

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS FROM RURAL AREAS ON  
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

by

JESSICA HORTON

(Under the Direction of Jay W. Rojewski)

ABSTRACT

Rural students continue to experience persistent challenges in accessing and completing postsecondary education despite living in communities that often value hard work, resilience, and close social ties. This qualitative study explored the postsecondary decision-making processes of recent high school graduates from a rural Georgia county located within close proximity to urban centers and a public university. The purpose was to understand how social, cultural, and contextual factors shaped their choices, as well as to identify the supports and barriers they encountered in pursuing higher education. Using a phenomenographic research design, the study examined the lived experiences of five participants who graduated from the same rural high school and subsequently enrolled in four-year universities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically through the lens of Social Capital Theory and the Student Choice Model. These frameworks provided insight into how relationships, networks, and institutional structures influenced participants' perceptions of opportunity and their capacity to navigate complex postsecondary systems. Findings revealed that family and mentor influence, community expectations, and limited exposure to postsecondary resources all played critical roles in shaping students' educational trajectories.

While strong relational networks often encouraged persistence, barriers such as financial limitations, inconsistent guidance, and lack of information about available options constrained decision-making. Participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability, viewing education both as a path to independence and to give back to their rural communities. The study concludes that improving postsecondary access for rural students requires more than removing logistical barriers. It demands intentional, relationship-based support systems that recognize the cultural strengths of rural communities. Implications for educators, policymakers, and community leaders include early exposure to college readiness, family engagement, and collaborative partnerships that bridge local values with broader educational opportunities.

**INDEX WORDS:** rural education, postsecondary education, perceptions, experiences, rural students, higher education access, educational aspirations, socioeconomic factors, academic preparedness, community support, educational barriers, college readiness, career aspirations, educational opportunities, socio-cultural context

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by

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Sean, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been the bedrock of my academic journey. Your patience, understanding, and belief in me have carried me through the challenges and triumphs of this endeavor. Thank you for always being my pillar of strength and seeing the Jessica I could be long before I ever could.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The postsecondary education experiences of rural students are shaped by a unique interplay of barriers and opportunities. Students in rural areas face systemic challenges such as limited access to rigorous academic preparation, financial constraints, and geographic isolation from higher education institutions (Miranda & Rodriguez, 2022). Rural high schools often struggle with inadequate resources, a lack of qualified educators, and fewer extracurricular opportunities, all of which impede college readiness and transition (Paterson, 2020). These educational disparities are further compounded by economic hardships that hinder rural families' ability to afford tuition, housing, and transportation costs, making higher education less accessible (Byun et al., 2015).

Social capital significantly influences rural students' postsecondary trajectories. Limited access to college-educated mentors, guidance counselors, and robust networks restricts students' awareness of and ability to navigate higher education pathways (Luedke, 2020). Cultural barriers, including the disconnect between rural community values and postsecondary environments, can amplify feelings of alienation and create tension between students' aspirations and community expectations (Gelber, 2017). Nevertheless, rural students often demonstrate remarkable resilience and benefit from strong community support, which can motivate their pursuit of higher education despite these obstacles (Fraysier & Reschly, 2022). McNamee and Ganss (2023) emphasized the critical gap in research, practice, and policy addressing rural

students' access to and success in higher education, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of their unique experiences.

Rural students in the United States consistently enroll in and complete postsecondary education at lower rates than their urban and suburban peers. National data reveal a 61% college enrollment rate for rural students—at least 6% lower than their urban and suburban counterparts (Paterson, 2020). Furthermore, rural students are less likely to attend selective institutions, more likely to delay college attendance, and more prone to withdrawing from college, reflecting systemic inequities in educational access and outcomes (Paterson, 2020). These disparities highlight the need to investigate not only the general barriers faced by rural students but also the localized factors that influence college attainment in rural areas near urban centers (Lisa & Roberts, 2016).

This study focuses on understanding the postsecondary experiences of recent high school graduates from a rural area with close geographic proximity to urban centers. While proximity may reduce some barriers, other challenges—such as inadequate access to advanced coursework, limited postsecondary guidance, and financial constraints—remain significant (Paterson, 2020). Perna and Ruiz (2017) suggest that adopting a place-based lens is crucial for understanding spatial differences in college attainment, as “place” shapes access to resources, economic mobility, and life opportunities. By examining how geographic, cultural, and social factors intersect to influence rural students' educational pathways, this study seeks to identify actionable strategies and policies to promote equitable postsecondary access for rural students.

Some existing literature suggests particular obstacles that may exist for rural students. An often-identified barrier is a lack of technological devices, along with a lack of access to sufficient internet access. Another barrier that is often cited is insufficient preparation due to high schools

that do not have a high level of academic rigor (McNamee, 2024). Also, rural students are historically more likely to experience poverty, and less likely to have a significant person in their life who has enrolled in a university, community college, or technical school (Swanson et al., 2024). Even the internal struggle that rural students experience between staying in their rural area or leaving to pursue further education was named by Grimard and Maddaus (2004) as a barrier.

According to Bouck (2018), “research reveals that students in rural schools face many personal and education hardships – from living in poverty to having less opportunity and sophistication in technology. Rural schools also have fewer course offerings” (p. 38). Rural communities often experience a lack of workforce training programs for their residents. Indeed, a study of residents in four rural areas in the United States indicates “only about 40 percent of respondents report full-time jobs, and in rural areas, many are low-skill positions” (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 11).

I am specifically interested in the experiences of recent graduates of this rural high school, and how they view, and pursued, postsecondary education and training. The lack of a trained workforce in their hometown has led to a decline in population, as business and industry does not find the skilled workers needed to pursue operations within the county (Gilchrist, 2025). The topic is important as determining barriers to postsecondary options will mitigate factors hindering the pursuit of further enrollment in higher education (Morris & McKenzie, 2024). Determining not only the barriers but also the supports to encourage postsecondary enrollment not only benefits the citizens of this particular county but also is important to companies looking to relocate in this region.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to discover the experiences related to postsecondary education for recent high school graduates living in a specific rural location. While previous studies have examined factors that are impactful on postsecondary decision making for rural students, the setting of this study is unique due to the rural area's access to a public university, and proximity to two urban areas.

## **Research Questions**

1. What factors did rural participants identify as barriers or enablers to accessing postsecondary education?
2. What resources or supports did rural participants perceive as present or missing in their postsecondary decision-making process?
3. How did rural participants perceive their rural identity, both generally and in relation to their postsecondary education decisions?

## **Conceptual Framework**

Understanding the factors that influence students' postsecondary decision-making requires grounding the discussion in relevant theoretical frameworks. Two frameworks, Social Capital Theory (SCT) and the Student Choice Model (SCM), help explain how students' environments, relationships, and available resources shape their educational choices.

Social Capital Theory (SCT) suggests that individuals' access to resources and networks will affect their postsecondary education decision making. Specifically, social networks and relationships with others can provide access to information, support, and resources. According to Weinstein and Savitz-Romer (2009), Social Capital Theory can be used as a framework to create

a culture where information about postsecondary education planning, application, and enrollment is encouraged and normalized.

In the context of postsecondary education, social capital can play a significant role in students' decisions about which institution to attend, what major to pursue, and what career path to take after graduation. Social capital can be derived from family members, friends, teachers, mentors, and other individuals within a student's social network. The quality and diversity of a student's social capital can affect their access to information about different educational pathways, career opportunities, and the ability to build social and professional connections that can be leveraged in the future (Ampaw, 2024).

The theory of social capital focuses on a highly interconnected network that helps to form cohesive group norms among actors in the network and emphasizes strong social ties within the family, which form an efficient conduit of norms, standards and expectations that enable children to become successful adults (Kim & Schneider, 2005, p. 1182)

Since the focus of my study is related to postsecondary education decision making of rural students, SCT could explain how the information and resources rural students have influenced their choices related to pursuing further education after high school. Specifically, the social capital that the students in this particular rural area possessed had an impact on their subsequent decisions and actions.

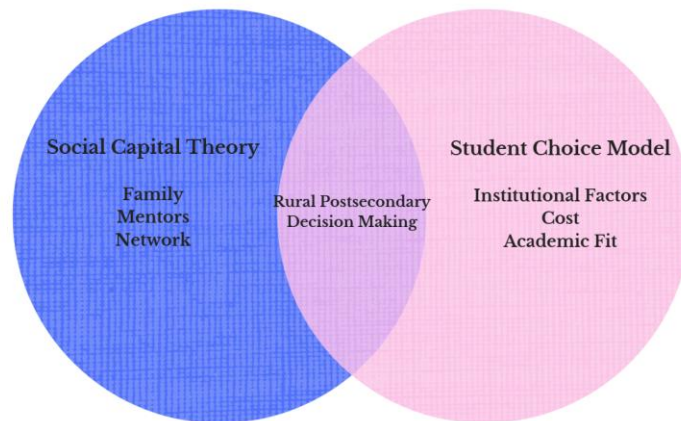
The Student Choice Model (SCM), Vrontis et al. (2006), could also be used to explain the focus of my study. This model combines elements of many previous choice models and emphasizes the importance of individual and institutional factors in shaping postsecondary education decisions. It suggests that students' decisions are influenced by a combination of

factors, including academic achievement, demographic characteristics, financial aid, and institutional characteristics such as location, reputation, and program offerings.

Student Choice Model suggests that individuals are rational decision-makers who weigh the costs and benefits of different educational pathways and institutions when making postsecondary decisions. Additionally, students' personal characteristics, such as their academic ability, interests, and values, also influence their decision-making processes. SCM emphasizes the importance of providing students with accurate and relevant information about their educational options to enable them to make informed decisions. It also suggests that policymakers and educational institutions should strive to create a competitive environment that encourages institutions to provide high-quality programs and services that meet the needs of students (Vrontis et al., 2006).

**Figure 1.1**

*Theoretical Framework*



Note: Own Work

Integrating Social Capital Theory (Sudbrock et al., 2024) and the Student Choice Model (Callender & Melis, 2022) provides a view of students' postsecondary decision-making processes through both a relational and structural lens. Social Capital Theory provided a way to

understand how students in rural areas access or are limited by their social networks, such as family, teachers, and community members, when gathering information and support for college decisions. The Student Choice Model offered a complementary framework that explained why students ultimately make specific educational choices, emphasizing the rational evaluation of costs, benefits, and institutional characteristics. Together, these theories guided my interpretation of participants' experiences by revealing how the quality and availability of social connections intersect with individual decision-making factors. This integrated perspective allowed me to interpret rural students' choices not as isolated acts of preference, but as decisions embedded within networks of influence, constrained opportunities, and localized forms of information sharing.

### **Importance of Study**

Many rural students have dreams and aspirations regarding what their plans will be after they obtain a high school diploma (Williams, 2025). They may consider continuing their studies at a technical, community, or traditional four-year university. However, when comparing the number of rural students that enroll in postsecondary educational options, these students do not enroll or complete their degrees at the rate of their urban and suburban counterparts. Rural students face challenges that can limit access to and participation in postsecondary education and occupational training. Identifying these barriers will provide insight into challenges that are particular to rural students (Ratledge et al., 2025).

“Researchers have argued that geography shapes postsecondary education outcomes and opportunities” (Means, 2024, p. 167). The rural students in my study are all from an area of sparse population, and mostly agricultural or undeveloped land. The county in which they reside is uniquely located geographically. While other rural counties may be over an hour's travel time

from any urban area, this location is positioned less than 60 miles from two urban counties. The proximity of the urban areas, which both have postsecondary institutions, make this a compelling place in which to frame my study.

According to Grimard and Maddaus (2004), high school students in rural areas and in urban areas express their intention to pursue postsecondary education at relatively the same rate. However, rural students enroll in, and remain in, postsecondary institutions at a lower rate than their urban counterparts. Further, the gap between the percentage of rural students and the percentage of urban students in postsecondary institutions is widening (Grant et al., 2025). Identifying barriers that exist for rural students that do not exist for urban and suburban students will provide insight on the reasons this gap exists. In particular, examining the experiences of students in this particular location will provide insight into the barriers experienced by these particular students, who have more of a geographic nearness to urban areas than other rural students. Not only is this topic important to the people in this county, it is also important within the context of the larger issue, barriers that rural students face that impact their attainment of postsecondary education (Ratledge et al., 2025). Identifying these barriers is critical to determining what challenges should be addressed and developing strategies to overcome these barriers.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted dynamics surrounding geographic mobility, focusing on rural, urban, and suburban contexts. Understanding the patterns and precipitating factors of rural migration is essential for grasping the influences of geographic mobility on various aspects of individuals' lives, including work, social interactions, and educational opportunities.

Geographic mobility, particularly rural migration, is influenced by a myriad of factors, such as economic opportunities, social networks, lifestyle preferences, and access to resources and services (Selod & Ventura, 2021). By examining the factors that propel individuals to migrate from rural to urban or suburban areas, this chapter aims to illuminate the complexities of migration decisions and their implications for individuals and communities.

The intersecting themes of work and social mobility within the context of geographic mobility are also examined. Understanding how mobility patterns shape individuals' employment opportunities, career trajectories, and social networks is crucial for comprehending the broader impact of migration on individual lives and societal dynamics.

Educational issues are explored within the framework of geographic mobility. Access to quality education, educational aspirations, and the purpose of postsecondary education are all influenced by individuals' mobility patterns and the unique challenges they face in rural, urban, or suburban environments (Zahl-Thanem & Rye, 2024).

## **Rural, Urban, and Suburban**

To define the term rural, the United States Census Bureau first defined the term urban. An urban area is defined as “a continuously built-up area with a population of 50,000 or more. It comprises one or more central places and the adjacent densely settled surrounding area” (United States Department of Commerce, 2013, p. 12–1). Rural is simply defined as any place that is not classified as an urban area. According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA, 2025), a rural area may be defined, for certain purposes, as a census tract that is “at least 400 square miles in area with a population density of 35 or fewer people per square mile and with RUCA codes 2–3 in metropolitan counties” (Another term that is quite common in discussions of the intersection of geography and education is suburban. A suburban area is located on the edge of an urban area, although not in a central place. However, despite not being located in a central place, suburban areas by definition are part of an urban area. For the purposes of this study, suburban areas will not be considered an area of their own, and will be included as a part of urban, or non-rural, areas (Anderson et al., 2020).

Although many governmental agencies and organizations define rural based on population density criteria, the feeling of rural-ness is not necessarily as easily quantified. “A natural tension exists between the need for an official definition and the more subjective notion of what it means to be rural” (Bennett et al., 2019, p. 1987). Therefore, it is important for researchers to have a clear understanding of how rurality is defined within the parameters of their study (Bennett et al., 2019; Tilt et al., 2012).

Essentially, a rural area feels like a place where the pace of life moves in rhythm with the seasons rather than the clock. The landscape stretches wide and open, dotted with fields, forests, and winding two-lane roads that connect small towns where everyone still waves as they pass.

Life centers around schools, churches, and Friday night ball games, where community spirit is as much a part of the air as the scent of pine and freshly cut hay. In these places, the silence between sounds is comforting, not empty, but full of familiarity. Opportunities may be fewer, and distances longer, yet the sense of belonging runs deep. Neighbors help one another not because it is expected, but because it is the way things have always been done.

The concepts of rural and urban have been used in research related to the convergence of geography and education. Topics that have been studied include the technology gap between rural and urban areas, school funding discrepancies based on geography, the ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers based on location, and differences in achievement as related to student location.

The technology gap between rural and urban areas is a problem that continues to persist. Rural areas tend to have less access to hardware, and the limited availability of newer devices means that rural residents tend to lag behind urban residents in adopting innovative technology. Further, rural educators tend to have favorable attitudes toward technology, but simply do not have the access to integrate it into their instruction as often as urban teachers. Rural students, therefore, typically do not have as comprehensive an experience with technology as urban students do (Li et al., 2018; Wang, 2013).

School funding, which is partially based on geographic location, has also been studied with regard to rural schools. “Property tax is the mainstay of local K–12 education revenue. Public schools derive over 80 percent of their local own-source revenue from the property tax” (Kenyon & Reschovsky, 2014, p. 373). Rural schools are often operating with budgets that are funded by far fewer properties, in areas with lower property values. While the geography of educational funding has been studied, “current educational policy has also neglected the role of

place, focusing instead on introducing competition to public education, increasing mandatory standardized testing, and identifying what have been deemed ‘failing’ schools. Such policy foci and aims are problematic given significant variation in educational opportunity across geographic space and its consequences for educational resource and investments” (Roscigno et al., 2006, p. 2139).

There has also been research conducted related to attracting educators to, and retaining them in, rural areas. Although class sizes in rural areas tend to be small, and teachers overall report relatively higher levels of job satisfaction than their urban counterparts, rural schools find it difficult to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. According to Monk, salaries tend to be lower in rural areas, and benefit plans are not as robust, likely due to lower fiscal capacity. These economic considerations contribute to staffing challenges in rural areas (2007). Further research has been conducted to determine, in today’s environment where teacher shortages are a concern, what strategies are effective at encouraging teachers to seek positions in rural areas where “wages are less attractive” (Podolsky et al., 2019, p. 1).

