

THE IMPACT OF EMORY'S OXFORD SUMMER EXPERIENCE PROGRAM ON
RURAL STUDENTS' COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS

by

REBECCA ANN PASCHAL-YOUNG

(Under the Direction of Richard L. S. Blissett)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative evaluation of Emory's Oxford Summer Experience Program examined rural students' college aspirations. Educational and economic barriers hinder rural students' college enrollment and degree attainment (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016). Because of these barriers, many rural students are unable to pursue higher education because of a lack of planning and resources (Smith, Gosky, and Li, 2022). Rural students are, therefore, disadvantaged due to a lack of resources and opportunities, as Secore (2018) argues. Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase college choice model, this study evaluated how the experience of being on campus and the strategies, practices, and opportunities associated with Emory's Oxford summer experience program influenced 11 rural students' college aspirations. The findings indicate that college aspirations were strongly influenced by knowledge about the application process, financial aid, entrance exams, campus impressions, campus security, and college-life visualization. This study supports the need to explore and support opportunities to provide rural students with early college knowledge, campus exposure, and a clear roadmap of what to expect during

the college choice process. The experiences of these 11 students can be used to inform educators, policymakers, practitioners, and college and university administrators on how similar programs can increase rural college enrollment.

INDEX WORDS: Rural student, college aspirations, college choice, campus environment, college knowledge, steps to college enrollment

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DEDICATION

I dedicated with love to my parents and first role models, Sidney and Bess Paschal, who taught me to honor God, put family first, value education, and never give up;

To my husband, Mike, whose love, support, and constant encouragement have sustained me throughout this journey and for nearly 30 years;

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to Lori, Nikki, and Jill – my Spelman *sister*-sisters and my first best friends;

and to my beloved and cherished grandparents in heaven –

Magnest Verosity Ludy & Mamie Ophelia Dodson Ludy

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Academically accomplished students with impressive grade point averages and good standardized test scores are often considered the gold standard. According to Conley (2007), academic achievement is instrumental to becoming college-ready. Numerous college-eligible and college-aspiring students do not enroll in college. For reasons that may have nothing to do with being primed, prepared, or well-positioned to enroll in college, some students may not progress from college aspirational to college-ready candidates.

According to studies, college degree holders are more competitive in the workplace than non-degree holders. Wolfe & Haveman, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) found that college graduates had wider pay gaps, less government assistance, and more career mobility and stability than non-college graduates. A study by Goldin & Katz (2007) found that bachelor's degree holders earned 84 percent more than high school graduates in 2009. In addition to the financial benefits, attending college has many other advantages. In the study by Ma, Pender & Welch (2019), college graduates lead healthier lifestyles due to reduced healthcare costs.

The fact that most young adults do not finish a postsecondary degree despite aspiring to college is well-known among educators, researchers, and policymakers (Cox, 2016). According to Ingels, Planty & Bozick (2005) and Schneider & Stevenson (1999),

80 percent of high school students intend to pursue a bachelor's degree. However, when it comes down to it, the percentage of young adults who attend college is much lower (NCES¹, 2013).

The development of social and emotional learning skills is necessary for college admission (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). By acquiring and applying SEL skills, students gain knowledge, attitudes, and skills that help them manage emotions, set and achieve goals, empathize with others, build and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). After getting admitted to college, the ability to manage time, study, make decisions, use critical thinking, and solve problems is crucial for success. According to researchers, students with these SEL competencies become better self-advocates, communicators, influential leaders, team players, and resilient, caring, and concerned community members (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000; Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004).

According to Hooker and Brand (2010), college-aspiring students with a strong foundation of college knowledge have a higher probability of enrolling in college after high school. Alternatively, students with limited college knowledge, no clear roadmap, or inadequate planning resources are disadvantaged. Consequently, a lack of college knowledge leads some college aspirants not to apply for or attend college. Kuh (2007) suggests that underserved students, in particular, suffer from a lack of clarity about what to expect. Therefore, the lack of guidance during the college application process, inadequate understanding regarding college funding, and inability to envision themselves

¹ National Center for Education Statistics

as college students are many constructs that distinguish college-aspiring students from college-ready applicants.

Rural Students and Educational Attainment

In 2021, the educational attainment rate of 25-29-year-olds holding bachelor's degrees was 38 percent (NCES, 2022). According to the literature, students' socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and gender influence their college enrollment decisions (Ross, Kena, Rathbun, KewalRamani, Zhang, Kristapovich & Manning, 2012). Consequently, low-income, Black, and Latinx students are less likely to earn a college degree (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Swanson, 2004). Rural students have to deal with all of these challenges as well as education barriers, making the pursuit of higher education in rural communities differ from those in non-rural areas (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes & Umbach, 2016). Rural students, for instance, have similar demographic and academic characteristics as students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, they lack school resources, take fewer academically rigorous courses, and have fewer aspirations for postsecondary education.

Rural students miss out on educational opportunities influencing their college choice due to a lack of resources (Secore, 2018). Rural students, for instance, rarely have the opportunity to tour college campuses. College access is a barrier for many rural students due to a lack of college planning and research resources (Smith, Gosky, & Li, 2022). Taking rural students to campuses is an integral part of a student's college selection process (Secore, 2018), and when rural schools need more resources, they miss out. The study by Smith, Gosky, and Li (2022) found that students who visited college

campuses were more likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions. Consequently, sponsoring college visits throughout high school could benefit students considering their options in their senior year (Smith, Gosky, & Li, 2022).

Rural students face significant challenges in higher education (Adelmann, 2002). Rural students make up a substantial portion of public school students but are less likely than their counterparts to attend college and earn a college degree (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Means et al., 2016). A quarter of public school students attend rural schools (NCES, 2013), and it is concerning that more rural students do not enroll in college.

An instrumental part of qualitative research is understanding how things in the environment relate to one another (Stake, 1995). This qualitative study aims to understand better how to help aspiring rural college students progress toward becoming college-ready candidates. Implementing innovative policies and programs to ensure all youth are college and career ready requires addressing the various factors influencing their educational paths (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Educational and economic barriers impede the learning progress of rural students (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Roscigno Tomaskovic-Devey & Crowley, 2006; Means et al., 2016). High school graduates and poor students from rural areas, for example, are at the most significant disadvantage regarding the opportunity to learn (Adelman, 2002).

The criteria for college enrollment extend beyond academic performance for researchers and policy analysts. To make informed college decisions, disengaged youth

need access to a broad range of resources and mentors. As a result, interventions need to target both school-aged and out-of-school youth (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

Emory's Oxford college summer experience program offers participants the opportunity to overcome educational and economic barriers. As an intervention, the program exposes high school students to a campus environment while instilling college knowledge and offering guidance through the college choice process. This study evaluates the impact of Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience Program on the college aspirations of eleven rural high school students through an analysis of focus groups, individual interviews, narrative writings, and surveys.

Statement of the Problem

Often, the most vulnerable people receive the least attention. The United States tends to overlook rural areas despite their significant student populations. One-third of American public school students live in small towns or rural areas. According to Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein (2012), the number of students enrolled in nonurban and nonsuburban schools outnumbers those in urban and suburban schools. Over 9.6 million students attend public schools in agricultural areas, or nearly 20 percent (Strange, 2011). In rural schools, two out of five students live below the poverty line, one in four are children of color, and one in eight has relocated within the last year (Strange et al., 2012).

The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2019 that rural adults aged 25 and over were more likely than anyone else to hold a high school diploma as their most advanced level of education (NCES, 2023). Specifically, 34 percent of adults in rural areas have a high school diploma (NCES, 2023). One-quarter of adults have a bachelor's degree or more in rural areas, much lower than the 37 percent who live in

suburban areas and cities (NCES, 2023). In addition, there are approximately ten million students in rural areas and 20 percent of secondary public schools (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring & Xie, 2007; Strange et al., 2012), making rural students' low college attendance rate alarming.

Several studies have demonstrated that campus visits provide a tangible means of making a good college decision in light of psychosocial factors (Nora, 2004; Okerson, 2016; Secore, 2018). By physically visiting a college campus, students can determine how the campus looks, how safe it feels, and how they envision themselves as students one day.

A few studies have explored college campuses and their influence on students. However, few studies examine college choice, rural students, and how campus visits affect them. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding practices, strategies, and opportunities that support college-aspiring rural students. The study also contributes to the limited research concerning the impact of campus environments on rural students' college choices.

Purpose and Context of the Study

This evaluation explores the experiences of eleven rural high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors participating in Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience Program. Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience Program is a new program available to Newton and Putnam county students. Students participate in the program to develop leadership skills and prepare for college. The program provides students with personal and professional enrichment tools that improve their understanding of college's importance. Students can also learn how to apply for college, how to succeed in college,

and how to prepare for college through workshops on admissions, financial aid, and writing essays. As part of the program, participants take classes taught by Oxford faculty, participate in recreational activities, and live on a college campus while interacting with students from another county (Williams, 2022). This project explores how rural students' exposure to a college campus and strategic programming affects their college aspirations.

Research Questions

This evaluation of Emory's Oxford program examines how the experience of being on a college campus and the strategies, practices, and opportunities surrounding a college-preparatory program impact rural students' college aspirations. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase college choice model was used to build a structural foundation for this study. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) believed that students gained a deeper understanding of higher education options and were affected by individual and institutional factors as they progressed through three sequential phases. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a three-phase model that includes (1) Aspiration, (2) Search, and (3) Choice. Aspiration refers to creating college plans before actually applying; Search refers to getting college information and applying; and Choice refers to selecting colleges (Klasik, 2012).

This program evaluation will address the following research questions:

1. What strategies, practices, and opportunities do Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college?
2. How do physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

Nature and Significance of Study

This evaluation of Emory's Oxford program follows a qualitative approach. Students aspiring to attend college were the target audience. Initially, Dr. Avis Williams and her design team from Putnam County Charter High School (PCCHS) selected 35 students to participate. A total of 24 participants participated in the program, 13 of whom participated in the original focus group. Individual interviews with 11 of the initial focus group followed. Participants shared their experiences by responding to semi-structured open-ended questions about Emory's Oxford this summer. Students also shared their college knowledge since the program began.

The evaluation examined how the program impacted rural high school students. The research addressed the following questions: (RQ1) What strategies, practices, and opportunities did Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college? Moreover, (RQ2) How do physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

Analysis of the data collected revealed a total of six dominant themes. In response to what are the strategies, practices, and opportunities that Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offers to rural students aspiring to attend college, the emerging themes included: (1) the application process, (2) financial aid and how to pay for college, (3) college entrance exams. Students generally needed to learn how to apply for college, pay, or apply for financial aid. As a result, students participating in the program wished to attend college, and an opportunity for growth could help them become college-ready.

In response to how physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students, the emerging themes included (4) campus impressions, (5) campus security, and (6) college life visualization. Even though many students had not experienced living in a college dorm, taking classes on campus, or eating in the college cafeteria, their impressions of the campus environment were strong. In their exposure to the college environment, students valued how they felt about the physical campus and facilities, how safe they felt, and whether they could envision themselves as students there in the future.

Significance of Study

It is beneficial for students to have clear expectations, guidance, and a blueprint during the college application, from the aspiration to the search and selection phases. As a result of fewer school resources, less parental education, lower postsecondary aspirations, and lower college attendance rates, rural and marginalized students are more likely to benefit because they lack the access and resources afforded to schools in larger cities and suburbs (Means et al., 2016). Providing rural students with early college knowledge, guidance, and a clear roadmap of expectations may increase their college enrollment. A structured summer experience program like Oxford's Emory College can also help improve college aspirations by providing early access to college campuses.

Putnam County Charter Schools' teachers and administrators might benefit from incorporating similar strategies and interventions into their curriculum. Putnam students will benefit from such programs and the relationships they form with mentors, counselors, professors, and staff at the university when applying to colleges.

This study may also be helpful to researchers and policymakers. For example, policymakers interested in improving educational outcomes in rural areas may find these

findings useful. As a result of this study, the federal government, states, and school districts can develop college access programs that are more effective. Furthermore, these findings may assist policymakers in improving educational equity and access for rural students.

Definition of Terms

To clarify terms used throughout this study, note the following definitions:

College/campus tour/visit - An introduction of the campus and facilities of a college or university to a prospective student. It can be in person or virtual. It is often recognized as an influential component of a student's college choice (Secore, 2018).

College choice - The progression a student undergoes as they transition from high school to college (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hanson & Litten, 1982).

College knowledge - A student's awareness of colleges' selection and admission processes, the financial options available to pay for college, the college preparatory academic requirements, and the cultural differences between secondary and postsecondary education (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

College readiness - is the level of preparation required for a student to enroll and succeed in college without remediation (Conley, 2007).

Federal Student Aid Application (FAFSA) - is the application used by all schools to award federal student financial aid. College financing begins with the submission of this federal form of financial assistance (Powell, Kerr & Wood, 2012).

Steps to college enrollment - Enrolling in college requires (at minimum) completing college preparatory coursework, taking a college entrance exam, and submitting an application (Holzman, Klasik & Baker, 2019).

Organization of the Dissertation

In this evaluation of Emory's Oxford program, six chapters are presented in a traditional structure, with an additional chapter focusing on the history of Putnam County, Georgia. Every chapter begins with a brief introduction and concludes with a summary or organization of what to expect.

Chapter 1 introduces this program evaluation. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research's background, motivation, and problem statement. The first chapter also includes the problem statement, the purpose and context of the study, the research questions, and the nature and significance of the study. Chapter 1 also contains definitions of terms used throughout the dissertation and the organization of the research.

For this study, Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature. The chapter begins with an introduction, shares college enrollment benefits, and provides information on rural college enrollment. The following section discusses college knowledge and the application process organized according to the Hossler-Gallagher (1987) model of college choice. A discussion of the barriers resulting from a lack of college knowledge is followed by a meeting of the benefits associated with exposure to a college environment. The final section before the conclusion discusses Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience program in detail.

Chapter 3 presents the history of Putnam County, Georgia. Following the introduction, there is a section on the chartering of Putnam County schools and school leadership through the charter and post-charter periods. Chapter 3 describes Putnam County Charter Schools' Experiential Learning Program, including local and remote activities.

Chapter 4 explains the research strategy and methodology, followed by a qualitative discussion of the data collected and analyzed. Chapter four presents the theoretical framework used to guide this study and to construct the structural framework that describes this research. In addition to pre-planning and organization, sampling and recruitment, site and population, and participant selection, chapter three also includes sections on participant selection. Chapter 4 also discusses this study's reliability, validity strategies, limitations, data collection, analysis, and summary.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings after collecting and analyzing data. Following an introduction, chapter five presents portraits of the eleven participants and results from thematic and quantitative data analyses. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the findings.

Chapter 6 is the final chapter which concludes everything in the study. After an introduction, Chapter 6 presents the researcher's summary of findings, conclusions, and implications for current and future research practices.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

College degrees are considered a worthwhile investment by many Americans. In the United States, a college education is often a prerequisite for financial success and social mobility, among other benefits. Several researchers have found that college graduates earn more than non-college graduates (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005; Carnevale, Cheah & Rose, 2011; Cunningham, 2006; Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner & Yagan, 2017; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). It is also well documented that a bachelor's degree is associated with higher earnings, lower government assistance dependency, and longer working lives (Wolfe & Haveman, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, Cunningham (2006) found that people with higher education levels had more leisure time, better health and longer lives, and better outcomes for their children.

College is not always accessible to students who wish to attend. Gaps in college enrollment fall along the lines of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and these gaps have remained stable despite policies aimed to narrow them (Holzman, Klasik & Baker, 2019). According to research, a student's socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity are among the primary factors predicting college enrollment (Perna & Kurban, 2013; Ross et al., 2012). One explanation for these enrollment disparities is the differences in college readiness (Holzman et al., 2019). Students who lack college readiness cannot enroll in and succeed in credit-based institutions (Conley, 2007). Marginalized students often lack the social capital to understand postsecondary education because they lack role models

that have attended higher education institutions and lack collective knowledge within their communities (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Aside from socioeconomic barriers based on racial and ethnic identity, rural students face educational barriers (Rosigno & Crowley, 2001; Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012). Among these barriers are lower household incomes, fewer parents' education, limited school resources, fewer challenging academic courses, fewer postsecondary ambitions, less academic achievement, and fewer college attendances and completions (Adelman, 2002; Byun et al., 2012). The resulting obstacles and challenges prevent many rural students from attending college or earning a degree (Adelman, 2002; Byun et al., 2012).

Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring & Xie (2007) estimate that 20.2 percent of U.S. secondary public schools serve rural students (Strange et al., 2012). It will be necessary to address some or all of these economic and educational barriers to improve rural students' college access. Providing additional support services to rural students can increase their college access (Choy, Horn, Nunez & Chen, 2000). It may also be necessary to increase the college knowledge of rural students who aspire to attend college and increase college access.

Only 31.8 percent of rural students enrolled in college compared to urban, suburban, and town² areas. As shown in table 1, college enrollment varies by age group, location, and gender among adults ages 18 to 24 (NCES, 2007). Rural students account for 27.1 percent of students enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs, according to

² Office of Management and Budget defines a town as either "fringe," "distant," or "remote" territories. Fringe is within an urban cluster ten miles from an urbanized area. Distant is within an urban group but greater than ten miles or 35 miles from an urbanized area. Remote is within an urban collection but more significant than 35 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2006).

Table 1. Compared to those attending in cities or suburbs, this is nearly 8.5 percent lower than urban, suburban, and town student enrollments. According to Strange et al. (2012), more than half of the students attend rural schools in Georgia. In addition, Georgia ranks third among the four states with the highest rural enrollment (Texas, North Carolina, and Ohio). In addition, approximately one-fourth of all U.S. rural students reside in Georgia, Texas, North Carolina, or Ohio (Strange et al., 2012).

Table 1

Comparison of 18-24-Year-Old Students Enrolled in Colleges or Universities³

Locale and sex	Percent enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate
Total	34.2
City	36.6
Suburban	36.6
Town	31.8
Rural ⁴	27.1

Table 2 below summarizes national statistics about rural areas as a reference point to facilitate comparisons of statewide rural regions. Table 2 incorporates data from National Rural Statistics (Strange et al., 2012). The table below spotlights nationally two

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2004 and the National Center for Education Statistics, 2007.

⁴ Census-defined rural as either “fringe” “distant” or remote” territories. Fringe is less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural environment that is less than or equal to two and one-half miles from an urban cluster. Distant is more than five miles but like 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than two and one-half miles but less than or equal to ten miles from an urban cluster. Remote is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban center (NCES, 2006).

essential statistics: the importance gauge⁵ and the rural graduation rate. According to Table 2, one-third of the schools are rural, educating almost ten million students.

Table 2

*National Rural Statistics for Importance and Educational Outcomes*⁶

Importance Gauge	
Percent rural schools:	33.0%
Percent small rural districts:	49.9%
Percent rural students:	20.2%
Number of rural students:	9,628,501
Percent state education funds to rural districts:	20.4%
Educational Outcomes Gauge	
Rural high school graduation rate:	77.5%

This program evaluation explores the impact of Emory's Oxford program. The summer program allows college-aspirational rural students to take classes, participate in workshops, reside on campus, and meet with admissions staff. This program evaluation contributes to the literature on strategies and practices for supporting rural college students. This research contributes to a growing body of theory-driven, empirical research on enrichment programs' importance in retaining and graduating underrepresented students and adding the concept of rurality. The following research questions guide this study:

⁵ The importance gauge is a measurement based on the importance of rural education in the 50 states

⁶ Data compiled from information collected and maintained by the NCES and the U.S. Census Bureau (Strange et al., 2012).

1. What strategies, practices, and opportunities do Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college?
2. How do physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

This literature review has nine sections, including an introduction and summary. This chapter explores several topics, including the benefits of attending college, the benefits of attending rural colleges, college knowledge, the application process, obstacles resulting from insufficient college knowledge, and the advantages of being exposed to a college environment.

The subsequent sections describe Putnam County's Summer Experience Program at Emory's Oxford College after discussing rurality, college enrollment, and college knowledge. Chapter two will end with a summary of broader discussion points.

The Benefits of College Enrollment

The community and individuals benefit from higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Carnevale et al., 2011; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Autor, 2014). The average college graduate moves up the social ladder faster and is more economically independent (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005; Carnevale et al., 2011; Cunningham, 2006; Autor, 2019). For instance, college graduates have better salaries, less government assistance, higher career mobility, and better job stability (Wolfe & Haveman, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). According to research, investment in education pays dividends for a lifetime to recoup education costs within 20 years of graduation (Bengali & Daly, 2014).

David Autor (2014) discusses the earnings gap between college graduates and non-college graduates in his study on the growing inequalities between college graduates

and high school graduates. Economists view a college education as an investment with a profitable return on investment by economists. In 2012, college-educated full-time, year-round employees earned \$17,411 less than those with high school diplomas in 1979. This gap reached \$34,969 in 2012, almost double what it was in 1979. There has been a continual decline in wage levels among workers without college degrees over the past four decades (Autor, 2019).

Another example of the financial benefits is that increased wages benefit those that do not have a college degree, have some college. For instance, according to the 2007 Census Bureau report, college graduates earn an average of \$55,000 yearly, regardless of whether or not bachelor's degree holders continue their education. In 2018, bachelor's degree holders without an advanced degree earned \$24,900 more than high school graduates (Ma, Pender & Welch, 2019). Moreover, this is evident across different socioeconomic lines. For example, Ma, Pender & Welch (2016; 2019) examined these benefits by gender. Compared with those with high school diplomas, women with bachelor's degrees between the ages of 25 and 34 made \$52,500 in 2018, while those with high school diplomas earned \$29,800. In addition, they found that men with bachelor's degrees earned \$63,300, while those with high school diplomas earned only \$39,800 (Ma et al., 2019). Even though Ma, Pender, and Welch (2016) found persistent disparities between socioeconomic groups in college participation and completion, they argue that improving access to postsecondary education for all who can benefit is essential, given the wide range of benefits college has to offer.

Community college graduates and junior college students can also benefit financially. One economist studied the profitability of community colleges and found a

direct correlation between formal education and income (Romano, 2011). For example, community college graduates experience more significant gains and benefits over their lifetime than high school graduates but less than those with bachelor's degrees. In 2011, Belfield & Bailey (2011) found that those with associate's degrees in technical or health fields earned more than those with bachelor's degrees in humanities. Depending on the field, associate degrees can be more lucrative than bachelor's degrees.

