RURAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT AN R1 DOCTORAL UNIVERSITY

by

PHILLIP D. GRANT, JR.

(Under the Direction of Sally J. Zepeda)

ABSTRACT

This case study sought to understand the experiences of rural students at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. Using interviews, demographic information surveys, and descriptive statistics, this single-case study assessed the phenomenological experiences of rural students from Georgia. The researcher engaged in deductive, inductive, emotion, and holistic coding in ATLAS.ti to discover themes in the transcripts. Three research questions framed the study:

1. What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States

2. How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

3. How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

For first research question, three themes emerged: (a) curricular disadvantage sets rural students back, especially in STEM (b) socioeconomic status mediates experience (c) rural students alter their religious views in college. For the second research questions, two themes emerged: (a) poor college advising in rural public schools (b) geography is a

dynamic barrier. Finally, for the third research question, two themes emerged: (a) rural

students experience a shift in cultural and academic expectations (b) residence halls

create cultural bridging opportunities for rural students.

The researcher provided implications for future research and for practitioners in

the concluding chapter of this study.

INDEX WORDS: Advanced Placement, College access, elite universities, Rural

                 student experiences, STEM

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Phillip Dale Grant, Senior and in honor my mother, Pennye Anne Purvis Grant. The journey to a formal education begins before birth. My mother was dedicated to my development well before my arrival. Before I was born, my mother listened to classical music and read books aloud to me. She encouraged my curiosity by taking me along with her on errands and explained to me what she was doing when she paid the water bill or deposited a check at the bank. In elementary school, she would spend two hours with me the night before a test to quiz me. My mother instilled in me an intellectual confidence and curiosity that I will hold with me for my entire life and for that I will be forever grateful.

I am sad that my father will never hold this study in his hand, as it is just as much his as it is mine. When I told him years ago that I intended to pursue a Ph.D. and attempt a career in academia, he never doubted me. Though he had never finished a bachelor's degree himself, he believed that I could complete this degree, and so I did. Though I had trouble making ends meet in graduate school, I was never hungry, because my father never hesitated to help when I asked for it. In the first four years of my time in Athens, I called him at least twice a week and spoke with him for hours about the classes I was taking and how my dissertation study was evolving. My father supported my dreams my entire life and it is for that reason that this dissertation was written. I am honored to carry on my father's name.

This dissertation is for my two biggest fans, my mom and dad.

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The acknowledgements section of a dissertation is never complete, as the number of positive influencers, well-wishers, and core supports is ever-growing. What follows is a chronological and incomplete acknowledgement of my support team for the last five years.

My parents, Pennye and Dale Grant, for whom this dissertation is dedicated to, I must thank for encouraging me to gain a formal education and to take it as far as I could. I had many teachers growing up who encouraged me follow my dreams, including Katrina Cook, Ernestine Chandler, Brenda Boyette, Nancy Brown, Carl Woods, and Benjamin Harrison.

My start in the world of education policy was initiated solely because of the efforts of my mentor at The University of Alabama (UA): Dr. Stephen Katsinas. Dr. Katsinas is the Director of the Education Policy Center (EPC) at UA and hired me as a part-time research assistant. In my previous five years at UA, I was looking for an opportunity to participate in faculty research, especially in the field of education policy.

My time at the EPC changed my life. My co-workers Jon Koh and Lucas Adair can attest that Dr. Katsinas pushed us to our intellectual limits by treating us as co-researchers rather than students. Though Dr. Katsinas is one of the world's experts on the impact of the Pell Grant in higher education funding and access, he encouraged us to arrive at our own conclusions, gave us speaking opportunities in front of elected officials,

dissertation in the University of Georgia's Ilah Dunlap Little Memorial Library listening to the Final Fantasy X soundtrack, including the tracks "Spira Unplugged," "Besaid," "The Travel Agency," "Calm Before the Storm," and "Macalania Woods." These songs provided me with a means to focus my attention on my research participants rather than the distractions in my environment.

Finally, I want to thank my dissertation committee members, Dr. John Dayton and Dr. Joseph Hermanowicz, for their diligent work steering this study and pouring over manuscript drafts. Dr. Dayton advised the legal implications of sampling for this study, which was critical in data collection. Dr. Heranowicz's expertise in research methodology was vital in improving this study's rigor.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary American Dream is deeply ingrained in American culture and politics; it advocates that any person, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic background, will become successful as long as that individual works hard (Hochschild, 1996). The feasibility of the American Dream is growing less certain, however (Barlett & Steele, 2012). The American worker must now be more skilled and educated because in the past 40 years, the manufacturing economy of the United States has shifted to a service economy. This shift has left many Americans, particularly rural ones, in need of further education or advanced training required for employment in the 21st century (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

The technological advances of the last 40 years have changed how Americans work. From 1987 to 2017 the manufacturing sector of the economy, which offered a significant portion of low-education low-skill labor in rural areas, lost over 5 million jobs, or 30% of the entire manufacturing workforce in the United States (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Though many factories still exist in rural areas of the United States, there are fewer low-skill positions. Moreover, of the jobs that do exist, many are in danger of being eliminated in the next 50 years through robotics and artificial intelligence (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Cochet, 2016; Hagerty & Shukla, 2015; Schumpeter, 2013).