Additionally, research has been conducted to study the differences in achievement between rural students and non-rural students. Reeves (2012) contended that “the main source of the rural achievement gap appears to be external to the resources and practices of the school proper. It lies in the influence of families and close peers on student motivation to take advantage of the learning opportunities that rural high schools provide” (p. 903).

Despite the aforementioned examples of studies that have been conducted related to rurality and its effects on education, some researchers believe that not enough emphasis has been placed on the educational circumstances faced by rural students. DeYoung states that according to “those who work in and with rural schools that research on the particular problems,

issues, and trends in rural education is relatively scarce, of very uneven quality, and typically found either in relatively obscure state department documents or in the work of scholars not identified with mainstream educational research” (1987, p. 123). Although the challenges faced by rural schools are numerous, affect many students and families, and are concerning, there is “a lack of high-quality research conducted in rural settings. Relatively few scholars are studying rural education issues, and almost no funding is available to conduct education research in specifically rural contexts” (Arnold et al., 2005, p. 1).

### **Geographic Mobility Patterns**

Over the past 100 years, there has been a considerable change in the percentage of the United States population that resides in a rural area. According to the United States Census Bureau (2022), in 1920, nearly half of the U.S. population lived in rural areas. However, by 2010, less than a century later, only 19% of the population lived in rural areas, and the trend has continued since then (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2022).

There are several factors that have contributed to this shift. One major factor is the mechanization of agriculture, which has led to a decline in the number of jobs available in rural areas. This has resulted in many young people leaving rural areas in search of better economic opportunities in urban areas. Another factor is the growth of industries such as manufacturing, technology, and healthcare, which have created jobs in urban areas and attracted people away from rural areas (Schmitz & Moss, 2015).

Additionally, improvements in transportation and communication have made it easier for people to move away from rural areas and still stay connected with friends and family. This has led to the development of suburbs, which are areas that are located outside of urban areas but still have easy access to both urban and rural areas (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022).

The shift from rural to non-rural residence has had significant impacts on both urban and rural areas. Urban areas have experienced significant growth in population and economic activity, but also challenges such as traffic congestion and housing affordability. Meanwhile, many rural areas have struggled with declining populations, aging infrastructure, and a lack of economic opportunities. Despite this, there are also many thriving rural communities that have found ways to adapt and thrive in the changing economy (Renkow & Hoover, 2000).

### **Precipitating Factors**

There were several precipitating factors that contributed to the shift from rural to non-rural residence in the United States during the 1900s. The growth of industrialization and manufacturing in the early 20th century created new job opportunities in urban areas, which drew people away from rural areas in search of work. Further, the development of new technologies such as the automobile and the telephone made it easier for people to travel and communicate over long distances, which reduced the isolation of rural life and made it more appealing to move to urban areas (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022).

Further, the mechanization of agriculture led to a decline in the number of jobs available in rural areas, which pushed people to seek employment in urban areas. Simultaneously, the demand for labor during World War II led to a significant migration of people from rural areas to urban areas to work in factories and other industries that supported the war effort. For example, in Savannah, Georgia, the population increased by nearly 29 percent in the first three years of the war (Lotchin & Long, 1999). After the end of World War II in 1945, there was a post-war economic boom which created new job opportunities in urban areas, which further drew more people away from rural areas as they relocated to work in factories that once

manufactured munitions, but now manufactured appliances and other modern conveniences (Bohanon, 2012).

The reduced agricultural work in the 1900s was a major contributing factor to the shift from rural residence to non-rural residence in the United States. Prior to 1900, much of the United States population lived and worked in rural areas, with agriculture being the primary source of employment. However, the mechanization of agriculture led to significant changes in the rural economy, including a decline in the number of jobs available in agriculture (Grigg, 1975).

There were also changes on rural family farms that contributed to the rural to urban population shift. The development of new technologies such as tractors, combines, and other farming equipment increased the efficiency of farming, reducing the need for manual labor. Many farmers were able to produce more food with fewer workers, and many rural residents found themselves without jobs. These unemployed people from rural areas relocated to urban areas in search of employment in other industries, such as manufacturing. Another factor that contributed to the decline in agricultural work was the consolidation of farms. As farming became more reliant on technology and mechanization, small family farms were increasingly unable to compete with larger, more efficient operations. This led to a trend of consolidation in agriculture, with larger farms producing more food with fewer workers (Dimitri et al., 2005; Satterthwaite et al., 2010).

The rapid industrialization in the 1900s in the United States required a large workforce of urban factory workers. Industrialization is “the application of modern industrial manufacturing, production, procurement, distribution, and coordination concepts” (Boehije, 1996, p. 30). Further, it is when an economy transforms from being primarily based on agriculture and

handicrafts to being based on large-scale manufacturing, technology, and services. During the 1900s, the United States experienced significant industrial growth, which led to the need for a large and specialized workforce.

One of the key drivers of industrialization in the United States during the 1900s was the development of new technologies, such as the steam engine, electricity, and mass production techniques. These new technologies made it possible to produce goods more efficiently and on a larger scale, which created new job opportunities in urban areas. For example, the development of the assembly line by Henry Ford in 1914 led to the mass production of automobiles and the creation of many new jobs in urban factories (Mokyr & Strotz, 1998).

Industrialization was also fueled by growing consumer demand for new products and services. As incomes rose and people became more urbanized, there was a growing market for goods such as clothing, household appliances, and automobiles. This demand created a need for a large and specialized workforce to produce these goods in urban factories (Nava, 2006).

### **Influences of Geographic Location**

Living in a rural area can have a variety of influences on individuals' life experiences and outcomes. Some of the factors that are influential are healthcare access, education, employment opportunities, infrastructure, social isolation, and rural environment (Boncinelli et al., 2015). Rural areas often have limited access to healthcare services, which can have a negative impact on individuals' health outcomes (Strasser, 2003). Further, rural areas may have fewer resources and lower-quality schools, which can limit educational opportunities for children and young adults. Similarly, rural areas may have fewer job opportunities and lower wages, which can make it difficult for individuals to support themselves and their families (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

Additionally, rural areas may have limited access to transportation, internet, and other critical infrastructure, which can make it difficult to access goods and services. Rural areas may have smaller populations and less social infrastructure, which can lead to feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Also, rural areas may have different environmental factors, such as exposure to agricultural chemicals or natural disasters, that can impact individuals' health and wellbeing (Cavaye, 2001).

However, many rural areas have unique strengths and assets, such as close-knit communities, natural beauty, and cultural traditions, that can contribute to positive life experiences and outcomes. These attributes often foster a strong sense of belonging and mutual support among residents, which can enhance overall well-being and community resilience. Additionally, the slower pace of life and lower population density can promote mental and physical health benefits, offering residents a distinct quality of life that differs from the demands of urban environments (Taylor, 2025).

### **Work and Social Mobility**

“As a result of limited job availability and lower occupational attainment, rural adolescents have traditionally faced a conflict between the pursuit of high educational or career aspirations and the need to move to a metropolitan area to attain such goals” (Rojewski, 1999, p. 142). Rural areas may have fewer job opportunities than urban areas, particularly in industries such as finance, technology, tourism, and entertainment. This can make it more difficult for individuals to find work that aligns with their skills and interests. Unfortunately, wages in rural areas may be lower than in urban areas, particularly in low-skill industries. This can make it more difficult for individuals to support themselves and their families. If job opportunities are limited in a rural area, individuals may need to commute to a nearby city for work. This can add

time and expense to their daily routine, but it may also provide access to higher-paying jobs and greater career advancement opportunities (McGranahan & Beale, 2002; Tickamyer & Duncan, 2001).

On the other hand, rural areas often have a higher concentration of jobs in agriculture, forestry, and other natural resource industries. For individuals with relevant skills and interests, these industries can provide stable and fulfilling employment opportunities. Also, rural areas may offer unique opportunities for entrepreneurship, particularly in industries such as agritourism, craft production, and specialty foods (Steele, 1997). Starting a business in a rural area can be challenging, but it can also offer a chance for individuals to pursue their passions and build a strong local community.

Living in a rural area can have a complex impact on an individual's social mobility, which refers to their ability to move up or down the social and economic ladder over time. As mentioned previously, rural areas may have fewer job opportunities than urban areas, which can make it more difficult for individuals to advance in their careers and increase their income. Rural areas may have limited access to high-quality education and training programs, particularly in specialized fields. This can limit individuals' ability to acquire new skills and pursue career opportunities in higher-paying industries. In some cases, rural areas may offer more limited opportunities for networking and mentorship compared to urban areas, which can make it more difficult for individuals to build professional relationships and advance in their careers (Ardoin & McNamee, 2020).

Conversely, living in a rural area can also offer some advantages for social mobility. For example, the cost of living may be lower than in urban areas, which can make it easier for individuals to save money and invest in their future. Rural areas often have close-knit

communities that can provide social and emotional support, as well as access to resources such as volunteer opportunities and community programs (Howley, A. & Howley, C., 2010).

### **Educational Issues**

Living in a rural area can have both negative and positive impacts on an individual's education. Rural schools often have fewer resources than urban schools, including access to technology, specialized teachers, and extracurricular programs. This can limit educational opportunities and make it more difficult for students to pursue advanced coursework or extracurricular interests. Further, rural areas may have a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in specialized fields such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). This can limit the quality of education and make it more difficult for students to acquire the skills and knowledge needed for future success. Rural areas may have a larger geographical area and longer travel distances to school. This can make it more difficult for students to attend school regularly, particularly if they face transportation barriers (Clark et al., 2022).

On a positive note, rural areas often have close-knit communities that place a strong emphasis on education. This can provide students with social and emotional support, as well as opportunities for mentorship and networking. Depending on a student's interests, a rural area may offer unique educational opportunities that are not available in urban areas, such as hands-on experiences in agriculture, environmental science, or other natural resource industries (Clark et al., 2022).

Postsecondary educational attainment for students living in rural areas in the United States has historically been lower than for students living in urban and suburban areas. However, the gap between rural and urban/suburban postsecondary educational attainment has been

narrowing in recent years due to various efforts aimed at increasing access to higher education for rural students (School Superintendents Association, 2017).

Rural students are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their urban/suburban peers. A study by Byun et al. (2015) found “rural youth were less likely than their nonrural counterparts to attend a selective institution. In addition, rural youth were more likely to delay entry to postsecondary education compared to their urban counterparts. Finally, rural students were less likely than their urban counterparts to be continuously enrolled in college” (p. 263). Rural areas often have fewer higher education institutions and limited access to community colleges and other lower-cost options. This can make it more difficult for rural students to access postsecondary education, particularly if they cannot afford to relocate to attend a college or university. There may also be other financial barriers to accessing postsecondary education, including higher transportation and housing costs, and limited financial aid resources. Sometimes, rural students may be less academically prepared for postsecondary education than their urban/suburban peers, due to limited access to advanced coursework and specialized academic programs in their high schools (Byun et al., 2015).

Fortunately, there are efforts to increase postsecondary access for rural students, though there is room for improvement. Many organizations and institutions are working to increase access to postsecondary education for rural students, through initiatives such as dual enrollment programs, online courses, and partnerships between colleges and rural high schools (Pretlow & Wathington, 2013).

### **Postsecondary Education – Purposes and Views**

In the early 1900s, postsecondary education was seen as a privilege reserved for the wealthy elite. The purpose of higher education was primarily to prepare students for leadership

roles in society and to cultivate their moral character (Thelin & Gasman, 2003). However, by the mid-century, veterans benefits provided to soldiers post-World War II, changed perspectives on postsecondary education. The GI Bill, which provided financial support for veterans to attend college, changed the purpose of postsecondary education. It was then seen as a way to promote social mobility and economic growth by creating a skilled workforce (Adams, 2000).

The Civil Rights Movement brought attention to the fact that access to postsecondary education was unequal. The purpose of higher education expanded to include providing opportunities for marginalized groups and promoting diversity and inclusion (Willie & Sanford, 1991). In the 1980s, there was a focus on the economic value of postsecondary education. College degrees were seen as a means to increase earning potential and secure a place in the middle class (Baker & Velez, 1996).

The Great Recession of the early 2000s increased attention on the purpose of postsecondary education as a way to address economic inequality. There was a shift toward career and technical education and a focus on providing students with skills that are in demand in the job market. Fortunately, there is a growing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and the need to provide education and training opportunities throughout a person's career. The purpose of postsecondary education has expanded to include not only preparing students for specific jobs but also to foster critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and adaptability in a rapidly changing world (Thelin & Gasman, 2003).

Postsecondary education was once seen as a privilege reserved for the wealthy elite. However, over time, there has been a growing emphasis on making higher education accessible to more people. This has included the expansion of public universities, the creation of financial

aid programs, and efforts to increase diversity and inclusion in higher education. As accessibility of postsecondary education has evolved, so has the funding of postsecondary education.

Prior to the 1950s and the GI Bill, higher education was primarily funded by private individuals and institutions. After the GI Bill, there was a shift toward greater public funding for higher education. In recent years, however, there has been a trend toward decreased public funding for higher education, with more of the burden falling on students and their families (Adams, 2000).

The cost of postsecondary education has risen significantly over time, making it more difficult for some students to attend. This has led to concerns about student debt and the accessibility of higher education for low-income and marginalized communities (Wellman et al., 2008).

Advances in technology have also had a significant impact on postsecondary education. Distance learning programs, online courses, and educational technology have all made it possible for more people to access higher education. These changes have also raised questions about the value of traditional, campus-based education and the role of technology in the classroom (Schmid et al., 2014).

Over the past century, there has been a significant increase in postsecondary education attendance in the United States. In the early 1900s, only a small percentage of Americans attended college, and it was primarily the wealthy upper class (Durbin & Kent, 1989). However, today, more than two-thirds of high school graduates enroll in college, and the number of people earning college degrees has increased dramatically (Reber & Smith, 2023).

The demographics of postsecondary education attendees have also changed significantly over time. Historically, college attendance was primarily limited to white, male students. However, over the past century, there has been a significant increase in the number of women and people of color attending college (Anderson, 2003).

The outcomes of postsecondary education have also changed over time. In the early 1900s, higher education was primarily focused on preparing students for leadership roles in society and cultivating their moral character. Today, the primary focus is on preparing students for the workforce and providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their chosen careers.

## **Conclusion**

By scrutinizing the diverse array of factors that shape rural migration, including economic opportunities, social networks, and access to resources, this chapter has offered insights into the complexities of migration decisions and their ramifications for both individuals and communities. Moreover, the exploration of work and social mobility within the context of geographic mobility has underscored the pivotal role of mobility patterns in shaping individuals' employment prospects, career trajectories, and social connections, thereby illuminating the broader societal implications of migration (Renkow & Hoover, 2000).

Furthermore, the examination of educational issues within the framework of geographic mobility highlighted the significant impact of mobility patterns on individuals' access to quality education, their educational aspirations, and the purpose of postsecondary education (Biddle & Azano, 2016). By elucidating the challenges and opportunities presented by geographic mobility in rural, urban, and suburban environments, this chapter lays the groundwork for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between mobility, individual experiences, and societal dynamics.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methods used to conduct this qualitative study. The chapter begins with a description of the research design and the rationale for its selection. It then addresses researcher subjectivity, outlining the researcher's role and potential influences on the study. The research questions that guided the investigation are presented, followed by a description of the setting in which the study took place. The chapter next introduces the participants and explains the procedures used for data collection, including the development and use of interview questions. Finally, the data analysis section details the process used to organize, code, and interpret data gathered from participants.

#### **Research Design**

A phenomenography qualitative design was selected. Phenomenography is an approach first developed by Marton (1994). Phenomenography was developed to provide an approach that focuses on participants' experiences of the phenomena in question, with data typically gathered through semi-structured interviews. Rather than focusing on an actual phenomenon, phenomenology focuses on the perception of the phenomenon through the descriptions provided by the participants.

Phenomenography provides several key advantages. The design encourages participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences and perceptions resulting in a nuanced understanding of the different ways individuals conceptualize and make sense of a phenomenon. Further, phenomenography recognizes that participants' experiences differ, and its goal is to

identify and explore existing variations. Phenomenography is a research method that lends itself well to the study of educational topics (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). Understanding the different ways that participants conceptualize and understand a phenomenon, in this case, postsecondary decision making, allows educators to tailor their methods to match the various conceptions. This personalization of support can lead to more effective postsecondary decision making and improved educational outcomes.

Phenomenography places a strong emphasis on valuing and honoring participant perspectives. The design gives participants a voice and allows them to share their experiences and understanding. Therefore, phenomenography promotes inclusivity and the importance of diverse viewpoints in research, application, and practice (Åkerlind, 2005). Finally, phenomenography can advance knowledge and understanding within a field of study. By uncovering the underlying qualitative differences in participant conceptions, researchers can refine existing theories or propose new theories (Cossham, 2017).