Degree holders are more competitive than non-degree holders in the workplace. Goldin & Katz (2007) report that in 2009, bachelor's degree holders earned 84 percent more than high school graduates. College graduates had an unemployment rate of just over four percent in 2011, while high school graduates had an unemployment rate of almost nine percent (Avery & Turner, 2012). Studies have shown that individuals with bachelor's degrees earn significantly more than those without (Carnevale, Cheah & Rose, 2011; Schmitt & Boushey, 2012; Perna, 2000). By the end of the 1970s, college graduates earned more than 25% more income than high school graduates, and by the late 2000s, the pay premium was 60% (Schmitt & Boushey, 2012).

The benefits of a college education also extend beyond earning money. In their study, Ma et al. (2019) found that a college degree is also more likely to live a healthier lifestyle due to reduced healthcare costs. Sixty-nine percent of 25–34-year-olds with at least a bachelor's degree exercised vigorously at least once a week in 2018 (Ma et al., 2019). Children of parents with higher educational levels are also more likely to participate in educational activities with their family members. According to a study (Lawrence, 2017), people with higher levels of education behave healthier than those with lower levels of education. For instance, graduates with more education tend to be

better off financially, professionally, socially, and psychologically; thus, degree attainment affects their health behavior, according to Lawrence (2017).

A college education can also have psychological and civic benefits. According to Oreopoulos and Petronijevic's (2013) study, attending college has many benefits beyond financial ones. Students enjoy peer interaction, participating in clubs and sports they might otherwise be unable to access, and satisfying their intellectual curiosity. For instance, colleges' civic education missions promote civic engagement as part of a well-rounded education (Abel & Deitz, 2014). As a result, higher-educated individuals are more likely to engage in civic engagement. A study by Ma et al., 2019 found that 73% of Americans aged 25-44 with at least a bachelor's degree voted in 2016, compared with 41% of high school graduates.

The advantages of attending college are numerous. The studies discussed above examine the causal impact of college on earnings and social mobility (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Wolfe & Haveman, 2002; Scott & Leonhardt, 2005; Cunningham, 2006; Carnevale et al., 2011; Autor, 2014; Autor, 2019), unemployment rates and lower government spending (Trostel, 2010; Ma et al., 2019). Additionally, noneconomic benefits exist (Lawrence, 2017; Abel & Deitz, 2014; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Even students who are not interested in or cannot complete a four-year college degree seem to benefit from completing a two-year degree (Romano, 2011). Community college graduates earn more than high school graduates in their lifetimes but less than those with bachelor's degrees (Romano, 2011; Belfield & Bailey, 2011). This income gap highlights postsecondary education benefits (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Carnevale et al., 2011; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Autor, 2014; Autor, 2019).

Rural College Enrollment

College attainment rates are generally lower in rural areas than urban areas (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012). According to the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, the percentage of rural adults with a bachelor's degree or more increased by six percent from 2000 to 2019. However, the number of adults without a high school diploma or equivalent decreased by 11 percent (USDA ERS, 2021). Essentially, the percentage of adults in suburban and urban areas with a bachelor's degree or higher is 25 percent, compared to nearly 40 percent in suburban and urban areas (NCES, 2022).

Researchers have shown that rural youth are increasingly interested in attending college (Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin & Weiss, 2013) but less likely to apply (Provasnik et al., 2007). Rural students may have lower college attendance rates for a variety of reasons. Lack of institutional support may make it difficult for students to pursue their educational dreams (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Rural schools usually have academic barriers that students from larger cities, towns, or suburbs may not face. There is a limited amount of advanced high school coursework available to rural youth, according to Planty, Provasnik, & Daniel (2007). Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer & Hutchins (2011) suggest that low salaries, inadequate resources, and geographical isolation might make it difficult for some teachers. There is also a lower prevalence of academic advisors and postsecondary preparation activities such as campus visits, campus tours, and career exploration for rural students, according to Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece (2011).

Proximity and geography also play a role in a rural student's decision to enroll in college. Rural students are more likely to attend college in their home counties and

remain there through age 25 than urban students. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data for 1991 in calculating this table, Gibbs (1995) reports. A third of the 75 percent who left to go to college returned home by 25. In 2012, Byun, Meece, and Irvin studied rural students' educational attainment. Thirty percent of rural students earn a bachelor's degree or higher, and rural high school graduates are less likely to stay continuously enrolled in postsecondary education than their urban and suburban counterparts (Byun, Irvin & Meece, 2015).

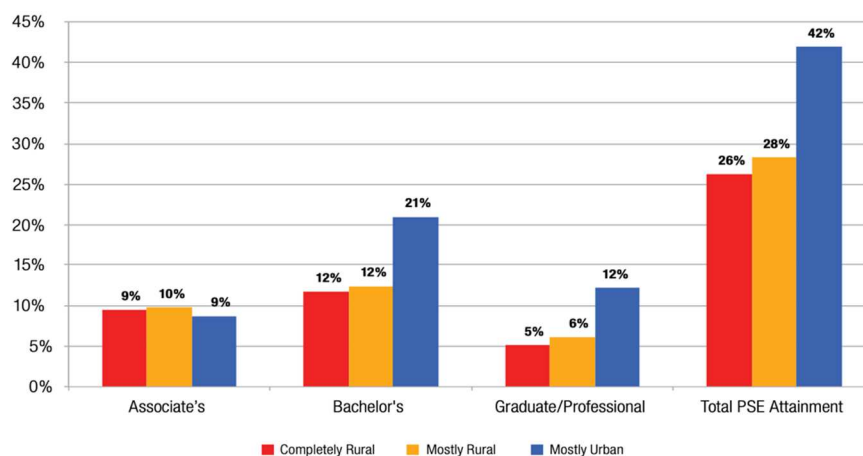
For many rural students, location and distance are more consequential than college preparation, according to Hillman and Weichman (2016). In their study, Hillman and Weichman found that rural families earn 20 to 25 percent less than urban families, making college more expensive than non-rural families. Rural students may face higher costs due to distance from home if they attend a college that is far away. The added expense may also explain why rural students choose not to venture far from home when attending college. According to Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, and Hurtado (2014), 57.4 percent of incoming first-year students participate in public four-year colleges within 50 miles of their permanent residences (Eagan et al., 2014).

Another factor influencing low college attainment rates in rural youth is lower aspirations (Ali & Saunders, 2006). The work typically found in rural communities is service, labor, and agriculture, requiring little or less postsecondary education (Elder & Conger, 2000). Distinct racial, economic, and regional characteristics are associated with rural counties. A majority of the economy in Putnam County, Georgia, is based on agriculture and dairy farming, which falls into a low-income area (USDA ERS, 2021). Because these jobs do not require a college degree, many students do not seek them.

Rural working adults with a high school diploma earned \$30,941 in 2019, an increase of \$5,295 over rural working adults without a high school diploma or equivalent (USDA ERS, 2021). According to Figure 1, 22 percent of working-age adults in rural areas earned at least a bachelor's degree in 2015, compared with 42 percent in urban areas (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). In predominantly urban counties, one-third of adults hold a bachelor's degree, compared to 17 percent in totally rural counties and 18 percent in largely rural areas.⁷

Figure 1

Percentage of Adults Ages 25 to 64 With at Least an Associate Degree by Rurality⁸



Factors related to family and community characterize rural areas and contribute to college enrollment numbers. Connections to family, community, and place are significant factors in rural students' career and educational aspirations and college selection decisions (Irvin et al., 2011). A deeper look at the rural family structure is necessary

⁷ The U.S. Census Bureau classifies counties into three rurality categories: completely rural, mostly rural, and mostly urban (Ruiz & Perna, 2017).

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). American Community Survey 2015 (5-year estimates).

before examining the relationship between college enrollment and rurality. A student's childhood environment influences college participation, economic mobility, and other outcomes (Chetty & Hendren, 2017). Family and community shape the characteristics and values of students. Family background characteristics are important determinants of educational goals and attainment. Parents' education is one of many factors connected to postsecondary enrollment (Choy, 2001). According to Choy, as parents' education increases, so does the student's likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education (Choy, 2001). Choy studied the enrollment rates among 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not attend college. He found that the enrollment rate increased to 75 percent among parents with some college experience and to 93 percent among those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. Based on Choy's study, children whose parents have attained higher academic levels are more likely to perceive college as a reasonable goal their families will support.

Table 3

Patterns of College and Post-College Mobility for Rural Attendees⁹

		County		Commuting zone	
College	After College Percent	Home	Away	Home	Away
Home	25	16	9	29	11
Away	75	24	51	20	40
Returners/Stayers		40		49	
Leavers		60		51	

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) tracks young adults' educational attainment and location. Using NLSY data, Table 3 illustrates the patterns of

⁹ Calculated using the 1991 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Gibbs, 1995).

rural students' post-college mobility. According to Table 3, 31 percent of rural college graduates return home after graduation. The number of students returning from other counties (49 percent) was lower than that of students who stayed in their county (20 percent).

College Knowledge and the Application Process

The transition from wanting to attend college to being prepared and successfully enrolled can sometimes require innovative policies and programs that address multiple factors that influence young people's educational paths (Hooker & Brand, 2010). College knowledge is essential for high school students who want to attend college. According to Hooker and Brand (2010), college knowledge includes understanding the admissions process, financial options for paying for postsecondary education, academic requirements for college-level work, and cultural differences between high school and college. College knowledge increases the chances of students succeeding during the college application process. In addition, providing students with college application information and fostering a college-going culture can be achieved through college counselors or coaching programs (Klasik, 2012).

Getting to high school from college requires more than just college aspirations. College-aspiring students need comprehensive resources and support to make informed choices about their postsecondary education and careers (Hooker & Brand, 2010). A broad range of factors facilitates the transition from high school to college, including parents, guidance counselors, professors, college admissions personnel, mentors, and university orientation staff (Rafes, Malta & Siniscarco, 2014; Smith & Zhang, 2009). In other words, aspirational college students need to research, choose, and apply to colleges

and depend on these groups of people for support. In addition to the support required by the parents, guidance counselors, university professors, mentors, and staff, these students will also need to connect high school students with colleges, professors, and other college students (Kitchen, Sonnert & Sadler, 2020) as part of the process. Hooker and Brand (2010) describe how acquiring college knowledge requires practical information about planning and enrolling in college and developing a college-going identity through exposure to college. They emphasize the importance of not just academic preparation but also academic success behaviors. These behaviors are crucial to college success, including study skills, self-monitoring, and other practical learning habits.

Hossler-Gallagher Model of College Choice

Choosing a college involves multiple college aspiration stages, ultimately resulting in a specific university, college choice, or specialized training (Hossler, Braxton, Coopersmith, 1989). For many years, researchers have studied college choice to examine the process of how aspiring college applicants choose their colleges (Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). The college choice decision is complicated despite ample research on college choice and existing models since students' paths to higher education and influences on their decisions are often unique.

The Hossler-Gallagher (1987)'s model, which organizes Putnam County students' transition from high school to college, guides this study. Hossler et al. (1989) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) summarize the college choice process succinctly and serve as a framework for this study. Three sequential phases shape a student's college choice in the Hossler-Gallagher model: Aspiration, Search, and Choice. The three phases are

Aspiration, Search, and Choice. In the Aspiration stage, aspiring college students develop and research college plans; in the Search stage, students obtain information and submit college applications; in the Choice stage, students select which colleges they will attend.

Several intersecting factors affect students' path from high school to college (Cox, 2016; Perna, 2006). These factors significantly impact the choice and enrollment of colleges or the decision to go to college. For example, Means et al. (2016) report that socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and other demographic factors affect students' college choices. Black, Latinx, and low-income students have less access to college funding; their high school curriculum is less rigorous, and they do not know how to apply for and receive financial aid (Means et al., 2016; Cox, 2016; Perna & Kurban, 2013; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Venegas, 2007).

Therefore, it may not be that the students did not aspire to attend college but needed the college knowledge blueprint or resources to transition effectively.

Stage 1: Aspiration

Research and Planning for College

In the Hossler and Gallagher Model (1987), aspirations are similar to educational goals. It differs, however, in that it focuses on the decision to attend college rather than the intention (Hossler et al., 1999). Students in the Aspirations stage should research and plan for college before applying and enrolling. In a 2001 Cabrera & La Nasa study, students are most likely to enroll in college after taking courses that minimally prepare them for college, graduating from high school, and applying. One to two years before their admissions process, students usually begin the process of researching and planning.

To attend four-year colleges, students must sit for entrance exams, meet with college counselors, write application essays, and apply for financial aid a year in advance (Klasik, 2012). In terms of academic preparation, the first step in college transition is choosing the colleges that best match the student's needs. Among the options are community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), public, private, or research-based institutions, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division schools, and Ivy League institutions.

A student in their sophomore and junior year of high school goes through many development patterns during the Aspirations stage, according to Hossler et al. (1999). In this stage, students' parents, family members, and peers provide the most information about college; students develop a list of desirable college characteristics, and their aspirations remain stable or increase.

Standardized Testing and Academic Preparation

As part of the quantitative measurement package for college applications, aptitude tests offer empirical evidence that students can demonstrate what they learned in school. Colleges expect seniors to complete either the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT) during their junior and senior years. The SAT is a test of academic aptitude that measures a student's ability to learn, designed to provide information as independently as possible from high school curricula (McManus, 1991). The ACT is a test of educational development and measures how much the student has already learned, mirroring the high school experience because it covers most concepts taught in most secondary schools (McManus, 1991). Beginning at least a year before college enrollment, aspiring college students must take academic achievement tests.

Students take these tests in the fall of their junior year. Both tests determine college admissions and merit-based scholarships, are three hours long, excluding essays, and cover reading and math. However, the ACT also covers science. Students must register to take either test, and a registration fee is required. Typically, the student or family covers this fee. Students who face financial barriers to taking the SAT and ACT can request a fee waiver through their schools to cover 100 percent of the cost of testing. Also worthy of mention is test preparation. In preparation for the tests, private test preparation is an available option for a fee, but the SAT College Board offers free test prep. The SAT College Board has partnered with Khan Academy to give personalized online test preparation help to any student.

Knowing what steps to take, when, and how to handle them is the key to a successful college application process (Holzman, Klasik & Baker, 2020). It includes researching and planning the best schools, visiting campuses, preparing academically, and taking one or more standardized tests. Atkinson & Geiser (2009) suggest that standardized tests can augment grades in predicting college readiness. A recent study (Hurwitz, Smith, Niu & Howell, 2014; Hyman, 2017; Klasik, 2013) found that students who did not take standard testing had a lower chance of enrolling in four-year colleges until the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. Several schools have dropped standardized testing requirements since the pandemic. Even when such tests are not required, testing policies vary. There are two key terms to pay attention to test-blind and test-optional. A test-blind process ensures that submitted scores do not count. A test-optional college does not require ACT or SAT scores but may consider them if offered with the application (Claybourn, 2022).

Second, according to Conley (2007), an academically prepared student must have the necessary skills to be college-ready. Third, students should maintain a competitive grade point average to prepare academically for college enrollment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Klasik, 2012). According to Lewin (2014), grades predict college success more accurately than standardized test scores. Since academic achievement measures often predict postsecondary enrollment and completion, students should have competitive grade point averages in core math, science, language arts, and reading courses.

Students typically develop a more extensive college list once they become juniors, but the types of colleges remain similar and stable. Hossler et al. (1999) believe high school students' aspirations increase when they become juniors. Junior year is also when students expand their college characteristics and circle of influence list. During a student's junior year, Hossler et al. (1999) note that teachers, counselors, and college materials become their primary sources of information. Moreover, students become involved in researching colleges and financial aid and obtaining information about them. As a final step, students begin taking the SAT or ACT in the spring semester.

Stage 2: Search

Interactions with Colleges: Tours, Visits, Programs

Hossler et al. (1999) describe the Search stage as when students inquire about college opportunities. This phase is regarded as the most significant by Hossler and Gallagher since it is the most amenable to intervention (Hossler et al., 1999), and the student's educational aspirations tend to remain steady. Students typically visit college campuses during this stage, which increases the interaction between students and institutions. Campus tours expose students to the academic community at a particular

institution while communicating the institution's norms, values, and beliefs, according to Kitchen, Sonnert, and Sadler (2020). During the campus visit, students understand the campus's atmosphere and size. Campus visits allow students to meet professors, learn about academic programs, and experience what it is like to be a college student (Lytle, 2012). According to the College Board and U.S. News and World Report (College Board, 2016; Witte, 2016), students should try to visit campuses to observe classes and speak with prospective students, stay in residence halls, eat in dining halls, and meet admissions and financial aid officers (College Board, 2016; O'Shaughnessy, 2011).

Students can also tour campuses virtually if access to the campus is an obstacle. Nowadays, social media allows students to take virtual tours of colleges 200 miles away from a computer laptop in their high school library. Secore (2018) refers to this as a "high-tech" way to use technology to experience a virtual campus tour using interactive multimedia. However, physically visiting the campus through a "high-touch" experience is preferred. According to Secore (2018), the campus visit provides students with a highly personalized opportunity to make a better college choice based on personal and psychological factors and a sense of how they will fit in once enrolled (Nora, 2004; Okerson, 2016). Virtual tours cannot accomplish the in-person feeling a student can get from a live visit and campus experience. According to researchers, campus visits are the most influential source of information for students when selecting a college (Brown, 2010; Okerson, 2016). In this way, in-person visits are more beneficial than virtual ones.

The Application Process

A college or university's Common Application, also known as the "common app," is the popular platform used by students, guidance counselors, parents, and teachers

(Claybourn, 2022) to apply to college. Students use the common application for college admissions at more than 1000 member colleges. Over 250 public universities accept the Common App, 12 Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and over 400 institutions with no application fees (Claybourn, 2022b). There are some exceptions, as not all colleges accept the Common app. For example, some states like California and Texas require students to apply through the statewide application system. Some well-known private colleges, like Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Georgetown University, only accept applications through their websites (Claybourn, 2022b).

A college application fee varies based on the school, but experts estimate it ranges between \$50 and \$90, though it may amount to as much as \$100 in some cases.

Prospective students should check college websites to determine the individual fees. Students from low-income families can apply to college for free in various ways. In addition to asking their guidance counselor about fee waivers, applicants can ask college admissions officers about fee waivers and apply to colleges that do not charge an application fee (Nimesheim, 2022).

Applicants must submit the application, extracurricular activities, summer activities, essays, honors, disciplinary infractions, grades and test scores, and application fees. Application completion is the student's responsibility. The guidance counselor submits high school transcripts and mid-year grade reports after the first semester and year-end reports at the end of the school year. The counselor typically offers a secondary school report and a letter of recommendation for the admissions officer to better understand the student's academic history. Since colleges ask for two or three letters of

recommendation (Claybourn, 2022), teachers and community leaders familiar with the applicant's work can write recommendation letters on the student's behalf.

College application processes can be intimidating for students without parents or siblings who have experience with them. Many students need help navigating the college application process successfully due to a lack of college knowledge. The lack of knowledge about college application policies, the absence of sports and extracurricular activities, and the lack of research on colleges make students less likely to be competitive candidates (Venezia & Kirst, 2005).

Stage 3: Choice

The Choice stage of the Hossler and Gallagher Model assumes students have made application decisions consistent with the search stage: they apply to schools they have previously selected and in a preference order consistent with the selection order. For example, if a student selects four colleges during the search stage, they might only apply to two and prefer only one. During the choice stage, students compare the academic and social attributes of each college they have applied to and seek the best value with the most significant benefits.

Typically, students wait patiently for the decision once they have submitted their applications, usually by the middle of October for early choices or by the end of February for regular decisions. Admissions offices can make final decisions as early as November or April. After hearing back from all the schools, they applied to; students should decide where they want to attend. Often, schools require an enrollment fee and confirmation to hold their spot.

Students reported concerns about affordability and the cost of college in their study on race/ethnicity and rurality. For example, a \$100 enrollment deposit and misunderstandings about college costs were among the barriers for many rural students (Means et al., 2016). Student financial aid covers tuition, fees, room and board, textbooks, and transportation for higher education students and their families (Powell et al., 2021). Financial aid knowledge becomes essential during these times when assessing college costs.

Powell et al. (2021) recommend that students and their parents become familiar with financial aid terminology and types of aid, including grants, scholarships, federal and private loans, and work-study. For their students to receive financial assistance for college, parents must complete the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and apply for financial aid and scholarships. Many schools and colleges that use the FAFSA to determine support set earlier deadlines (Powell et al., 2021). The purpose of college financial aid is to cover the expenses associated with higher education, including tuition and fees, room and board, books, and other coursework supplies. In addition, the FAFSA is available on the US Department of Education website, and families can complete the form as early as October 1 for the following academic year.

Some schools require students to complete a supplemental form known as the College Scholarship Service Profile, or CSS Profile¹⁰, to determine how to distribute their funds. Unlike the FAFSA, this form is more detailed and takes more time to fill out. CSS Profiles initially cost \$25 to submit and \$16 for each additional report. States are free for

¹⁰ CSS Profile is an application for financial aid required by 300 colleges, universities, and scholarship organizations.

undergraduate students with family incomes under \$100,000 (Powell et al., 2021). They can waive the fees sometimes.

Barriers to College Success

Despite these clear indicators, many high school graduates are not college-ready (Greene & Forster, 2003). Gaps exist between what high schools require for students to graduate and what is required of four-year traditional college students to persist and graduate outside of academics. The number of minority and low-income students completing each step of the application process (such as meeting minimum academic requirements, taking the SATs, and submitting an application) is lower than the number of White and higher-income students (Avery & Kane, 2004; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997; Klasik, 2012).

Racial and economic backgrounds exacerbate college enrollment disparities and aspirations (Klasik, 2012). Among the factors that affect college choice and access are race/ethnicity and rurality, according to Means et al. (2016). In addition, rural students face several obstacles to pursuing higher education, including leaving home, inadequate guidance, and financial aid. This matters since college and career counseling, learning resources, and college-level coursework correlate with increased college enrollment rates (Mokher, Lee & Sun, 2019). Furthermore, since not every school district has the resources to prioritize college enrollment, not all students know the steps needed to complete college enrollment. While many families and youth understand the importance of college enrollment, they lack the necessary academic and social preparation (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Because of this lack of social capital, low-income and first-generation college students find it challenging to apply to, enroll in, and persist in college due to the

inability to comprehend postsecondary education and a lack of role models who have attended college. Some obstacles students face are a blueprint, academic preparation, paying for it, and what happens after acceptance. Below is a breakdown of some barriers that affect students' aspirations toward college.

Inadequate College Knowledge

A lack of college knowledge is often a barrier to postsecondary education for rural youth because they face similar barriers as first-generation, low-income, and marginalized students (Hooker & Brand, 2010). The academic preparation, support, and resources necessary for rural students to succeed in and complete postsecondary education are often lacking. Therefore, rural students are less likely to attend college and earn a degree due to a lack of college knowledge (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012).