From 1987 to 2017, the number of Americans engaged in business services positions more than doubled, from an average of just over 9 million in 1987 to an average of over 20 million in 2017 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Business services positions are decidedly urban and suburban jobs, as they require telecommunications infrastructure, assess to reliable transportation via interstate or flight, and formal postsecondary education. Business services positions are one example of the jobs created in the 20th and 21st century that are decidedly urban and suburban.

Rural students, like suburban and urban students, must decide in their final years of high school whether to pursue higher education or job training. Unlike suburban and urban students, rural students are more likely to be forced to pursue a career that cannot be performed within their community, especially in emerging fields such as business services (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Though there is a current drive to enroll more students in job training programs locally, a short-term certificate or associate degree may not provide the best opportunity for talented rural students.

In a 2014 study, Daly and Bengali found that if a student completes a bachelor's degree, they are expected to make $800,000 more in their life than their peers who do not. Moreover, specific job training may not provide lifelong success as private sector employees are more likely to enjoy their job if they are paid well, regardless of whether their education prepared them for their specific position (Lee & Sabharwal, 2016). Therefore, talented rural students ought to be encouraged to pursue at least a bachelor's degree.

For children in families with generational poverty, the only path to a better life is through the education system via a public school. Unfortunately, even intelligent rural

students with superior academic performance are less likely to attend a four-year college if they attended a high school with students with a background of low income, compared to their urban and suburban peers (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013). The rising cost of college is at least partially to blame, as the total cost of college, including room, board, tuition, and fees is around $500,000, nearly double its cost a few decades ago after adjusting for inflation (Autor, 2014). Beyond cost, socioeconomic factors including parents' education level, race, and geography create significant barriers to higher education for high school students in the United States (Cashin, 2014; Perna, 2006).

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.) classifies universities in the United States according to their research output. R1 Doctoral Universities are the 115 universities in the United States that produce the most research (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.).

In the fall 2015 semester, 3,336,295 students were enrolled in an R1 Doctoral University in the United States, which averages to 29,272 students per campus (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). Rural students who matriculate to an R1 university begin school with more people on their college campus than existed in or near their hometown, as the National Center for Education Statistics defines rural as a city with a population of fewer than 2,500 people or less (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Rural students who decide to attend large research universities enter an entirely different world, where they coexist with thousands of strangers daily. Moreover, rural students experience intense academic competition with peers who have had more opportunities to experience an advanced curriculum at the high school level (Li, 2013; Schultz, 2004).

Of the 4,511 freshmen who enrolled in the fall 2014 semester at the University of Georgia, only 794 came from rural areas (UGA Office of Institutional Research, 2016). That number represents just over 17% of all first-year students enrolled, while the high school senior class of 2014 in Georgia was over 27% rural (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). The clear majority of the students enrolling at the University of Georgia come from suburban areas. The senior high school class of 2014 was only 46% suburban, while 61% of newly-enrolled first-year students in fall 2014 came from suburban areas. The University of Georgia is underserving rural students, and thus the rural residents, of Georgia.

Some rural students will opt to learn a skill in a non-postsecondary apprenticeship or technical college. Others will attend a community college and transfer to a four-year institution. Though it is not known nationally how many, a few rural students will attend a research institution, also known as an R1 or R2 Doctoral University, as designated by The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.). This study analyzes the experiences of a sample ($n = 18$) of rural students at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States.

Rural student enrollment data is limited, but if the freshman class of 2014 were extrapolated to four classes (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), then it can be

estimated that there are 3,376 rural students at the University of Georgia, and that roughly 1% are sampled in this study (UGA Office of Institutional Research, 2016). This section on the problem statement continues with a discussion of the recent state-based rural education research and the emerging need for further qualitative inquiry in the field of rural education research.

State-Based Rural Research

This study is designed to contribute to the need for state-based rural education research. National research on rural students in the United States primarily uses quantitative data to find large-scale trends (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins 2012; National Student Clearinghouse, 2013). Rural areas of the United States differ significantly, depending on the area's region, state, history, and economy (Burke, Davis, & Stephan, 2015; Howley, Johnson, Passa, & Uekawa, 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015).