While the advantages of phenomenography are significant, there are also challenges associated with this research design. Phenomenographic studies most often entail a relatively small number of participants. This allows for in-depth analysis of individuals' experiences; however, it precludes the generalizability of the findings. Phenomenography captures individuals' perceptions of a phenomenon at a specific point in time and does not account for potential changes in individuals' perceptions over time (Hajar, 2020). Another challenge of phenomenography is that it does not seek to determine the causes of variation in experiences. Exploring underlying causes would require additional research, perhaps using a different research method. Finally, phenomenographic analysis requires the researcher's interpretation and categorization of participants' responses. Therefore, an element of subjectivity exists within the

process of analyzing the data (Guisasola, 2023). A researcher's personal biases and preconceived notions may influence the interpretation of the data, which could impact the validity and reliability of the findings (Stolz, 2020).

Phenomenography is an appropriate design for my study for a variety of reasons. The decision-making process regarding postsecondary education can be quite complex, and rural students may face unique challenges and considerations (Puente et al., 2023). Phenomenography provides a way to determine how various factors influence decision-making. Phenomenography highlights a diverse range of perspectives and understandings, allowing me to analyze commonalities and differences in experiences. Further, phenomenography can provide insight into the various ways in which rural high school students approach postsecondary decision making (Sims, 2024). This analysis can have practical implications for policy and interventions. Phenomenography's focus on identifying categories of description and relationships between them can provide insights that inform targeted support strategies for rural students (Guisasola, 2023). Also, phenomenography assists in gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that shape rural high school students' postsecondary decisions, including their aspirations, motivations, barriers, and challenges.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

I had no personal relationship with research participants prior to the study. However, due to the fact I grew up a generation earlier in the rural town they are from, I am likely acquainted with several of the family members of each participant. Therefore, while I did not know the participants, I am familiar with their families, as they are with mine. An ethical consideration is researcher bias, and taking steps to ensure that I do not let impressions of participant families affect my perspective and research.

In addition, my own experiences growing up in this rural community shape the lens through which I view issues of opportunity, access, and social capital. Having personally navigated the challenges of limited resources, distance from higher education institutions, and strong community ties, I am aware that my background could influence both how I interpret participants' experiences and the meaning I attribute to their responses. I recognize that I may carry certain assumptions, such as the belief that rural students often value close-knit relationships, that educational aspirations are influenced by family expectations, and that leaving one's hometown for college can be both exciting and emotionally difficult.

To mitigate these potential biases, I maintained a reflective research journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting my thoughts and reactions to each interview. This reflexive practice allowed me to remain conscious of my positionality and to separate my personal experiences from the participants' narratives. By continually revisiting my assumptions and grounding interpretations in direct participant quotations, I worked to ensure that the findings reflect the authentic voices of the students rather than my own preconceptions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors did rural participants identify as barriers or enablers to accessing postsecondary education?
2. What resources or supports did rural participants perceive as present or missing in their postsecondary decision-making process?
3. How did rural participants perceive their rural identity, both generally and in relation to their postsecondary education decisions?

## Setting

The location of the study was situated in a rural county in the southeastern U.S. Which is located approximately 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. The population of the county is approximately 14,000 people. The study county shares core features that typify many rural counties in the United States: low population density and an older age structure, with out-migration of younger adults and in-migration of older residents shaping the local labor supply; employment concentrated in a narrower set of sectors and more small employers; higher exposure to poverty relative to metropolitan areas; and persistent gaps in enabling infrastructure such as affordable childcare, eldercare, and reliable broadband, all of which affect educational access, job search, telehealth, and business development (Farrigan et al., 2024).

All participants graduated from the same rural high school in 2022 or 2023. They were all residents of the county in which they graduated high school, though they attended a college or university outside of the county. The selection criteria align with the purpose of the study, as the focus is on students from the specific rural area being examined. Participants were selected from the graduating classes of 2022 and 2023, ensuring they had both recent experience transitioning from high school to college and sufficient time to reflect on the factors that supported or challenged their decision to enroll in a university.

This study utilized a selective, nomination-based snowball sampling approach to identify participants who met the established inclusion criteria (Ting et al., 2025). Selective sampling was appropriate because the goal was to recruit individuals who shared a common experience of growing up in the same rural county and successfully enrolling in a four-year university. This approach allowed for the intentional selection of participants who could provide rich, relevant

insights aligned with the study's purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inclusion criteria required participants to have graduated from the local high school in 2022 or 2023 and to be currently enrolled in a university, ensuring they had both recent and reflective perspectives on the factors that supported or challenged their transition to higher education.

To recruit participants, I first described my research to a respected local community leader who was familiar with recent high school graduates from the area. This individual nominated two potential participants who met the criteria and were willing to be contacted. After participating, these initial students were asked to recommend other individuals from their graduating classes who also fit the study's criteria. Through these referrals, I recruited three additional participants, resulting in a total of five. Snowball sampling relies on social networks to identify additional participants and is often used in qualitative research to reach small, specialized populations that may be difficult to access through random sampling (Patton, 2015).

I interviewed 5 participants. The total number of graduates at the high school in a typical year is around 125. Not all those graduates enroll in a university, making a relatively small pool of potential participants. While some phenomenographic studies utilize as many as 20 participants, five participants were selected to allow for variation among responses and allowing for rich, extensive detail from participants (Nilsson & Mårtensson, 2022). I completed a pre-study screening process to ensure that all potential participants met the established inclusion criteria. The screening involved confirming that each individual had graduated from the local high school in 2022 or 2023, was currently enrolled in a four-year university, and had been raised in the same rural county being studied. This step was necessary to verify eligibility and to confirm that participants could provide authentic, first-hand perspectives aligned with the purpose of the study. Screening was conducted through brief introductory conversations with

potential participants, during which I explained the study's purpose, reviewed the participation criteria, and verified their current enrollment status before obtaining consent to participate. If data collection had produced a wide variety of responses without recurring themes, I would have considered increasing the number of participants to ensure sufficient depth and consistency in the findings (Rolls & Payne, 2023). However, as interviews progressed, common patterns and repeated ideas began to emerge across participants, suggesting that data saturation had been reached. Data saturation occurs when additional data no longer generate new insights or themes relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). Because each participant's responses reflected overlapping experiences and recurring concepts related to the factors that supported or challenged their postsecondary decisions, increasing the number of participants was deemed unnecessary. The five participants provided adequate richness and depth of information to meet the study's purpose and ensure analytic sufficiency.

The recruitment process took place with an initial message or phone call, and there was a follow up discussion prior to commencement of the interview questions via an electronic conferencing platform. There were no incentives or compensation provided for participation. Participants were fully informed of institutional review board processes and procedures, along with their rights as a participant. Further, I ensured that participants know I will maintain their anonymity to the farthest extent possible, and they could revoke their consent to participation at any time.

### **Data Collection**

I utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data. This process involved using a set of predetermined open-ended questions while allowing flexibility to ask follow-up or probing questions based on participants' responses (Busetto et al., 2020). Semi-structured interviews

provide consistency across interviews while giving participants the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words, resulting in rich and detailed data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview followed the same general guide to ensure alignment with the research questions but remained conversational in nature so that new or unanticipated insights could emerge naturally during the discussion.

Of great importance in qualitative interview research is to gather a deep level of information, with extensive and thorough interviews. The context and data collection related to the research questions in that they are the keys to learning what the postsecondary influences were for these rural students, and what resources may have been useful to them (Kareem & Hussain, 2023).

Interviews were conducted in a quiet location without significant distractions, and the setting of observations varied, depending on participant's comfort. Interviews lasted about one hour each. Since I have been in a similar situation as my participants, reflexivity was critical as I examined and suspended my own assumptions. Reflexivity is the process through which researchers continuously reflect on their personal values, experiences, and potential biases that may influence the research process or interpretation of data (Berger, 2015). In this study, I engaged in reflexivity by maintaining a reflective journal throughout data collection and analysis. After each interview, I recorded my initial reactions, emotional responses, and any personal connections I perceived with the participants' experiences. This practice helped me to remain aware of my positionality as both a researcher and someone who shares a similar rural background with the participants. Reflexivity was essential because it allowed me to critically examine how my experiences could shape the questions I asked, the interpretations I made, and the conclusions I drew. By acknowledging these influences and intentionally setting them aside,

I worked to ensure that the participants' voices were represented authentically and that my findings reflected their perspectives rather than my own preconceptions (Etherington, 2022).

The interview questions were designed to explore the factors that influenced rural students' decisions regarding postsecondary education. Specifically, the questions examined the barriers and supports participants encountered, the resources available or lacking during their decision-making process, and the ways in which participants perceived their rural identity in relation to their educational choices.

#### Research Question 1.

1. Can you describe your decision-making process when considering postsecondary education?
2. What influenced your decision to pursue or not pursue postsecondary education?
3. Were there any individuals, such as teachers or family members, who played a significant role in shaping your decision?
4. What challenges, if any, did you encounter when planning for postsecondary education?
5. What factors made accessing postsecondary education easier or more difficult for you?

#### Research Question 2.

1. What types of support did you have when exploring postsecondary education options?
2. Were there any resources you wish had been available to you during this process?
3. How accessible were college counselors, financial aid information, or career guidance in your high school or community?
4. Did your school or community offer any programs that helped you explore postsecondary opportunities?

5. What role did transportation or location play in your access to postsecondary education resources?

### Research Question 3.

1. How would you describe your experience growing up in a rural area?
2. How do you think your rural background influenced your educational decisions?
3. Did you feel your rural community supported or hindered your pursuit of postsecondary education?
4. How do you perceive the differences between rural and urban education opportunities?
5. In what ways, if any, do you feel your rural upbringing shaped your personal or professional goals?

### **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, a code is a label given to a piece of data that identifies it by the theme or main concept reflected by the data. The pieces of data can be segmented by word, sentence, paragraph, or even larger section of data. The coded data are then grouped according to theme, which allows researchers to look for patterns, similarities, and differences relative to the qualitative study (Brailas et al., 2023). Coding “is a dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorizing” (Basit, 2003, p. 143).

Researchers code data to organize vast amounts of data into structured units that can be effectively grouped by theme and concept. “Coding is a way of essentially indexing or mapping data, to provide an overview of disparate data that allows the researcher to make sense of them in relation to their research questions” (Elliott, 2018, p. 2851). Coded data is more easily reviewed than raw data, and coding reflects in an orderly system. Codes create a structure that can assist the researcher in ensuring that important themes are not overlooked. The reason we conduct the

coding process is to identify and categorize themes in the data, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the research questions (Bingham et al., 2023).

Coding is not a linear process; it is repetitive in nature. Initially, data is reviewed and codes are identified and assigned through an initial review of the data. During the second and later reviews, more themes and concepts continue to emerge (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Codes are developed not only from the words and ideas expressed directly by participants but also from the researcher's process of interpreting and organizing those ideas. In qualitative research, the researcher's methodological decisions, theoretical framework, and personal perspective all influence how data are categorized and understood. In other words, coding is both a data-driven and interpretive act that reflects how the researcher makes sense of the information collected (Hedlund-DeWitt, 2013). Coding is used in qualitative research to identify patterns, themes, and concepts that can provide insight into the research questions. Themes are identified through a systematic process of analyzing coded data to uncover recurring patterns, ideas, or concepts that capture the essence of participants' experiences. After coding the interview transcripts, I reviewed and compared the codes to determine how they related to one another and to the research questions. Similar codes were grouped together to form broader categories, which were then refined into overarching themes that represented the central findings of the study. This process allowed meaningful interpretations to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The development of codes in qualitative analysis requires review and revision of the codes as the data are examined and re-examined.

Theoretical or conceptual frameworks may also guide the coding process. Frameworks may be developed during analysis or before the coding begins. Researchers must ensure that personal biases or prior experiences do not influence how data are coded or interpreted (Orwin &

Vevea, 2009). To reduce this risk, I employed several strategies to promote objectivity throughout the coding process. During coding, I repeatedly compared participants' statements to the research questions and to one another to ensure that codes reflected the actual content of the data rather than my assumptions. I also revisited and refined codes multiple times, checking for consistency and grounding each code in direct participant quotations. These steps helped ensure that the analysis remained true to the participants' voices and experiences rather than my own preconceptions (Busetto et al., 2020).

The primary source of data in my study were participant interviews. Using Microsoft Teams, a video conferencing software, I recorded the interviews with participants. Video conferencing software was used in order to provide a virtual format that interviewees were comfortable with, and use of their camera was optional. Microsoft Teams has a built-in transcription component, which was the primary method of transcribing the interviews (Siddique et al., 2022). After interviews were concluded, the entirety of collected was reviewed. Initial data analysis used inductive coding. Inductive coding is a coding technique that allows the researcher to create codes and categories based on what is present in the data itself. In inductive coding, there is no predetermined coding structure or prepared codes that exist before the data is reviewed. The codes emerged directly from the data through an inductive coding process, meaning they were developed based on the participants' own words and ideas rather than being predetermined by existing theories or frameworks. The interview transcripts were reviewed, and meaningful phrases, concepts, and patterns that captured key aspects of each participant's experience were identified (Bingham et al., 2023). These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories that represented shared ideas across multiple interviews. Through continued comparison and refinement, these categories evolved into overarching themes that described the

central findings of the study. Inductive coding was chosen for the freedom it provides to discover new themes and patterns not previously considered and mitigated the challenge of developing codes before the information the data may contain is identified. Inductive coding also helps neutralize coder bias during the coding stage of analysis (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Coding the data allowed me to identify trends, commonalities, and rich detail that participants provided. One goal of coding the data was to identify barriers experienced by participants in pursuing secondary education. I first reviewed the data as a whole using an iterative, holistic approach to identify connections across participants' experiences. This process involved reading all interview transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the collective data before and during the coding process. Reviewing the data in its entirety allowed me to recognize overarching patterns, contextual relationships, and nuances that might not have been visible when examining individual transcripts in isolation (Bingham et al., 2023). This holistic review is an essential step in qualitative analysis, as it supports a deeper interpretation of meaning across cases rather than focusing solely on isolated codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the revision phase of analysis, I reviewed all of the initial codes to identify relationships and overlaps among them. Similar or related codes were reorganized and combined into broader categories that captured more comprehensive ideas across participants. These categories were then examined to determine how they connected to the larger themes that were beginning to emerge from the data. This process allowed me to refine and structure the findings so that each theme represented a coherent and well-supported pattern within the participants' experiences (Nowell et al., 2017).

In qualitative analysis, a theme is a concept that reoccurs multiple times throughout the data analysis. Themes are the central ideas found in the data and provide

researchers with a way to understand and interpret participants' experiences and behaviors.

Vaismoradi et al. (2016) explained that each theme “contains codes that have a common point of reference and has a high degree of generality that unifies ideas regarding the subject of inquiry” (p. 101). Themes were developed by analyzing and coding the data to identify repeated ideas and patterns that directly addressed the research questions. Related codes were then combined to form broader themes that captured the central meanings within participants’ experiences. These themes provided the foundation for interpreting the data and offered deeper insight into the phenomenon under study. “Generating themes requires the researcher to collate initial codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to the particular theme. Reviewing themes is the process of checking whether the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Defining and naming themes consists of determining the heart of what each theme conveys: knowing what it is and what it is not” (Scharp & Sanders, 2019, p. 118).

Themes are the key to making sense of qualitative data and discovering patterns. Some themes are descriptive and include certain experiences or actions of the participants. Other themes are conceptual and encompass ideas that are related to the research questions (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Themes in qualitative analysis have several functions. First, themes are a tool to organize the collected data. By organizing the data, researchers can more readily find trends, similarities, and differences within the data. Additionally, themes provide a deeper, more detailed understanding of the viewpoints and experiences of the participants. Further, themes provide clarity on the most relevant and important concepts related to the research questions. Themes also can suggest new theoretical concepts or provide support to existing theories.

Themes in this study were generated from the grouping of codes into overarching ideas. Much like codes in an inductive coding process, themes are not predetermined and are developed from what the data contain. In my study, themes were generated in response to similarities and differences that participants report related to the experiences they have had during their postsecondary decision-making process (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012). Phenomenographic analysis was used to analyze the data in my study. Phenomenographic analysis is a research method used in educational and social sciences to explore how people experience and understand different phenomena. It is a qualitative approach that aims to describe and categorize the different ways in which individuals perceive and interpret a particular phenomenon (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998).

Phenomenographic analysis typically involves collecting data through interviews, surveys, or other forms of data collection, and then analyzing the data using a structured process of categorization and comparison. The goal of this process is to identify different categories of experiences or interpretations that emerge from data, and to explore relationships between these categories (Marton, 1986).

Phenomenographic analysis differs from other qualitative analysis methods in that it is focused on the ways in which people perceive and understand a particular phenomenon, rather than on the meanings or interpretations they attach to it (Sims, 2024). Phenomenography is often used in studies of learning, where researchers are interested in understanding how students experience and interpret different aspects of the educational process, such as the postsecondary decision-making process (Marton, 1981; Rolls & Payne, 2023).

One advantage of using a phenomenographic approach is that the focus is on the participants' experiences related to the phenomenon, not on the phenomenon itself. This

participant-focused approach lends itself to a deeper, more personal understanding of the phenomenon through the participant's lens. Phenomenography also narrows the number of experiences related to the phenomenon, allowing researchers to streamline the experiences to a manageable amount to look for variation within the collection of experiences. Criticisms of phenomenological research are that it is not easily replicated, and that it does not have a sufficient level of research rigor (Cossham, 2017).