As previously mentioned, it is highly beneficial for students to discuss college choices with counselors and parents. Students should develop a college application strategy through continued dialogue with a school guidance counselor during the college selection process. Parents and counselors with college knowledge or schools with a strategy plan to equip students with the necessary college knowledge are more likely to enroll successfully. In some schools, however, this is not possible, which impacts students' behavior based on their social class or cultural background (McDonough, 1997).

Counselors, teachers, and peers can guide college application procedures, according to McDonough's (1997) concept of organizational habitus (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The school influences students' educational trajectory by shaping and informing

their college choice process (Means et al., 2016). It can be challenging to strategize the application process if the student lives in a rural or small town without support systems and resources. Although rural students may have emotional support and encouragement, they may lack substantial resources like test prep, transportation to tour colleges, or a checklist of the following steps on the application journey, making the journey more challenging.

According to researchers, students need to know what steps to complete and when and how to successfully navigate the college application process (Holzman, Klasik & Baker, 2019). Getting into college requires understanding how the application and enrollment processes work. As a result, students can formulate a plan of action based on this information. Since this knowledge tends to be more common among high socioeconomic status populations like children whose parents attended college (McDonough, 1997), a lack of college knowledge is a significant barrier.

While many families and youth understand the importance of college enrollment, they lack the necessary academic and social preparation (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds may find applying to, enrolling, and persisting in college challenging. In part because they cannot comprehend postsecondary education and lack role models with college degrees.

Among the barriers mentioned previously is the lack of understanding young people and their families have about the importance of college but not how to get there (Hooker & Brand, 2010). In light of this, many students aspire to attend a four-year college but have little knowledge of the academic and social preparation required to make a successful transition (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

Financial Barriers

Generally, low-income and minority students have less information and fewer options for college search (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, Moeller, Roddie, Gillam & Patton, 2008).

Studies have also shown that low-income students and minorities begin the application process later, which leads to fewer submitted applications (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; McDonough, 1997).

The availability of financial aid influences student decision-making and college enrollment, according to Perna (2000). Financial aid plays a significant role in African American students and their college admissions decision-making processes (Davis, Nagle, Richards, & Awokoya, 2013). According to Perna (2000), African American students are more likely to receive student loan funding than students from other racial groups.

Students in rural areas face several obstacles to obtaining an education and financial resources (Adelman, 2002; Byun et al., 2012; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006). In rural areas, students tend to come from lower-income families, have parents with less education, fewer resources in schools and have lower aspirations for postsecondary education. There might be differences in priorities from one community to another, which could explain this. The preferences of schools and districts differ, for example, due to priorities in education (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Rather than focusing on college recruitment, some high schools place greater emphasis on job placement or enrollment in the military. As a result of this prioritizing, fewer rural students attend college while also serving as a barrier to college-bound rural students. Adelman (2002) suggests that rural high schools do not prioritize

providing paths to higher education as much as other schools because rural students are less likely to attend college.

Lack of financial aid knowledge is a significant barrier for college aspirational students. Based on their study investigating the barriers rural African American high school students face with college access, Means et al. (2016) found that students commonly misunderstand the cost of college. Means et al. found that many students needed help understanding financial aid and Pell Grants and how they applied it to their lives. Although many students knew the terms, they needed to become more familiar with the connection between financial aid and FASFA. Consequently, only a few students understood that financial assistance enables them to finance their higher education (Means et al., 2016).

Post-Acceptance Barriers

Getting accepted to college continues beyond just getting accepted. College knowledge is essential to know that students need to accept the invitation to attend, pay enrollment fees to hold their spots, and devise a plan to pay for attendance. For some students, the steps that follow acceptance have the most impact. Knowing how to pay for the costs is critical in choosing a school. For low-income students, the FASFA is essential for applying for financial aid and prioritizing college costs and expenses (De La Rosa, 2006; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Flint, 1993).

Among the three steps mentioned previously, each one creates a different type of barrier to students aspiring to postsecondary education (Klasik, 2012). One student may find accepting the offer of admission and paying the enrollment fees easy, while another may find them challenging. Some steps require considerable effort, while others require

academic preparation and prior experience. Consider the FASFA. Students mention FAFSA forms in research as complicated and time-consuming to complete (George-Jackson & Gast, 2015; Davidson, 2013; Feeney & Heroff, 2013; Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos & Sanbonmatsu, 2012). Apart from the difficulties in completing the form, many students and families lack knowledge about financial aid and whether or not they should apply. For low-income and first-generation students, a lack of financial assistance information is more likely to result in noncompliance with the FAFSA.

Students' primary sources of financial aid information are their parents, counselors, high school teachers, websites, and other Internet sources of higher education (George-Jackson & Gast, 2015). It is most effective to take an individual approach to complete FASFA and financial aid forms (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Davidson, 2013), but it creates a barrier in areas of limited access.

Rural students have found that intervention programs that help them overcome these barriers are effective. College counseling, learning resources, and access to college-level coursework increase the chances of rural students enrolling and completing college-level coursework (Smith, Gosky & Li, 2022). The same applies to students facing economic barriers. Choy et al. (2000) believe that students from low-income backgrounds whose parents did not attend college may also benefit from additional support services. Per Choy et al. (2000), it is therefore beneficial to implement some programs to help students transition from high school to college.

Among the barriers mentioned previously is the lack of understanding young people and their families have about the importance of college but not how to get there (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Several studies have shown that rural high schools offer fewer

rigorous college preparatory courses than urban high schools (Ruiz & Perna, 2017; Byun et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2012), putting students at a structural disadvantage. Parents who did not attend college or did not have the resources to attend college may also have contributed to the problem. Because parents who do not attend college are less likely to set high educational goals for their children, according to Byun et al. (2012).

As a result of these factors, the environment in which a student grows up influences college participation, economic mobility, and other outcomes (Chetty & Hendren, 2017). Many factors contribute to the underrepresentation of rural students in higher education, including family characteristics, school characteristics, and funding (Schmitt & Boushey, 2012; Reardon, 2011). Before studying college enrollment and rurality, it is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of rural culture and family structure.

Perceived Lack of Administrative Support

Perceived educational barriers can prevent youth from formulating or pursuing postsecondary aspirations (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994). During data collection, some students felt their schools or counselors did not provide support through the college application process. Upon asking if they had met with their counselors to discuss colleges, many students indicated they had not. The emerging theme is that students perceive themselves as working in silos, not that there was a lack of support or even an abundance of support. According to some researchers, a typical educational barrier is students' perception that they lack support (Lent et al., 1994). For rural students and many others, perception is reality.

It is particularly significant to identify individual differences in perceived barriers for young students experiencing difficulties achieving their postsecondary goals (Brown & Lent, 1996). Despite interest in college among rural young people (Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin & Weiss 2013), the number of applicants is lower (Provasnik et al., 2007). The belief that no one can help during a difficult application period may discourage the rural student from progressing through the college choice.

Students may find it challenging to pursue their educational dreams due to a lack of institutional support (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). The academic environment for rural students can be challenging due to limited resources and limitations on living and working in a rural area. Irvin et al. (2011) suggest that teachers may face difficulties because of low salaries, inadequate resources, and geographical isolation. There are few academic advisors and counselors (Griffin, Hutchins & Meece, 2013) due to the low demand for college counselors at rural schools. In rural areas, students are more likely to join the military or enter the workforce than attend college (Farmer, Dadisman, Latendresse, Thompson, Irvin & Zhang., 2006).

Benefits of Exposure to a College Environment

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) assert that students gained a greater understanding of the higher education options available as they progressed through the college choice model's predisposition, search, and choice phases. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) describe the second phase, or search, as the initial interaction with the institutions to gather more information. During the search phase, students can narrow the number of schools to meet their preferences best. The narrowing down of schools helps to create the desired choice

set. In the search phase, there is still a possibility of other college options, demonstrating that the search process could still influence whether a student desires to attend college.

Campus visits are essential because they allow students to see which colleges best suit their individual needs as students and individuals (Secore, 2018). To feel satisfied with their college choice, high school students need to receive a highly personalized experience (Secore, 2018). The college campus experience is most beneficial during the search phase. During this phase, students assess colleges for their characteristics and attributes, compare them, and evaluate them (Hossler et al., 1989). Colleges seek students who align with their mission and values, while students search for colleges that fit their values and priorities. In other words, during phase two, students and institutions seek each other out. Students can also use the search phase to select only schools that match their preferences, reducing the number of schools from all to a select few. A choice set can achieve the desired outcome by narrowing down the schools.

A college tour is integral to recruitment (Secore, 2018; Swanson, 2021; Smith, Gosky, & Li, 2022). There is significant value in visiting campus before applying to a college or university, according to researchers and administrators alike. According to students in their study of over 1500 students, campus visits were an instrumental factor in the decision-making process for prospective college students (Yost & Tucker, 1995).

The process of determining college admissions involves several frameworks (Chapman, 1984; Jackson, 1982; Hansen & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The common element for these frameworks is exposure to colleges by visiting campuses, even though each outlines the selection process as having distinct phases. Programs that provide access to students are crucial in helping shape their view of themselves as college

students (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Swanson et al., 2021; Smith, Gosky & Li, 2022).

Prospective students should take advantage of the opportunity to visit a college campus (College Board, 2016; Witte, 2016; O'Shaughnessy, 2011). Potential students and their families can gain a deeper understanding of the college environment and post-graduation success by visiting college campuses (Secore, 2018). Having students engage in active learning through first-hand experience may help them understand something new, and college tours are the ideal experiential learning opportunity. Rural students with limited access to colleges will find this particularly meaningful. Those with no family members who have attended college may find college irrelevant or distant in a small town where college campuses are merely backdrops for television. This is why high school students with parents who did not attend college and face challenges accessing college may benefit from additional support services (Choy et al., 2000). Students also gain a deeper understanding of a school's values, beliefs, and traditions by visiting college campuses, according to Magolda (2000).

For a college-bound first-generation student, campus visits are crucial, mainly if the student has never visited a college or has never had a family member attend one. Students can identify mentors and role models within their fields of interest through the interactions they experience during campus visits. To inform their attitudes about a particular college as they research their paths, students are encouraged to ask questions regarding the college experience (Lytle, 2012).

The campus tour allows students to meet experienced professionals and build connections, in addition to seeing how the campus looks and the general feeling of comfort they experience on campus; according to Okerson (2016), students' impressions

of college are affected by a college visit. Studies found that programs that allow high school students to attend college positively affect their self-perceptions (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Swanson, Kopotic, Zamarro, Mills, Greene & Witter, 2021).

Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience Program

Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience program was created in partnership with the Newton County School System and the Putnam County Charter School System. Rising high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors could participate in the free, weeklong program on Oxford's campus. According to the Oxford College News Archive written on May 26, 2022, for one week, students had the opportunity to explore choosing the right college fit, navigating the application and financial aid process, taking college courses, and preparing for a smooth transition from high school to college (Oxford College News Archive, 2022). According to the Oxford News Archive (2022), this program aimed to expose 60 local high school students, 30 from Newton County School System (NCSS) and 30 from Putnam County Charter School System (PCCSS), to campus life, college-level academics, and college readiness activities on a college campus. During the ceremony to sign the agreements of mutual understanding, Oxford College Dean Doug Hicks, NCSS Superintendent Samantha Fuhrey, and PCCSS Superintendent Eric Area expressed their excitement about the pilot program and how it will benefit students. Dean Doug Hicks of Emory's Oxford College explains that the program is "structured to offer sessions on applying to and preparing for college, and succeeding" during college. Laura Gafnea, Oxford Director of Community Relations, adds that the value of this program is "an effective outreach opportunity to welcome students to the

campus and teach them about the process of transitioning to higher education" and also how "higher education can help them meet students goals in life."

The Rev. Dr. Avis Williams, an Oxford alumna and Community Liaison for the PCCHS community liaison at PCCHS was instrumental in putting the program together. Dr. Williams worked directly with counselors and teachers from Putnam and Newton County schools to identify students who would benefit from this experience. Dr. Williams is also credited for arranging a similar program with Albany State University (ASU) in 2018 and 2019, eventually leading to an ongoing partnership with ASU and PCCSS. Dr. Williams explains, "she saw another opportunity to benefit local students and families in Oxford and is overjoyed that the program has come to fruition (Williams, 2022). The weeklong program included classes taught by Oxford faculty, current students, and college foundations and fundamentals workshops. The courses offered were chemistry, English, political science classes, self-discovery seminars, and interactive academic sessions, such as a walking biology course on the Hearn Nature Trail. During the program, students ate their meals in dining halls and slept in dormitories like college students (Christian, 2022).

Emory's Oxford summer experience program's primary objectives include performing leadership activities and preparing students for college. Participating students benefitted from the program through their access to personal and professional enrichment tools. The Emory's Oxford program aims to give students a glimpse of campus life and academic offerings on a college campus while providing them with personal and professional enrichment, college preparation, and recreation (Emory's Oxford College website, 2022). According to the program coordinator, students will be able to learn how

to align their academic and social profiles with what admissions officers want after participating in the program (Williams, 2022). These workshops are extremely valuable because students may feel intimidated when they have no experience with college application processes. The lack of college knowledge makes it difficult for many students to successfully navigate the college application process. Students are less likely to be competitive candidates because of a lack of knowledge about college application policies, the absence of sports and extracurricular activities, and the lack of research on colleges (Venezia & Kirst, 2005).

Below is a picture of the recruitment flyer advertised at PCCHS for students interested in participating.

Figure 2

Oxford College Summer Program Advertisement



Putnam program participants had the opportunity to participate in English enrichment programs, political science and chemistry courses delivered by Oxford faculty, and college preparation sessions. In addition, Oxford College faculty members provided a program curriculum that included several skills outside of academics to teach students about college. The program offered the following workshops:

1. College Preparation workshops including:
 - a. Why should I go to college? Why is it important?
 - b. Course selection in high school
 - c. Types of colleges
 - d. Creating a college list
 - e. Application Process
 - f. Financial Aid
2. College Fundamentals workshops including:
 - a. Study skills
 - b. Writing essays
 - c. Tips and tricks for college success
 - d. Building connections with faculty
 - e. Library resources
3. Enrichment and recreation sessions:
 - a. Health and wellness
 - b. Field trips
 - c. Self-discovery
 - d. Community service

- e. Team building
- f. Games and competitions

In addition to admissions, Putnam students learned about financial aid and scholarships. They had opportunities to interact with each other, Newton County students, and Oxford students through recreational activities and bonding opportunities (Williams, 2022). These social and recreational activities included crab boils during dinner time, field trips, activities, and backyard barbecues.

The program's primary objectives were to introduce students to a top liberal arts college's academic experience, enrich them for college, provide professional enrichment tools, increase students' awareness and knowledge of academic opportunities, and demonstrate how they can align their academic and social profiles with the qualities desired by colleges, as well as improve students' knowledge of college admissions, financial aid, and other opportunities (Emory's Oxford College website, 2022). College fundamentals and foundation workshops focused mainly on these goals. After the admissions workshop, students shared in their interviews that they better understood how admissions evaluate applications. This helped them understand what it takes to get accepted, how their packages would likely be reviewed, and what grade point averages, community involvement, and test scores meant. During the financial aid workshop, the students learned how to pay for college, apply for financial aid, and about scholarships and grants. According to Means et al. (2016), rural students frequently misunderstand the cost of college and require assistance understanding financial aid and Pell Grants. Means et al. (2016) found that students understand financial aid and FASFA but did not understand how financial aid enabled them to finance their higher education—as such,

participating in a program that provides students with college knowledge can, according to Davis et al. (2013), play an instrumental role in students' college admissions decision-making processes. As Perna (2000) explains, financial aid availability significantly impacts student decision-making and college enrollment.

Emory's Oxford program was many Putnam County students' first visit to a college campus and first opportunity to meet students their age outside their educational cohort. Founder Dr. Williams states, "I simply saw a need for our students, who have traditionally been denied some access through no fault of their own." She adds, "we wanted to encourage socialization so that they could make friends and learn together, stimulating their academic achievement and dreams before returning to school in the fall." Through Emory's Oxford program, Putnam County students had access to college knowledge and an opportunity to experience the campus in a unique social setting while being integrated into a blended academic and social community.

Summary

Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice as a guide, this study examines the impact of a college-preparatory program on rural Putnam County students. Emory's Oxford program is evaluated here to examine its impact on rural students' college aspirations. This will be accomplished by analyzing how a select group of Emory summer program participants felt about college before and after taking part.

Chapter two summarizes what the literature teaches us about the benefits of college, rural college enrollment, college knowledge and the application process, barriers caused by a lack of college knowledge, and the benefits of exposure to a college environment. In addition to providing a historical overview of Putnam County, Georgia,

the chapter also includes information on Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience program. In addition, a detailed analysis of the theoretical framework guiding this research aligns with the research questions for this study.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF PUTNAM COUNTY, GEORGIA

Putnam County is an agricultural community in central Georgia along the upper Oconee River sub-basin Altamaha River basin. In 1807, 341 square miles of land were taken from Baldwin County and named after Revolutionary War general Israel Putnam (Krakow, 1975). Dairy farms and lakes cover the majority of Putnam County. When driving to Putnam County, the first visual of leaving neighboring counties behind is the rows of cows on either side of the road.

The 2020 Census estimated that 22,047 people lived in Putnam County: 8,937 households and 6,282 families, with an average family size of 2.82. For residents 25 and older, the median earnings range from \$28,326- \$32,210, depending on their level of education (US Census, 2020a). Table 4 informs on the racial makeup of Putnam County.

Table 4

*2020 Putnam County Demographics by Race*¹¹

Race	Percentage
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.5%
Black	24.6%
Hispanic	7.0%
Multi-Racial	5.2%
Other	2.8%
White	66.5%

¹¹ 2020 Decennial Census, Putnam County, Georgia (US Census, 2020)

Rural counties throughout the South have been declining. The most significant developments in recent decades have been economic trends in rural communities hollowing out communities such as Putnam. Small companies are closing or moving out, rural areas are experiencing financial difficulties, and the opioid epidemic has devastated many rural areas (Stephens & Bromley, 2021). Today, mobile homes, government-subsidized housing, lack of access to nutritious food and healthcare, financial hardship, personal struggle, drug abuse, and violence- each contributing to the decline of the Putnam community (Lawton, Kopcha, Walters & Ocak, 2020).

Some of the world's most famous literary giants have come from Putnam County, including Joel Chandler Harris and Alice Walker. Joel Chandler Harris was a fiction writer and folklorist born in 1845 and best known for his Uncle Remus stories. Born in Putnam County over a century later, Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Color Purple*, her most famous work. The work of both Harris and Walker represents the consequences of decades of racial inequality and economic injustice that followed. (Walters, Kopcha & Lawton, 2020). Another famous Putnam County native is S. Truett Cathy, Founder, Chairman, and C.E.O. of Chick-fil-A, Incorporated. Truett Cathy was not much of a literary figure - despite writing six books, his fame comes from his chicken sandwiches. Cathy, Walker, and Harris achieved fame and prestige in their fields after leaving Putnam County.

Putnam County's job market offers few high-paying opportunities. Most students' parents experience the financial insecurity of caring for fundamental needs, even though there are jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, Putnam's economy had a

favorable unemployment rate of 3.3 percent in July 2021. However, with few people choosing to live or work in Putnam, it is challenging to have ample resources for well-being, leading to hopelessness and intergenerational poverty, making social mobility difficult. According to Lawton and Kopcha et al., Putnam students share this similarity with others in poor or underprivileged places across the rural South. Many residents do not choose to live in Putnam but cannot leave due to intergenerational poverty (C. Lawton, personal communication, June 23, 2021).

According to the 2019 College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) demographic report, 3,031 students enrolled in Putnam County Charter Schools, 100% of whom are people with limited economic opportunities (GA DOE, 2019). College and career readiness of all Georgia public school students is the focus of the CCRPI, a platform for accountability, improvement, and communication. Putnam County Charter schools CCRPI scores for 2018-2019 were 66.3% in the middle school and 66.2% in the high school, exceeding the district average of 60.25%. There was no tabulation of the 2019-2020 school year scores due to COVID-19, and 100% of Putnam County Charter school systems are Title 1 schools. The schools receive federal funding to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity for a high-quality education that meets state academic achievement standards and assessments. The charter school system in Putnam County, Georgia, is now in its twelfth year. Since implementing the charter, graduation rates have been above 90% (B. Bacon, personal communication, September 21, 2021). Despite this significant milestone, more than one-third of the Putnam County graduating students attend college.

Chartering of Putnam County Schools

Putnam County residents have historically placed a high value on education, especially at the beginning of the 19th century. According to the New Georgia Encyclopedia, Eatonton Academy (formerly Union Academy) opened in 1809. Later, Alonzo Church, the first principal of Eatonton Academy, became a professor and the sixth president of the University of Georgia. The first rector was William H. Seward, the future secretary of state for Abraham Lincoln. Several years later, in 1828, Adiel Sherwood, a plantation owner, opened the Manual Labor Training School on his plantation. The school taught local farmers and plantation owners how to plant crops in new ways (Ramage, 2005).

The Charter Schools Program became legal in October 1994 under Title X, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. All four Putnam County public schools are charter schools. Each school falls under one system, which is publicly funded and governed by federal and state laws. According to its charter, the school is exempt from regulations and rules in certain states or localities. Under its charter, the school has independence and flexibility. Putnam County Charter Schools are also Title 1 schools. With a Title 1 designation, the educational program must help all students meet state standards, participate in the annual state assessment, report their data correctly to the state, participate in any required improvement efforts, and spend Title 1 funds appropriately (US DOE, 2019). As a Title 1 school, Putnam County Charter schools also have direct requirements for a public charter school. Putnam County Charter schools must:

1. provide appropriate special education services to students with disabilities that fulfill each student's individualized educational program,
2. not discriminate against any students groups,
3. protect private student information, and
4. Adheres to all federal health and safety requirements (NACSA, 2021).

As part of the charter, Putnam County schools must integrate school systems.

School districts should also have a flexible approach to implementing educational programs to meet the needs of their communities and insist on implementing innovative educational programs like local management of schools (Putnam County Charter, 2010). Before the Putnam County chartering, Dr. Jim Willis was its superintendent, and District Common Assessments were the assessment standards. High school graduation rates barely exceeded the fiftieth percentile, an exact measurement. This low high school graduation rate indicated the necessity for the charger and provided an indicator to measure growth with the incoming change. Over the next ten years, program and policy implementations would increase graduation rates.

