheme: Social disconnects and changes in peer relatability

##### **Theme Two: Motivations for Enrolling in College**

- Subtheme: The role of mentors as essential to college enrollment
- Subtheme: Inspiration and personal goals as college motivation
- Subtheme: Desire to not be “stuck” in a rural town

#### **Question Two: What are Common Lived Experiences of Rural Students in their First Term of College?**

##### **Theme Three: Lack of Social and Co-Curricular Involvement**

- Subtheme: Inability to form friendships
- Subtheme: High school over-involvement to college lack of involvement

##### **Theme Four: Multiple Dimensions of New Exposure to Diversity**

- Subtheme: Racial and ethnic diversity shifts
- Subtheme: Increasing diversity of values, viewpoints, and experiences
- Subtheme: Political, religious, sexual orientation, and physical appearance shifts

##### **Theme Five: Consciousness of Difference Stemming from a Rural Identity**

- Geographic dissonance in social interactions
- Rural culture as a marker of difference

#### **Question Three: What Perceived Barriers do Rural Students Face when Entering a Postsecondary Institution?**

##### **Theme Six: Prioritization of Labor Over Education in Rural Communities**

- Subtheme: Lack of a college-going culture
- Subtheme: Lack of economic and financial resources

##### **Theme Seven: Rural Secondary School Systems as Both a Barrier and a Catalyst for College Success**

- Subtheme: Poor academic quality of rural secondary schools
- Subtheme: Early academic difficulties in college
- Subtheme: Hidden benefits of rural secondary schools

**Theme Eight: Physical Dimensions of Size and Distance as an Educational Barrier**

- Subtheme: Exponential increases in size of classroom, campus, and community
- Subtheme: Geographic distance as a factor in enrollment and retention

## **Appendix L: Six General Themes**

### **Question One: How Do Rural Students Describe Their Transition from High School to College?**

#### **Theme One: Unexpected Emotional and Social Transition to College**

- Subtheme: Disclosed emotions surrounding transition
- Subtheme: Disparity between expectations and reality
- Subtheme: Social disconnects and changes in peer relatability

#### **Theme Two: Motivations for Enrolling in College**

- Subtheme: The role of mentors as essential to college enrollment
- Subtheme: Inspiration and personal goals as college motivation
- Subtheme: Desire to not be “stuck” in a rural town

### **Question Two: What are Common Lived Experiences of Rural Students in their First Term of College?**

#### **Theme Three: Lack of Social and Co-Curricular Involvement**

- Subtheme: Exponential increases in size of classroom, campus, and community
- Subtheme: Inability to form friendships
- Subtheme: High school over-involvement to college lack of involvement

#### **Theme Four: New Exposure to Diversity and Consciousness of a Rural Identity**

- Subtheme: Increasing diversity of identities
- Subtheme: Increasing diversity of values, viewpoints, and experiences
- Subtheme: Rural culture as a marker of difference

### **Question Three: What Perceived Barriers do Rural Students Face when Entering a Postsecondary Institution?**

#### **Theme Five: Prioritization of Labor Over Education in Rural Communities**

- Subtheme: Lack of a college-going culture
- Subtheme: Lack of economic and financial resources
- Subtheme: Geographic distance as a factor in enrollment

#### **Theme Six: Rural Secondary School Systems as Both a Barrier and a Catalyst for College Success**

- Subtheme: Poor academic quality of rural secondary schools
- Subtheme: Early academic difficulties in college
- Subtheme: Hidden benefits of rural secondary schools

## Appendix M: Institutional Review Board Approval



**STUDY ID**  
**5769**

Notification Type	<b>APPROVED</b>		
Date of Notification	08/02/2013		
Study Title	Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural College Student Transitions		
Principal Investigator	David Kovac, PhD		
Study Team Members	Karen Ast		
Submission Type	Project Revision		
Level	Expedited	Category(ies)	6, 7
Number of Participants	15 <i>Do not exceed this number without prior IRB approval</i>		
Waiver(s)	Documentation of Consent, Parental Permission		
Risk Level for Children	\$46.404 minimal risk		
Funding Source	None	Proposal #	N/A
PI on Grant or Contract	N/A		

The above referenced study was reviewed and approved by the OSU Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Approval Date:** 08/01/2013