In response to the need for more state-based research, a series of quantitative studies emerged from regional education laboratories in the United States. Studies in Indiana, Oregon, and Pennsylvania used quantitative data to measure the persistence and enrollment of rural students at colleges and universities in their perspective states (Burke et al., 2015; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015).

The authors of these three reports presented their papers at the 2015 American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Annual Meeting. During their presentations, the authors indicated that they conducted rural research within the context of their states because national studies of rural education failed to provide the context of rural life specific to the experiences of their students.

The Need for More Qualitative Inquiry

Findings from recent state-based research are incredibly important because they help explain national research and provide further context for differences between states. For example, at a national level, rural students from low-income high schools are the least likely to complete a four-year degree (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013). State-based rural research allows researchers and stakeholders to understand how students attend and persist in postsecondary institutions with only their state in mind, rather than combining the results with a sample of other states. Three studies presented at AERA in 2015 revealed that:

- In Indiana, about a third of students from rural areas undermatched, or attended a postsecondary institution that was less selective than the colleges and universities that a student could have academically qualified (Burke et al., 2015).

- In Pennsylvania, rural students persisted at colleges and universities at a higher rate than city students, but lower than town and suburban students (Howley et al., 2014).

- In Oregon, rural students persist at a lower rate than their urban and suburban peers (Pierson & Hanson, 2015).

All three of these studies give insight into the differences that exist between rural, suburban, and urban students. What is less clear, however, is why differences exist between rural students and students from other geographical spaces.

State-based research gives practical insight to state policymakers whose decisions most directly affect students in their state. To improve the completion rate of rural students, we must examine their experiences carefully and seek to understand the rural

students in the context of their geography. Rather than asking if rural students complete college at a lower rate than their suburban and urban counterparts, qualitative research methods, including the ones employed in the present study, seek to understand if and why differences exist. The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States.

Background of the Study

Unfortunately, the number of studies that seek to understand the rural student experience at universities is lacking. The author of the current inquiry could only locate one study of rural students at elite universities at the time of writing, though others may exist (Li, 2013). Using Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, Li explored the experiences of 10 Chinese students from rural areas at one university in China. Li reported that students from rural regions experienced feeling out of place, inferiority to peers from non-rural areas, and shame because of not adequately fitting the mold of a model student.

The participants in Li's study considered themselves the best students in their home communities but moving to a larger city in a more academically rigorous environment placed them behind their peers academically for the first time in their lives. The transferability of any international inquiry is limited because the context of Chinese higher education is very different than American higher education.

The literature on rural students in higher education is limited but growing (Burke et al., 2015; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012; Pierson & Hanson, 2015). Because of the small number of studies on rural student experiences at R1 Doctoral Universities, this study focuses on previous literature regarding rural students, their

access to college, their persistence in college, and their educational aspirations. Rural students were less likely than students from suburban and urban areas to choose to attend a selective institution (Burke et al., 2015; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Gibbs 1998).

The definition of "selective institution" varies from study-to-study, but we can assume that, at least, selective means that an institution does not have an open enrollment policy and rejects first-year students who were not successful in high school.

Research Questions

The development of this study began as a single question from the author of this study's advisory committee, "What is the rural student experience?" The initial interview guide created sought to respond to this single question, but as data collection continued beyond the three participants in the pilot study, it became apparent that the rural student experience is as unique and diverse as rural America itself.

First, by asking students about their life at home before college and their decision to attend the University of Georgia, it became apparent that their decision-making model had strong parallels to Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice. Second, most participants interviewed in this study indicated discomfort on a large college campus as a direct result of coming from a small town. As a result, sense of belonging theory was added to the theoretical framework. Three research questions emerged and are:

1. What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

2. How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

3. How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

Conceptual Framework

The terms "theoretical framework" and "conceptual framework" are used by researchers to describe the underpinnings of a study. Some scholars who employ qualitative research methods prefer the term conceptual framework, as it emphasizes that every item included for study does not necessarily need to be a formal theory (Maxwell, 2013). Others, however, prefer the term "theoretical framework" as they believe a study that does not employ some theory is impossible to undertake (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schwandt, 1993). This study uses both theories and concepts and will henceforth use the term "conceptual framework." The three concepts included in the conceptual framework of this study were Bourdieu's social and cultural capital, sense of belonging theory, and Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice.

Bourdieu's Social and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice uses a variety of concepts to explain how the dominant class in society creates a distinction between itself and lower classes. Of note in Bourdieu's theory of practice are social and cultural capital. The term capital most commonly means wealth in the form of money and assets. Here, Bourdieu refers to capital as any useful resource or power. There are four forms of capital that Bourdieu recognizes: economic, human, social, and cultural (Sablan & Tierney, 2014).