Compared to public schools in other metropolitan areas, Putnam County charter school has only one primary, one elementary, one middle, and one high school. Schools in Putnam County have more flexibility and fewer bureaucratic obstacles. The superintendent, for example, has fewer schools to oversee and more influence over decision-making. Putnam County school system development involves parents, teachers, and the community.

In July 2010, when the Putnam County Charter School system started, Dr. Willis spearheaded the initiative for the district to become a Charter School with all the new

freedoms that charter schools bring. He emphasized the importance of creating a strategic plan that required the board to set goals and objectives and hold itself accountable for its decisions. Dr. Willis implemented new programs and was heavily involved with community strategic planning events (Bacon, 2021). In addition, Dr. Willis introduced the Thinkgate program, a prelude to the Experiential Learning program, by creating a link between Central Georgia Tech and the Early College program, enabling students to earn college credit while still in high school" (Bacon, 2021).

However, implementation could have been more effective. During Dr. Willis's tenure, several creative people participated in experiential learning initiatives, projects, and programs. However, the program needed more organization due to the lack of an organized experiential learning program under one dedicated contact person. Since PCCHS had no organized department, evaluating the program's implementation was challenging. However, the summer inspiration coordinators Bacon and Smith noted that it was only possible to measure improvement with an organized department and streamlined program (Bacon, 2021). Thus, without this measurement, it became difficult to determine if the program was thriving since there was no mechanism to assess improvement in student performance.

By 2016, Superintendent Arena added an experiential learning department to create unified coordination, accountability, communication, and a structure layer to implement all programs (Bacon, 2021). After meeting with Dr. Lawton and Dr. Kopcha about collaborating with UGA, Arenas established the department after seeing the potential for growth that could benefit all school students, not just those in Mr. Deen's history class. Superintendent Arenas hired Dr. Lawton from the UGA to oversee the

experiential learning department. Dr. Lawton worked with Superintendent Arenas and the administration in Putnam to bring all eleven programs under one umbrella that spanned the primary through secondary grades. After steadily increasing over the past several years, the Putnam School's graduation rate reached 90.7% by the 2016-2017 school year. This improvement was likely due to the Putnam School's systematic, practical, and organized experiential learning program.

Putnam County Charter Schools Leadership Post Chartering

2005-2011 Superintendent Jim Willis

Before its chartering, the Putnam County school system was traditional, and minimal information existed outside graduation rates. Without finding any archived data, researchers gathered information from current superintendent Eric Area, former assistant superintendent Beth Bacon, and veteran teacher Kathy Smith in separate informal interviews on different dates at Putnam County Charter High School (PCCHS).

According to Bacon, Putnam County Public Schools was a traditional school system with a standardized curriculum where about 50% of the high school class graduated. Dr. Jim Willis, former Superintendent from Oglethorpe County, was hired by Putnam County in 2005 to "build a strategic plan requiring the board to establish goals, objectives with accountability and measurements for the district" (Bacon, 2021). Dr. Willis led the district to become a Charter System, established the Early College program, built connections with schools such as Central Georgia Tech, and created opportunities for students to add college credit to their High School experience. He also introduced the "Thinkgate" program as a precursor to the Experiential Learning program at Putnam (Bacon, 2021).

In July 2010, Putnam County Charter School system opened, consisting of four schools to serve Putnam County residents from kindergarten through 12th grade. The schools included one primary school, one elementary school, one middle and one high school. As such, each student entering primary school travels with their cohorts to high school for their entire educational career. The state of Georgia Department of Education identifies a charter system as traditional public schools that operate free from many restrictions imposed by local and state governments (GA DOE, 2020). Charter schools allow groups outside the classroom- parents and community leaders, to contribute to learning through innovative means, thus expanding the school system's educational options. In support of this knowledge expansion, Putnam County Charter School Systems included language in the charter for educators to be highly flexible and tailor their educational programs to meet the unique needs of their communities (PCC, 2010).

Dr. Willis remained Superintendent through the first year of its charter during the 2010-2011 academic year and then retired. Dr. Willis envisioned and helped execute a plan to bring forth the charter system, laying the foundation for the experiential learning program. According to Burton, the charter system allowed flexibility around state governance in exchange for higher accountability to raise student achievement. Putnam County allowed us to surpass expectations and embrace innovative educational opportunities. During Dr. Willis ' tenure, graduation rates improved from just over 50 to 63.4 percent.

2011-2013- Superintendent Marcia Clanton

After Willis' retirement, Ms. Marcia Clanton became the second Superintendent of Putnam County Charter Schools. She implemented a College and Career Academy and

established the current promotion criteria. According to Burton, Clanton used mastery of standards and a nationally normed assessment to determine where students were in their learning continuum instead of traditional grades. Clanton passed away shortly after being diagnosed with brain cancer (Few, 2013). In her absence, Mr. Eric Arena became interim Superintendent Clanton's legacy at Putnam County Charter schools was implementing programs that increased graduation rates from 63.4 to 72.3 percent.

2013- 2021- Superintendent Eric Arena

Through the efforts of Superintendent Eric Arena, Putnam County Charter Schools advanced in becoming more aligned with Clanton's motto: Inspire, Innovate, Excel. Arena focuses on what "will benefit Putnam County Charter Schools and students" (E. Arena, personal communication, June 23, 2021). According to Bacon, Arena's leadership allowed development programs that allowed students to find their learning pathways. Arena took the Mastery of Standards and formative assessments concept and built a partnership with the University of Georgia (UGA) to build a level of validity by being the founding district partner in the assessment format of NAVVY education. This evidence-based standards-level assessment believes assessment should inform instruction as part of ongoing learning and not measure what has been learned (Navy Education, 2017). In addition, Arena laid the groundwork for the following programs: Summer Inspiration, Experiential Learning, Albany State University, Extended Learning Trailblazers, Nontraditional Teachers, Teachers as Leaders, Fluid Learning, and expanded the work-based learning and student employment program.

In 2014, a partnership between Putnam County Charter School System and the College of Education at UGA began when Dr. Christopher Lawton and Dr. Theodore J.

Kopcha met with Superintendent Arena about a possible collaboration. Dr. Lawton and Dr. Kopcha wanted to know if their UGA students could work with Putnam County high school students and teachers on projects connected to local history. Based on the interviews with Beth Bacon and Kathy Smith, the timing of this meeting was optimal, as it was one year after they piloted the very successful Summer Inspiration program (Bacon, 2021). Putnam County Charter schools were exploring opportunities to develop their logos and motto, "Inspire. Innovate. Excel," and shift the instructional focus away from just textbooks.

Lawton and Kopcha launched a collaborative project to connect UGA with grades K-12 in Putnam County (Walters et al., 2020). A partnership between the Putnam County School System and the University of Georgia would later receive two separate grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities to address the needs of children living in rural poverty. A weekly collaboration between Lawton and Kopcha involved graduate students from UGA working with Jonathan Deen's U.S. History class, ultimately forming a formal experiential learning program. In 2016 Putnam students spent the first summer at Sapelo (Bacon, 2021).

Through his construction of an environment of innovation with accountability and community partnerships, students' success in learning drives Arena's programs to flourish. In Table 5 below, Arena's impact is evident. His administration has partnered with NAVVY to bring an innovative perspective to formative assessments, maintained the early college and college and career academy, expanded school into the summer with Enriching programs and job opportunities, increased partnerships with different universities, and broadened the options for the Experiential learning program. Arena's

efforts have positively impacted the school, as indicated by the surge in graduation rates from 72.3% to 91%. Table 5 below depicts PCCHS data organized from 2005 to 2021.

Table 5

Putnam County Schools Consolidated Data, 2005-2021¹²

Year Superintendent	Economic-ally Disadvantaged (%)	GA DoE cohort graduation rate (%)	Standards-based Formative Testing	Early College	College/Career Academy	Summer Inspiration	Experiential Learning	Work-based Learning Summer Jobs	ASU	Extended Learning	Trailblazers	Non-Traditional Teacher Program	Fluid Learning
Grade Span			K-12	7-12	9-12	PK-8	K-12	10-12	9-12	K-8	4-5	Staff	PK-2
2021-22 Arena	100		NAVVY District Common	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2020-21 Arena	>95	90-91	NAVVY District Common	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2019-20 Arena	>95	90.30	NAVVY District Common	✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	
2018-19 Arena	>95	92.30	NAVVY District Common	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2017-18 Arena	75.73	92.60	NAVVY District Common	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2016-17 Arena	77.60	90.70	District Common	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2015-16 Arena	73.73	91.80	District Common	✓	✓	✓		✓					
2014-15 Arena	75.56	83.40	District Common	✓	✓	✓		✓					
2013-14 Arena	79.10	81.50	District Common	✓	✓	✓							
2012-13 Clanton Arena	80.30	72.30	District Common	✓	✓								
2011-12 Clanton		69.59		✓									
2010-11 Willis Clanton		63.40		✓									
2005-10 Willis		>51											

¹² This chart was synthesized from the oral histories shared of Beth Bacon and Dr. Avis Williams (Bacon, 2021; Williams, 2022).

The chart above identifies the 11 programs or approaches within the Putnam County Charter School System over the past decade. They include NAVVY formative assessments, Early College, College, and Career Academy, Summer Inspiration, Experiential Learning, Work-Based Learning and Summer Employment, Extended Learning Opportunities, Trailblazers, Non-traditional Teachers Program, and Fluid Learning. According to Table 5, all these programs or initiatives began under Arena's administration, except for Early College and College and Career Academy. In 2022, Dr. Avis Williams facilitated a new collaboration with Oxford College of Emory University, focusing on underrepresented rising high school sophomores and juniors from PCCSS. This study focuses on the impact of experiential learning on students participating specifically in the developed curricula, activities, and projects during the summer exposure program at Oxford College of Emory University.

Experiential Learning in Putnam County Charter Schools

Putnam County Charter Schools follows an experiential learning approach, which incorporates a community-based learning approach. This experiential learning approach establishes the community as a partner in the learning process. Involvement influences learning (Tinto, 1997), and student learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in education and placed in situations where they must share knowledge positively and connect. Students and faculty work together in community-based learning to conduct studies adapted to the local community's needs. In experiential learning programs, students become active participants while learning to exercise social and emotional learning skills. As part of these skills, people need to take risks, assess their

strengths and challenges, persist, ask questions, take responsibility, learn from peers, and find solutions when unclear instructions (Bradberry & DeMaio, 2000).

Traditionally, experiential learning is essential to internships, practice, service-learning, community-based education, and fieldwork (Austin & Rust, 2015). Students are directly engaged in meaningful work outside the classroom in each course. As a result of each teaching approach, students are encouraged to "engage in excitement and critical thinking," and teachers are less visible in the classroom (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009).

The Putnam program has distinctive experiential learning programs going on throughout the school year: the integrated classroom initiative, the Sapelo partnership with George Mason University, the Creek and Cherokee removal project with Georgia, and the Tennessee partnership with Piedmont University, the College access program with Albany State University, and the new Summer Experience program with Oxford College at Emory University.

The Experiential Learning program in Putnam County consists of two components: the distance programs and the local classroom program. Each program follows traditional experiential learning approaches: active, place-based/community, problem-based, project-based, or service-learning methodologies. Local classroom programs follow the Putnam Model of curriculum development, field trips, and assemblies. The distance programs include partnerships with the following three universities: the Sapelo program with George Mason University, the Creek and the Cherokee removal project with Piedmont University, and the Summer Bridge pipeline partnership with Albany State University.

George Mason University-PCCSS Sapelo Island program

For one week every summer, 15-30 PCCHS students and George Mason University students go to Sapelo Island. With the help of UGA graduate students and community members, the program began in 2016 with a series of small-scale public history projects. Participants in the Sapelo Island program live and work with the island's residents for a week.

PCCHS students and George Mason University students to Sapelo Island for one week each summer. The program began in 2016 with a series of small-scale public history projects conducted with community members and a UGA graduate team. Students in the Sapelo Island program spend the week living and working with Dr. Lawton (from PCCSS), a professor of marine biology from George Mason University, and three Putnam County experiential learning teachers. Each day on the island consists of intensive field and lab work in coastal environmental science, environmental readings drawn from selected nature and historical writers, ecological writing, historical field research and reading, and community engagement and volunteer work (Lawton, 2021).

Piedmont University-PCCSS program

The Creek and Cherokee Removal program is a week-long immersion in place-based humanities that began in 2018. Students and faculty work with Dr. Lawton and a series of on-site content experts at approximately ten key sites across north Georgia and southeastern Tennessee related to the history, myths, and memory of Native American life and removal. Each day combines readings from a carefully compiled course pack, research, exploration, and projects. Students on this trip also study photography and photojournalism. They work daily on creating a visual and written document of what they

saw and learned and their thoughts and feelings on uncovering that history (Lawton, 2021).

Albany State University Partnership

In 2017, Dr. Avis Williams proposed an idea for a bridge or upward bound type program that exposes students in grades 9 through 12 to life on a college campus for one to two weeks during the summer. This two-week college experience intends to provide college readiness and experiential learning opportunities while living on a college campus. Putnam County students attending the summer bridge program were given a chance to experience and exposure to experiential learning and residential living on a college campus. At the end of the week, Putnam brings the parents of participating students to ASU to observe presentations on what they learned during the program. They signed a Memorandum of Understanding and formed a partnership. The first Putnam students attended the Summer Bridge program at ASU in the summer of 2018. For most Putnam families, this experience marks the first time the students or their parents have been on a college campus. Since the program began, several hundred PCHS students have been part of the rising 9th-grade cohort. Today, the program has developed into a more profound version equivalent to the Sapelo program, allowing for PCCSS teachers and students to work with ASU faculty and students on local history/ humanities/ environmental science projects connected to the Albany Civil Rights Institute (Williams, 2022; Lawton, 2021).

Putnam Model of Curriculum Development and Local Partnerships

The Putnam model of curriculum development applies to classroom instruction with specific teachers, field trips, assemblies, and special projects. One example of the

Putnam model of curriculum development is the 8th grade Georgia Studies/English Language Arts classes. Since 2016, the Putnam County Charter Schools team has built and implemented a different version of 8th grade Georgia Studies than taught anywhere else in the state because it is grounded in a belief in place-based humanities. The 8th-grade teachers work in teams to plan and conduct a year-long curriculum that ensures all students at all levels are reading and writing content woven with Georgia Studies standards. As a part of the project-based learning opportunities, students travel across the state and write stories based on places they have studied or visited, write plays or puppet shows, and prepare presentations using foods eaten during a specific period in specific locations across the state. Students chronicle their reflections in journals and keep journals, writing about how being at each place makes them feel about the history they have studied, the state of Georgia, and themselves. While observing classes during the week of September 20th, I observed eighth graders in the Georgia Studies class participate in a reflective activity. Students chronicled their reflections in their road to revolution decade journal- a meditative activity based on videos observing the Battle of Kettle Creek during the previous virtual field trip.

Another example is the Digital Humanities Initiative. The Georgia Virtual History Project. This project aims to create audio and visual content in physical and digital spaces. It shows that the humanities can benefit scholars and be an invaluable tool for reaching out to traditionally underserved populations. More than 30 teachers, covering grades two through twelve, produced project-based lessons or units that supported student-driven inquiries, surpassed state standards, and implemented transparent assessment processes throughout the project. Lawton, Kopcha, and Walters have written

several peer-reviewed publications on the outcomes and recently presented a keynote address at a national education conference.

Approximately 200 black and white photographs, now located at the National Archives and Records Administration, document life in Putnam County in 1941. Long ago, the world forgot about the remarkable photographs captured in the collection that shed light on life in Putnam back then. This project restores the names and stories of several people not identified in the original photos. For two years, the students recorded oral history interviews with Putnam residents who, like Alice Walker, grew up during segregation and the struggle for civil rights.

The students conducted oral history recordings with UGA's oral archivist, a graduate assistant from the History Department, Professor Kopcha of the College of Education, and a graduate assistant. Teachers and administrators at Putnam County Charter Schools now have access to improved tools to create and implement curriculums around the materials collected through this partnership with the College of Education.

A primary objective of the Georgia Virtual History Project and experiential learning program was to uncover, construct, and share stories of people's lives lost to history. Students can learn historical content and gain knowledge by collecting, researching, and sharing stories that tell the story of their community.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Studies of social interactions and daily behaviors typically use qualitative methods when key factors are not readily apparent. In this type of research, individuals and groups analyze the meaning attributed to social or human problems (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By employing qualitative research designs, I can explore how a summer bridge program impacts the college aspirations of rural high school students in Putnam County, Georgia. This research aims to determine if, based on a student's participation in the program, the college knowledge gained through specific strategies, practices, opportunities, and exposure to a college campus helps a student move from being an aspirational student to becoming a college-ready student.

The research process involves emerging questions and procedures, data collection from the participants' setting, inductive analysis building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher's interpretations of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For this study, I will collect and analyze data from narrative writing samples, surveys, focus group data, and individual interviews, explore the themes emerging from the data, and make interpretations based on this analysis.

To comply with all necessary research protocols and satisfy all ethical demands, I will take the following actions:

1. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and UGA (IRB) approval before beginning the study's research to ensure participant privacy.

2. Participating students will have the free and independent choice of agreeing to participate in the survey without coercion.
3. Informed consent will be obtained and documented.

This evaluation of Emory's Oxford program examines the impact of a summer program on rural students' college aspirations using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice as a guide. This project examines how rural students' exposure to a college campus and strategic programming impacts their college aspirations beyond just wanting to attend college. Assisting students in moving from dreaming of attending college to achieving college acceptance is extremely valuable by identifying the specific areas that require attention.

The following chapter describes the methodology and research design used to answer the research questions below:

1. What strategies, practices, and opportunities do Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college?
2. How do physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

Theoretical Framework

Creating a research plan involves choosing one or more theories to guide objectives, developing realistic and relevant research questions, selecting appropriate methods, and identifying potential validity threats to possible conclusions (Maxwell, 2012). College enrollment gaps can be explained by understanding students' enrollment process and the influences on their decisions. College enrollment gaps can be explained by understanding how students enroll in college. College enrollment is not a single decision but the culmination of a long process where students make a series of decisions

regarding how to think about, research, and select colleges. College choice models guide these choices. Because this study involved addressing the economic and educational barriers rural students faced, I needed a college choice model that considered both the financial and sociological aspects of college choice, so I reviewed the combined choice models of Chapman (1981), Jackson (1982), Hanson and Litten (1982), Hossler and Gallagher (1987), and Perna (2006).

To determine which model would guide this study and to construct a structural framework, I examined the various stages of the decision-making process outlined by Chapman (1981), Jackson (1982), Hanson and Litten (1982), Hossler-Gallagher (1987), and Perna (2006). The decision-making process is outlined differently in each of these models.

Chapman (1981) included five stages in his model: pre-search behavior, search behavior, application decision, choice decision, and matriculation decision. Chapman (1981) argues that the characteristics of students and schools influence college decisions. Unlike Chapman's model, Jackson's (1982) model includes three stages: preference, exclusion, and evaluation. According to Jackson (1982), there is a strong correlation between academic achievement and educational ambitions. Chapman and Jackson's models offered distinct steps dedicated to the research sequence, application process, and post-acceptance decision-making. Among the limited influences in the model were educational aspirations, high school performance, socioeconomic status, and aptitude for student characteristics. The limited external influences (Chapman, 1981) were friends and family, college characteristics, and recruitment efforts. In neither model was rurality taken into account.

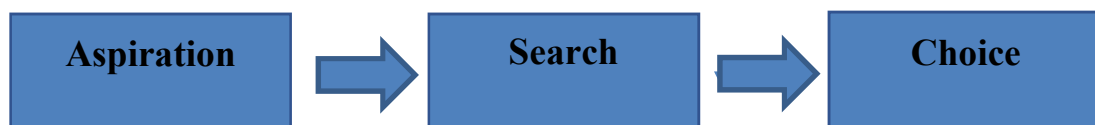
The model developed by Hanson and Litten combines Jackson's and Chapman's. Hanson and Litten's (1982) four-stage model consisted of college aspirations, search, gathering information, sending applications, and enrolling. They examined the variables in their model: income, education, race, gender, class, and parents' self-image. Their model included race, gender, religion, personal background, and high school and college characteristics. Hanson and Litten's model was broader, encompassing race, gender, and religion. Likewise, Perna's (2006) model was the most comprehensive, incorporating four contextual layers that shaped and informed college choice processes. Layers included: the systems influencing an individual's behavior (*habitus*), the school and community context, the higher education context, and the broader social, economic, and policy context. Despite the Hanson and Litten model and the Perna model addressing influences that shaped and informed college choice, neither model considered the timing of these influences.

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model of college choice informs this study and explains enrollment decisions as a developmental process. Students decide whether or not to continue their education after high school during the predisposition phase (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989). According to Hossler et al. (1989), the predisposition phase begins in junior high school. This stage focuses on occupational and educational aspirations (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Students identify attributes and characteristics of colleges and consider, compare and evaluate possible choices during the search phase between early childhood and the 10th grade (Hossler et al., 1989). The choice is the final phase of Hossler & Gallagher's model. During the choice phase, the lessons learned from the predisposition and search phases apply to weigh the most influential factors regarding

colleges and universities. Students choose after reviewing and evaluating their most highly-ranked institutions (Hossler et al., 1989). Figure 2 below highlights the image of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model.

Figure 3

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Model



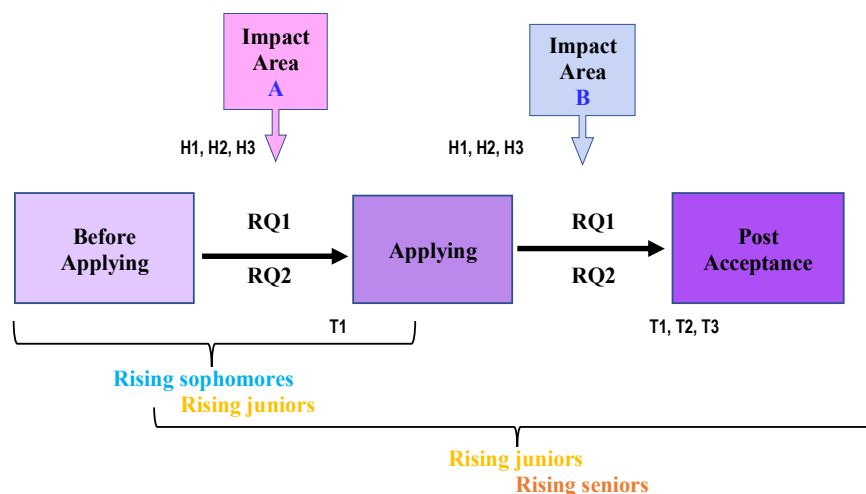
The Hossler-Gallagher model was the best fit because not only did the model consider sociological and economic factors, but it also considered the impact of timing. According to the Hossler-Gallagher model, the aspiration stage occurs between the 7th and 10th grades. The search stage occurs between the 10th and 12th grades, and the choice stage occurs between the 11th and 12th grades. A critical element of the study is how the strategic timing of influences impacts students' progression from one stage to the next, especially for students who are applying to college one month after Emory's Oxford program ends.