*Annual continuing review applications are due at least 30 days prior to expiration date*

**Expiration Date:** 7/1/2014

Documents included in this review:

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Protocol            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recruiting tools    | <input type="checkbox"/> External IRB approvals        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Consent forms       | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Test instruments    | <input type="checkbox"/> Translated documents          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assent forms        | <input type="checkbox"/> Attachment A: Radiation        | <input type="checkbox"/> Attachment B: Human materials |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative consent | <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative assent             | <input type="checkbox"/> Grant/contract                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letters of support  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Project revision(s) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:                        |

**Comments:** Grammatical corrections, formatting of study instrument questions, and resequencing of demographic data collection.

### Principal Investigator responsibilities for fulfilling the requirements of approval:

- All study team members should be kept informed of the status of the research.
- Any changes to the research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the activation of the changes. **This includes, but is not limited to, increasing the number of subjects to be enrolled.**
- Reports of unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others must be submitted to the IRB within three calendar days.
- Only consent forms with a valid approval stamp may be presented to participants.
- Submit a continuing review application or final report to the IRB for review at least four weeks prior to the expiration date. Failure to submit a continuing review application prior to the expiration date will result in termination of the research, discontinuation of enrolled participants, and the submission of a new application to the IRB.

**Appendix N: Institutional Review Board Protocol****RESEARCH PROTOCOL***May 20, 2013*

1. Title: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural Student College Transitions

**PERSONNEL**

2. Principal Investigator: David C. Kovac, Ph.D.
3. Student Researcher(s): Karen M. Ast
4. Co-investigator(s): None
5. Study Staff: None
6. Investigator Qualifications

David C. Kovac, the principal investigator for this study, is a current faculty member at Oregon State University in the College Student Services Administration program, the Physical Activity Course program, and the University Honors College. He has a Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Management, a master's degree in College Student Services Administration, and a bachelor's degree in Physical Education. He is approved by the Graduate School at Oregon State University to serve as a major professor for thesis projects. The PI is qualified to conduct research and advise student researchers in the social sciences, having taught a graduate level research methods course for eight years. He has completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) course online ethics training.

Karen M. Ast, the student researcher for this study, is a current graduate student in the College Student Services Administration Program at Oregon State University. She has a bachelor's degree in Business Administration and has completed the course in protection of human research subjects through the CITI course online ethics training. Ast has been trained by the PI to obtain informed consent, administer questionnaires, and conduct interviews. She and the PI have scheduled monthly meetings to discuss this research project and plan to add meetings when deemed necessary to facilitate clear communication regarding this study. This study is being completed as the capstone requirement in the fulfillment of a thesis for the master's of science degree in College Student Services Administration.

7. Training and Oversight

The PI is responsible for the conduct of the study, all human subject protection issues, and the timely and complete submission of Institutional Review Board (IRB) documents. He will work closely with the student researcher to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and accurate data collection. The student research has been trained on ethical research protocol

through coursework and interactions with the PI. All documents created by the student researcher (protocol, informed consent, recruitment documents, demographic questionnaire, interview questions, interview transcriptions, and data analysis) will be reviewed and approved by the PI before these documents will be seen by participants. Both the PI and the student researcher have completed the course in protection of human research subjects through CITI and will adhere to these guidelines. Regular monthly meetings will occur between the PI and the student researcher to ensure ethical progression of the project. All interview transcription data will be backed up on a computer in a locked office, accessible only to the PI and the student researcher, to ensure confidentiality. In data analysis, pseudonyms will be used to protect anonymity. To prevent over enrollment of subjects, only the first 12 participants who respond to recruitment materials will be permitted to participate in this study. The target number of participants is listed as 15 to compensate for attrition. In the unlikely event that the PI experiences an extended absence from the Oregon State University campus, communication to the student researcher will continue through electronic communication and phone conversations.

## **FUNDING**

8. This project is unfunded. Any funding needed for participant incentives will be provided by funding from the student researcher.

## **DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH**

### **9. Description of Research**

Nationally, students from rural secondary schools have lower college entry rates than their urban counterparts. As colleges face increasing pressure to enroll a diversity of students, this population requires the attention of higher education professionals. This study seeks to determine the lived experiences of these rural students who have enrolled in their first term of college to describe the challenges faced by this population in higher education.