Phenomenographic analysis was appropriate for my research because the focus was on how participants experienced the phenomenon of postsecondary decision making. While I am interested in the phenomenon, I focused on how my participants experienced, viewed, participated in, navigated, and ultimately felt about the phenomenon. I used the approach to determine what factors in the participants' lives, both external and internal factors, influenced their personal experience of postsecondary decision making (Rolls & Payne, 2023; Åkerlind, 2005).

In qualitative research, validity is the measure of the accuracy and credibility of the findings. Validity can also be thought of as the measure of how accurate the findings are to the actual lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Miller, 2010; Schwandt, 1997). Validity is a determination of trustworthiness, and proof of legitimacy of study conclusions. Validity in qualitative research is essential because it not only establishes the accuracy of the research findings, but it also helps to solidify the pertinence of the results. When the findings are valid, the researcher can be confident that the data is legitimate and worthy of use in further studies.

Strategies to ensure the validity of a qualitative study include dependability, data saturation, member checking, triangulation, peer review, reflexivity, and thick description. Dependability requires the assurance that the study was conducted with consistent procedures

that can be repeated and replicated (Bashir et al., 2008). Triangulation is another strategy to ensure validity, and requires the researcher to use a variety of sources of data rather than relying on a sole source (Carter et al., 2014). Triangulation views the data from several perspectives and forms a multifaceted view of the experiences of the participants (Patton, 1999). Another strategy to ensure validity is known as thick description. As the name suggests, the researcher can support validity by providing intricate and nuanced details to not only describe a scenario or situation, but also create a deeper understanding of the experience. Thick description “leads readers to a sense of verisimilitude, wherein they can cognitively and emotively place themselves within the research context” (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543).

The primary strategies I used to ensure validity were data saturation, member checking, peer review, and reflexivity. Data saturation is a commitment to collect data until the identification of new, unique themes has concluded (López-Gómez et al., 2022). Data saturation assures the researcher that all themes have been identified and the data as a whole are extensive and complete. However, a limitation of the strategy is that some findings, at first glance, may seem to be repetitive, but actually have slight nuances worth exploring (Francis, et al., 2009). Data saturation is appropriate for my study because with a relatively small sample size, it is somewhat of an assurance that all relevant findings will emerge. As I interviewed participants, I noted when themes become repetitive and no new findings appear to result from further discourse (McKim, 2023).

Member checking is a strategy that keeps participants actively engaged in the research process by sharing findings with them. “This check involves taking the findings back to the participants and asking them (in writing or in an interview) about the accuracy of the report” (Candela, 2019, p. 621). This ensures that their experiences are communicated and interpreted

with fidelity and accuracy. It also gives researchers opportunities to correct any misconceptions or misinterpretations while the study is still active. As I conducted the study and collected data, I engaged in a process of member checking to ensure that participants' lived experiences were accurately represented. After each interview was transcribed, I provided participants with an opportunity to review their transcripts or summaries of their responses to confirm accuracy and clarify meaning. Participants were invited to offer feedback, correct any misinterpretations, or expand on their ideas if needed. This process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that the findings authentically reflected participants' perspectives rather than my own assumptions (Birt et al., 2016).

Peer review uses the assistance of other researchers to review study activity to provide assurance that the study is conducted properly. Peer review also helps researchers by providing an additional perspective to identify any flaws or concerns in the study. A limitation of peer review is that the peer reviewers may have their own biases or professional differences that could prohibit a truly neutral assessment of the research (Jana, 2019). As I conducted my research, I invited peers familiar with qualitative methods to periodically review my coding, emerging themes, and written analyses. These peer debriefing sessions served as an external check on the research process to ensure that I was following accepted methodological guidelines and maintaining transparency in how findings were derived. During these reviews, peers asked questions, challenged interpretations, and offered alternative perspectives that helped me reflect critically on my assumptions and decisions. This collaborative process strengthened the credibility of the study by minimizing the influence of personal bias and promoting a more balanced interpretation of the data (López-Gómez et al., 2022).

Another strategy I used to ensure validity is reflexivity. This technique requires researchers to examine and acknowledge their own experiences, biases, opinions, and feelings, and carefully consider how they may affect the study and subsequent research findings. “The researcher’s positionality does not exist independently of the research process nor does it determine the latter. Instead, this must be seen as a dialogue – challenging perspectives and assumptions both about the social world and of the researcher him/herself” (Palaganas et al., 2017, p. 427). While the strategy has the limitation of not completely erasing my personal experiences and potential biases on the study, it has the advantage of making me aware that my background can be impactful. As I conducted my research, I continually monitored my own impact on the study by engaging in ongoing self-reflection and documentation throughout the research process. I kept a reflexive journal where I recorded my thoughts, reactions, and potential biases after each interview and during data analysis. This allowed me to identify moments when my personal experiences or assumptions might influence interpretations and to take deliberate steps to refocus on the participants’ perspectives. I also revisited my notes and coding decisions regularly to ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than shaped by my own expectations (Etherington, 2022).

Reliability in qualitative research is defined as the consistency of results and conclusions. A reliable study is one that can be repeated by any other researcher and lead to the same results and conclusions (Golafshani, 2003). It can also refer to another consistency in interpretation from researcher to researcher who are analyzing the same data. Research data that is reliable is dependable, and not marred by researcher bias (Goodell et al., 2016).

Reliability is important in qualitative research because it establishes credibility, trustworthiness, and supports validity. Unreliable research leads to findings and conclusions that

do not have consistency or accuracy. Research that is not reliable leads to a study that cannot be used as a base for further study and cannot be used as a dependable source (Houghton et al., 2013).

Researchers have several strategies to make sure their qualitative data is reliable. Some of these approaches and procedures include using multiple coders to create and evaluate inter-rater reliability, training all coders, pilot testing, establishing participant criteria, collecting and analyzing the data consistently, using a specific and well-defined design, and keeping thorough documents of the research process (Sweeney et al., 2012).

The strategies I employed in my study included establishing participant criteria, collecting and analyzing the data consistently, using a specific and well-defined design, and keeping thorough documents of the research process.

First, establishing participant criteria for inclusion in the study, as well as criteria for exclusion in the study, is critical for establishing reliability (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

Doing so ensures that there is consistency among the participants, and that the participants all have experiences that can be relayed to give information that will assist in answering the research questions. In order to further support reliability, I not only determined inclusion criteria, but also exclusion criteria (Grant & DePew, 1999). A challenge with participant inclusion criteria is that there is a possibility that a finding may be missed if the criteria is too narrow. In my study, I had a checklist of criteria that a potential participant must have met to be included in the study, along with criteria that would have excluded them from the study.

Another important strategy for qualitative research reliability is the use of consistency in the collection of data and the analysis of data. For example, using structured interviews will assure the researcher that no topic of interest is forgotten or overlooked in the data collection

process. Additionally, according to Holloway and Todres (2003), qualitative phenomenographic research “needs coherence and consistency between its goal, research question, data gathering methods, modes of analysis, and presentation of results” (p. 352). To utilize this strategy in my research, I ensured that there were specific questions that were asked of each participant, and that I followed the same procedures for each (Nassaji, 2020, p. 427).

A final strategy to ensure qualitative researcher reliability is to document the research process in great detail. If there are issues or challenges, the researcher will be able to more easily locate any concerns or errors and correct them. It will also create a blueprint of what has occurred for reference when needed. “A qualitative study typically involves a large volume of researcher-generated data, including notes about the context of the study, methodological decisions, data analysis procedures, and self-awareness of the researcher. Such data are important in many aspects of the study, particularly in the development of an audit trail to substantiate trustworthiness” (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993, p. 219). In my study, I documented and preserved all data, all processes, and all notes for reflection both during the study as well as after the study has concluded.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my research delved into the experiences of recent high school graduates residing in a specific rural location regarding their postsecondary education journeys. By exploring the influences and factors that either facilitate or hinder access to higher education in this unique rural context, this study has addressed two central research questions.

The rationale, relevance, and significance of this research lie in the observed disparities in postsecondary enrollment and completion rates among rural, urban, and suburban students. Despite harboring aspirations for higher education, rural students encounter unique challenges

that impede their educational pursuits. Through the identification and examination of these barriers, this study provided valuable insights into the specific obstacles faced by rural students, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of postsecondary education access and participation in rural areas.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS: INTERVIEW SUMMARIES

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which explored the postsecondary decision-making experiences of five students who graduated from a rural high school in the southeastern United States in 2022 or 2023 and subsequently enrolled in a four-year university. Each participant's story provides insight into the complex interplay of family influence, school support, financial considerations, community context, and personal motivation that shaped their paths to higher education. Using data collected through semi-structured interviews, the findings are organized as individual narrative summaries that reflect each participant's lived experience and highlight both common themes and unique perspectives. The goal of this chapter is to give voice to the participants by presenting their stories in their own context, capturing the nuances of how rural identity, access, and opportunity influenced their educational journeys. These narratives lay the foundation for thematic data analysis and interpretation are discussed in greater depth.

**Table 4.1**

*Interview Summaries*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Year Graduated</b>	<b>College Attended</b>	<b>Major or Career Interest</b>	<b>First-Generation Student</b>	<b>Distance from Home to College</b>
Carter	Male	2022	Public University	Mechanical Engineering	Yes	20 miles
Kate	Female	2022	Public University	Health Sciences	Yes	25 miles
Elizabeth	Female	2023	Public University	Health Sciences	Yes	30 miles

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Year Graduated</b>	<b>College Attended</b>	<b>Major or Career Interest</b>	<b>First-Generation Student</b>	<b>Distance from Home to College</b>
Mallory	Female	2023	Public University	Nursing	No	90 miles
Charlotte	Female	2023	Private University	Nursing	No	125 miles

The group of participants represented a range of perspectives within the shared context of a single rural county. Three participants were first-generation college students, while two came from families with prior college experience. The group included both male and female students, all of whom pursued higher education at public or private universities within the state. Although each participant grew up in the same community, their decisions reflected different motivations and priorities, including cost, proximity to home, family expectations, and career aspirations.

Collectively, the participants' stories provide a multifaceted picture of the opportunities and challenges faced by rural students as they transition to higher education. Their experiences illustrate the influence of family encouragement, local school resources, transportation access, and community attitudes toward college-going.

### **Mallory**

Mallory described her decision-making process for postsecondary education as one that was shaped early and strongly by her family. Her parents are both educators who place a high value on learning and encouraged her to pursue college, though she never felt pressured in a negative way. She grew up watching her father work his way through advanced degrees while raising a family, which gave her an appreciation for the importance of obtaining education while she was young. As the youngest of four children, she also saw all of her siblings attend the state university. This series of events created a natural expectation that she would follow the same

path. Though she did well in school—graduating near the top of her class—her parents were more focused on ensuring she had a plan for her future than on demanding perfection. Mallory never doubted that she would attend college, especially since she had long dreamed of working in healthcare. She emphasized how much her parents’ encouragement and support made that dream possible.

Still, there were moments of doubt. Mallory recalled attending a preview program at the state university during high school and being overwhelmed by the size of the campus and the number of students. She initially told her parents she could not imagine attending, but her father insisted that she would pursue something after high school, whether it be technical school, a four-year university, or another pathway. Their philosophy, she explained, was not about pushing her toward one specific path but ensuring she had some form of postsecondary education to secure her future. That expectation, coupled with her admiration for her father’s perseverance and her mother’s steady encouragement, guided her firmly toward higher education.

Teachers in the county also played a critical role in shaping her college ambitions. Mallory praised her high school faculty, describing them as universally supportive and invested in their students’ success. She mentioned that in a small town, teachers often remain in the school system for decades, teaching multiple generations of the same family. This situation created a deep sense of connection and trust. Her teachers gave her a strong academic foundation that prepared her to compete successfully at the university level. In fact, she often tutored her college peers with methods learned in high school. Counselors also provided structured guidance, walking students through FAFSA and scholarship applications, and offering clear pathways whether students chose college, technical school, or military. Mallory felt fortunate to

have support, while recognizing that many of her peers did not experience the same encouragement at home.

When asked about challenges, Mallory pointed first to personal difficulties rather than structural ones. She struggled with homesickness and the emotional difficulty of leaving her close-knit community for a large, unfamiliar environment. At first, she often returned home on weekends, making use of her car to bridge the distance. She admitted that if she had not had reliable transportation, she might have chosen a closer school. The thought of being unable to return home regularly would have been unbearable. Financially, she benefited from the Zell Miller Scholarship and from her family's stability, which made her path easier than many county-based peers. Still, transferring universities later on complicated her access to scholarships, and she reflected on how difficult it was for students to find financial support, particularly at her current institution. She recognized that her ability to rely on her parents for assistance set her apart from classmates who lacked such support.

When considering resources she wished had been available, Mallory highlighted the limited career pathways offered in her county's schools. She had access to agricultural education and FFA, which provided leadership opportunities and skills like interviewing. However, health occupations pathways were not available. She contrasted her lack of experience with students from larger urban schools who could graduate with medical assistant licenses or other credentials. She believed that having access to healthcare-related pathways in high school would have provided her with valuable preparation and job options during college. She also noted that while AP and dual enrollment courses were available, expanding those opportunities—especially in specialized fields—would have made a significant difference for her.

Mallory described growing up in a rural county as a gift. She valued the sense of community, the familiarity of knowing everyone, and the way people rallied around each other during times of hardship. She believed this environment fostered her interpersonal skills, leadership qualities, and appreciation for hard work. At the same time, she acknowledged the disparities between rural and urban schools. Urban areas seemed to have more funding, resources, and extracurricular opportunities, whereas her community operated within more limited means. Yet, she argued that the personal support from teachers and community members in the county often compensated for these disparities, giving students encouragement and relationships that many peers in urban areas might not experience.

Mallory said her rural identity has deeply shaped her goals. She feels a responsibility to make her community proud and hopes one day to return to the county to contribute, particularly in the area of healthcare. She has seen firsthand the disparities in rural healthcare access and wants to be part of addressing them. Even when considering careers elsewhere, she expressed a desire to remain connected to her home, either by living nearby or by continuing to give back in whatever way she can. For her, the encouragement, love, and community spirit of the county instilled a lasting commitment to serving others and carrying forward the values of her upbringing.

Throughout the conversation, Mallory returned again and again to the theme of gratitude—for her parents, her teachers, her community, and the opportunities she has had. She recognized that many of her classmates lacked the stability and support she enjoyed, and she does not take that for granted. Instead, she sees it as motivation to use her education and career to support others, just as she has been supported. Her story reflects both the advantages and the

challenges of rural life, and how, in her case, the strength of family and community helped her navigate the transition to higher education and shape her vision for the future.

### **Charlotte**

Charlotte described her decision-making process for attending college as thoughtful and intentional. She knew early on that she wanted to pursue higher education, but her priority was finding a smaller university that felt personal and close-knit. Large schools like the state university felt overwhelming, while institutions near home did not offer the change she was seeking. She explained that she wanted to get away from home and have new experiences, but not to such an extreme that she would feel lost or disconnected. After visiting a private instate university several times between her sophomore and senior years, she fell in love with the campus, its atmosphere, and the sense of community it provided. Charlotte said that the private university offered exactly what she was looking for—a small environment with a big impact.

Her decision to pursue college was never in question. Charlotte said she had always envisioned earning a degree, particularly since the career fields that interested her all required one. She initially planned to study pharmacy but later discovered her passion for nursing. She described her mother as the most significant influence in her college decision-making process. Her mother not only encouraged her to attend college but also supported her exploration of different schools and career paths. Charlotte recalled that her mother helped her evaluate options, visited campuses with her, and fully supported her ultimate choice.

When reflecting on challenges during her college planning process, Charlotte said the biggest hurdle was the financial burden of attending a private university. Tuition was significantly higher than that of public institutions. Although she received a scholarship, she acknowledged that she could have earned a larger one had she pushed harder for more financial

opportunities. Still, she believed the investment in her private university's smaller class sizes and strong community was worth it. Charlotte expressed gratitude for Hope and Zell Miller scholarships but noted that those funds did not stretch as far at private universities as they did at public ones.

Charlotte said that obtaining information about colleges was not particularly difficult for her. Her high school hosted a "college day" that brought representatives from approximately 30 different institutions to meet with students. For a graduating class of about 125, she considered this an impressive turnout that gave her access to information and connections many rural students might not have. In fact, the admissions counselor who visited her school later became her personal contact at the private university, which made the process feel more personal and guided. She felt her high school did an excellent job of keeping students informed about options, financial aid, and standardized testing requirements.

When asked about the types of support she had during the process, Charlotte again credited her family as her greatest source of encouragement. Her mother was actively involved in visiting campuses, and Charlotte's extended family and community members were also positive and encouraging. She added that working part-time at a local pharmacy provided an unexpected form of mentorship—her supervisors and coworkers encouraged her to pursue her goals and offered valuable advice as she prepared for a career in healthcare.

Charlotte said she did not feel a lack of access to resources, though she wished there were more local scholarships available. She felt fortunate that her school gave students the opportunity to retake the SAT at no cost, which allowed her to improve her score and feel more confident in her college applications. That opportunity made a tangible difference in helping her reach her

goals. She also said that while her rural community did not organize multi-day college tours like some urban districts, she was grateful her family could take her to visit several campuses.