This conceptual framework constructed from the Hossler-Gallagher model includes three new stages: before applying, during the application, and after acceptance. The program's influence lies between Aspiration (Before Applying) and Search (Applying), which is Impact Area A. The other area of program influence is between Applying (Search) and Post Acceptance (Choice), or Impact Area B. There is a connection between research questions and impact areas A and B.

During the research, Hossler and Gallagher hypothesized that students would become more knowledgeable about higher education options (Hossler et al., 1989). Individual and institutional factors also played a part in their progression through the three phases. Secore (2018) suggests that the physical walk around campus is the most influential part of the search process since it may influence the decision to move from Aspiration to Search. Walking around allows students to become familiar with the campus, its aesthetics, and its culture (Secore, 2018).

Figure 4

Rural Student's College Choice Framework Constructed for the Study



Pre-planning and Organization

In this study, data collection took individual interviews with 11 students. Organizing the interviews was challenging because the summer had ended, and school was back in session. Organizing 11 45-minute interviews during 22-minute lunch breaks between classes would require great assistance from Dr. Williams and her design team.

Dr. Williams, PCCHS' program coordinator and community liaison, and I met to schedule the time to interview and record the students. As the Summer Experience program coordinator, Dr. Williams is responsible for planning the itinerary and programming for the program. Dr. Williams allowed me to present my research during the kickoff information session. She arranged a time and location for me to conduct the narrative writing activity and scheduled the intervals for me to show the focus groups for individual interviews.

As program coordinator and community liaison for PCCHS, Dr. Williams formed a design team that included herself, an assistant teacher, and a school staff member familiar with the participants. They assisted with the scheduling issues.

Site and Population

The targeted population for the study was rising high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors matriculating through Putnam County Charter High School living in rural Putnam County, Georgia. Putnam County is in the central part of Georgia in Eatonton. Putnam County Charter High School has 863 students in grades 9-12 and 51 teachers. Over the past five years, the student and teacher population has remained flat (PCPSR, 2022). Much more detailed information about Putnam County, Georgia, is in Chapter 3.

The participants of this study were selected to participate in the week-long Summer Experience program at Oxford College of Emory University, located in Oxford, Georgia. Emory's Oxford College is a private junior residential college located on Emory University's original campus 38 miles outside Atlanta. The Summer Experience program is the newest collaborative partnership with Putnam County Charter schools scheduled in late June of 2022.

Thirty-six racially, economically, and academically diverse students expressed interest in gaining exposure to Emory's Oxford campuses and participating in structured programming and activities. Even though there were only 30 available spots in the program, all of the 36 students that registered were accepted to participate in the program.

Sampling and Recruitment

The summer experience program at Emory's Oxford college sought to introduce and support Putnam and Newton County students on their college pathways while developing college knowledge. (See Figure 3 below for the flyer). Hosting the program on campus offered a competitive curriculum, early college exposure, and connections with adults who can help students navigate the admissions process and find ways to finance their education. (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

Morning and afternoon announcements and flyers were distributed throughout the school to inform students about the program. Figure 3 in Chapter 2 illustrates this. Students interested in participating in the Oxford College Summer Experience program directly reached out to Dr. Williams. Dr. Williams was contacted directly by students interested in participating in the Oxford College Summer Experience program. Further, Dr. Williams recruited students whom she believed would enjoy the program.

Students accepted to the program were invited to attend an informational session with their parents at Putnam County Charter Middle School on Thursday, May 12th, and an introductory meeting on May 20th. I presented my proposed research at the May 20th introductory meeting and addressed all questions.

There was no requirement in Putnam County for an IRB protocol, and the UGA IRB determined that this project does not constitute human subjects research. According

to the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, this study was not designed as research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations. The activity was designed as a case study to understand better what influences college aspirations for students in Putnam County schools. IRB concluded that the findings resulting from my research could be shared widely in this local exploratory activity. Even though the findings of this study can improve college education at UGA, the IRB did not require approval for this study. As a courtesy, I still informed Dr. Andrew Cooper, Putnam County High School principal, and Mr. Eric Arena, Putnam County Charter School superintendent, that I would be working with PCHS students during the summer. It is also important to note that the pilot study guided the primary research design. However, the data analysis therein will not be discussed in Chapter 5, as the purpose of this stage was formative.

Participant Selection

Dr. Williams was contacted directly by students interested in participating in the Oxford College Summer Experience program. Further, Dr. Williams recruited students whom she believed would enjoy the program. A total of 36 students expressed interest, and all 36 were accepted for 30 open spots.

Pilot Project

Before beginning the actual research project, I launched a pilot project for this study. The pilot project described below was intended to be a small-scale implementation of the broader project. The following is a description of how data was collected and analyzed.

Data Collection

Data collection was primarily done through focus groups with semi-structured open-ended questions. I asked open-ended questions to maximize the chances of obtaining information aligned with the research questions. In contrast to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews are more flexible and adaptable, encouraging rather than asking questions.

Three methods were used in the first phase of the study: a narrative identity writing activity, two college interest surveys, and focus groups. A narrative writing assignment was completed before the program began. A college interest survey was completed on the first and last days of the program, and a focus group was conducted one week after the program ended.

Narrative Identity Writing Activity

The Narrative identity writing activity took place three-four weeks ahead of the summer program after the information session. Students participated in a narrative identity writing activity that produced an artifact to share their personal stories. Each student was given the same writing prompt (See Figure 2 below) and had 15 minutes to write their response. Students imagined their life becoming a TikTok¹³ series about Putnam high school, where they are the star in this activity.

TikTok and reality television formats encourage dialogue in a platform more familiar to Generation Alpha¹⁴. Students can tell their stories in the way their generation

¹³ TikTok is a video-sharing app that allows users to create and share short videos on any topic.

¹⁴ Generation Alpha refers to people born between 2010 and 2025. The term was coined by generational researcher Mark McCrindle (2009) and represented the first generation born entirely in the 21st century. Influential cultural figures and emerging consumers have reshaped the landscape of social media (Tootle, Freeman & Freeman, 2014).

interacts and communicates, enabling students to see themselves in the world. This activity will excite students and inspire them to share their stories. According to McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007), storytelling is essential for understanding and discovering truths about our identities.


Figure 5

Narrative Identity Writing Prompt

Name: _____

Date: _____

Grade classification during 2022-2023 school year: _____



Imagine your life was suddenly a hit reality TikTok video series about high school in Putnam County, and you were chosen as the student to be the star of the video. What would the name of the video series be called? What would viewers say about it? Who would be in the video with you?

YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES TO COMPLETE THIS ACTIVITY
Please use both sides of this page to write about your video series.

Here are some other questions to help guide your thinking:

1. What would you name the video series?
2. Who would be in the show with you?
3. What would viewers say about it?
4. What words would you use to describe yourself as a student?

College Aspirations Surveys

I conducted a survey to assess the students' attitudes toward college one week before and one week after the program ended. This survey identified student college interest levels after completing the program and predicted who would most likely apply to college. Figure 6 below lists questions from the survey.

Figure 6

College Interest Survey

Survey Assessing Student's Interest in College				
<i>I see many benefits of going to college</i>				
not at all	somewhat low	neutral	somewhat high	very interested
<i>My parents want me to go to college</i>				
not at all	somewhat low	neutral	somewhat high	very interested
<i>I feel pushed into going to college</i>				
not at all	somewhat low	neutral	somewhat high	very interested
<i>The thought of going to college scares me</i>				
not at all	somewhat low	neutral	somewhat high	very interested
<i>I am ready to begin thinking about my career and planning for college</i>				
not at all	somewhat low	neutral	somewhat high	very interested
<i>After graduating from high school, what is your interest level in going to college?</i>				
not at all	somewhat low	neutral	somewhat high	very interested

Focus Groups

I held focus groups during the program wrap-up meeting at Putnam County Middle School a week after the program ended on June 30th. Thirteen students participated in three 45-minute focus groups of four to five students each. As a reward for their participation, each student received a ten-dollar McDonald's gift card after each session. The group interview began with a dessert reception.

Prasad (2018) describes how many qualitative traditions utilize interviews extensively to gain insight into different subjective worlds. Using a discussion to explain social circumstances and justify actions is practical. The focus group protocol I established followed a structured format and asked investigator-centric questions to optimize conversation and ensure the necessary topics were covered, as Hall (2020) suggested. Following the semi-structured protocol format, which balances broad and specific related questions, I organized my protocol to include warm-up queries and questions related to the topics covered, going from general to particular and closing questions (Hall, 2020, p.44). Hall also suggested ranking¹⁵, vignettes¹⁶, free listings¹⁷, rating¹⁸, and pile sorting¹⁹ focusing exercises to promote participant engagement and gives variety to focus group session. (Hall, 2020, p.48).

I chose focus groups as a second source of data collection. Focus group research involves organized discussion with participants about their views and experiences related to community and college going. Focus group research provides what Gibbs (1997) refers to as insight into students' shared understandings of everyday life and their interpretations of how others influence them in a group situation. Focus groups allow participants to express diverse viewpoints and emotions in a group setting. Another advantage of focus groups is that they are more challenging to control from a researcher's point of view.

¹⁵ Ranking is a form of focusing exercise correctly to glean insights into the group's prominent domains, solutions, and meanings (Hall, 2020, p.48).

¹⁶ Vignettes, or short stories, detail a hypothetical scenario which invites participants to respond to (Hall, 2020, p.48).

¹⁷ Free listings invite participants to verbally list characteristics of a domain or solution to a problem while the moderator records their ideas (Hall, 2020, p.48).

¹⁸ For rating, participants respond to something (word, object, picture) that must be rated on a scale (Hall, 2020, p.48).

¹⁹ Pile sorting requires participants to sort cards into groups according to how the elements represented on the cards relate to or are different from one another (Hall, 2020, p.48).

Participants initiate discussions during focus groups. The complete focus interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Table 6

Sample Pilot Phase Focus Group Questions for Qualitative Data Collection

Sample Focus Group Interview Questions
How does the thought of leaving Putnam make you feel?
When you hear the word 'rural,' what feelings do you have?
Describe Putnam High School to a stranger.
How does the thought of leaving Putnam make you feel?
If you go away to college, do you plan to move back to Putnam to work after college?
How do you feel about living in Putnam County?
Do you believe you will need to leave Putnam County to succeed?
How meaningful are your ties to the Putnam community to your future?
Are the people in the community important to you? In what way?
Does your connection to the Putnam community play an essential role in your future?

Interviews will be moderated with open-ended questions to elicit reflections on personal experiences. As part of the focus groups, sample questions were used like those used in Herzog and Pittman's (1995) study of what constitutes rural education. These questions elicit students' opinions about their community and attitudes toward college. According to Ostermann's (2000) study, classroom conditions and the school influence students' feelings about themselves, resulting in better engagement and achievement.

Data Analysis

Narrative writing sample

Twenty-six PCCHS rising sophomores, juniors, and seniors completed narrative writing samples in late May. Only nine original 24 students participated in the program and the focus groups one month after completing writing assignments. The writing samples were, therefore, only used to understand student responses in the focus group setting. When transcribing the focus group recordings, I used triangulation to reread what one student wrote in the writing assignment to understand that student better. I analyzed each writing selection for evidence of (1) friendship, community attachment, sense of community, membership, and influence, (2) Living in Putnam County, (3) Self-awareness of individuals who do not belong to a community, and (4) Personal student life. I used these categories to sort the participants' responses in their writing.

Surveys

Each student completed a college interest survey at the program's beginning and end. A few students were confused about the surveys, and 40 out of 60 students filled them out, which means 18 of the respondents were Newton County residents. I could not use these analytics since I could not differentiate between Putnam County and Newton County students.

Focus Groups

Focus Group 1 consisted of four females and one using the pseudonyms Squirrel, Elani,

Jasmine and Christie. Three of the students were sophomores, and one was a junior. All the students in Focus Group 1 were eager to register their thoughts, frequently speaking, talking over each other, and having side conversations during the recording. Some parts of the recordings are inaudible. I often had to refer to my field notes when transcribing the recordings.

Focus Group 2 consisted of four females and different races and grade classifications. The students used the pseudonyms Ash, Blue, Rose, and Daisy. Focus group 2 consisted of one rising junior and three rising seniors.

Focus Group 3 was the most influential and mixed group of genders, but they were all sophomores. Students used the pseudonyms JT, Jalah, Sarah, Michael, and Shon.

I recorded each focus group with permission from the participants and transcribed the recordings verbatim using Otter.ai, an automated service that converts speech to text, then uploaded them into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis program. I reviewed each transcript and tagged the relevant text for themes related to how the students felt about their community, their sense of community, and how they felt about college. The following codes were created based on emerging themes in the focus groups:

<i>Community codes:</i>	<i>Sense of Community:</i>	<i>College Aspirations:</i>
tight-knit	support of each other	parental support
caring	collaboration to improve things	lack of parental support
living in a fishbowl	helping each out	community influence
rural life-negative		friends influence
rural life-positive		church community input
no amenities, no fun		considering college
rural life-bad for teenagers		barriers attending college

In its original form, McMillan and Chavis' (1986) Sense of Community theory guided this study, exploring how rural youth feel about their communities and how this

impacts their college aspirations. The codes were created based on the emerging themes based on how the students felt about their community, the student's sense of community, and what they thought about going to college. While coding, it became apparent that the student's attitudes and behaviors toward college did not correlate with the SOC theory.

Lessons Learned from Pilot Project

The pilot study guided the design of the main study, but the data analysis therein will not be discussed in Chapter 5, as the purpose of this stage was formative. During the pilot project, this study examined how students' sense of belonging and personal and emotional investment affect their educational trajectory. The pilot study examined how rural communities affected rural students' aspirations for college following McMillan and Chavis' (1986) Sense of Community Theory. Based on the data collected from the focus groups, I realized the community had a limited impact. There was no correlation between the data and the Sense of Community theory.

As a result of this pilot study, three significant flaws in my data collection and analysis were identified, which will benefit my broader research. The first issue was changing the theoretical framework that guided the study. There was little evidence that their community influenced students' behaviors and attitudes toward college. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to use the Hossler-Gallagher (1987) model of college choice as a framework for the study than the Sense of Community theory.

A second lesson learned from the pilot project was the culmination of mistakes caused by improper recording instruments and the location of focus groups. The focus groups were conducted in a large auditorium at Putnam Middle School. On one side of the auditorium, parents were enjoying a dessert reception and conversing among

themselves, while on the other side, I was conducting focus groups. Often, the parents' noise interfered with the audio recordings, making transcription difficult. The method of recording was also an issue. I audio-recorded the focus groups using an iPhone video recorder. The iPhone was placed on stage to capture only the audio of the focus groups. Having no audio recorder at hand, I made this decision in haste. Transcription was complex due to the nature of the recordings.

The final lesson was learned from improper pre- and post-college survey distribution. There was no communication with the students about not sharing QR codes. This resulted in me receiving the results of 40 surveys from both Newton and Putnam County students instead of just the 24 Putnam County students. The survey analytics could not be used since Putnam and Newton County surveys could not be separated.

Broader Research Design

Data Collection

Eleven students participated in one-to-one, semi-structured interviews for this qualitative research. Seven sophomores, three seniors, and one junior were interviewed. Each participant in the study was asked open-ended questions throughout the interview process to maximize the likelihood of obtaining information that would answer the research questions. By using flexible questions to guide the interview process, semi-structured interviews are primarily used to collect specific data from each respondent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews enhance flexibility and adaptability.

The interviews were conducted at Putnam County Charter High school. Dr. Williams arranged for the interviews to be conducted during school hours, primarily

during the student's lunch times. Thus, each interview lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Some interviews took place in two 20-minute sessions, while others lasted for 45-minutes and took place in one session. I interviewed Putnam County high school students participating in Emory's Oxford Summer Bridge program to provide context and a deeper understanding of the college choice. Each interview began with a brief introduction, followed by an interview and follow-up questions. During the interview process, the following steps were taken:

1. Introduced myself, my role, and the project in neutral terms;
2. Explained how confidentiality will be maintained;
3. Clarified sample selection and diversity;
4. Affirmed neutrality;
5. Reiterated the confidentiality agreement;
6. Described the recording process, asked permission, and informed how to access the recording;
7. Asked each other some personal questions to get to know each other;
8. Asked fun questions to make the interviewee more comfortable;
9. Inquired about college knowledge and aspirations pre-program;
10. Inquired about college knowledge and aspirations post-program;
11. Asked if the student had any additional information to share;
12. Thanked students for their time and gave each one a \$10 Walmart gift card

The interview protocol consisted of questions about what they learned in the program (e.g., "Which workshops did you like best? What did you learn about applying to college?"), and campus environment (How did it feel to be on Emory's Oxford

College's campus?) Table 7 below displays sample individual interview questions. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Table 7

Sample Interview Questions for Qualitative Data Collection

Sample Interview Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What classes did you take there? 2. Which workshops did you like best? 3. What did you learn about applying to college? 4. What did you learn about Oxford college? 5. Did you learn about financial aid? 6. Where would you take the SAT? 7. If you wanted to apply to college, do you know how much the application costs? 8. Have you ever talked to your guidance counselor about colleges? 9. Did you meet anyone at Oxford to ask questions about college? 10. What do you want to accomplish in the next few years? 11. How did it feel to be on the college campus?

All interviews were audio-recorded. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. In the first round of transcription, audio recordings were uploaded to Otter.ai, a service that converts speech to text automatically. In order to verify the accuracy of transcribed words, I reviewed each transcript for all of the one-on-one interviews while listening to the recordings. I then created a one-page summary of each transcript and emailed it to each student for data checks. This made it possible to flag anything transcribed incorrectly. Figure 7 below highlights a section from the summary transcript. The full transcript can be found in Appendix C.

Figure 7*Sample Summary Transcript from Interviews*

TOPIC	STUDENT'S RESPONSE
COLLEGE CAMPUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “That (being on a college campus) influenced me into wanted to go to an HBCU” • “it was nice, really nice” • “I thought a college campus would be one regular sized building with different classes in each room like school”
COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “absolutely thinking about going to college because the certain profession I want (requires) a college degree” • “I have to be in college to get into the field to be an anesthesiologist or pediatrician-my dream” • “I chose to (participate) in the program because a lot of people don't have the opportunity to get outside of Putnam and go and experience different chances and opportunities to go somewhere like that. I figured it's a chance to go look at a college that I might be interested in”
APPLYING TO COLLEGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I feel like if I go (to college) there are multiple ways to get help to get in college.” • “ They (my mom and granddad) tell me to research about colleges so I have as many choices as possible, and can choose the right college and not just a good college... the college best for me, not just a big name school. They want me to go to a college where I'm actually comfortable as myself” • “they (the program) taught us about getting accepted/waitlisted and denied, and they told us that you might have a 4.0 GPA but no extracurricular or community service things and that a 4.0 is no guarantee you will get accepted” • “I know (the ACT and SAT) are very important tests and some colleges make it mandatory that you have to take them, but some colleges don't- we talked about that (in the program)” • “I wish I had more help understanding the college application part, like being able to understand more, like a straight to the point description to get me through the process step by step. Just tell me straight forward what I have to do, because some people don't get it straight off the bat. Some people actually need help doing by like, step by step by step. I feel like this is the only thing I really need help with- the application process”.
PAYING FOR COLLEGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I knew college was not cheap” • “I feel like finance and funding are important because you don't want student loans after you get out of college”

Data Analysis

During the analysis phase of a study, the researcher makes sense of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To understand how the multiple pieces of data fit together to answer the research questions, it is necessary to scrutinize the raw data obtained from all sources simultaneously. All data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed by breaking down sentences, phrases, and words to observe the patterns, themes, and categories that emerged. By identifying patterns and themes, I better understood the research questions and the process (Merriam & Tisdell). For instance, interview 1 data was compared with interview 2-11 data to find commonalities. Upon transcribing the data, comparing it to the digital recording, and completing member checks, I uploaded all transcripts into ATLAS.ti, a data analysis software.

In the coding phase of the analysis process, text passages are categorized according to their content (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As part of an open coding strategy or initial coding strategy, the transcribed interview data were manually coded line-by-line to capture the participants' essence and meanings (Saldana, 2016). In figure 8 below, I have embedded a snapshot of the transcribed data from the student Jalah. In the transcript, the relevant text is highlighted to summarize the primary topic in her answer to the questions about applying to college and financial aid. Underneath the text is an example of eight initial codes applied to the data from the interview transcript. The codes are based on the knowledge Jalah shared about what she learned about the application process and financial aid in the college fundamentals workshop.

Figure 8

Relevant Text Transcript Sample

Rebecca Young 08:38

So what did you learn about applying to college,

Jalah Hill 08:43

Basically most of what they taught us was about the like, get getting accepted, begin waitlist and getting denied.¹ And like they will tell you that just because you might have 4.0 GPA, you might not have that many like community service things or you might not have them extra curricular activities that you like did.² But just because you have a 4.0 there's no guarantee you're gonna get accepted into that college.³ Like you have to have extra things that might make your personality pop out to them.⁴ Like you might make you be put at the top whatever you write down or putting an essay or something like that it might make you at the top of the list or it might put at the bottom. Just because you have a high GPA or higher SAT score a high ACT score doesn't necessarily mean you're going to automatically get into that college.⁵ And they live who taught us about like registration, and mostly like about the accepted, denial and wait-list situation.

Rebecca Young 09:46

Did you learn about financial aid?