The results of this research will assist secondary counselors and teachers in ways to encourage postsecondary aspirations in rural students. Outcomes will also assist higher education professionals in tailoring their educational practices to better support this population. Specific to this geographical area, this study will contribute descriptive information about rural Oregon students as a part of Oregon's 40-40-20 initiative. Overall, this study aims to find the deep descriptors of rural students' experiences to further educators' understanding of issues this specific population faces in transitioning to a college environment.

The intended use of this specific project is for the capstone completion in the form of a thesis for the master's of science degree in College Student Services Administration at Oregon



State University. This research may also be used in the future for presentations on rural student populations or for publication in rural education and student affairs literature.

## 10. Background Justification

Existing research on rural students in higher education indicates that this population is facing low college entrance rates because of low socioeconomic status, first generation status, racial/ethnic identity, rural labor markets, lack of academic preparation, cultural constraints, and geographic isolation. Little data has been done to describe the lived experiences of these aspects from the rural students themselves. In addition, little information has been discovered on rural students in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. This study will fill a gap in the literature surrounding the lived experiences of rural students in higher education in the Pacific Northwest. The results of this project are anticipated to help educational policy makers, higher education professionals, and secondary educators better support this population.

## 11. Subject Population

- Description of participant characteristics: All participants will be first-year, Oregon students attending Oregon State University who are from an identified rural, Oregon high school. More details of these criteria can be found in the inclusion and exclusion criteria section. Participant selection is not restricted to any gender, ethnic group, or age population.
- Total target enrollment number: The target enrollment number for this study is 15 individuals.
- Description of vulnerable populations: As participants will be from identified rural areas in the state of Oregon, vulnerable populations may be included in this sample. The PI and student researcher understand that certain precautions must be made to protect these individuals. Several vulnerable populations will be allowed to participate in this study, including individuals under the age of 18, children in foster care or wards of the state, pregnant women, and American Indians and/or Alaska Natives. Individuals under the age of 18 are allowed because students entering their first-year of college may be under this age. This population is included to prevent bias in the study. Children in foster care or wards of the state will also be included, as their opinion is valid as a member of a rural community. Also, as this study is being conducted in an educational setting, the majority of children involved as subjects will not be wards of the state. Other valid opinions include that of pregnant women and American Indians and/or Alaska Natives. The focus of this study is on the identity of being from a rural, Oregon high school, so other identities that exist within this are allowed. For all of these at-risk populations, the research involves no more than minimal risk to subjects.
- Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Participants in this study will meet the following criteria:
  - All participants will be **first-year students**, as defined by those students who

entered college the fall following their attainment of a high school diploma or general education degree, regardless of their completion of college credits prior to high school graduation. This is based upon entrance to college, not class standing, as certain first-year students may be considered as sophomores or juniors according to class standing through classes taken in high school.

- All participants will be **Oregon residents**, as determined by the Registrar's Office at Oregon State University. It is important that participants are Oregon residents to ensure consistency in results and applicability to this geographical region.
- All participants will be **full-time students**, which is 12 credits or above per term for undergraduate students according to the Office of Financial Aid at Oregon State University.
- All participants will have **graduated from a rural, Oregon high school**. For the purposes of this study, rural is determined based upon public school characteristics used by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which delineates three categories within a rural population as fringe, distant, and remote. These definitions are based off of public schools; therefore this study defines rural students based upon the secondary school they attended, not their physical home address. Rural students are defined in this way because the literature has shown that high school preparation affects college aspirations. Only public schools are included because this population tends to be more at-risk for not attending colleges. Special education, vocational, and alternative schools are omitted, as this study will capture the experiences of typical rural students. Also, only public schools at the high school level (those which include 12<sup>th</sup> grade) will be included to insure that high school voices are captured. According to the NCES data, there are 297 public, Oregon high schools, 124 of which are considered rural based upon this revised definition.
- All participants will be enrolled in their **first term at Oregon State University**, as this is the host site. This site was chosen because the institution is the state land grant institution and seeks to serve the educational needs of the people of Oregon, including rural students.
- Recruitment: Participants will be recruited for the study through data pulled by the Registrar's Office at Oregon State University based upon the above criteria. Conversations via email between the Office of the Registrar (Rebecca Mathern specifically) occurred between March 20, 2013 and April 26, 2013 regarding obtaining this data. The results of these conversations, which occurred via email, indicates the data will include the following:
  - All freshman and sophomore students according to class standing information. Sophomore data is included since many students enter Oregon State University with enough credits to be considered a sophomore because they have taken college classes while enrolled in high school. This is to fulfill the definition of a first-year student according to the study criteria. Freshman and sophomores are included because many first-year students may fall into either of these categories