Transportation was not a major barrier for Charlotte. Both alternative institutions were within manageable driving distance, and she felt comfortable traveling to visit campuses or return home when needed. Although she admitted to feeling some anxiety about driving long distances after growing up in a small town, she never considered it a factor that limited her choices.

When asked to describe her experience growing up in a rural area, Charlotte's response was mixed. She spoke fondly of the close-knit community, where people knew one another and supported each other during important moments. However, she also expressed frustration about the limited opportunities available to young people in small towns. She said that after meeting college classmates from larger cities, she realized how many more experiences and activities they had access to—internships, specialized classes, and community programs that simply didn't exist in her county. Comparing herself to peers from metropolitan areas made her aware of the structural inequalities in educational opportunity. Still, she said, the community connections and strong relationships she formed in her rural hometown gave her a foundation of confidence and character that has served her well.

Charlotte said her rural background was a major influence on her educational decisions, primarily because it made her want to leave. She was eager for new experiences, a larger environment, and exposure to diversity that she could not find in her hometown. While she considered nearby colleges, she ultimately decided on a school that would push her outside her comfort zone. She noted that one option, though larger than her town, still felt familiar and small, while the city offered the balance of size and opportunity she sought.

She also said that, despite her desire to move away, her rural community was extremely supportive of her academic goals. The people in her town celebrated her successes and encouraged her to pursue her dreams. Senior night and scholarship events reflected the town's strong sense of pride in its students. Charlotte appreciated the community's encouragement and said she never felt any resentment or pressure to stay local.

When asked to compare rural and urban education, Charlotte pointed to clear differences in opportunities and exposure. She shared examples of students at her university who had accomplished extraordinary things before college—running businesses, performing medical research, or gaining professional certifications—experiences that she had never imagined possible in high school. She emphasized that it wasn't a lack of ability among rural students, but rather a lack of available programs and connections. The exposure her urban peers had, she said, gave them a head start in both confidence and career preparation.

Charlotte also discussed how the limited career and technical education (CTAE) options in her high school shaped her perspective. She admitted that none of the available pathways, such as agriculture, appealed to her interests. Instead, she pursued an academic pathway because she wanted something different from what was traditionally offered in rural communities. Her goal was to create a future beyond the local industries that defined her county.

Despite her desire to build a life elsewhere, Charlotte said she still feels a deep connection to her hometown and wants to give back in meaningful ways. She expressed plans to establish a nursing scholarship for future graduates from her high school once she begins her career. She explained that while there are scholarships for education and agriculture, none currently exist for students pursuing healthcare, which she hopes to change. She sees this as her

way of continuing to support the place that raised her while also encouraging others to pursue new opportunities.

Charlotte said her upbringing instilled strong values of community, resilience, and gratitude, even as it motivated her to seek broader horizons. She wants her future children to grow up with access to opportunities she did not have, but she will always cherish the relationships and work ethic she developed in her rural hometown. Her story reflects the balance many rural students navigate—the pull between home and opportunity, between loyalty to their roots and a desire to experience the world beyond the county limits.

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth described her decision-making process for attending college as a combination of practicality and proximity. When she began considering postsecondary education, she knew she wanted to stay close to home while avoiding a heavy financial burden. She was determined to find an affordable option that would allow her to pursue a career in the medical field without incurring significant student debt. Although she had always known she wanted to do something in healthcare, she admitted that she was not entirely sure which specific field she would enter when she first began college. She approached her decision with caution and careful thought, wanting to ensure she chose a path that would lead to a stable and meaningful career.

Her decision to go to college was strongly influenced by the nature of her professional goals.

Elizabeth explained that nearly every career she was interested in required at least some level of college education, which made attending college a necessity rather than a choice. She also credited her parents as major influences in her decision. After high school, she worked at her family's diner, a business her grandmother had owned and later passed down to her parents. Although she enjoyed being part of the family business, she said she knew she did not want to do

that forever. Her parents recognized that, too, and they encouraged her to pursue higher education so she could find work that aligned more closely with her personal aspirations.

Unlike many students who encounter barriers in accessing higher education, Elizabeth said she did not face major challenges when planning for college. She credited this to her parents' support and guidance throughout the process. However, she acknowledged that navigating financial aid and scholarships was somewhat difficult due to limited information and resources. Looking back, she said she wished she had known more about different types of scholarships and how to apply for them. Although her school counselors were available, she felt that their knowledge of financial aid options was somewhat limited. Ultimately, she and her parents figured out most of the college financing process on their own.

Elizabeth explained that while her high school counselors were accessible, most of the meaningful support she received came from her parents rather than from school personnel. She recalled that the school did not offer many programs or initiatives to help students explore college options. For example, while she had heard about other schools organizing multi-day college trips for students, her school did not provide such opportunities. There were few colleges nearby, and most students who attended college typically went to one of the two closest universities. Because she wanted to remain within a 30- to 45-minute drive from home, her choices were naturally limited. She said transportation was never an obstacle since she had her own car, but proximity to home was an important factor in her decision-making process. She wanted the ability to return home easily and maintain close connections with her family, which played a large role in her choice of college.

When discussing her experience growing up in a rural area, Elizabeth described it as very family-centered. She said the lack of entertainment and recreational options in the county meant

that much of her time growing up was spent with extended family. She recalled many evenings spent at her grandmother's house surrounded by cousins, aunts, and uncles, explaining that this sense of closeness shaped her values and priorities. While she appreciated the strength of family and community in her small town, she also acknowledged that the area lacked opportunities for young people. There were few extracurricular options, limited job choices, and minimal exposure to diverse experiences, which she believed influenced her worldview.

Elizabeth reflected on how her rural background shaped her educational decisions. She believed that if she had grown up in a larger town or city, she might have been more open to moving farther away for college or pursuing a more advanced degree. The lack of exposure to different career possibilities in her community limited her awareness of what was available beyond her immediate environment. She also said that few people in her town had gone to college, which made it harder to imagine herself in that setting or to seek advice from those who had gone through the process.

When asked whether her rural community supported or hindered her decision to attend college, Elizabeth admitted that she felt it was more of a hindrance than a help. She explained that while people in the county wanted the best for their children, there was an underlying belief that college might take young people away from the community for good. Many residents worried that once students left for college, they would never return, which sometimes created a quiet resistance to postsecondary education. She said that while this attitude was not openly hostile, it subtly discouraged ambition beyond what was familiar. In her view, this reflected the limited opportunities in the area. She pointed out that even when she graduates with her degree, she still will need to drive a minimum of 30 minutes each way to work because there are few professional jobs available locally.

When comparing rural and urban education, Elizabeth said the difference in opportunities was striking. She believed that students in urban areas have greater access to resources, college exposure, and career exploration. In her words, “most people around here don’t go to college—they pick up a trade.” She said that in her county, college was rarely treated as a priority. Instead, young people were encouraged to find steady work as quickly as possible, often in local trades or family businesses. She acknowledged that this path worked well for many people but noted that it limited the professional diversity of the community. Elizabeth also observed that urban students likely had more structured guidance when it came to college preparation, such as access to advanced placement courses, college fairs, or school-sponsored visits, which were not available in her high school.

Despite the lack of resources, Elizabeth identified several positive aspects of her rural upbringing. She said that living in a small town surrounded by tradesmen and practical workers gave her hands-on skills that people in urban areas might never learn. She described herself as self-reliant and resourceful, traits she attributed to being raised in a community where people took pride in hard work and problem-solving. These qualities, she said, have served her well in her life, even if her career path was shaped by the limitations of rural access.

When asked how her rural upbringing influenced her long-term goals, Elizabeth said it affected both the direction and depth of her career choices. She believed that if she had grown up in a different setting with greater exposure to career options, she likely would have pursued a more advanced or specialized field. The lack of emphasis on higher education in her community made her less likely to consider advanced degrees early on. Even so, she expressed gratitude for the foundation her hometown gave her, emphasizing that her work ethic and appreciation for family were direct results of her upbringing.

Elizabeth's story reflected both the benefits and the barriers of growing up in a rural community. While she valued the closeness, tradition, and sense of belonging that shaped her childhood, she also recognized that limited exposure and opportunity constrained her educational and professional choices. Her experience illustrated how deeply geography, community attitudes, and family expectations can shape the postsecondary decisions of students from rural areas in Georgia.

### **Carter**

Carter described his decision-making process for attending college as one focused on practicality, cost, and alignment with his career interests. When he began exploring options, his primary considerations were tuition rates, financial affordability, and whether schools offered a strong program in mechanical engineering. He admitted that at the time, he focused heavily on costs, something he laughs about now, but acknowledged that affordability was a necessary part of his decision process. He wanted to make a responsible choice that would not burden him with excessive debt. From the beginning, his goal was clear: to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering, a field that matched his natural strengths in math and science.

Carter said the decision to attend college was influenced by both personal ambition and family encouragement. He had always enjoyed subjects like math and physics, and his parents strongly encouraged him to use his academic strengths to build a career that would challenge and sustain him long-term. While he considered other paths, the structure and challenge of an engineering degree appealed to him. He said, "I figured I'd go to college because I wanted to get the best out of myself," and that his parents' belief in him helped make that possible. His family always saw higher education as the natural next step, particularly given his talents and interests.

Several teachers also played an important role in shaping Carter's decision to pursue college. He recalled that a few of his high school math teachers encouraged him to continue his education, recognizing his aptitude in the subject and pushing him to see how those skills could translate into a career. He had taken several advanced math courses in high school, including pre-calculus and calculus, which gave him confidence in his ability to handle rigorous coursework at the college level. Their support, combined with his parents' guidance, helped him view college as an achievable and worthwhile goal.

When reflecting on challenges he faced during the planning process, Carter said that standardized testing was his biggest obstacle. Although he graduated with a high GPA, he felt that his SAT scores limited his options for admission at certain universities. He expressed frustration that schools placed so much emphasis on a single test rather than evaluating students more holistically. He believed that work ethic and the difficulty of courses taken should weigh more heavily than standardized scores. Despite that setback, he persevered and was accepted into his top choice, a university known for its strong engineering program.

Family and community support made Carter's transition to college easier. He credited his uncle, who had also studied mechanical engineering, for mentoring him through the process. His uncle shared old textbooks, explained what to expect in specific courses, and offered advice on how to prepare for the workload. Having a family member with direct experience in the same major gave him valuable insight and confidence. Carter said he was grateful to have someone to turn to when questions came up; a mentor who could guide him through unfamiliar academic territory.

His high school counselors were another positive influence. Carter described them as knowledgeable and approachable, noting that they frequently held presentations and information

sessions to help students prepare for college applications and financial aid. He said the counselors did an excellent job explaining the process and answering questions, which eased much of the stress that often comes with planning for college. He also had the opportunity to visit a nearby university, which helped him visualize himself on a college campus for the first time. Seeing the difference between a technical college and a four-year university, he said, gave him a better understanding of the type of environment he wanted to be in.

If he could change one thing about his college planning experience, Carter said he wished he had asked more questions earlier in the process. The Common Application, in particular, was confusing to him. He had heard older relatives talk about applying directly to schools, but by the time he applied, many universities required submission through the Common App, which he found cumbersome and misleading. He said that while his counselors helped as much as possible, the process would have been easier if students had received more guidance on how to navigate online application systems and scholarships.

Transportation and location were also major considerations in Carter's college decision. He chose to attend a university roughly 30 miles from home so that he could commute daily and save money on housing and meal plans. This decision significantly reduced his expenses and allowed him to stay connected with his family while pursuing his degree. Because he owned his own truck, transportation was never an issue, and he appreciated the freedom and flexibility of commuting. He acknowledged that if he had chosen a school farther away, housing and travel would have added significant financial strain.

When describing his experience growing up in a rural area, Carter spoke warmly about the simplicity and familiarity of life in a small town. He said everything in the county seemed to center around one main area, with most businesses and schools clustered together. He found it

peaceful and easygoing with no traffic, few distractions, and a strong sense of community. He liked knowing everyone and being known in return, saying that in small towns, “everybody knows everybody,” which fostered trust and connection. Though he enjoyed the slower pace of rural life, he also acknowledged that opportunities were limited.

Carter believed that growing up in a rural community influenced both his college decision and his perspective on higher education. He felt that students from smaller towns often had fewer academic and extracurricular opportunities compared to peers from larger cities. He noted that big-city schools tend to have more resources, more course options, and more name recognition, which can make a difference in college admissions. He said it sometimes felt like universities favored applicants from well-known schools over those from smaller rural districts. Still, he was grateful for the quality of teaching in his high school, emphasizing that his teachers cared deeply about their students and provided a strong academic foundation.

Carter also observed that in his town, not everyone viewed college as a necessity. Many residents were farmers or tradespeople who valued hard work and family legacy over formal education. He believed this cultural mindset contributed to fewer students pursuing college. Parents often wanted their children to carry on the family business rather than leave for school. However, he said he never felt pressured personally to follow that path and that his community supported him in whatever direction he chose. He emphasized that even for students who opted for trade school or immediate employment, the town was encouraging and proud of their achievements.

When comparing rural and urban education, Carter highlighted disparities in funding and resources. Larger districts, he explained, benefit from greater tax revenue and government funding, allowing them to invest in technology, facilities, and extracurricular programs that

smaller schools can't always afford. He mentioned that urban schools can also attract and retain more teachers because they often offer higher salaries and better benefits. Despite these challenges, he said the teachers in his county were exceptional and that their dedication compensated for the lack of resources.

Reflecting on how his rural upbringing shaped his goals, Carter said that growing up in a small community gave him a realistic understanding of work and life. Because everyone knew one another, he had direct insight into different careers and could easily talk to people about what their jobs were really like. This helped him think critically about his own path and understand what kind of work he wanted to pursue. He valued that sense of closeness and the opportunity to learn from others' experiences. He said, "In a small town, you know everyone, so you learn what people actually do for a living—you see it up close."

Ultimately, Carter expressed pride in where he came from. He appreciated the values his rural upbringing instilled in him, things like hard work, humility, and community. He said that even if he one day works in a larger city, he will always consider the county home. He hoped to find a job close enough that he could stay connected to his roots while building a career in mechanical engineering. His story illustrates how small-town values, family encouragement, and practical decision-making can shape the educational journeys of rural students pursuing postsecondary education.

### **Kate**

Kate described her decision-making process for attending college as one based on practicality, self-awareness, and long-term goals. She knew from the beginning that she wanted to enter the medical field, even considering medical school for an eventual career as a radiologist, but she also wanted to take a path that allowed her to start working quickly and build

experience. After researching medical school and realizing how competitive it was, she decided to begin with a health sciences program to gain a solid foundation in healthcare. Her plan was to use that experience as a stepping stone toward further studies and career advancement. She explained that she preferred a program that would allow her to graduate sooner, begin working, and eventually return to pursue a more advanced medical degree once she had professional experience and financial stability.

Her decision to attend college was influenced primarily by her family, particularly her grandfather, who consistently encouraged her to pursue her education and build a successful future. Kate said his words of motivation stayed with her throughout high school and into college, reminding her to focus on independence, stability, and personal growth. She described him as her biggest source of inspiration, often emphasizing how he wanted to see her achieve milestones such as purchasing her own car and home. His support gave her the determination to pursue college not just for herself but also to make him proud.

Kate also credited two teachers with having a significant impact on her decision to attend college. She spoke fondly of her math and science teachers, both of whom went beyond academics to provide emotional support and guidance throughout high school. One teacher, in particular, allowed her to work in a quiet conference room when she needed a space to regroup or reflect. Those small acts of understanding, she said, made her feel seen and supported, and they reinforced her desire to keep pushing toward her goals. Both teachers served as role models and demonstrated the kind of compassion and professionalism she wanted to bring to her own future career in healthcare.

When asked about challenges she faced in planning for college, Kate said the biggest obstacle was financial aid. Completing the financial aid process was confusing and stressful, and

she had to work closely with her parents and the financial aid office to ensure everything was submitted correctly. She said that while her college was close enough to home that she didn't have to worry about relocating, the administrative side of college preparation felt overwhelming at times. Beyond financial paperwork, however, she said her transition to college was relatively smooth. She was accepted into her university with ease, and she felt prepared for the academic workload thanks to her high school teachers' support.

Kate's research skills and determination helped make the college search process easier. She explained that she spent considerable time comparing programs across several universities to determine which offered the best combination of quality, cost, and convenience. She wanted a program that aligned with her career goals but also fit her budget and personal preferences. Her attention to detail helped her find a school that offered both academic rigor and flexibility. The fact that her chosen university provided a direct pathway into healthcare positions after graduation made her feel confident that she had made the right decision.

When reflecting on the types of support she received, Kate emphasized the encouragement she received from her family and friends. She said that their belief in her abilities gave her the confidence to pursue her goals. Their consistent messages, such as "you've got this" and "we're proud of you", were powerful motivators that kept her grounded during stressful moments. She explained that this encouragement not only pushed her to succeed academically but also helped her see her education as a way to give back to those who believed in her.