Jalah Hill 09:48

We as we learned about finance, we learned a little about financial aid. They also told us like depending on our parents pay⁶, like the amount how much money we can get⁷ from the college to like pay with college tuition and stuff like that. But I think I don't think I really didn't learn much from that. They were basically like, depending on your parents wage⁸. You know how much money you can get. But you could also, you could also request more money if you feel like you haven't been given enough.⁹

Jalah Hill 11:26

I basically, I really don't know much about those either. I just know those are very important tests and some colleges make it mandatory that you have to take them. But some colleges don't. We also talked about that. Like some colleges, you don't have to take the ACT or SAT.¹⁰ But most of the time, they're required. But I just know they're a very important test that some colleges requiring to get into the college:

CODES grouped based on these categories:

APPLICATION PROCESS RELATED

FINANCIAL RELATED

ENTRANCE EXAM RELATED

CODES generated from this transcript:

-
- 1 Admissions decision
 - 2 Items needed for application
 - 3 GPA value
 - 4 Extra for application
 - 5 ACT/SAT value
 - 6 Parents contribution
 - 7 Award letter
 - 8 Parents income
 - 9 Appeal financial aid
 - 10 Test optional
-

During the first cycle, transcripts were coded individually. As shown in Jalah's transcript, ten initial codes emerged related to the first research question. They included: admission decisions, items needed for application, GPA value, extracurricular activities for application, ACT/SAT value, parent contribution, award letter, parents' income, appealing financial aid, and test optional. Of the 11 transcripts reviewed, Jalah was the only student to mention the financial aid appeal process and parental contribution.²⁰

²⁰ I used Jalah's transcript because she had more initial codes from the relevant text than any other student.

As part of the second coding cycle, pattern coding was used to identify emerging themes from each participant group (Saldana, 2016). Codes representing similar patterns, concepts, and themes were merged using a constant comparative process (Saldana, 2016). For example, in Figure 8 above, of the ten codes emerging from the relevant text, four were grouped into application-related themes, four were combined into financial-related themes, and two were combined into entrance exam themes based on a constant comparative process. Based on the first research question, these codes were condensed into four overarching themes: application process, financial aid, entrance exams, and transcript analysis. It was apparent through the iterative process of comparing the initial four themes to each transcript that the transcript-associated codes could be condensed into the Application theme because GPAs were referenced to the general application process rather than as transcript analysis. As a result of cross-checking each code, I identified three overarching themes: application-specific, financial aid-related, and entrance exam-related. This same process applied to themes for the second research question, where the initial codes were consolidated into three themes based on campus impressions, campus security, and college-life visualization.

By identifying themes in the data, the research questions were addressed regarding the program's strategies, practices, and opportunities and how the physical experience of being on campus influenced the students. As a result of the questions, insights were gained into the impact of college knowledge and the college campus experience on rural students.

In addition, I created individual portraits of each participant. Students' unique perspectives and personalities, as well as their attitudes, brought their words to life. I intended to provide insight into each interviewing student's personality beyond just a transcript of the interview.

Trustworthiness of Study

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), researchers can persuade their audience that the findings of their study are worthwhile. To assess the trustworthiness of my research and associated claims, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Using the following criteria, this study will establish reliability.

Credibility Criterion

Triangulation of data sources and member checking according to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By examining whether the case remains the same at other times, in different spaces, or as students interact differently, I will determine whether my observations and reports are consistent. I also used the narrative writings to check for consistency among the students' essays and interview responses.

A second method of supporting credibility is member checking. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the purpose of member checking is to verify the accuracy of respondents' intentions, validate the researcher's interpretation, provide more detail, safeguard the researcher from claims of misinterpretation, summarize the data, and confirm individual responses. I used member checking as a second method of supporting credibility when I emailed the one-page summary transcript of each interview discussion to the participants for their feedback.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to applying the study's findings to other contexts or settings with other respondents. A researcher's contextual information acts as a basis of judgment for the reader to determine whether the results can be applied to different contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To facilitate the transferability judgment of my interpretations, I used rich data and thick descriptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) to facilitate the transferability judgment of my interpretations. The strategy for using portraits was to describe behavior and experiences in detail and context so that the behavior and experiences become meaningful to an outsider.

Dependability and Confirmability

I used an audit trail strategy to strengthen the validity and confirmability of my findings. I archived field notes, narrative summaries, recordings, and transcripts. In this way, an auditor can examine my research path's transparency.

I ensured intersubjectivity by maintaining research field notes, writing samples, audio transcripts, and written transcripts throughout the study. As suggested by Korstjens and Moser (2018), it is critical not to interpret the data based on personal preferences but rather on the data itself.

Limitations of the Research

As far as limitations, Creswell (2009) defines limitations as aspects of the design of the methodology that affect the interpretation or application of the results. Before beginning the research, I knew three limitations: sample size and timeframe. The sample size limits this study. I initially expected to work with 30 students but ended up with only

11. This reduction in sample size to roughly one-third of what I expected narrowed the perspectives when I began to collect data.

The second limitation of this research is the timeframe. There was a tiny window of opportunity to collect data on the participants once the program announcement was made and I received IRB approval. Rather than have an extended time to hold focus groups and later individual interviews, I ended up with one day to keep the focus groups and three days to collect individual interviews. Regarding the personal interviews, the issue was scheduling 11 45-minute interviews during lunch breaks, as school was back in session. Further expansion on the limitations after data collection and analysis is detailed in chapter 6.

Positionality

I began pursuing my Doctorate in Philosophy after twenty-one years as a stay-at-home mom and professional volunteer when my youngest child was sixteen. As a mother of four young adults between 19 and 24, I was a banana peel away from becoming an empty nester. It felt like time to complete my terminal degree and start planning my next chapter. So, I packed my laptop and headed to Athens, convinced that I would develop an assessment that quantified SEL skills and eliminate the SAT.

I have progressed from measuring the motivation and coping skills of homesick first-year college students to a more pressing concern: the inequities of college knowledge and how transformational it can be for those that have it and those that do not. In contrast to an SAT score, a lack of college knowledge can predict a student's ability to attend college.

All of my children have grown up and left home. Two are still in college, and two are in graduate school. The college application process has been so familiar to me that I overlooked the challenge of acquiring college knowledge. I aim to learn as much as possible about the barriers between aspiring to go to college, applying, and enrolling. Identifying the gaps is the first step in developing intervention programs. This is what brought me to Putnam County to conduct my research.

A Personal Connection to Putnam County, Georgia

Putnam County has been home to my father's family for centuries. Several years ago, UGA faculty members contacted my father about sharing his oral history as part of a collaboration using pictures from the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History's "From Field to Factory" exhibit (Smithsonian, 1987), Putnam County Schools and UGA conducted oral history recordings. Several Putnam County students have participated in experiential learning lessons based on my father's and my family's history. As a result, I became acquainted with many faculty members at PCCHS, including Dr. Christopher Lawton and Mr. Deen. In the Georgia Virtual History Project, PCCHS was awarded a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities, including pictures of my family. I refrained from having personal conversations with any of the students, and I introduced myself as Rebecca Young, not Rebecca Paschal-Young, so I am not sure if they made the connection about my father and knew about our relationship with the Smithsonian exhibition or ongoing experiential learning projects. I usually fade into the background when I accompany my father to his recordings.

Two months before I began researching with the students, Dr. Lawton invited my father to speak at Black History Month's school assembly. The culinary students

prepared and served a special breakfast of cappuccinos and omelets prepared by culinary students before the program, followed by a dessert reception. As part of the Experiential Learning program, one of the students interviewed Daddy about his family history.

Following are a few pictures I have included in Figure 9:

Figure 9

Pictures from Putnam County Charter High School Black History Program 2022



Since my father has been a part of the experiential learning oral history project for about four years, I have become acquainted with Dr. Lawton, Mr. Deen, and a few experiential learning students. Several times, I have hosted the students, Mr. Deen and Dr. Lawton, for interviews at my home in Atlanta. I have accommodated my dad at his recordings in Putnam. It has been my pleasure to observe and get to know many students in the experiential learning program at PCCHS.

I have worked with students outside PCCHS's experiential learning program. Dr. Williams, the PCCHS community liaison, introduced me to the current 11 students during my work with the SOC. After our conversations, I wondered why more PCCHS students did not pursue further education, even though they aspired to attend college. It was this curiosity that sparked my interest in pursuing this research.

Summary

This chapter presents the methodology with a detailed research design to explore the strategies, practices, opportunities, and campus exposure that impacts rural students' college aspirations. The experiences of 11 Putnam County high school students were examined using a qualitative approach.

Collected data were collected, coded, and analyzed. In the final two chapters, I will discuss the findings, share limitations, delimitations, and assumptions, along with recommendations for future research. Then conclude and share implications for future research.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

This qualitative evaluation of Emory's Oxford program aims to understand better how to help aspiring rural college students progress toward becoming college-ready candidates. This program evaluation examines the potential impacts of participating in a summer program that enables rural students to gain college knowledge through clear expectations, guidance, and exposure to a college campus.

Data collected through personal interviews with eleven Putnam County Charter High school students were analyzed using open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data were organized using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. This was done to explore the themes that emerged from the interview data and coded using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. The findings address the following research questions:

1. What strategies, practices, and opportunities do Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college?
2. How do physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

This chapter introduces the eleven study participants. For this group of students, the data collection period began in May 2022 and ended in October 2022. The following eleven portraits offer a glimpse into their as college aspiring high school students. As the students reveal their ambitions, discuss family dynamics and college connections, and highlight concerns and career objectives, the reader gets a glimpse of their personalities.

The following section begins with Table 8, which collectively provides a descriptive summary of the students. Following Table 8 are the eleven portraits individually. Introducing Ash, Blue, Chastity, Daisy, Jalah, Jasmine, Jessica, JT, Michael, Rose, and Sarah.²¹

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics of the Participants

Descriptive statistics of the participants

Participants	Grade	Gender	Race	Parents highest level of Education		Siblings in college	Born in Putnam	Relocated to Putnam	First exposure to college campus
				Mother	Father/Stepfather				
Ash	11 th	F	W	8 th grade	8 th grade	No	Yes		Yes
Blue	12 th	F	W	Some college	Unsure	No		from Michigan	No. Visited in 2019 for JROTC
Chasity	10 th	F	B	Question skipped	Question skipped	Yes, brother	Yes		No. Visited in 2016
Daisy	12 th	F	B	High School	High School	Yes, brother & sister	Yes		Yes
Jalah	10 th	F	B	Associate Degree	High School	No	Yes		No. Visited ASU in the Fall of 2021.
Jasmine	10 th	F	B	Unsure	Unsure	Yes, Sister	Yes		Yes
Jessica	10 th	F	B	Associate Degree	Unsure	Yes, three siblings		from New York	No-father works on college campus
JT	10 th	M	B	Some college	Unsure	No	Yes		No. Visited ASU in the Fall of 2021.
Michael	10 th	M	B	In college	High School	No		Macon	No. From a college town, visited others.
Rose	12 th	F	W	Some college	11 th grade	No	Yes		Yes
Sarah	10 th	F	B	College degree	Some college	Yes, sister	Yes		Yes

²¹ These names are pseudonyms selected by the students to protect their identity.

Portraits of Students

Ash

Ash is the only junior interviewed in this study; she is bubbly, cheerful, and a Putnam native. Meeting Ash was unforgettable because she burst into the interview room filled with delight and could barely contain her excitement. She announced that the timing of our interview enabled her to avoid running the mile in gym class.

Ash's infectious and heartwarming optimism consistently comes through in her answers to my questions, even when discussing her challenges in foster care as Ash approaches her first adoption anniversary. Ash shares that she has dealt with DFACS²² while in foster care for over three years. From this experience as a foster adoptee, Ash considers herself fortunate to have the opportunity to take advantage of Senate Bill 107²³. Several times during the interview, she references how this knowledge encourages her to apply for a Georgia tuition waiver for post-secondary education.

Physical science is Ash's favorite subject. In our conversation, Ash extensively discussed how the show *Bones*²⁴ inspired her to become a forensic anthropologist. Today, Ash hopes to attend art school in California and pursue a career in music and songwriting. Ash speaks enthusiastically about her dream of attending college and wishes she had more assistance with the application process. Her grandmother, who has taken college courses, is the only member of her family with any college connections.

²² DFACS is an abbreviation for Georgia's Division of Family and Children Services, which investigates reports of child abuse.

²³ Senate Bill 107 waives all fees and tuition for qualified adopted or foster care students at institutions within the Technical College System of Georgia, which are not covered by other student aid resources (Horvath, 2021).

²⁴ *Bones* is a television crime series based on forensic anthropology and forensic archaeology.

Therefore, Ash shapes her expectations of college by what she sees on television. Her mom and friends support her as she prepares college applications because she wants "to get out of this small town and do something big."

Blue

As a senior, Blue plans to study English education in college to become a teacher. Blue moved to Putnam five years ago from Michigan with her family. My first impressions of Blue are that she appears composed, focused, and quiet. The difference between Blue and most students her age is that she maintains eye contact when speaking and does not constantly check her cell phone. Blue asserts her ambitions rather powerfully by saying she intends to "achieve something great that *she* will be proud of."

Blue's support system consists of her mother, aunt, and best friend. Her mother and aunt both attended college in Michigan. Her aunt finished college, and her mother left to have children after two years. She is uncertain if her father attended college before joining the Navy.

Security is critical to Blue. Throughout our interview, Blue uses the words "comfortable, secure, safe, and protected." Being safe ranks highest on her list of needs for college. Her safety concern extends beyond campus environments and campus life. She also mentions her parents' comfort and protection, her brother's encouragement, and her best friend's advice. Blue's guiding principle is a sense of safety and security.

Chasity

Chasity is a sophomore who enjoys being in the JROTC²⁵ and World History. She wants to be an OB/GYN²⁶, a lawyer, or join the Army. Chasity is the youngest of three children, with two older brothers. Her support system for navigating the college process consists of her parents, brother, cousins, godmother, godfather, Grandma, and Pastor Avis²⁷. Chasity is also optimistic, confident, and idealistic. She believes she can complete college, medical school, and training, open an OB/GYN practice within three years and retire at thirty. Furthermore, as our conversation progressed, Chasity's convictions were convincing, despite knowing she was condensing twelve to fourteen years of education into three years- omitting her two additional years of high school.

Chasity embodies everything traditional southerners are known for: hospitality, grace, kindness, and a desire to make others feel comfortable. When Chasity enters the room, she crosses her ankles and smiles quietly, saying, "please, thank you, and yes, ma'am." Chasity is also very considerate. She reminds me of the kind person in the smorgasbord line who selects the unappealing foods so those in line behind them have better options. For example, when I ask her about college, she confidently and convincingly responds with her plans to be an OB/GYN in three years. Then she quips softly, "I want to go to college because I feel like if I don't, I will fail my parents or my family."

²⁵ The Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps prepares high school cadets for responsible leadership roles while making them aware of their rights, responsibilities, and privileges as American citizens (Putnam County High School is Website, 2022).

²⁶ OB/GYN is the abbreviation for Obstetrics and Gynecology.

²⁷ The students refer to Dr. Avis Williams, as Pastor Avis. In addition to being the Program Coordinator and Community Liaison for the school, Dr. Williams/Pastor Avis has a doctorate in ministry.

Daisy

Daisy is a stylish, soft-spoken senior with a keen sense of fashion. Daisy enters the room with perfectly coiffed hair, brightly colored yellow fingernails, and flawless makeup. Interestingly, Daisy's demeanor seems very shy. As we progress through our interview, I realize her chosen pseudonym perfectly matches the vibrant energy she carries inside, sometimes surfacing through her nail color and hairstyle.

Daisy is the baby of her family and has college ties through her siblings. Her support system includes her parents, who want her to progress further with her education than they did. Her older sister attended Central Georgia Technical College for cosmetology, and her brother attended Cochran Middle Georgia State University. Daisy shares that she enjoys learning cosmetology but desires to study photography in college.

Daisy is the only student of all interviewed registered to take the ACT. She seems grounded in her efforts to go to college. Daisy googles colleges frequently. As part of her research, Daisy is learning about colleges, researching tuition costs, and determining how much she will spend on admission to the colleges she is considering. Daisy is confident that college will help her succeed in what she intends to do professionally.

Jalah

Jalah is a delightfully outgoing, charismatic, and ambitious sophomore. She is passionate about math and plans to become an anesthesiologist or a pediatrician. Jalah's confidence and sense of security strike you when you meet her for the first time. She listens intently to what I say and eagerly expresses herself fully without holding back. Like a poker player who wagers everything, Jalah gathers her thoughts and pushes them

towards me in the middle of the table, then awaits my response. For example, when I asked if she aspired to apply to college, she enthusiastically declared, makeup, am *going* to college.” Then she added, "I already received my first \$10,000 college scholarship in the 8th grade."

As the oldest of three children, Jalah exudes an energy that makes her seem like she is blazing a trail for her younger siblings. However, from what she shares in our interview, I also detect an air of caretaking for her younger siblings and older family members. Jalah reminds me of the child who secures her parents' oxygen masks during a turbulent flight, then affixes her own.

Jalah mentions her mother and grandfather as sources of positive energy and steadfast support, along with Pastor Avis. She praises her mother and grandfather for teaching her to research colleges and choose the most suitable fit for herself, not just a prestigious school. Additionally, she is proud of her mother, who studied online at Central Georgia Technical College and is currently pursuing her second degree. In three years, Jalah intends to enroll in college, get her degree, and begin internships.

Jasmine

Jasmine is one of four sisters in her large family and a sophomore in high school. Jasmine entered the interview cautiously, kept her answers concise, and committed to brevity. While discussing her interests, she mentioned that she enjoys weight training, being in the JROTC, and making alfredo sauce for her friends.

As Jasmine navigates the college process, her mom and grandparents support her. She has a family connection to college through her mother, who attends Central Georgia Technical College, and one of her sisters, who studies at Valdosta State University. Her

interest in the program stemmed from her desire to become familiar with college life before applying. Jasmine plans on attending culinary school in Atlanta within the next three years.

Jessica

Jessica is a charmingly charismatic and extroverted sophomore. Her captivating personality and confident communication skills make her stand out. From the moment she walks into the room, it is evident she is a people person who has never met a stranger.

Jessica is the youngest of seven children. As a native of New York, her family moved to Milledgeville, a college town, where she is used to "all the college students passing through." For school, she commutes from Milledgeville to Putnam.

Jessica's family members have some college connections, so she is familiar with the college process and campus environment. At age six, she had her first experience performing on a college campus. Her mother attended Central Georgia Technical College, and her father, who works at Georgia College as a janitor, has taken her around campus often. One of Jessica's sisters attends college in Tampa, and two other siblings have graduated from college, one of whom is pursuing a doctorate.

Her goal is to attend New York University or John Jay Criminal Justice College, where she would like to escape the South. Her interest in becoming a lawyer varies from criminal law to real estate law. In three years, Jessica envisions herself "sitting in my dorm room, waiting for the next class, helping people... being the person I've always wanted to be".

JT

JT is a sturdy, athletically built football player, eager to play either small forward or power forward for Putnam's basketball team. Surprisingly, JT is soft-spoken, reserved, and somewhat introverted. JT's family connections to college include his mother, who takes online college classes from home, and a cousin who plays collegiate basketball. His biggest influencers and supporters are his mother and grandmother, and he is comfortable sharing how much they mean to him. For example, he takes the time to read an article about her achievements in the paper he has stored on his cell phone. After sharing, he tells me he is a proud son and "wants to make Mama and Nana proud of everything he does."

JT is the middle child in a large family with seven siblings. Math and history are among his favorite classes. As a student, he "enjoys studying about Rome, Alexander the Great, Constantinople, and the Byzantine Empire." JT is the opposite of many idealistic students, being more grounded and pragmatic. For example, JT desires to learn Spanish to "speak more than one language and increase his employment prospects."

JT is the kind of student who wants to visit college campuses at every opportunity. He acknowledges that he probably irritates Pastor Avis by constantly asking her when they will schedule to see the next college visit. Additionally, he shared that he watches YouTube videos and researches everything about a college campus before visiting. JT feels college education is an opportunity to prove to his family that he will succeed.

Michael

Michael is a polite, well-mannered sophomore who speaks with the sophistication of a college freshman. Michael's responses are reflective and itemized when asked a question. For example, when asked about his favorite Laker, he struggled for several minutes. His response was, "First, Kobe, then Magic, and third, LeBron."

Michael is a Los Angeles Lakers fan who has played basketball since he was three. He enjoys Spanish but missed his Mandarin Chinese classes before moving to Putnam from Macon. Additionally, he tells me he is academically a year ahead as an Early College student for two years.

Michael's mother is enrolled at Southern Crescent Technical College, aspiring to become a nurse by December. During the college process, his mom, grandmother, cousins, and aunts keep an eye on his grades, savings, and plans after graduation. By participating in work-based learning at Walmart, Michael saves college money so his family will not have to pay so much for his education. Although Michael believes college is his backup plan. He plans to study cybersecurity in college and work for the Navy or Airforce "if basketball doesn't work out."

Within three years, Michael hopes to attend a "big-time institution like the University of Georgia." He adds, "he is willing to start at a junior college or Division 3 school and transfer to a Division 1 school."

Rose

Rose is a pragmatic senior with a matter-of-fact outlook on going to college. Rose's perspective toward college seems shaped by what she believes her family can afford and the lack of knowledge about financial assistance. Rose sits at the traditional

crossroads for rural seniors who wish to continue their education. Despite a strong desire to further her education, Rose understands her family cannot afford it, so she chooses an alternative path.

Rose reports that her mother started college at Georgia Military College in Milledgeville but dropped out before completing the program. Her father dropped out in the 11th grade as well. Several of Rose's relatives encourage her to join the military, believing she will benefit.

As Rose navigates this process, she considers her mom and stepdad her support system. Her goal in three years is to graduate high school and begin working or college if she does not work. Despite this, she is not actively applying to colleges during her senior year.

Sarah

Sarah is an easygoing sophomore with a laid-back attitude toward college. Her words indicate that she is interested in college, but her body language suggests the process overwhelms her. Sarah reports that her parents attended college, but her father did not graduate. Though she does not know where her parents went to college, her older sister attends Albany State University.

After high school, Sarah plans to attend college. Within three years of finishing high school, she hopes to have a job and a car and be in college. Sarah's belief that college will help her earn more money motivates her to enroll in college.

Themes and Data Analysis

The findings of this program evaluation of Emory's Oxford program are presented in this chapter. This program evaluation aims to comprehensively understand

how to help college-aspiring rural students progress toward becoming college-ready candidates. Data from interviews with the 11 program participants were analyzed after incorporating open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data were organized using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program to explore the themes that emerged from the interview data. Findings address the following research questions below:

1. What strategies, practices, and opportunities do Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college?
2. How do physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

This study identified the fundamental interactions that shaped and influenced the decision-making process of college-aspiring rural students during the 3-stage college choice model of Hossler-Gallagher (1987). According to interviews with participants, at least one supportive family member influenced the aspiration stage of the college choice process. As Hooker & Brand (2010) have suggested, the limited college knowledge and a lack of campus exposure researched by Secore (2018) of rural students in post-secondary schools can impact college choice studied by Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989).