- depending on how many college credits they may have completed during their time in high school.
- Full-time students according to the Office of Financial Aid, which is 12 credits or above.
  - Most recent educational institution attended, which is high school for most freshman and sophomores.
  - Current mailing address. This is to verify the status of the participants as residents of the state of Oregon as determined by the Registrar's Office.

Data will be requested from the Registrar's Office in fall of 2013. This will provide the Registrar's Office time to compile the data of enrolled students and send the data set to the principal investigator and student researcher. Through a triangulation of this data, the principal investigator and student researcher will narrow down this data based on participant criteria. Only those participants who meet criteria will be contacted for recruitment to this study. Recruitment will be done through a series of emails. A total of three emails will be sent, if needed, to recruit participants. The final email will be sent to those participants who still have yet to respond to earlier emails. If 12 individuals have agreed to participate in the study before the third email is sent, the last recruitment email will not be sent, as the study will be full. After participants indicate their willingness to participate in this study by sending an email response, they will receive a confirmation email. A copy of this email has been included in the protocol. Participants will be offered a \$15 gift card to the Beaver Store at Oregon State University for participation in the study. Each participant (up to the 12 person desired limit) will be given this certificate, of equal value to every other participant. A 15 participant maximum has been included in this proposal to allow for attrition. A copy of each recruitment email has been included in this proposal.

Once participants respond with interest in participating in the survey, they will receive a confirmation email. A draft of this email has been included in this proposal. One-on-one interviews will begin after participants agree to participate and will be scheduled according to the convenience of the participant.

Participant privacy is of utmost importance during this entire process. The only data on each student that will be accessible to the PI and the student researcher is that which is necessary for the criteria as outlined by the study. Most of this information is public knowledge and accessible through the Oregon State University Online directory, so little information outside of this will be available to the PI and student researcher.

## 12. Consent Process

- The principal investigator and student researcher of this project are seeking a waiver of documentation (signature) of informed consent. Both individuals realize the importance of providing truthful and accurate to all study participants in an ethical manner. As this research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no

procedures of which written consent is normally required outside of the research context, a verbal consent will be used. Information will be presented so the participant is enabled to voluntarily decide whether or not they would like to participate as a research subject. Plain, easily understood language will be used. The verbal consent form that will be used is titled “Explanation of Research” and has been included in this application.

- Verbal consent will take place before the interview and data collection methods begin. Each participant will be emailed an electronic version of the explanation of research form attached to the confirmation email when they agree to participate in the study. Participants will not agree to this consent via electronic methods, but this allows them to read over these details in privacy and gives them time to consider the implications before completing the interview, with no interference from the researcher.

Before the actual interview, in the location of the participants’ choice, each participant will receive a printed, paper copy of this explanation of research form to keep for their records, yet actual confirmation that they agree to participate in the study will be done verbally. A summary of the explanation of research will be discussed with the participant to reiterate consent. The following questions will be used to determine if the participant has comprehended the consent:

- What questions can I answer for you?
- I will be recording this interview with an audio recorder. Do I have your permission to record our conversation and transcribe it into written words for analysis?
- Given this information, would you like to participate in this study?

After the researcher determines that the participant does fully understand the implications of the study, they will be asked the final question regarding their desire to participate. Participants will be informed that they can opt out of the interview at any point and for any reason. This consent will be noted in the researcher’s notes, stating that the approved consent procedure was followed and informed consent was obtained.

- As I will be interviewing only those students who have been admitted as full-time students to Oregon State University, I will not determine whether or not an adult subject has diminishing capacity to consent to this study. Under the enrollment standards of the University, the student researcher and PI will assume that each individual has the ability to consent to this study under their own accord.
- Non-English speakers have been excluded from this study because of the PI and student researcher’s inability to fluently speak languages other than English. We believe that including a translator in the interviews would subtly affect the ability for the participant to convey their real, lived experiences in transitioning from high school to college. As effective communication is an essential part of this research process, only those students who speak English fluently will be allowed to participate.