Kate said she was fortunate to have strong counseling support at her high school, where the counselor made herself available for questions about college applications, financial aid, and deadlines. The counselor visited classrooms regularly to check in on students' progress, which made the process feel manageable. Kate said she appreciated how proactive her counselor was,

especially since she knew many students in rural areas did not always have that level of guidance.

Her school also hosted a college fair each year, which she described as one of the most helpful experiences during her senior year. Representatives from universities across the state set up booths in the school gym, offering brochures, information about programs, and small giveaways. Kate recalled spending time walking from table to table, asking questions, and gathering materials that helped her compare schools. She said that event made college feel tangible and achievable, especially since she could speak directly to admissions representatives. Additionally, she participated in dual enrollment courses, which gave her firsthand experience with the expectations of college-level coursework. She credited that opportunity with helping her transition smoothly into her university studies.

Transportation and location also influenced Kate's college decision. She owned her own car, which gave her flexibility and independence, but she wanted to remain close to home to save on expenses and stay connected with her family. She compared several schools before choosing one about 20 minutes away, explaining that proximity was an important factor both financially and emotionally. The location allowed her to commute easily without the added costs of housing and meal plans, which she considered a significant advantage. She said that while traffic could be heavy during peak times, she preferred the stability and comfort of living near her family while attending a university that still offered a vibrant campus life.

Growing up in a rural area, Kate said, shaped both her personality and her educational outlook. She described her hometown as small and close-knit, the kind of place where everyone knows each other and where friendships often last from kindergarten through graduation. She said that while there were times she wished for more activities or entertainment options, she

appreciated the sense of community that came with living in a small town. She liked being recognized in the grocery store and valued the shared history among neighbors. She said that one of the greatest advantages of growing up in the county was the stability and familiarity it offered. Everyone supported each other, and that sense of belonging made her feel secure as she moved into adulthood.

Kate also reflected on how her rural background influenced her college decisions. She said that part of her motivation for going to college was to see more of the world beyond her small community and meet new people. Although she appreciated the comfort of her hometown, she wanted to experience diversity, expand her social circle, and gain independence. She said that in a rural environment, it's easy to feel sheltered, so college became her way of broadening her horizons while still maintaining her roots. She also mentioned that if she had grown up in a larger area, she might have chosen a bigger university, but she is grateful for where she is because her current university provides both community and opportunity.

When asked whether her community supported or hindered her decision to attend college, Kate said she felt supported. She described how her high school and local community encouraged students to pursue higher education, regardless of where they chose to go. She said that while some people moved away for college and later returned to the county, the community remained proud of their accomplishments. She plans to follow a similar path, living nearby but remaining connected to her roots.

Kate compared rural and urban education by noting that while small-town schools foster strong relationships between students and teachers, they often lack the variety of programs and career pathways found in larger districts. For example, she pointed out that her school offered strong agricultural and trade programs but limited options in healthcare and business, which

many of her peers were interested in pursuing. She expressed hope that rural schools will expand their offerings to include more medical and professional pathways, so students like her can begin preparing for healthcare careers earlier.

When reflecting on how growing up in a small town shaped her personal and professional goals, Kate said it strengthened her sense of responsibility to her community. She expressed pride in the idea of one day caring for the same people she grew up around. “I might be taking care of someone I know,” she said, describing how her motivation to help others is rooted in her experiences in the county. Her desire to serve her community reflects a combination of compassion, loyalty, and purpose. She said she hopes to build a meaningful career in healthcare while staying close to the place that shaped her.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents an analysis and interpretation of the data collected through semi-structured interviews with five participants—Carter, Kate, Elizabeth, Mallory, and Charlotte—who graduated from a rural high school and subsequently enrolled in four-year universities. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, influences, and contextual factors that shaped their postsecondary decision-making processes. Guided by Social Capital Theory, the findings illuminate how familial support, school-based relationships, and community norms shaped students' pathways to higher education. Analysis also underscores the interplay between rural context, access barriers, and internal motivation (Tan & Fang, 2023). The discussion in this chapter integrates both within-case and cross-case analyses, highlighting emergent patterns through the thematic lenses of (a) family and mentor influence, (b) program fit and practicality, (c) access and navigation gaps, (d) rural context as a double-edged influence, and (e) testing and institutional gatekeeping (see Figure 5.1).

**Figure 5.1**

*Conceptual Map of Themes*



Note: Own Work

**Table 5.1**

*Overview of Major Themes and Subthemes*

Major Theme	Subthemes	Representative Participant Quote	Description or Interpretation
Family and Mentor Influence	Parental encouragement, teacher mentorship, emotional support	“My teachers always told me I could do more. That made me believe college was possible.” – Charlotte	Highlights the critical role of interpersonal relationships as sources of social capital.
Program Fit and Practicality	Choosing majors aligned with realistic goals, balancing financial and geographic factors	“I wanted a program close enough to home but big enough to help me grow.” – Carter	Demonstrates pragmatic decision-making rooted in both aspiration and practicality.

<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Representative Participant Quote</b>	<b>Description or Interpretation</b>
Access and Navigation Gaps	Lack of information on financial aid, limited college counseling	“I had to figure out FAFSA by myself. It was confusing.” – Elizabeth	Reveals systemic gaps in college preparation and guidance.
Rural Identity and Community Connection	Loyalty to community, desire to give back, conflict between leaving and staying	“I want to work in healthcare, but I also want to stay near my family.” – Kate	Reflects the emotional tension between opportunity and belonging.
Testing and Institutional Gatekeeping	Barriers related to standardized testing, exposure, and confidence	“I didn’t even know how to prepare for the SAT like students in bigger schools.” – Mallory	Illustrates inequities related to institutional expectations and test preparation.

### **Family and Mentor Influence**

The role of family members and educators was both formative and sustaining for all participants. Social Capital Theory provided the framework for understanding how relationships and networks influence students’ access to educational opportunity (Mikiewicz, 2021). The theory explains that individuals gain benefits from the resources available within their social connections, such as information, guidance, and support that help them reach personal or academic goals. Within this framework, bonding social capital refers to the close, trust-based relationships found within families and tight-knit communities, while bridging and linking social capital describe connections that extend beyond one’s immediate circle to institutions, organizations, or individuals with greater knowledge or authority. In this study, Social Capital Theory was used to interpret how rural students relied on both family and community relationships, as well as school and institutional networks, to navigate their decisions about pursuing higher education (Poff et al., 2024).

For each participant, bonding capital—the emotional and motivational support received from immediate and extended family—served as the initial catalyst (Tan & Fang, 2023). Kate

described her grandfather as her biggest inspiration, recalling his persistent encouragement to see her succeed and attain independence. His influence was deeply tied to her vision of stability, owning a car, a house, and building a self-sustaining future. Similarly, Carter attributed much of his determination to his parents' consistent belief in his potential, emphasizing that their support made college the natural next step.

For Mallory, familial influence extended beyond encouragement and included modeling. As the daughter of two educators—one of whom is the county school superintendent—college was woven into her family's narrative. Education was never optional, she explained, but it was not forced either. It was an expectation that you would have a plan. Watching her father pursue advanced degrees while raising a family instilled in her a sense of academic perseverance and purpose, reinforcing the principle that education is both attainable and essential.

In addition to family, teachers and counselors functioned as key sources of bridging and linking capital, connecting students to institutional knowledge and broader opportunities. Each participant recalled specific educators who provided academic or emotional mentorship. Kate's math and science teachers offered not only instruction but also compassion and understanding during personal challenges, modeling the kind of professional empathy she aspired to carry into her own healthcare career. Carter similarly highlighted his high school math teachers who pushed him to continue and made him see what was possible. Mallory, Elizabeth, and Charlotte each referenced teachers and counselors who went above and beyond to ensure that students understood application processes, scholarship opportunities, and college expectations.

Collectively, all participants reflected on the transformative role of relational capital within small, interconnected communities. Relational capital refers to the value that comes from the quality of relationships individuals build with others. It includes trust, respect, shared

understanding, and mutual support that develop through consistent interactions over time. In the context of this study, relational capital describes how students benefit from meaningful personal relationships with family members, teachers, mentors, and community members that provide emotional encouragement, information, and access to opportunities. These trusting relationships form an important part of social capital by connecting individuals to the resources and support systems that influence their educational pathways. Families provided moral grounding and financial advocacy, while teachers and counselors functioned as mediators translating the often opaque structures of higher education into actionable steps for first-generation or rural students.

### **Program Fit and Practicality**

A strong pattern emerged when examining participants' decision-making. Rather than pursuing prestige or distance, they prioritized program alignment, affordability, and manageable transition. This reflects a pragmatic approach grounded in both personal circumstance and rural cultural values emphasizing responsibility, work ethic, and stability.

Carter, pursuing mechanical engineering, carefully evaluated tuition rates and proximity to home, ultimately selecting a university 30 miles away so he could commute daily and avoid debt. His narrative typified a recurring theme, which was practicality before prestige. Kate likewise approached higher education as a strategic steppingstone, selecting a medical science program as a foundation for future advancement. She emphasized employability and financial independence over immediate institutional status or specialization.

Mallory's trajectory offers another dimension of this theme. Initially enrolled at a flagship university, she later transferred to a smaller regional university to pursue nursing, a field her first institution did not offer at the time. Her transfer decision reflected not failure but intentional redirection. She stated that she wanted to be somewhere that matched what she

wanted to do. This adaptability demonstrates the reflective self-awareness that characterizes resilient rural students navigating institutional structures not always designed for them.

Elizabeth and Charlotte echoed similar sentiments. Both sought institutions that balanced accessibility with academic rigor and emphasized staying close enough to home to maintain family connections. For Charlotte, the private university's small campus environment just felt right, offering the relational intimacy and community engagement that mirrored her hometown. Across cases, program fit was deeply intertwined with emotional security, affordability, and self-knowledge. Students from rural backgrounds consistently weighed logistical and personal factors against academic ones, revealing that their college decisions were not merely intellectual but relational and cultural.

### **Access and Navigation Gaps**

While family and mentor support often mitigated confusion, every participant identified moments of institutional opacity—processes that were complex, intimidating, or insufficiently explained. This theme underscores the persistent navigational inequities experienced by students from rural districts, where college counseling resources, exposure to higher education, and familiarity with digital systems like the Common Application may be limited (Wells, 2023). Carter described frustration with the Common App, calling it cumbersome and misleading, and admitted wishing he had asked more questions earlier. His reflection aligns with a broader pattern of first-generation or rural students lacking early access to procedural literacy regarding applications, scholarships, or aid deadlines (Hardy, 2021).

Kate's experience navigating the financial aid process further highlighted this gap. She described it as confusing and stressful, requiring significant family involvement to ensure accuracy. She later reflected that she wished she had spoken to someone already enrolled in her

program, an insight that reveals the importance of near-peer mentoring as a bridge between aspiration and execution.

Elizabeth's account adds nuance. Her counselors were always available, yet she perceived limited expertise on financial aid specifics. Her desire for greater clarity around scholarships reflects a structural barrier rather than a lack of motivation. Similarly, Charlotte, though well-supported by her school, expressed that scholarship awareness and financial guidance were areas where additional support could have expanded her choices.

These experiences demonstrate a paradox of rural schooling. Participants uniformly praised their teachers' commitment but noted that college and financial navigation systems remain disproportionately complex for small-town contexts. Despite high levels of local support, institutional barriers such as application platforms, aid processes, and inconsistent guidance constrain students' access to the full spectrum of opportunities available to their urban or suburban counterparts.

### **Rural Context as a Double-Edged Influence**

Participants' reflections revealed an ambivalent but affectionate view of their rural upbringing—a blend of belonging, pride, and awareness of limitation. Each acknowledged that growing up in a small, tightly connected community offered emotional grounding and character formation, yet also recognized its structural constraints.

Carter described his hometown as peaceful and easygoing, where everybody knows everybody, fostering trust and connection. At the same time, he acknowledged that opportunities were limited and that universities favored applicants from well-known schools over smaller rural districts. Similarly, Elizabeth spoke warmly of family closeness and safety while noting that there was not much to do and few local examples of diverse professional pathways.

Mallory articulated the benefits of rural schooling in terms of educational quality and individualized attention, asserting that teachers in small schools know their students personally and teach in ways that make sense. Yet she also recognized that many of her peers lacked the resources or role models to navigate postsecondary life successfully. Kate and Charlotte echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the cultural normalization of staying close to home and entering the workforce quickly.

The rural context thus functioned both as a supportive social fabric and a structural boundary. On one hand, it generated high levels of bonding capital, trust, accountability, and shared values. On the other, it limited exposure to diverse careers, competitive programs, and the symbolic capital often associated with urban schooling. This tension shaped each participant's educational worldview. College was desirable, but it needed to feel attainable, local, and grounded in community ethics.

### **Testing and Institutional Gatekeeping**

A recurring barrier across interviews was the outsized influence of standardized testing. For multiple participants, SAT performance became a gatekeeper to opportunity, overshadowing academic excellence and work ethic. Carter articulated this frustration directly, stating that schools placed too much emphasis on a single test and that work ethic should count for more. Despite maintaining a high GPA and advanced coursework, his SAT score constrained his admission options—an experience that mirrors systemic inequities in admissions metrics. Charlotte, by contrast, benefited from the state's free SAT retake program, which allowed her to improve her score and gain acceptance to her desired institution. Her story illustrates how policy interventions can mitigate structural inequities for rural students, but also how uneven awareness of such opportunities perpetuates disparities.

These cases underscore how standardized testing, designed as a meritocratic tool, often disadvantages students from under-resourced schools. Factors such as access to test prep, familiarity with test design, and exposure to competitive peer benchmarks heavily influence performance. As a result, testing becomes a filter not of potential but of privilege, a reality that participants recognized intuitively even if they lacked formal language to describe it.

### **Synthesis of Themes: Intersections of Support, Access, and Identity**

When viewed holistically, participants' experiences revealed a pattern of collective resilience. Each student navigated the intersection of relational support and institutional constraint with creativity and pragmatism. They leveraged family, teachers, and community networks to overcome challenges in financial navigation, geographic isolation, and systemic gatekeeping.

At the same time, their stories reflect a distinctly rural epistemology—a way of knowing and valuing the world shaped by interdependence, humility, and practicality. Their educational decisions were not acts of rebellion against their context but extensions of it. For these students, pursuing college was not an escape from rural life; it was a continuation of the values instilled by it.

Analysis revealed that rural students' trajectories cannot be reduced to deficits in access or aspiration. Instead, their choices reveal an adaptive alignment between opportunity structures and deeply rooted community norms. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at increasing rural college enrollment should not merely replicate urban outreach strategies but rather build upon the relational strengths and localized decision frameworks already present in these communities.

## **Conclusion**

Social capital, manifested through family encouragement, teacher mentorship, and community cohesion, played a decisive role in shaping these rural students' postsecondary pathways. However, the persistence of structural barriers such as financial aid complexity, limited exposure, and testing bias underscores the need for targeted institutional interventions.

Narratives did not reveal passive recipients of circumstance but active decision-makers, negotiating their futures within the contours of their environment. Their experiences illuminate the nuanced interplay between agency and structure, demonstrating that the question is not whether rural students aspire to college, but how systems can evolve to meet their aspirations halfway.

An unexpected finding that emerged from the study was that participants' primary barriers to postsecondary enrollment were not the tangible or material challenges often assumed, such as limited access to technology, internet connectivity, or physical resources, but rather the absence of intangible supports. Many participants emphasized the significance of emotional encouragement, guidance, and advocacy from family members, teachers, and school staff as key influences in their decision-making process. The lack of these relational supports, rather than material deficits, appeared to have a more profound impact on their confidence and readiness to pursue higher education. This finding was particularly surprising given the frequent focus in rural education research on resource scarcity, highlighting instead the critical role that human connection and sustained mentorship play in shaping students' postsecondary pathways. Although studies such as Irvin et al. (2011) and Becker and Park (2011) identified limited technology as a significant rural barrier, participants in this study rarely mentioned it as an obstacle.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

The postsecondary education experiences of rural students have been shaped by a complex set of economic, social, and geographic factors that influenced their access to and success in higher education. Rural students have historically faced barriers such as financial constraints, limited academic preparation, and inadequate access to guidance and mentorship, all of which have contributed to disparities in college enrollment and completion rates when compared to their urban and suburban peers (Seaman et al., 2023). The challenges associated with rural postsecondary education have been well-documented, yet there has remained a need to understand how individual students navigated these obstacles and what factors ultimately influenced their educational decisions (Rutt Williams, 2024).

This study explored the postsecondary decision-making of recent high school graduates from a rural community. The chosen rural setting was notable in that it was geographically close to urban centers and included access to a public university. However, despite these advantages, rural students from this region continued to experience difficulties in accessing and persisting in postsecondary education. This research sought to investigate the specific barriers these students encountered, the support systems they relied on, and the role their rural identity played in shaping their educational choices.

Using a qualitative phenomenographic research design, the lived experiences of rural students were examined. In-depth interviews captured participants' perceptions of factors that helped or hindered their ability to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. Findings

contribute to a broader discourse on rural educational equity by providing insights into influences on rural students' decisions about their educational futures, what resources they found valuable, and what gaps in support they perceived.