This study found several institutional factors to influence rural students' college choices. They also evidenced in previous studies that rural youth's educational ambitions can be hindered by a lack of institutional support (Farmer et al., 2006; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). According to data, rural students do not complete the college choice process from aspiration to enrollment due to a lack of support or understanding about (1) the application process, (2) financial aid (3) college entrance exams.

Student Aspirations

In their interviews, all students expressed a desire to attend college. Ten students interviewed indicated that Emory's Oxford program increased their likelihood of going to college after they participated. Jasmine, one of the students in the program, stated that her ambitions were not affected by the program, but she still wanted to attend college. In addition, I asked them where they saw themselves three years from now. I wanted to determine the students' interests once they graduated high school. Except for Rose, all students saw themselves in college three years from now.

Many students volunteered what their aspirations were after graduating from PCCHS. Most students named careers or professions that required them to attend college for additional education. For example, Blue wanted to "get her English education degree so she could start teaching." According to Ash, "she has more realistic dreams now of getting into phlebotomy and photography instead of forensic anthropology." Among the 11 students, the majority named a career ambition that required post-secondary education. Figure 10 below lists the aspirations shared by the students interviewed. See Figure 10 below:

Figure 10

Samples of Aspirations

Name	Grade	Career Ambition
Ash	11	Phlebotomist/Photographer
Blue	10	English teacher
Chasity	10	OBGyn
Daisy	12	Cosmetologist and photographer
Jalah	10	Pediatrician or Anesthesiologist
Jasmine	10	Culinary College
Jessica	10	Criminal Justice Lawyer
J.T.	10	Engineer
Michael	10	Cybersecurity (if basketball doesn't work out)
Rose	12	Did not indicate
Sarah	10	Did not indicate

Research Question 1

The first research question seeks to understand what strategies, practices, and opportunities Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college. The analysis of eleven interviews revealed three dominant themes, indicating growth areas and the need for guidance, structure, and support. The students lacked college knowledge about applying to college, paying for college, and preparing for entrance exams. The gaps in their existing knowledge made it possible to identify what students needed to know about college readiness, as described by Conley (2007). After compiling the textual data shared in interviews from the students into themes, data were analyzed into three primary themes: (1) the application process, (2) financial aid and how to pay for college, and (3) college entrance exams.

Theme 1: Application Process

After the program ended, each of the eleven students reflected upon what they did not know about the college application process. As it related to college applications, some students needed to realize that they had to apply and get accepted to college. For example, Jalah (sophomore) said, "I didn't know about the process of applying ... I didn't even know that you have to fill out a form. I thought it was just like ... you're accepted." Similarly, Ash (junior) shared, "I didn't know about the application. There's a lot that goes into it!" The students learned from the program that the application process is complex, but as indicated by Klasik (2012) in his research, an integral element in the

progression toward college enrollment. As a result, the program gave them substantial knowledge of the application process's existence, complexities, and stages.

Others knew there was an application but felt overwhelmed by the numerous steps in applying. Daisy (senior) noted, "I haven't looked at the college application process yet, but when I do, I probably would [need help]." Blue (senior) also discussed the need for assistance and explicitly talked about the complexity of the application itself: "I just need help with the application ... it's confusing even for parents." Among students who were aware of the application, understanding how to demystify the process itself was important.

Holzman, Klasik & Baker (2019) emphasize the importance of understanding the steps students must take and when they should complete them to successfully navigate the college application process. In his research, McDonald (1997) found that knowledge tends to be less common among students whose parents did not attend college.

Participants in the process often came from households where neither parent attended college and was unfamiliar with how the application process works. Emory's Oxford program sought to address this barrier by educating program participants on the application process and having admissions staff on-site to answer questions. Students were also provided with contact information if they had future questions after the program ended.

Theme 2: Financial Aid and Paying for College

A concern expressed by all study participants was how to apply for financial aid and pay for college. To begin with, most students knew that attending college had a cost. Daisy (senior) and Rose (senior) both expressed understanding of this by saying, "I know

it's expensive" and "I knew it wasn't cheap." Jalah (a sophomore) provided additional insight into costs beyond tuition. As she understood, "you gotta pay tuition and books, but that's pretty much all I know."

Saving money for tuition has been a priority for students who believe this is the only way they can afford it. As Jasmine (sophomore) points out, "you have to save up a lot to go to college to pay the fees and stuff like that," while Chasity (sophomore) replies, "I'm trying to budget for college... see how much I gotta keep saving...gotta see what colleges fit in my budget range."

Among the students present was one who better understood the financial aid process. Jalah (sophomore) explained: "there are multiple ways of getting financial help for college.... depending on what our parents pay, we can get money from the college to pay with tuition and stuff like that." Not only did Jalah seem to understand the many ways of accessing financial help, but she also indicated an understanding of how to appeal for more money. According to Jalah (sophomore), "they also said if you didn't get enough money, you could request more... but I didn't learn (how) from that."

Students shared the challenges of knowing there was some financial relief with scholarships. Still, as Jalah mentioned previously, they needed to learn how to access the funds. Rose (senior), for example, states, "I know there are grants and all. I wish it were a little easier to get them... I also wish college wasn't as expensive."

One student makes the connection between financial aid knowledge and college decision-making. With one comment, Ash demonstrates why enrollment is lower amongst rural students. As shown by the Hossler-Gallagher (1987) model, a student in the choice phase declines college enrollment because of a lack of being able to pay for

college. Ash (junior) succinctly states, "people struggle with financial problems, and certain financial problems can affect people now going to college."

One of the program's goals at Emory's Oxford is to inform the students about the financial aid process and provide guidance on how to pay for college. Completing a Federal Student Aid (FASFA) application is the most critical step in accessing financial aid (Powell et al., 2021). One of the questions asked of students was to share their understanding of fee waivers, the FASFA, and the financial aid process. Most students had never heard of the FASFA but were receptive to learning more about it. Some students like Jasmine (sophomore) and Michael (sophomore) had never heard of the FASFA. When asked, both stated, "... never heard of it". Other students were receptive to knowing more about it. Jessica (sophomore) commented, "I want to know more about the form that helps with tuition," while Sarah (sophomore) said, "I'd be interested in learning more about FASFA."

Some students indicated familiarity with financial terms like FASFA, fee waivers, scholarships, and grants but needed to familiarize themselves with their purpose. For example, Chastity (sophomore) said, "I learned about FASFA where it's like some type of financial aid that helps you budget -keep you from overspending." Alternatively, Ash (junior) shares her thoughts about fee waivers, "fee waivers are both like loans... which often leaves students in debt, where they're paying it off for possibly the rest of their lives".

Many students had strong opinions about loans. They reported not wanting to borrow money and going into debt. Jessica (sophomore) states, "I know you can get a loan; the loan always has to be paid back." Alternatively, Jalah (sophomore) emphasizes

that funding is essential because “you don't want no student loans after you get out of college.” Daisy agrees and adds, “when I get older, I don't want to be too much in debt; it will affect my credit score...then I'm not able to get the things I need or want.”

For most students, financial aid and how they will pay for college are more significant than acceptance. Thus, a student's ability to pay for college plays a crucial role in their college enrollment. The ability to pay for college is the most influential factor for this particular group of rural students since its practicality overshadows affordability. Implementing a strategy to educate these students on completing a FASFA, financial aid application, applying for fee waivers, and avoiding taking out loans seems beneficial.

Theme 3: Entrance Exams

Entrance exams took up a significant portion of the discussion among the students interviewed. Most students lack awareness or understanding of college entrance exams. Of those who recognized the value of these tests, only one of the eleven registered to take them. When asked about what they learned about the SAT and ACTs, the students shared many opinions. Jessica (sophomore) believed, “It's a major test you must take in high school to get where you want in college.” While Jalah (sophomore) thought, “Having a high GPA or higher SAT score and a high ACT score doesn't necessarily mean you're going to automatically get into that college.”

Some students focused their responses on the actual test score. Jasmine (sophomore) thought you needed entrance exams to “graduate high school,” while Ash (sophomore) thought, “Your scores on the tests help rank your application.” Many of the responses were preoccupied with the actual test score. For example, Michael

(sophomore) felt, “You need a certain score for colleges. There was one outlier that correlated test scores with being smart. Blue (senior) said entrance exams “determine whether you were smart enough for college. That's how I viewed it. That's how I still view it.”

None of the students interviewed had taken either a practice entrance exam or sat for an official ACT, SAT, or PSAT. One student had registered to sit for the ACT this fall. Klasik (2012) asserts that students do not sit for college entrance exams because they have not committed to applying to college. The cost of studying for and taking the SAT should be weighed against the benefits of attending college and completing all of the other steps. When already uncertain about going to college, Klasik (2012) suggests that students may only meet some steps to enroll when deciding to go to college. Having no factual information and not taking entrance exams, wondering how to pay for the exam, paying for college, then worrying about the score, inaction is likely to result.

Considering there was no workshop on entrance exams at the program, it makes sense that entrance exams were The students shared many opinions when significant than the application process and accessing financial aid. However, the majority of the students had concerns and comments about the entrance exams because they were discussed in the college application workshops. The program offered essay writing workshops in the College Fundamentals class, which might be helpful with the essay portions of the entrance exams and the application essay. Taking entrance exams is between the Before Applying (Aspiration) and Applying (Search) stages in the constructed structural model of college choice derived from the Hossler-Gallagher model.

Emerging Theme: Perceived lack of administrative support

During data collection, one non-dominant theme emerged regarding what Lent et al. (1994) refer to as the perceived lack of academic and administrative support experienced by students during the college choice process. Students acknowledged having a support system to help with the college choice process, but most indicated their support came from home or in the community. Only one or two students even referenced an experienced professional in college choice as a member of their support system.

Daisy, the only senior who took the SAT a few weeks after that interview, said she had not met with the school guidance counselor. I asked her why, since she has a college list, she was about to take the ACT and was about to begin the application process, and she replied, "I just haven't thought about asking him." Sarah's (sophomore) response to the same question was, "I just don't know what to ask or what to say."

According to some researchers, student's perception of a lack of support is a common barrier to education (Lent et al., 1994). Rural students experience this perception as their reality. A lack of institutional support may cause some students to face difficulties pursuing their educational goals, as illustrated by Daisy's and Sarah's responses. While this emerging theme was not dominant, it underscored the significance of connecting with mentors and admissions professionals during Emory's Oxford program. Students participating in Emory's Oxford program received contact emails for future questions and concerns. An administrative contact was added to support and assist during the application process.

Research Question 2:

The second research question asks how physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students. Several students returned from the program excited about the college's opportunities. Having the opportunity to be physically on campus can, according to Magolda (2000), have a positive impact on many students. According to Lytle (2012), the students participating in the program indicated positive impressions of the campus, discussed enjoying the facilities, and appreciated the opportunity to understand the academic programs better and meet the professors. Students also talked about enjoying the freedom from being away from home and the ability to roam around and be social on campus.

For many students, this was not the first time seeing or being on a college campus. A few students had toured Albany State University the previous week, and a couple had been exposed to a college campus through other means. However, most students attending had never bunked multiple nights in a college dorm, taken college classes on campus, or eaten in the college cafeteria. From the students' exposure to the college environment, themes emerged, such as (1) how they felt about the physical campus and facilities, (2) the level of safety they felt, and (3) whether they could envision themselves as students there someday.

Theme 1: Impression of Campus

When asked about their initial impression of the campus, the most consistent theme in student feedback was how beautiful and spacious the campus seemed. (See Figures 7 and 8 below for pictures of the main campus and an aerial view of the campus.) A few students referenced a sense of freedom, but the main comment was on the campus

aesthetics. For example, both Jasmine (sophomore) and Blue (senior) described the campus as “beautiful” and stated how much they “loved the campus.” Jasmine describes the campus as “amazing, and Jalah’s (sophomore) first impression of the campus “was really, really nice.” JT (sophomore), who admitted to doing the research before visiting the campus, was also at a bit of a loss, for words. JT explains seeing the campus for the first time “ was great... I loved it... and I watch YouTube videos and have seen many college campuses.”

Figure 11

Seney Hall at Emory’s Oxford College



Figure 12

Aerial view of Emory’s Oxford College



Aside from the campus aesthetics, many students comment on the size of the campus. (For context, Emory’s Oxford College is located on 56 acres in Newton County. For context, it is less than one-tenth the size of Emory University in Atlanta, which is 631 acres). When asked what their first impression of some students spoke about how beautiful the campus was, while others mentioned its size, which they correlated with freedom. Michael (sophomore) said, “on campus, you have more freedom. Similarly, Ash (junior) said, “there was a more open space, more room to walk around. Unlike in high

school, where you have like a few halls with identical classrooms.” Daisy (senior) also referenced how liberating it felt. Daisy adds, “ It felt free... I get actually to experience stuff on my own and be alone for the first time”.

One student seemed appreciative of the opportunity to experience the campus. For example, Jalah (sophomore) explained, “Many people do not have the opportunity to go outside of Putnam and experience different chances and opportunities to go somewhere like this.”

Students described the campus' beauty and size as their first impressions of it, while others appreciated the opportunity to be on the campus. The overall appearance of the campus was greatly influenced by its visual appeal and freedom of movement. In their research, Hooker & Brand (2010), Secore (2018), and Swanson (2021) stated that college experiences influence a student's decision to attend.

Theme 2: Campus Security

Having a safe and secure environment was another key theme for the students. While on campus, students needed to feel comfortable, secure, and safe. A few students found the campus large and intimidating. I wanted to know if the intimidation was more from being nervous about being on the campus away from home or the vastness of the campus. For example, Sarah (sophomore) student described being “ scared and nervous” about going on the trip in the first place. At the same time, Jessica (sophomore) described herself as anxious and worried about what happens “if people get lost on their way to class” since the campus was so large. Blue (senior) indicated that feeling safe was very important to her. Blue described the campus as feeling “safe” and went on to explain that “... I want to be in a safe, comforting environment for school... because if I have to

worry about my safety every day, I'm not going to focus on my classes and grades and everything". In other words, campus safety was a significant feature for the students.

Students also seemed to appreciate the size of the campus. As mentioned earlier, they wanted to roam around and explore the university's large campus environment, so security and safety played a crucial role in its appeal. Blue's response clarifies why campus safety is critical and likely explains why some students resonate with it. Students need to feel comfortable and secure on a campus (Okerson, 2016), while aesthetics, as noted by Secore (2018) and Swanson (2021), play an essential role in their college selection.

Theme 3: College-Life Visualization

Another critical theme for the study participants was imagining themselves as college students. Students must be able to envision how life will be on campus to envision themselves in the future and what opportunities they will have. Jasmine (sophomore) shared that she had "never been on an actual college campus for that long. It's experiencing what it's like to be in college." Michael (sophomore) had a similar sentiment to Jasmine. Michael said, "I felt like, okay. I could get used to this life." Daisy agreed, "I get to experience independence, and it made me want to go to college more."

College-life visualization was another prominent and necessary theme among students in the study. It was crucial that students could imagine themselves living on campus, eating there, and studying there in the future. Students' stories of their experiences on campus indicated their significance to them.

Emerging Theme: Campus Intimidation

During data collection, campus intimidation emerged as a non-dominant theme. One student, in particular, spoke of the campus feeling "scary" (Jessica). Although it was not a dominant theme among the students interviewed, I thought it was worth mentioning as an emerging theme given the small sample of students interviewed. A more extensive selection of participants may experience similar feelings in a study.

Summary

RQ1: What are the strategies, practices, and opportunities that Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience Program offers to rural students aspiring to attend college?

The college aspirations of the students from this study were tested after the week-long summer program. An analysis of the data collected from the eleven participants yielded three major themes from the first research question. Regarding what strategies, practices, and opportunities surrounding the college experience inspire students to become college-ready candidates, the students responded by providing opportunities that incorporated training and strategy in the overall college application process, workshops on financial aid and how to pay for college, and practice for and techniques on college entrance exams. According to the student's responses, providing strategies, practices, and opportunities in these three areas will propel college aspirational students into becoming better-equipped college-ready candidates.

Almost all students said they now understand the application and financial aid process better. Before the program, only some students understood how to apply for college or get financial assistance. As a result of completing workshop sessions, Putnam

students now understand the "many layers" of the complex application process, and they are aware of the financial aid available to them. Students are not experts on this process after only a few days of workshops, but they are now familiar with terms like Common App, fee waivers, and FASFA, and they are now more aware of what admissions are looking for on an application. Furthermore, they now have connections with peers in Newton County who are going through the same process, and they have identified support from the mentors they met at Emory's Oxford College.

Students decide whether to continue their education beyond high school in the Aspiring stage of the Hossler-Gallagher model; most students are in the Aspiration phase and have time to explore entrance exams and continue their research before applying to colleges. Three seniors in the program are now in the search stage. As part of the Hossler-Gallagher model, students search for and identify characteristics and attributes of colleges and universities as potential choices (Hossler et al., 1989). Among the seniors interviewed, Rose is actively applying to colleges. Daisy will decide about applying after she takes the ACT in the fall, and Blue is in the process of determining whether or not to use it.

RQ2: How does physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

According to Secore (2018), students' interactions with campus visitors before, during, and after their visit profoundly impact their decision to enroll. Although the research did not explore the effects of Emory's Oxford campus environment before seeing the campus, students shared their perceptions of it during and after being on campus. Putnam students described the beauty of the campus and their feelings of safety in the context of their commentary on the aesthetics of the campus. Additionally, they

indicated that they could visualize themselves as college students. I interviewed the students four months after the program and found they still displayed solid and positive feelings about the campus. Several students commented enthusiastically regarding the campus appearance, smiled, and indicated the school among their top choices.

According to the data analyzed, students benefit from being exposed to the college environment. Campus visits provide a tangible way to get a feel for attending college in a way that students cannot experience from interactive campus tours or the YouTube videos that JT referenced. As Secore (2018) described, a campus visit is a brief trial run of what life might look like at the institution. The students shared testimonials about seeing themselves as students living on campus to illustrate how they had enjoyed that trial run.

Influences and impacts play a crucial role in propelling students through college choice. Physically walking around the campus, exploring the facilities, and meeting other college students significantly impacted Putnam students. Besides the connections and friendships they formed with their classmates, it was their most influential stand-out moment. Okerson (2016) and Secore (2018) suggest that campus aesthetics, personal interactions, and a strong sense of community often play the most vital role in determining a student's connection to an institution. For this group of students, the excitement generated by the exposure to the campus encouraged them to continue with their progression in the college choice process.

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

A primary concern addressed in this evaluation of Emory's Oxford program was the issue of why more rural students do not attend college. According to research, rural students represent a significant portion of public school students who are less likely than their counterparts to attend college and earn a college degree (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Means et al., 2016). Limited resources for college planning and research make college access difficult for many rural students, as indicated by Smith, Gosky, and Li (2022). According to Secore (2018), rural schools are disadvantaged by a lack of resources when taking students to campuses as part of the college selection process.

This qualitative study aimed to examine the impact of a program that instilled college knowledge, guided students through the college selection process, and exposed them physically to Emory's Oxford College compass. Emory's Oxford college summer experience program allows participants to overcome educational and economic barriers. As an intervention, the program engages high school students in a compass environment while instilling college knowledge and providing guidance. This program evaluation investigates the impact of Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience Program on the college aspirations of eleven rural high school students through an analysis of focus groups, individual interviews, narrative writings, and surveys.

In this evaluation of Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience program, the experiences of eleven rural high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors from Putnam County, Georgia. Williams (2022) informs students are given workshops on admissions, financial aid, and writing essays as part of the program's personal and professional enrichment component, enhancing their understanding of college, applying to college, and preparing for college. The program exposes students to and allows them to live on the Oxford campus, take classes taught by Oxford faculty, engage in recreational activities, and interact with students from Newton county.

This evaluation of Emory's Oxford program considers how being on a college campus and engaging in college-preparatory programs affects rural students' college aspirations. The study was structured around Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase college choice model and addressed the following research questions:

1. What strategies, practices, and opportunities do Emory's Oxford College summer experience program offer rural students aspiring to attend college?
2. How do physical, in-person college experiences affect rural students?

Summary of Findings

RQ1

This evaluation of Emory's Oxford program tested students' college aspirations at the end of a week-long summer program. Based on the data collected from the eleven participants, three major themes emerged from the first research question. In response to a question involving what strategies, practices, and opportunities surround the college experience that inspires students to be college-ready candidates, the students offered opportunities that incorporated training and strategy in the overall college application

process, financial aid workshops, and preparation for and techniques for college entrance exams. College aspirational students will become better equipped college-ready candidates if strategies, practices, and opportunities are provided in these three areas.

Students report that they now understand the application and financial aid process better. Students at Putnam now understand the financial aid options available after attending workshops on the complex application process. The students still need to learn more about this process after only a few days of workshops, but they are familiar with terms like Common App, fee waivers, FASFA, and what admissions are looking for. They have identified mentors at Emory's Oxford College and have made connections with peers undergoing similar processes in Newton County.

As it relates to Hossler-Gallagher's model, the aspiring stage (Hossler et al., 1989) is when students decide whether they want to continue their education beyond high school. Having analyzed the data, all the sophomores and juniors interviewed are in the aspiration phase. Students in this phase have time to study for entrance exams and research colleges before applying. According to the model, all three seniors involved in the study are in the search phase. This means that according to Hossler et al. (1989), they are comparing colleges that match their preferences and actively applying to them. Rose, one of the senior interviewees, is actively applying to colleges, including Emory's Oxford. Daisy will decide whether to apply after taking the ACT in the fall, and Blue is deciding whether to complete an application.

During this program evaluation, an issue that had not been discussed in the literature and needs to be addressed emerged. The problem was that students might need to be informed that they were applying to college. One of the 11 students who were

interviewed did not know you had to apply to college. She stated that she thought college students just showed up to class as they did in high school. The lack of awareness about the need to submit college applications was not a dominant issue. However, I thought it relevant to acknowledge it since a student brought it up.

RQ2

Visits to campus and interactions with campus visitors have a profound impact on a student's decision to enroll, according to Secore (2018). Students shared their perceptions of Emory's Oxford campus environment before and after seeing the campus. Students at Putnam described the campus's aesthetics and their feelings of safety in the context of commenting on its aesthetics. They also indicated that they could see themselves as college students.

According to the data analyzed, college exposure benefits students. A campus visit provides a tangible way to experience college (Nora, 2004) in a way that students cannot obtain from virtual tours. As Secore (2018) explains, campus visits are a brief glimpse into what life might be like at an institution. Students shared testimonials as an example of how they enjoyed living on campus.