### 13. Assent Process

- As this study does allow for admitted Oregon State Students under the age of 18 to participate, the principal investigator and student researcher are applying for a waiver of parental permission for children to participate in this study. The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects and the waiver will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects. Those participants under the age of 18 as deemed by the demographic questionnaire will receive full disclosure of their rights and full explanation of the explanation of research form to ensure they understand the details of the study and are best equipped to determine if they would like to participate or not.

### 14. Eligibility Screening

This is determined in recruitment according to data provided by the Registrar's Office and this screening will ensure that participants meet necessary criteria. Each individual that is invited to participate in the study will meet all eligibility requirements, therefore it is unnecessary to complete an additional eligibility screening during the interview. Again, participant criteria is as follows:

- Oregon resident
- First-year student
- Full-time student
- Enrolled in their first term at Oregon State University
- From a rural, Oregon high school as determined by the National Center for Educational Statistics

A verbal description of the process of the interview will be provided to the participant before the eligibility screening. This will describe the following:

- Thanks, welcome to the interview
- Introduction of the student researcher
- Our time today will consist of
  - A demographic questionnaire, which will assist in data analysis.
  - A verbal informed consent process, which will inform the participant of all risks involved with the study.
  - A semi-structured interview process consisting of open-ended questions.

### 15. Methods and Procedures

Before the actual interviewing process, pilot interviews will be conducted with three test interviewees to check for clear questions. Data from these pilot interviews will not be used in research.

Some demographic data will be collected through a printed, paper questionnaire during the first part of the interview process. This will be used in data analysis to determine if there are trends in the data unique to a certain demographic group. A copy of this questionnaire has

been included. Data will be collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants. Questions will be intentionally constructed to answer the research questions in this study, which are included in this application. These questions will be in an open-ended format allowing participants the greatest degree of flexibility in their answers. Questions in the interviews will be asked in several different ways to make sure the student researcher is getting at what the participants would really like to describe. Interviews will be conducted in a space chosen by the participants at a time convenient for them. These interviews are expected to last between 30 minutes and one hour. Participants will be allowed to withdraw from the study at any point before, during, or after the interview process for any reason.

The actual interview will include an introduction, explanation of research to gain consent, demographic questionnaire, interview questions, and time for follow-up questions. Interviews will be collected after participants are secured and dates will depend on number of participants and scheduling details.

To analyze the data collected through interviews, data will first be transcribed from recorded interviews into electronic format. Each interview will be transcribed at a different date depending on then the interview occurred. After completion of the transcription, this will be given back to participants via email to ensure that it is accurate and their views are expressed correctly. At this point participants will be given the opportunity to interview with the researcher again or document in writing any changes or additions to the transcript.

The student researcher will utilize Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach to analyze data. After each interview is transcribed, the student researcher will gain an overall sense of data by taking notes on similarities, differences, and items of interest. Data will be coded further by dividing the text into segments of information with common elements. By repeating this process several times, codes will be collapsed into themes, beginning with many categories and resulting in five to seven main themes. Categories will be determined based upon commonalities according to perceived barriers and overall experiences as described by participants. The principal investigator will work with the student researcher to ensure experiences are being placed in their correct corresponding category.

Participants will be given a copy of the results section of the study to ensure that descriptions of experiences were not altered.

The principal investigator and the student researcher will be the only individuals with access to participant data. This information will be stored on a computer in a locked office and will not be accessible to any other individuals. Documentation of work done throughout the process of this study will be provided in great detail through written notes, typed notes, and recorded interviews.

## 16. Compensation

Each participant that agrees to be interviewed will be compensated with a \$15 gift certificate to the Beaver Store at Oregon State University. Participants will receive this gift certificate upon completion of the interview. Those students who do not meet eligibility requirements or choose to not participate before the first question is asked will not receive the compensation. If a participant chooses to withdraw from the study after the first question of the survey has been asked, they will receive the compensation for their time.

#### 17. Costs

Participants will be responsible for travel and parking costs associated with getting to and from the interview location. As the location is determined by the participant, these costs will vary depending on chosen location. There are no other costs associated with this study.