This chapter summarizes key aspects of the study rationale and design, including a restatement of purpose and research questions, along with summaries of the theoretical framework, method, and data analysis procedures used. These components established the foundation for the study and guided the analysis of rural students' postsecondary experiences.

Ultimately, a discussion of results includes reflection on the complex realities facing rural students. Their experiences underscore that success in higher education cannot be understood solely through quantitative measures such as enrollment or completion rates. Instead, it must also be viewed through the lens of lived experience—how students make sense of their world, draw upon the resources around them, and persist in the face of uncertainty. Their voices, as captured in this research, remind educators and policymakers that meaningful progress in rural education requires understanding the human stories behind the statistics.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore and understand the postsecondary experiences of recent high school graduates from a specific rural area. While prior research has investigated the challenges faced by rural students in higher education, I focused on individuals from a region that was geographically close to urban areas and had access to a public university (O'Neal & Perkins, 2021). I sought to determine whether these geographical advantages mitigated traditional barriers to postsecondary education for rural students or whether systemic and cultural challenges still played a significant role in their decision-making.

The purpose of this study was to explore and interpret the postsecondary decision-making experiences of rural students within the context of social capital and educational access. Using participants' narratives, the study examined how family relationships, community networks, and institutional supports interacted to influence students' choices about higher education. Particular attention was given to the types of resources students found most valuable, the supports they perceived as lacking, and the ways their rural identity shaped their aspirations and sense of possibility. This focus aligns with Social Capital Theory, which highlights how relationships, trust, and community connections influence individuals' opportunities and decision-making processes.

Through the lens of Social Capital Theory, the study aimed to explore how participants' networks—both bonding (family and close friends) and bridging (teachers, counselors, and mentors)—influenced their ability to access information about college, prepare for the transition, and persist once enrolled (Sowl, 2021; Sims, 2021). The research also sought to capture how these students' educational aspirations were connected to their sense of belonging and purpose within their communities. For many, leaving for college meant balancing ambition with loyalty to home, revealing a complex emotional and cultural negotiation that extends beyond academic readiness or financial aid (Wells, 2023).

Through the process of analysis and interpretation, the study also revealed insights that challenged prevailing assumptions about rural students frequently found in educational discourse. Too often, rural populations are framed from a deficit perspective—defined by what they lack rather than what they possess. This research took the opposite approach by highlighting the strengths, resilience, and community-based values that rural students carry with them into higher education. Their stories offered evidence that social capital, when nurtured and supported,

can act as a protective factor against the limitations of geography or economics. In this way, the study contributed to a growing recognition that success among rural students is not simply a matter of individual drive, but also of relational support and institutional responsiveness.

The purpose also extended to generating implications for practice and policy. By documenting the lived experiences of these participants, this study provided valuable insight into how educators, counselors, and policymakers can design interventions that meet rural students where they are. The narratives revealed that access to higher education involves more than logistical solutions such as transportation or internet access—it also requires emotional and informational scaffolding that empowers students to envision college as an attainable and meaningful goal. Understanding these layers of influence can inform efforts to bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary institutions, especially in rural areas that are geographically near, yet culturally distant, from higher education centers.

In essence, the purpose of this research was to amplify the voices of rural students and position their lived experiences as evidence of both challenge and possibility. Their perspectives illuminated the everyday realities that statistics alone cannot capture: the quiet determination to succeed, the subtle influence of mentors, and the deeply rooted sense of community that both anchors and propels them forward. By focusing on the intersection of identity, opportunity, and place, this study offered a nuanced understanding of how rural students define success, make choices, and imagine their futures within and beyond their hometowns.

By analyzing participants' experiences, the study aimed to provide valuable insights into what factors facilitated or hindered their transition to postsecondary education. The research also sought to identify which resources rural students found beneficial, what support systems they

wished had been available, and how their upbringing in a rural community influenced their educational aspirations and choices.

This study contributed to the growing body of literature on rural education by offering a nuanced perspective on the unique challenges faced by students in rural areas, particularly those who had the option of attending college relatively close to home. The findings had implications for educators, policymakers, and community leaders seeking to improve postsecondary access and success for rural students.

Ultimately, this study was guided by the conviction that improving postsecondary access for rural students begins with understanding their perspectives. The insights gained from this research can serve as a foundation for building systems that honor local culture while expanding opportunity. The purpose, therefore, was not only to analyze data but to bring forward authentic stories that reveal the humanity behind the numbers and contribute to a more equitable and informed approach to rural education.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by three primary research questions:

1. What factors did rural participants identify as barriers or enablers to accessing postsecondary education?
2. What resources or supports did rural participants perceive as present or missing in their postsecondary decision-making process?
3. How did rural participants perceive their rural identity, both generally and in relation to their postsecondary education decisions?

These questions were designed to explore both the external and internal factors that influenced students' postsecondary choices. By addressing these questions, the study sought to uncover the

systemic barriers rural students faced, the specific types of support they relied upon, and the personal and cultural influences that shaped their educational trajectories.

Each of these questions emerged from a recognition that postsecondary access for rural students cannot be explained solely by quantitative measures of enrollment or completion. Instead, a deeper qualitative understanding is required—one that examines the emotional, social, and cultural contexts that frame students' decisions. The first question focused on identifying the tangible and intangible barriers that rural students encounter, including financial limitations, transportation challenges, and the availability of information about college options. However, it also allowed for the identification of enablers—factors that supported students' aspirations and helped them navigate the transition to higher education. In many cases, these enablers took the form of people rather than programs: parents, teachers, mentors, and community members who provided guidance, reassurance, and encouragement at critical moments.

The second question invited participants to reflect on the gaps in resources and support they experienced during their postsecondary decision-making process. This inquiry was not limited to material resources such as funding or internet access but extended to informational and relational resources—such as college counseling, scholarship awareness, or networks that connect students to postsecondary institutions. By centering this question on perceived absence rather than simply observable data, the study was able to highlight areas where schools and communities might strengthen existing systems of support. Many rural students described “not knowing what they didn't know,” suggesting that even modest improvements in communication, exposure, and mentorship could have significant effects on outcomes.

The third question centered on the role of rural identity in shaping educational decisions. This was a particularly important element of the study, as it addressed how a student's sense of

belonging, loyalty, and cultural understanding of community influenced their view of college. For some participants, their rural background instilled a strong work ethic, humility, and appreciation for community—all of which motivated them to succeed in higher education. For others, it presented internal tension: the fear of leaving family behind or of losing connection to home. By examining how students negotiated these feelings, this question illuminated the ways in which identity and place are intertwined in educational decision-making.

Together, these questions created a framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of rural students' postsecondary experiences. They positioned participants not as passive recipients of circumstance but as active decision-makers navigating competing pressures and opportunities. This approach allowed the study to bridge micro-level experiences with macro-level contexts, revealing how individual choices are embedded within broader social structures.

By maintaining a focus on barriers and enablers, perceived resource gaps, and the influence of rural identity, these questions collectively framed the study as an exploration of both limitation and possibility. The intent was not only to document what constrained students but also to highlight what sustained them—the relationships, values, and moments of resilience that propelled them forward despite structural inequities. Through this inquiry, the research offered a holistic understanding of how rural students interpret, pursue, and persist in their postsecondary journeys, contributing to a more comprehensive picture of rural education and access in contemporary America.

**Table 6.1***Alignment Between Research, Themes, and Theoretical Framework*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Key Themes Addressed</b>	<b>Connection to Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>Summary of Findings</b>
What factors did rural participants identify as barriers or enablers to accessing postsecondary education?	Family and Mentor Influence; Access and Navigation Gaps	Social Capital Theory – Emphasizes the role of relationships and networks as enablers or barriers	Participants identified interpersonal encouragement as critical to access, but structural gaps (financial aid, test prep) limited opportunity.
What resources or supports did rural participants perceive as lacking but necessary when making decisions about postsecondary education?	Access and Navigation Gaps; Program Fit and Practicality	Student Choice Model – Emphasizes rational decision-making and access to information	Students lacked exposure to college options and financial literacy, impacting their ability to make informed choices.
How did rural participants perceive their rural identity, both generally and in relation to their postsecondary education decisions?	Rural Identity and Community Connection; Family and Mentor Influence	Social Capital Theory – Highlights how cultural belonging shapes motivation and identity	Students viewed education as a way to strengthen their communities rather than leave them, balancing loyalty and mobility.

Table 6.1 outlines the alignment between the study’s three research questions, the key themes identified during data analysis, and the theoretical framework that guided interpretation. The purpose of this table is to demonstrate how the findings were systematically connected to the study’s conceptual foundation. Each research question is paired with the themes that most directly addressed it and the theoretical perspectives that provided explanatory power. This alignment illustrates the integrated nature of the study’s findings. For example, the Social Capital Theory framework helped explain how family and mentor relationships served as both enablers and barriers to higher education access, while the Student Choice Model clarified how limited information and exposure influenced students’ decision-making processes. Together,

these frameworks provided a comprehensive understanding of how personal, relational, and contextual factors intersected to shape the participants' experiences.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenographic design to explore the lived experiences of recent high school graduates from a rural Georgia community as they navigated the transition to postsecondary education. The phenomenographic approach was selected because it allows the researcher to examine the varying ways individuals experience, understand, and interpret a shared phenomenon—in this case, the process of pursuing higher education within a rural context. Rather than seeking a single, uniform truth, phenomenography recognizes that meaning is constructed through experience and shaped by the individual's social, cultural, and environmental surroundings. This design was particularly well suited for a study centered on perception, identity, and access, where participants' subjective viewpoints reveal as much about the system as they do about the individuals themselves.

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with five participants who graduated from the same rural high school and later enrolled in four-year universities. Each participant was purposefully selected based on specific criteria, including residence in the rural county at the time of high school graduation, attendance at a postsecondary institution, and willingness to engage in reflective discussion about their educational journey. Purposeful sampling ensured that participants possessed firsthand experience with the phenomenon under study and could offer diverse perspectives on how rural context influenced their decisions.

Interviews were conducted individually and guided by a consistent set of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their experiences in their own words. The

conversational format provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on significant memories, insights, or turning points. The researcher maintained an active listening stance, prompting participants to clarify or expand upon key ideas without leading their responses. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' language and tone, which was essential for interpreting meaning within the phenomenographic framework.

The data analysis process involved several iterative stages. First, each transcript was read multiple times to gain familiarity with the participant's narrative and identify emerging patterns or themes. The researcher then coded the data, categorizing statements that reflected similar perceptions, experiences, or understandings of postsecondary decision-making. These coded segments were analyzed to determine variations in meaning across participants, a key feature of phenomenographic inquiry. The goal was to capture the range of ways students experienced access, support, and identity, rather than to generalize their experiences into a single conclusion. Through this process, several thematic categories emerged, reflecting the interplay between personal motivation, social relationships, and structural context.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Member checking was used by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Triangulation was achieved through the comparison of participant perspectives, identifying points of convergence and divergence across narratives. Reflexivity was also central to the research process; the researcher maintained a reflective journal to acknowledge personal biases and to document how her professional background and prior knowledge of rural education could shape interpretation. By maintaining awareness of positionality, the researcher sought to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices and ensure that findings were grounded in their lived realities rather than the researcher's assumptions.

This methodological approach supported the study's theoretical foundation in Social Capital Theory and the Student Choice Model. Social Capital Theory provided a lens for interpreting how family relationships, community ties, and institutional networks contributed to participants' access to higher education. The Student Choice Model, meanwhile, emphasized how individual aspirations intersect with institutional characteristics, financial realities, and perceived benefits when making educational decisions. Together, these frameworks guided both the design and interpretation of the study, ensuring that the analysis captured the complexity of decision-making within the rural context.

The phenomenographic approach ultimately allowed the study to illuminate the diversity of thought and experience among rural students who, despite sharing similar geographic and social contexts, interpreted their pathways to higher education in distinct ways. Some viewed college as a necessary step toward independence, while others saw it as a means to serve and remain connected to their community. These variations reflected not inconsistency but richness—an authentic portrayal of the multifaceted realities of rural life.

In summary, the methodological design of this study provided a powerful structure for capturing and interpreting the nuanced experiences of rural students. The emphasis on individual perception, meaning-making, and context revealed insights that extend beyond surface-level explanations of access or success. It allowed the participants' voices to guide the interpretation, ensuring that the findings represent not abstract data points but the lived truths of young people navigating the intersection of rural identity and educational opportunity.

Phenomenography was particularly relevant for this study because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of how rural students perceived their postsecondary education journeys. It focused on the subjective experiences of participants, capturing the different ways they

understood and navigated the challenges associated with higher education. This approach provided a detailed and nuanced understanding of the factors that shaped rural students' educational decisions (Zuckerman, 2022).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Social Capital Theory (SCT) and the Student Choice Model (SCM).

Social Capital Theory (SCT) focused on the role of relationships, networks, and access to resources in shaping students' educational trajectories. Rural students often relied on social capital from family members, educators, peers, and community organizations to navigate the complex process of preparing for and enrolling in postsecondary education. Given that rural schools and communities often had limited formal resources, informal networks of support played a crucial role in determining students' access to information, guidance, and opportunities related to higher education (Mishra, 2020).

The Student Choice Model (SCM) provided a framework for understanding how students weighed the costs and benefits of different postsecondary options when making educational decisions. This model considered factors such as financial limitations, academic preparedness, institutional reputation, and personal aspirations. Rural students frequently faced a unique set of trade-offs, balancing economic constraints with their educational ambitions and assessing whether higher education aligned with their career goals and family expectations (Callender & Dougherty, 2018).

By integrating these two frameworks, the study offered a comprehensive lens for examining how both social influences and individual decision-making processes shaped rural students' postsecondary experiences. SCT helped explain who influenced students' choices and

how networks provided access to opportunity, while SCM clarified why students made particular decisions based on available information, perceived risks, and personal goals. Together, these frameworks grounded the analysis by connecting relational context with individual agency, allowing for a richer understanding of the factors influencing rural students' pathways to higher education.

### **Participants**

Participants were recent high school graduates from a specific rural county who had completed their secondary education in either 2022 or 2023. All participants were permanent residents of the county and had attended a four-year university located outside their home community. This criterion ensured that participants had direct experience with the transition from a rural high school to a postsecondary institution.

Participants were recruited through a combination of referral sampling and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling led to participants who did have commonalities, which reduced the diversity of the sample. Additionally, early participants were encouraged to recommend peers who met the study's criteria. Participants shared several similarities, including having supportive families, a strong interest in STEM professions, and were predominately female.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. This format allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while also providing flexibility for follow-up questions based on individual responses.

Interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams to accommodate participants' schedules and create a comfortable setting for discussion. Each interview lasted approximately

one hour and was recorded with participants' consent. Microsoft Teams' built-in transcription feature was used to transcribe the interviews, with manual verification ensuring accuracy.

The interview questions focused on three key areas that aligned with the study's research questions and theoretical framework (Kallio et al., 2016). The first area explored participants' decision-making processes, including how they evaluated postsecondary options, who or what influenced their decisions, and what obstacles they encountered along the way. These questions were designed to uncover both the practical and personal factors that shaped their choices about higher education. The second area examined barriers and supports, emphasizing the types of resources participants found most helpful, as well as the gaps in information, guidance, or financial support that made accessing college more difficult. This section helped illuminate differences in opportunity and support systems among rural students. Finally, the third area focused on rural identity and education, inviting participants to reflect on how their upbringing in a rural community influenced their aspirations, motivation, and sense of belonging within higher education. Together, these areas provided a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives that shaped each participant's postsecondary journey.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using an inductive coding approach, which allowed themes to emerge directly from participants' responses rather than being predetermined by existing theories or assumptions. This method ensured that the findings remained closely connected to the lived experiences of rural students and accurately reflected their perspectives. The analysis process involved several stages designed to move systematically from raw data to meaningful interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, all interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' narratives. Next, significant words, phrases, and

ideas were highlighted and assigned initial codes that represented key concepts or experiences. These codes were then compared and grouped to identify patterns and similarities across participants. Through ongoing refinement, broader categories began to form, which ultimately developed into overarching themes that captured the central ideas related to rural students' decision-making, access to resources, and identity. Throughout this process, I revisited the data frequently to ensure consistency and accuracy, allowing the themes to remain authentic representations of the participants' experiences.

The analysis process involved multiple stages:

1. Initial Coding: Key phrases and concepts were identified in participants' responses.
2. Categorization: Related codes were grouped into broader themes based on commonalities.
3. Theme Development: Patterns and relationships between categories were analyzed to draw conclusions relevant to the research questions (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Member checking and peer review were used to enhance the validity of the findings. Member checking involved sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to ensure accuracy, while peer review provided additional scrutiny to reduce researcher bias.

## **Findings**

This study explored the postsecondary experiences of recent high school graduates from a rural community located near urban centers. The findings revealed five major themes that collectively illustrate how social, financial, and cultural factors intersect to shape rural students' educational pathways.

The first theme, family and mentor influence, emphasized the central role of interpersonal encouragement and guidance in students' decisions to pursue higher education. Support from

parents, teachers, and community members often served as a key motivator for college enrollment. The second theme, access and navigation gaps, reflected ongoing challenges related to college readiness, financial literacy, and exposure to postsecondary options. Although geographic proximity to urban areas reduced some logistical barriers, limited access to information and preparatory opportunities continued to affect students' confidence and decision-making.