Evaluating Emory's Oxford program, the issue of intimidation also arose. One of the students interviewed used language like "scary" and referenced the campus as intimidating. Again, this is not a prominent issue, but it is relevant since a student mentioned it. I could not find any research regarding intimidation on campus as a factor in college choice.

Several factors influence students' college choices. It was a very impactful experience for Putnam students to walk around campus, explore the facilities, and meet

other students. According to research (Okerson, 2016; Secore, 2018), campus aesthetics, personal interactions, and a strong sense of community often play a significant role in determining students' connection to an institution. They were encouraged to continue their progress in the college choice process due to the excitement generated by their visit to the campus.

Limitations, Assumptions, Delimitations

Limitations

Creswell and Creswell (2017) define limitations as aspects of the design of the methodology that affect the interpretation or application of the results. The study has four significant limitations: sample size, timeframe, preexposure to college campuses, and transfer students from other cities.

The first limitation is the size of the sample. Initially, I expected to work with 30 students. There were 36 students accepted into a program, but only 24 showed up for the bus. Also, only 13 out of 24 participants were available to participate in the focus groups, and 11 could participate in individual interviews. By reducing the sample size to 11, the perspective of the population sampled has been narrowed significantly.

The timeframe of this study was also a limitation. This research was accelerated due to the program's start date and the student's class schedules. Focus groups were conducted five days after the program, which took place from June 21-25, 2022. With school starting, Dr. Williams and I were able to schedule 11 individual interviews, but we needed to work around instruction times. Data collection for personal interviews took place over three days, primarily during the first two months of school, to minimize disruptions to learning.

Another limitation was that a few students had previously been exposed to college campuses. One-quarter of the students had been to Albany State University just a week earlier, where they stayed on campus. Even though ASU's program was based on experiential learning, not college choice fundamentals, I considered this preexposure a limitation of the study.

A fourth limitation included the number of students not originally from Putnam. Three students moved to Putnam from other areas. They were from Macon, New York, and Michigan, respectively. While none of the students stated whether or not they were from rural areas, they have all lived in rural Putnam County for at least three years. They all attended a rural high school in Putnam County at that time.

Assumptions

One assumption underlies this study. It was assumed that study participants answered all questions truthfully and were transparent about the factors influencing their college aspirations.

Delimitations

Lastly, there was one key delimitation of the study. Of the Putnam and Newton County students attending Emory's Oxford program, only the Putnam County students were invited to participate in this study.

Recommendations and Implications

As a result of limitations and the review of existing literature, several recommendations for further research were identified during the planning stages. In this study, Emory's Oxford College Summer Experience Program is examined through the experiences of eleven rural high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors from Putnam

County, Georgia. Students participated in admissions and financial aid workshops and seminars, enhancing their understanding of college, applying, and preparing for college. They were exposed to the physical campus through a residential component (Williams, 2022).

Recommendations for Future Research

1. *Further investigation can be based on the findings of this research.* I still had to anticipate some conclusions from this study. Future researchers may explore the following non-dominant themes in data collection: perceived lack of support, not knowing about college applications, and intimidation on college campuses. Future research could focus on any or all of these issues.
2. *Addressing the limitations of this research.* The study had four significant limitations: sample size, timeframe, students who visited another college campus the week before, and some students may only have been classified as rural for three years. Several of these limitations may need to be addressed in future research.
3. *Developing the same research with a broader range of rural students.* Research on rural students' college choice models and their impacts and influences could be conducted in different settings, contexts, or cultures. For example, a similar study could be performed on students in Putnam and Newton counties.
4. *A re-evaluation and expansion of Hossler-Gallagher that incorporates different theories.* I believe this research could benefit from McMillan and Chavis' (1986) Sense of Community theory, especially concerning students' search for a sense of "fit" when they visit college campuses. In future studies, the Sense of Community

theory could be integrated with a college choice model as a conceptual framework.

Implications for Policy and Future Practice

A wide range of practical implications is evident from my study of policy and practice. The findings are intended to guide future projects investigating the link between college choice and strategic programming interventions. This may include the application process, financial aid, entrance exams, and campus visits.

Policymakers should support programs and initiatives to educate rural families about the admissions and financial aid processes and funding opportunities for rural learners to experience college campuses in person. Students from rural communities often need help navigating the college search, application, and financial aid processes, which can be a significant barrier. Through Emory's Oxford program, students had access to the university campus, classes, and broader educational opportunities. This program is essential for students deciding where to attend college, particularly in the early stages.

Public policymakers should consider funding colleges and supporting institutions serving communities where students are less likely to attend college. In my research, one student (Michael) said he would attend a community college if necessary, then save up and transfer to UGA. Michael's thinking is similar to that of many students who attend community colleges and later transfer to four-year institutions. Policymakers and practitioners should consider increasing support for non-traditional college pathways.

Implications for Higher Education Practitioners

The role of higher education institutions in preparing underrepresented youth for postsecondary education success is crucial. For higher education institutions, this means

fostering student visits and promoting programs to assist rural students with their application and financial aid processes. Furthermore, higher education should establish a contact point for rural schools to help students with questions or concerns about college.

The recommendations I believe would be helpful for future college choice research might also remedy some of the limitations and delimitations I encountered:

1. Extend the program duration to a whole week. Students would have more time to process and discuss their learning during their experience.
2. Make workshops shorter and more frequent for maximum impact. I recommend separating admissions and financial aid workshops and scheduling them over multiple days during the week. A student complained that the workshops were long and repetitive (Jalah), which may have diminished their effectiveness. Spreading the workshops over a week also allows students to reflect on their learning and return with questions.
3. Assign a digital portfolio due on the first day of the program. When students receive their acceptance letters, they should receive a checklist of the academic materials they must bring. This checklist should include a list of colleges, a digital portfolio, and what they are looking for in a college. The student should consist of their academic and extracurricular accomplishments while understanding that they can build one if they do not already have one. As a result, the student has scheduled research time ahead of the program and an opportunity to participate in one of the workshops.
4. Schedule dedicated time for students in the search phase to meet with an admissions counselor. In addition to the valuable feedback they receive, that

meeting can spur additional discussion with their guidance counselor when school resumes that Fall.

5. Include Newton County students in future analyses. Adding students from a college town (Emory's Oxford College is in Newton County) might provide a broader perspective on the data collected.

Implications for High School Counselors

College counselors play an instrumental role in the college search process. As gatekeepers of information, they communicate and disseminate information about colleges. Counselors should be more proactive in making themselves accessible and approachable to all students, a non-dominant theme in this study. Counselors can organize assemblies to introduce college information to the entire school and open the doors for students to approach them later. Ideally, guidance counselors should strive to be more approachable by making themselves more accessible. In light of this information, rural students may no longer be.

Implications for High School Students

Students must advocate more effectively for their interests. Students are ultimately responsible for making college choices, regardless of what policymakers, school counselors, or higher education do. Information is readily available online and through word-of-mouth. Students must schedule appointments with their counselors to find out what options are available to them. The tools at the students' disposal include staying connected, staying informed, and doing as much research as possible.

Conclusion

As part of Emory's Oxford summer experience program, Newton and Putnam county students were allowed to experience college life and academic offerings on a college campus while enhancing their personal and professional development, college preparation, and recreational activities. The goals of the program included:

1. Experiencing a top liberal arts college;
2. Empowering students and enhancing their college readiness;
3. Providing students with tools for making a successful transition from high school to college;
4. Enhancing education and career awareness;
5. Teaching students how to align their academic and social profiles with college admissions criteria; and
6. Educating students about financial aid, scholarships, and other college admissions processes.

The program's major successes were the exposure to the campus environment, the academic classes, and the college fundamentals and foundations workshops. According to their interview responses, the students achieved many program goals. The students mentioned their exposure to academic courses in their discussions about their favorite classes, such as chemistry lab, the nature walk, political science, and writing class. Students described their impressions of the campus, how secure they felt on campus, and their ability to visualize what college life would be like as prospective students.

During the individual interviews, there was an extensive discussion on financial aid, scholarships, and admissions among several students. By synthesizing interviews, the

workshops provided an overview of what is expected of students in terms of admissions and financial aid, the importance of grade point averages, the fact that not all schools require entrance exams, and the importance of extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the students also exhibited a sense of empowerment by expressing a keen interest in continuing the college choice process.

However, there was no discussion of the knowledge and practices needed to transition from high school to college successfully. Also, students' college readiness levels would be difficult to assess after only a few days of exposure to a strong college program. Due to this, I believe those two goals should be reinforced throughout high school through sequential summer program attendance. In addition, it could be a concern if students are unable to reinforce their learning and continue the dialogue with the school. I believe that Emory's Oxford could correct this if they offered a similar program next summer and if a new cohort of students was invited to attend along with them.

This evaluation of Emory's Oxford program proved that increased college knowledge and access to the college environment positively impact rural students' aspirations to attend college. This program evaluation contributes to the body of knowledge about how rural students' decision to attend college is heavily influenced by their understanding of the college application process, financial aid application process, and entrance exam, as well as their ability to experience campus life. The literature teaches us that there are many educational and economic barriers that rural students face when it comes to accessing college education. The findings provide empirical support for the importance of college knowledge in securing college access.

This study had two significant findings. The study found it impactful for rural students to physically experience the campus environment and access the programs, which increased college knowledge. In the program evaluation, the students shared the benefits of learning how to apply for college, pay for college, and what to expect on admissions tests. This study also contributes to the literature by discovering its non-dominant findings from this evaluation. While the literature addresses the perceived lack of administrative support among rural college students, there was no literature I could find on the intimidation on the college campus. While both themes were non-dominant, it does speak broadly to the population of rural students that may be negatively influenced by the perception that they have no help from their school and do not initially experience positive impressions on a college campus.

Finally, this study identifies Hossler-Gallagher's model as a well-suited theoretical framework for examining college choices among rural students. The strategic timing of the influences, coupled with the ages of these students, positively impacts the progression through the stages of college choice.

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APPENDIX A

Pilot Interview Protocol*College Perceptions and Sense of Community among Putnam County, Georgia Students*
Interview Protocol**1. Clarify purpose of opening.**

Before we go ahead and start, I want to go over a few housekeeping things our team wants to make sure people know before starting the interview. So please bear with me for just a moment.

A. Introduce yourself, your role, and this overall project in neutral terms.

To introduce myself, my name is Mrs. Young, and I will be your interviewer today. The project team consists of myself and one other researcher from the University of Georgia, who are just trying to help society and policymakers better understand the range of perspectives people have on policy.

Today's interview is part of a research project that I am doing at UGA with PCHS. Last week you signed a consent/assent form that talked about this, but I wanted to remind you of a few things before starting. I will be asking about your experiences living in Putnam County as a member of the Putnam community. I will not interrupt much; I mostly want to hear your thoughts. So, it might feel a little awkward because it won't be like a normal conversation. If you are uncomfortable or don't want to share something, that is fine. Before we do anything further I want you to know that I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

B. Ask for a pseudonym.

Now, because this interview is relatively anonymous, I am not going to ask you for your real name, and any references to names will use a fake name. Do you have a fake name that you would prefer that we use? If not, no problem, we can come up with one.

C. Clarify selection and diversity of sample.

You were selected to be invited to an interview because you are current Putnam County Charter high school student participating in the Oxford College of Emory University Summer Experience program. You were selected because we wanted to maximize the diversity of perspectives within the Putnam community.

D. State neutrality

Because we are listening to a variety of perspectives, I do want to remind you that my role here is to ask questions and listen, not to judge. As such, I invite you to be as honest with me as you feel comfortable.

E. Reiterate confidentiality

Just as a reminder, this interview is confidential, in that only the people on the research team and you will ever have access to the full conversation we will have. Any analyses and reports we create from this interview will be summarizing information from all the participants, so most of it will be based on broad themes. For

any quotes we do pull together for the purpose of showing examples, we will remove any identifying information. **However**, interviews are held in small groups, and I cannot control what other members of the focus group share from this interview.

- F. Explain recording/asking permission/reiterate autonomy** - I would like to record the interview to go back and listen to it and make sure I wrote down everything you were saying correctly. If at any point you would like for me to stop the recording, I am happy to do so. Remember, the transcript from this conversation will be totally confidential to the research team. Plus, two months after the study finishes, we will destroy them. What do you think? Is everyone okay with me starting the recording now?

(This is Rebecca Paschal-Young recording group interview #1, including the following students by name and grade. Today's date is---)

- G. Getting to know each other** - Let's talk a little bit. I am going to spend some time asking you a few questions. When you are ready to share your thoughts about each question, go ahead and speak. You don't have to raise your hand; say how you feel. The only rule I have for today is that we do not talk over each other. This is mainly because I need to hear what everyone is saying and understand everyone's thoughts. It's difficult for me to do that when more than one person speaks.

1. The first few questions are to get to know each other. Let's talk a bit about each of you in the room. Please introduce yourself to me, tell me what grade you will be in this fall, whom you live with at home and one exciting thing about you that I would not know. So, I need four things: Your name, grade, who lives with you, and something interesting that you would like to share.
2. Does everyone here know everyone else?
3. How long has each of you know each other?
4. How is the summer going for you so far?
5. What do you think about Oxford College?
6. What's been your favorite thing to do since you arrived? Why?

- H. Narrative Identity information** (Before the interview, gather the completed narrative inquiries and preselect the ones conducted by the interviewees. Take notes and make clarifications as needed on their worksheets)

1. Did everyone complete the workshop where you wrote stories about being a reality television star?
2. What did you share?
3. Using the worksheet to look at the stories the students wrote, ask them to explain some of the adjectives/nouns they used to describe themselves
4. Let's talk a little about that.

(Pause and give each student time to discuss what they wrote)

I. Sense of Community

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word rural?
2. When you hear the word 'rural,' what feelings do you have?
3. Describe Putnam High School to a stranger.
4. How does the thought of leaving Putnam make you feel?
5. How do you feel about living in Putnam County?
6. Are the people in the community important to you? In what way?
7. Does your connection to the Putnam community play an essential role in your future?

J. College-Going

1. Where do you see yourself in the next few years?
2. What do you want to accomplish in the next few years?
3. What did you think about going to college before you arrived at Oxford College?
4. Now that you are here, what does being on the campus make you think?
5. Would you consider going to college in a few years?
6. What do you think about Oxford?
7. Have you ever been on a college campus before?
8. Do you think you may one day go to college?

9. Did either of your parents go to college?

10. If you go to college, would you plan to move back to Putnam to work after college?

K. Additional questions -Is there anything else you would like to share? Anything you want to add that you didn't have time to share earlier?

L. Thank you so much for your time. Would you like me to share the transcript of your interview with you so that you may review it before it is used in the research?

APPENDIX B

Broader Research Design Interview Protocol

Clarify the purpose of the opening.

Before we start, I want to review a few housekeeping things our team wants to ensure people know before beginning the interview. So please bear with me for just a moment.

A. Introduce yourself, your role, and this overall project in neutral terms.

To introduce myself, my name is Mrs. Paschal-Young, and I will be your interviewer today. The project team consists of myself and another researcher from the University of Georgia. They are just trying to help society and policymakers better understand the range of perspectives people have on policy.

Today's interview is part of a research project that I am doing at UGA with PCHS. Last week you signed a consent/assent form that talked about this, but I wanted to remind you of a few things before starting. I will be asking about your experiences living in Putnam County as a member of the Putnam community. I will not interrupt much; I mostly want to hear your thoughts. So, it might feel awkward because it will not be like a normal conversation. If you are uncomfortable or do not want to share something, that is fine. Before we do anything further, I want you to know that I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

B. Ask for a pseudonym.

Because this interview is relatively anonymous, I will not ask you for your real name, and any references to terms will use a fake name. Do you have a phony name that you would prefer that we use? If not, no problem, we can come up with one.

C. Clarify the selection and diversity of the sample.

You were selected to be invited to an interview because you are a current Putnam County Charter high school student participating in the Oxford College of Emory University Summer Experience program. You were selected because we wanted to maximize the diversity of perspectives within the Putnam community.

D. State neutrality

Because we are listening to various perspectives, I want to remind you that my role here is to ask questions and listen, not judge. As such, I invite you to be as honest with me as you feel comfortable.

E. Reiterate confidentiality

Just as a reminder, this interview is confidential in that only the people on the research team and you will ever have access to the entire conversation we will have. Any analyses and reports we create from this interview will summarize information from all the participants, so most of it will be based on broad themes. We will remove any identifying information for quotes we pull together to show examples.

F. Explain recording/asking permission/reiterate autonomy - I would like to record the interview to go back and listen to it and make sure I wrote down everything you were saying correctly. If you would like me to stop the recording at any point, I am happy to do so. Remember, the transcript from this conversation will be confidential to the research team. Plus, two months after the study finishes, we will

destroy them. What do you think? Is everyone okay with me starting the recording now?

(This is Rebecca Paschal-Young recording group interview #1, including the following students by name and grade. Today's date is---)

G. Getting to know each other - Let us talk a little bit. I am going to spend some time asking you a few questions. Go ahead and speak when you can share your thoughts about each question. You do not have to raise your hand; say how you feel. My only rule for today is that we do not talk over each other. This is mainly because I need to hear what everyone is saying and understand everyone's thoughts. I find it challenging to do that when more than one person speaks.

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What grade are you in?
4. Tell me something interesting about yourself, like your favorite music/artist/movie.

H. Fluff questions for fun.

1. What is your favorite class in high school?
2. Which ones? Tell me about them.

I. Pre-Oxford Program- For the next set of questions, I want you to think about how you felt BEFORE the program started. Not now. What were your thoughts when I was here with the donuts, and you completed the TikTok writing sample in May?

1. What grade were you in during my previous visit?
2. Why do you like that class?

3. What class were you missing? Do you remember the donuts? Were you with one of the groups that got to eat them, or were you with the last group that ran out?
4. Before the program, what did you know about college in general?
5. Have you ever heard of Oxford college?
6. What did you think about attending college before you arrived at Oxford?
7. What did you think it would be like?
8. Have you ever thought about going to college?
9. What did you know about applying to college?
10. Ever heard of the SAT or ACT? What do you know about it?
11. Ever heard of a FASFA?
12. How many people do you know that are in college right now?
13. Did anyone in your family go to college?

J. POST-Oxford Program

1. What classes did you take there?
2. Which workshops did you like best?
3. What did you learn about applying to college?
4. What did you learn about Oxford college?
5. Did you learn about financial aid?
6. Where would you take the SAT?
7. If you apply to college, do you know how much the application costs?
8. Have you ever talked to your guidance counselor about colleges?
9. Did you meet anyone at Oxford that can ask questions about college?

10. What do you want to accomplish in the next few years?
11. How did it feel to be on the college campus?
12. Did it make you feel more or less likely to go?
13. Would you consider going to college in a few years?
14. What do you think about Oxford?
15. Have you ever been on a college campus before?
16. Do you think you may one day go to college?

K. Additional questions -Is there anything else you would like to share? Anything you want to add that you did not have time to share earlier?

L. Thank you so much for your time. Would you like me to share the transcript of your interview with you so that you may review it before it is used in the research?

APPENDIX C

Summary Transcript Example

Transcript Summary

Student # 1: **Jalah**

Individual interviews: September 23-27, 2022

Themes/Questions	Summary of Responses
Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Sophomore, Female, Black ⇒ Recipient of \$10,000 REACH scholarship awarded in 8th grade ⇒ Aspires to be a pediatrician or anesthesiologist ⇒ Favorite class is math ⇒ Oldest child. Has 1 brother and 1 sister ⇒ Dual Enrollment student, registered for Healthcare class at CGTC, takes class at PCCHS ⇒ Wants to go to an HBCU, but is “fine if she ends up going someplace else, as long as she gets the education she needs for her dream profession of anesthesiologist or pediatrician”
Family/College connection	Mother- CGTC
Support system for help with college process	Mother Grandfather Pastor Avis
In three years, where do you see yourself	“Hopefully get a couple of degrees under my belt and start doing internships at hospitals and stuff, so I can get my mind right for the medical career.

	College-Aspiring	Family/college history	Been on college campus	Familiar w/ college application	Familiar with SAT/ACT	Familiar w/ FASFA Fee Waivers Financial aid	Likelihood to go to college
Pre-Program	Yes	Mother-CGTC- Associates degree online; working on second degree, will finish in December	Yes, ASU for football game and tour	No	No	Only heard of FASFA	Yes
Post-Program	Yes			Yes	Yes	Learned about scholarships and grants	More likely since program

In the student's own words:

Family & influences	<p>“my mom had scholarships to go to college but didn’t go because she had to stay back to help her mom”</p> <p>“My mother is the first person (in our family) to go to college, but I see myself as the first person to go physically because she went online”</p> <p>“My mom and granddad encourage me by telling me positive things: be positive and have positive thoughts: they tell me I am smart; I am gonna to make it, and I am gonna do great things.”</p>
College campus	<p>“That (being on a college campus) influenced me into wanted to go to an HBCU”</p> <p>“it was nice, really nice”</p> <p>“I thought a college campus would be one regular sized building with different classes in each room like school”</p>
College aspirations	<p>“absolutely thinking about going to college because the certain profession I want (requires) a college degree”</p> <p>“I have to be in college to get into the field to be an anesthesiologist or pediatrician-my dream”</p> <p>“I chose to (participate) in the program because a lot of people don’t have the opportunity to get outside of Putnam and go and experience different chances and opportunities to go somewhere like that. I figured it’s a chance to go look at a college that I might be interested in”</p>
Applying to college	<p>“I feel like if I go (to college) there are multiple ways to get help to get in college.”</p> <p>“ They (my mom and granddad) tell me to research about colleges so I have as many choices as possible, and can choose the right college and not just a good college... the college best for me, not just a big name school. They want me to go to a college where I’m actually comfortable as myself”</p> <p>“they (the program) taught us about getting accepted/waitlisted and denied, and they told us that you might have a 4.0 GPA but no extracurricular or community service things and that a 4.0 is no guarantee you will get accepted”</p> <p>“I know (the ACT and SAT) are very important tests and some colleges make it mandatory that you have to take them, but some colleges don’t- we talked about that (in the program)”</p> <p>“I wish I had more help understanding the college application part, like being able to understand more, like a straight to the point description to get me through the process step by step. Just tell me straight forward what I have to do, because some people don’t get it straight off the bat. Some people actually need help doing by like, step by step by step. I feel like this is the only thing I really need help with- the application process”.</p>
Paying for college	<p>“I knew college was not cheap”</p> <p>“I feel like finance and funding are important because you don’t want student loans after you get out of college”</p>