#### 18. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Although subjects will not be anonymous, as their names will be known to the researcher, many steps will be taken to ensure confidentiality. Only data necessary for this study will be collected from the Oregon State University Registrar's Office. Most of this information is public knowledge and accessible through the Oregon State University online directory, so very little information outside of this will be available to the PI and student researcher. Participant criteria is listed in section 11 of this document. The only individuals with access to this data will be the principal investigator and the student researcher. Data, transcripts, and all notes from the study will be saved on a computer in a locked office in the possession of the student researcher and on a computer in a locked office in the possession of the principal investigator. Both computers will be password protected and in locked offices, so no other individuals will be able to access the information.

Information from this study will be kept for three years after the completion of the study. The only information that will be retained is the final thesis, which becomes knowledge that will contribute to the existing body of literature. In these findings, pseudonyms will be used, so as to not identify participants. Actual names and email addresses will be used for participant recruitment but nothing further. As the consent form will be a verbal agreement, this document will not be placed in any individual records.

In situations where conditions of abuse or neglect may be revealed, the student researcher and/or principal investigator will identify themselves as a mandatory reporter of this type of abuse. The nature of this study does not lend itself to the possibility of this subject arising. In very rare case that it does, the student researcher and/or principal investigator will notify Oregon State University Department of Human Services.

#### 19. Risks

As this study involves personal history, background, upbringing, family life, and other emotional subjects, there is minimal potential for mental or emotional harm to the subjects.

If painful circumstances arise as a result of any of the interview questions, participants will be allowed to withdraw without penalty from the study at any point. Questions are designed as to minimize potential for emotional reactions and are worded to be as straight forward as possible. Participants will be notified of their right to withdraw or to not answer a question at their choosing.

There is little to no potential for physical, legal, financial, insurance, employment, or social risk for this study.

As email communications will be used in this study to communicate with participants, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed over the Internet, yet a beech of confidentiality in this area is extremely rare.

## 20. Benefits

As a benefit of participating in this study, participants will be a part of a greater cause to assist in the success of students from rural geographical areas to enroll in higher education. They will have the emotional satisfaction of contributing to the body of knowledge on this subject and further assisting college-bound students who were once in their same situation. Society will benefit from this study through knowledge that will help to increase the awareness of higher education in rural areas, which is an essential part of the United States today. It is also a hope that participants will benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon their student experiences in understanding their individual growth and development in the college transition process. This study is not designed to benefit participants directly. Participants will also receive a \$15 gift certificate to use at the Oregon State University Beaver Store, which is mentioned earlier.

## 21. Assessment of Risk:Benefit ratio

There is little to no risk for participants in this study. When risk is a possibility, intentional steps have been taken to minimize this risk.



## Appendix O: Demographic Information

Name	High School Distance from Campus	Class Size	Age	Marital Status	Gender	Ethnicity	Religious Affiliation	Mother's Education	Father's Education	High School GPA	Annual Household Income
Darla	83	19	Less than 17 years old	Single, never married	Female	White	No religious affiliation	Bachelor's degree	High school/GED	4.0 or above	Less than \$19,999
Sara Lee	198	13	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Female	Native American	No religious affiliation	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree or above	4.0 or above	\$60,000-\$79,999
Hailee	435	17	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Female	White	No religious affiliation	Some college	Associate's degree	3.5-3.99	\$20,000-\$39,999
Gillian	211	40	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Female	White	Roman Catholic	Master's degree or above	Master's degree or above	3.5-3.99	More than \$80,000
Victoria	120	52	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Female	White	Christian	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	4.0 or above	More than \$80,000
Molly	70	14	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Female	White	Christian	High school/GED	High school/GED	4.0 or above	Unknown-Working Class
Heather	274	34	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Female	White	Protestant Christian	Master's degree or above	Bachelor's degree	4.0 or above	\$40,000-\$59,999
Paige	249	11	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Female	White	Roman Catholic	Bachelor's degree	Some college	4.0 or above	\$60,000-\$79,999
Paul	74	38	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Male	White	No religious affiliation	Some college	High school/GED	3.5-3.99	\$40,000-\$59,999
Calvin	145	47	18-24 years old	Single, never married	Male	White	Christian	Some college	Some college	3.5-3.99	\$40,000-\$59,999

Highlighted areas indicate first-generation students