The third theme, program fit and practicality, highlighted how students balanced personal aspirations with financial and geographic constraints, often selecting institutions based on affordability, proximity, and perceived job outcomes rather than prestige. The fourth theme, rural identity and community connection, captured the strong emotional and cultural ties that shaped participants' educational choices. While some students viewed their rural background as a source of strength, others experienced tension between loyalty to their community and the desire to seek broader opportunities. Finally, the fifth theme, social capital and support systems, underscored the importance of relational networks in bridging access to resources and information about higher education.

Together, these themes demonstrate that while rural students possess significant resilience and determination, they continue to face structural inequities that limit their access to postsecondary success. The findings suggest that strengthening school-based support systems, expanding college and career counseling, and creating locally relevant pathways can help rural students better navigate the transition to higher education.

## **Discussion**

Findings of this study align with existing research on rural education, while also offering new insights into the experiences of students from rural communities with geographic proximity

to urban centers (Wells, 2023). Although access to an urban college provided some advantages, it did not fully eliminate barriers that rural students faced. Financial limitations, academic preparation gaps, and cultural expectations continued to influence students' educational trajectories. Findings reinforce the notion that simply living near a university does not automatically grant rural students the same opportunities as their urban peers. Instead, rural students often face a combination of structural and social barriers that require targeted interventions.

An important takeaway from this study is the role of social capital in shaping postsecondary decision-making. While financial resources and academic preparation are crucial, the influence of mentors, family members, and community support cannot be overlooked. Many participants emphasized that the guidance they received from trusted individuals played a pivotal role in their decision to attend college. However, the lack of formalized mentorship programs in rural schools means that many students rely on informal networks, which can result in inconsistent access to information and support (Carver & Bouffard, 2022).

Cultural and economic expectations were also identified as impacting rural students' decision-making. Several participants described feeling torn between their aspirations for higher education and the realities of their rural upbringing. Some felt pressure to stay close to home due to family obligations or economic concerns, while others struggled with feelings of guilt for wanting to leave. Even those who pursued higher education sometimes faced difficulties adjusting to new environments, highlighting the need for greater support during the transition to college (Sowl, 2021).

Supporting rural students in higher education requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond financial aid and academic support. Social and emotional guidance, mentorship, and

programs that ease the transition between rural high schools and urban colleges can help bridge the gap. Understanding the interplay between social capital, financial constraints, and cultural expectations can inform policies and programs aimed at improving postsecondary outcomes for rural students (Gantt et al., 2024).

### **Implication for Practice**

Several implications are identified for teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and community leaders who influence the educational pathways of rural students. While each participant's story was unique, collectively their experiences illustrate patterns that can inform strategies for improving postsecondary access and persistence in rural areas. Supporting rural students is not solely a matter of providing more information or financial aid, but of addressing the interconnected systems of education, society, and culture that shape their perceptions of college and their confidence in navigating it (Wells, 2023).

An important implication from study findings centers on the importance of early and consistent exposure to postsecondary opportunities. Many participants described limited awareness of college options, financial aid processes, and career pathways during high school. For educators, this finding suggests the need to embed college and career readiness into the curriculum beginning in the lower grades, rather than reserving these discussions for senior year. Exposure should go beyond college visits or brochures; it should include authentic, ongoing engagement with postsecondary institutions, career mentors, and alumni who can share relatable experiences. School systems might consider formal partnerships with nearby colleges or technical programs to offer mentorships, shadowing opportunities, or workshops that clarify the application and financial aid process for rural students and their families (Musoba & Cullinan, 2024; Roberts & Grant, 2021).

Another important implication concerns the role of school counselors and teachers as critical connectors of social capital. Participants consistently emphasized that individual educators played an outsized role in their decision to pursue higher education. However, the influence of these mentors was often the result of personal initiative rather than systemic design. Rural schools should intentionally cultivate a culture where educators are trained and supported to act as college and career advocates for all students, not just those who are already high achieving. This could include professional development focused on postsecondary advising, equitable access to Advanced Placement or dual enrollment courses, and the use of data to identify students who may need additional guidance (Grimes et al., 2019).

Findings underscore the importance of community-based partnerships and family engagement. Participants' stories revealed that parental encouragement and community pride were powerful motivators, even when material resources were limited. Schools can build on this strength by involving families in the postsecondary planning process and offering workshops that make financial aid and college readiness information accessible. Community organizations, churches, and local businesses can also play a vital role by sponsoring scholarships, hosting information sessions, and providing students with employment or internship opportunities that link education to local workforce needs. Strengthening the connection between education and community outcomes can help rural students view higher education not as an act of leaving home, but as a way of contributing to it.

Another implication involves reframing the narrative of rural education. Too often, rural students are portrayed through a deficit lens as underprepared, underexposed, or unmotivated. Yet the participants in this study demonstrated strong work ethics, loyalty to their communities, and a deep desire to succeed. Educators and policymakers should move toward an asset-based

approach that values the cultural strengths of rural life, such as persistence, resilience, and social cohesion. This approach can shift both the mindset and the practices that shape how rural students are counseled and supported. For example, teachers might design projects that connect classroom learning to local issues, or colleges might create transition programs specifically designed for first generation and rural students that validate their experiences and provide supportive peer networks.

The study revealed that while the selected county is geographically close to higher education institutions, many students still faced barriers related to information and connectivity. Expanding reliable broadband access remains essential for equity, but equally important is digital literacy, ensuring that students and families know how to navigate online college applications, financial aid portals, and virtual learning platforms. Partnerships between school districts, libraries, and local government can help bridge these gaps by providing not only access to devices and internet service but also training on how to use these tools effectively.

Findings also carry implications for postsecondary institutions themselves. Colleges and universities serving rural regions must actively work to build trust with these communities. Recruitment efforts should not end with a campus visit; they should include ongoing communication, family engagement, and visible presence in the community. Institutions can collaborate with rural high schools to establish bridge programs, summer college readiness initiatives, or dual enrollment pathways that ease the transition from high school to college. Once students arrive on campus, universities should ensure they have access to mentorship, first-year seminars, and financial aid counseling designed specifically to address the unique challenges faced by rural and first-generation students.

From a policy standpoint, the study highlights the necessity of sustained investment in rural education infrastructure. State and local policymakers must recognize that equitable access to higher education requires more than funding for tuition. It demands investment in school counseling programs, transportation networks, broadband expansion, and teacher recruitment initiatives. Policies that incentivize collaboration between K–12 schools, postsecondary institutions, and workforce development agencies can help ensure that rural students are not isolated from pathways to meaningful employment and continuing education.

The importance of incorporating rural students’ perspectives into educational decision-making was noted. Their narratives reveal valuable insights into how current systems of support function and where gaps remain. While this study does not propose specific interventions, it underscores the need for educators and leaders to consider the lived experiences of rural students when developing policies and programs related to college access and readiness. Ensuring that these perspectives are represented in advisory boards, focus groups, and educational planning processes can help create more responsive and equitable approaches to supporting rural learners.

Study results imply a more holistic understanding of what it means to support rural students in accessing postsecondary education. Efforts to improve rural college enrollment and completion must be relational as much as they are structural. They should build upon the strengths of rural communities, empower educators as advocates, and bridge the information and opportunity gaps that persist even in geographically advantaged regions. By integrating these practices into policy and programming, stakeholders can help ensure that rural students are not only able to reach college but also to thrive once they get there.

## **Future Recommendations**

Although much is known about general college decision-making processes, this study extends existing research by highlighting how relationships, community dynamics, and local opportunity structures shape the experiences of rural students. The findings point to several areas that merit further investigation to better understand the intersection of place, social capital, and educational access. The findings suggest that the complex interactions among social capital, rural identity, and educational opportunity require continued investigation. Expanding this line of inquiry can provide a more comprehensive picture of how students from rural backgrounds navigate barriers, leverage support, and construct meaning around higher education.

Future research should first focus on expanding the sample size and geographic scope. This study was limited to a small group of participants from a single rural county in Georgia, which allowed for an in-depth examination of personal experiences but did not capture the diversity of rural contexts across the state or nation. Conducting similar studies in different rural regions, including areas that are more isolated or that lack proximity to universities, could reveal important variations in how students access and experience postsecondary education. Comparative studies across states or regions could also illuminate how differing policies, school structures, and community resources influence outcomes for rural students (Drescher, 2022; Sowl, 2021).

Additional research should explore how social capital develops and operates across generations in rural communities. Several participants in this study described the influence of parents, grandparents, and local mentors in shaping their educational choices. A longitudinal or multi-generational study could examine how patterns of mentorship, expectations, and exposure to higher education evolve within families and communities over time. This could provide

valuable insight into how social networks sustain or hinder educational advancement in rural areas.

Another recommendation is to investigate the transition period between high school graduation and college enrollment in more detail. Several participants discussed the uncertainty they felt in the months following graduation, suggesting that this period is critical in determining whether students ultimately persist in their postsecondary goals (Hudacs, 2020). Future studies might focus on how high schools and colleges can collaborate to create smoother transitions, such as through summer bridge programs, dual enrollment, or extended advising support that continues after graduation. Research of this kind could identify strategies to prevent the loss of momentum that often occurs when rural students leave the structured support of high school environments.

There is also a need for research that examines the experiences of rural students who choose alternative postsecondary pathways, such as technical colleges, apprenticeships, or direct entry into the workforce. Although this study focused on students attending four-year universities, many rural graduates pursue other forms of education or training that are equally valuable to community and economic development. Understanding their motivations, challenges, and outcomes could offer a more inclusive view of postsecondary success and inform efforts to create multiple viable pathways for rural youth.

Future studies should also explore the role of school personnel and community leaders in shaping postsecondary expectations. Teachers, counselors, and administrators were described in this study as significant sources of motivation and information, yet their influence varied widely depending on the resources available in their schools. Quantitative and qualitative research could further explore how professional development, workload, and school culture affect the ability of

rural educators to serve as college and career advocates. Examining how schools can institutionalize these roles rather than relying on individual initiative could lead to more equitable access for all students.

Another promising area of research involves examining the psychological and emotional dimensions of rural students' college transitions. Several participants described feelings of guilt, separation, or fear of losing their sense of belonging when leaving their rural communities. Future researchers might study how identity, attachment, and mental health influence persistence in higher education for rural students. Mixed-method approaches combining interviews with surveys on belonging, self-efficacy, and cultural identity could help explain why some students thrive while others struggle in new environments.

The integration of technology and its impact on rural postsecondary readiness is another critical topic for future study. The rise of online education, virtual advising, and hybrid programs offers new opportunities to bridge geographic divides, yet access to reliable internet and digital literacy remains uneven. Research should investigate how technology can be leveraged to expand access while also exploring the challenges rural students face in adapting to digital platforms. Studies could also examine how rural schools and communities can strengthen digital infrastructure and provide training that empowers students to use technology effectively for academic success.

Finally, future research should include the perspectives of educators, parents, and community members in addition to students. While this study centered on the voices of graduates, understanding how adults within rural communities perceive and support educational aspirations could lead to a more holistic view of the ecosystem influencing student outcomes.

Collaborative research that brings together students, families, and educators could identify strategies for aligning expectations and resources to better support college and career readiness.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated the postsecondary experiences of rural students, focusing on the barriers, supports, and influences that shaped their decisions. Findings suggest that while geographic proximity to urban centers can provide advantages, it does not fully eliminate the challenges that rural students face in accessing and succeeding in higher education. Financial constraints, academic preparation gaps, and social capital limitations remain significant factors in their educational trajectories.

It appears that rural students continue to face systemic barriers that impact their ability to enroll in and persist through college. While proximity to an urban center provides access to resources, it does not fully resolve the structural challenges inherent in rural education. It is likely that expanding college readiness programs, increasing mentorship opportunities, and providing financial support could improve postsecondary outcomes for rural students. Additionally, targeted transition programs could help rural students adjust to new academic and social environments, reducing the risk of early attrition.

Ultimately, this research highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to supporting rural students in higher education. By addressing financial, academic, and social capital barriers, educators and policymakers can create more inclusive and equitable pathways for rural students to achieve their educational and career goals. Through strategic interventions and continued research, a more comprehensive understanding of rural student experiences can help inform policies that foster long-term success in postsecondary education.

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**APPENDIX**  
**APPENDIX A**  
IRB Approval

 Outlook

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**Study Approved**

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**From** IRB@uga.edu <IRB@uga.edu>  
**Date** Fri 9/12/2025 1:15 PM  
**To** Jessica Lee Horton <Jessica.Horton@uga.edu>; Jay W Rojewski <rojewski@uga.edu>

**Notification of Approval**

**To:** Jessica Horton

**Link:** [PROJECT00011465](#)

**P.I.:** Jay Rojewski

**Title:** Perceptions and Experiences of Individuals from rural areas on postsecondary education

This submission has been approved. You can access the correspondence letter using the following link:

**ACTIONS TO TAKE:** [Correspondence for PROJECT00011465.pdf\(0.01\)](#)

To review additional details, click the link above to access the project workspace. For Non-Exempt research and if required, date-stamped consent documents can be found in the Documents section under "Final" in PDF form.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Informed Consent Form**

#### **UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM**

#### **PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS FROM RURAL AREAS ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

##### **Researcher's Statement**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

**Principal Investigator:** Jay Rojewski  
Department of Workforce Education  
rojewski@uga.edu

We are asking you to participate in a research study titled “Perceptions and Experiences of Individuals from Rural Areas on Postsecondary Education”. The purpose of this research is to understand individuals from rural areas perceptions and experiences related to postsecondary education and their choice to enroll and continue in a university. To conduct our research, we are seeking participants for this study who 1) graduated from a rural high school, specifically Screven County High School, in 2022 or 2023, 2) enrolled in a university after graduation, and 3) are currently enrolled in postsecondary education. Participants will be asked to participate in one virtual interview, expected to last 45–60 minutes. The interview will be recorded. Questions will ask the participant to reflect on their decision to pursue postsecondary education, along with the factors that influenced them to pursue postsecondary education. We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. The stakeholders for this study include educators, administrators, policymakers, community leaders, and organizations focused on rural education and postsecondary success. These individuals and groups have a vested interest in understanding the factors that influence students from rural areas in their decisions to pursue and persist in postsecondary education. The results of the study will provide insights into how individuals from rural areas perceive higher education, including its benefits, challenges, and relevance to their lives and goals. Additionally, the study will shed light on key decision-making factors. It will also identify barriers and challenges that may discourage rural students from pursuing higher education. Furthermore, the findings will highlight support mechanisms, including programs, initiatives, and policies, that could better assist students from rural backgrounds in their educational journey. Ultimately, this research aims to equip stakeholders with actionable knowledge to develop more effective strategies and support systems to encourage and sustain postsecondary participation among

rural students. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Interviews will be audio recorded via Microsoft Teams. Participants may choose if they wish to have their camera on or off as part of the recording. The audio recording will be used to transcribe the interview. The recordings will be deleted at conclusion of the study.

This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please read the additional information on the following pages, and feel free to ask questions at any point.

### **Study Procedures and Time Commitment**

Participants are asked to participate in one virtual interview. The interview is expected to last 45–60 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Microsoft Teams and the audio will be recorded. After the interview, participants will have the opportunity to review their interview summary and ensure their experiences are accurately reflected.

### **Risks and discomforts**

This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

### **Benefits**

Participants in this study may experience several benefits. First, they have the opportunity to engage in self-reflection, allowing them to consider their educational journey, the factors influencing their decision to pursue postsecondary education, and the challenges they encountered along the way. This process can offer personal insights and a sense of accomplishment. Additionally, by sharing their experiences, participants contribute to a broader understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by students from rural areas, ensuring their voices are heard and valued. Their input can also influence the development of policies, programs, and resources aimed at supporting rural students in accessing and completing higher education. Furthermore, the study offers an opportunity to create a positive legacy by shaping initiatives that improve educational access and success for future students from similar backgrounds. Direct financial or material compensation will not be provided.

### **Confidentiality of records**

Once identifiers have been removed, your information may be used/shared with other researchers and/or future studies without additional consent. Only researchers directly involved in this study will

have access to information that directly identifies participants. Identifiable information will be deleted at the conclusion of the study. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

**Participant rights**

If you have any general questions throughout the study, please contact Jessica Horton at [jlh10800@uga.edu](mailto:jlh10800@uga.edu). Specific questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant should be directed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu). If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

**Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.**

## APPENDIX C

### Summary of Coding Framework and Frequency of References

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Example Codes</b>	<b>Number of References</b>	<b>Participants Referencing Theme</b>
Family and Mentor Influence	Support, Encouragement, Role Model, Motivation	62	All five
Access and Navigation Gaps	FAFSA, Advising, Application Process, Information	54	All five
Program Fit and Practicality	Proximity, Cost, Flexibility, Degree Value	39	Four
Rural Identity and Community Connection	Loyalty, Home, Giving Back, Belonging	44	Five
Testing and Institutional Gatekeeping	SAT/ACT, Academic Preparation, Confidence	28	Three