Economic capital refers to cash or property which can be exchanged for goods and services. Human capital pertains to skills acquired which allow individuals to gain access to jobs. Social capital involves a person's inclusion in a single or variety or social

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groups, and the value individuals represent collectively. Simply put, cultural capital refers to an individual's disposition toward cultural artifacts.

Cultural capital is much more complicated than just a piece of art in the home. Cultural capital, as explained by Bourdieu (1986), consists of cultural goods, personal preference toward cultural goods, and the reproduction of class structures through awarding advantage to individuals who have access to and are disposed toward an elite culture. In a recent review of cultural capital in the higher education literature, Sablan and Tierney (2014) define cultural capital as:

> Cultural resources that have a concealed exchange value and that enable or foster social and educational advancement. These resources are not just material resources such as books or computers, but can also exist in more subtle forms, such as the dispositions of upper classes. Their properties explain the perpetuation of the privileged class's advantage. (pp. 155-156)

Cultural resources, therefore, may be evident in cases where individuals subscribe to premium streaming services such as Home Box Office (HBO).

Cultural resources may also include natural dispositions. For example, a child might grow up with a parent who golfs and will, therefore, be predisposed to enjoying golf. Moreover, if a child lives in a community with a golf course, they are more likely to view golf as a potential hobby. The key in this example is that enjoying golf has a concealed value; golfers tend to be upper-class individuals with access to desirable social networks (Duncan, 1973).

Social capital, like cultural capital, can be leveraged to benefit the individual. Rather than being a measure of artifacts and disposition thereof, social capital measures

the value of connections between individuals in a community. Bourdieu (1986) refers to social spaces, like a community, as a "field." where individuals interact to exchange capital. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as:

> The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition… which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249)

We think about the value of social capital in access to higher education when we reflect on a student receiving help applying to schools. Both the decision to apply to college and the quality of that choice will likely be improved if students have access to someone in their social network who has already attended college (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016).

Cultural and social capital were chosen in this conceptual framework because they help us understand why intellect or hard work do not always correlate with academic success. This study's analysis of students from rural Georgia set out to understand why social class and geography are prevalent and negative predictors of academic success (Adelman, 2002; National Student Clearinghouse, 2013; Perna, 2006; Schultz, 2004; Youmans, 1959).

Sense of Belonging Theory

As human beings, we all need to feel a sense that we are connected to other people, to feel that we have a bond with others, and to feel a connection to our communities (Murray, 1938; Putnam, 2000). With its roots in psychological research, sense of belonging theory explains how a person's comfort in a social space or institution

can lead to academic success (Strayhorn, 2016). Sense of belonging theory is part of a larger family of student development theories and focuses on how comfortable students feel in various contexts at their respective institutions (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016).

Many factors within the institutional framework of a university can lead to comfort or discomfort experienced by students. For example, African American students sometimes choose to attend a historically black college or university (HBCU) rather than a predominately white institution (PWI). African American students typically attend HBCUs because they feel a stronger sense of purpose and perceive more support than their peers at PWIs (Seymour & Ray, 2015). Moreover, black men at PWIs reported a higher frequency of hyper-surveillance by police officers than non-black males (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007).

A better sense of purpose and belonging at HBCUs translated to a higher engagement with campus and graduation rates for African American students (Wilson, 2008). Sense of belonging theory proposes that a sense of belonging is a "basic human need, universal to all" and that it is a "fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior" (Strayhorn, 2016, p. 16). A student's sense of belonging cannot be ignored because everyone needs to feel connected to other human beings.

Belonging is an integral part of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, just above safety. According to Maslow, humans have needs that correspond to a hierarchy. At the bottom of the hierarchy are physiological needs. We can think of these as our basic survival needs. Above that are safety needs, like shelter and security. These two layers of the hierarchy are our basic needs. Without them, we cannot survive. The next two layers

are psychological needs. This study concerns itself with the first of the two psychological needs: belongingness and love. Belongingness is a general sense that one belongs and has relationships with others. Humans are social creatures and participating in relationships is vitally important. Maslow's hierarchy is a framework to think about how people are motivated toward success. In this study, it is clear that students will not perform at their fullest potential if their psychological needs are not met.

Because college success is linked with rigor of high school curriculum, and rural students are often offered less rigorous curricula options than their high school urban and suburban counterparts in high school, their feeling of exclusion is increased (Byun, Meece, & Irvin 2012). Students who begin college at an R1 Doctoral University from rural areas are the most academically successful students at their high schools. In fact, being successful becomes part of their identity, which can prove problematic when transitioning to college.

Perna's Nested Model of College Choice

Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice is a hierarchical approach to analyzing college-going decisions. In Perna's model, students determine whether to go to college based a variety of environmental and social factors, such as social and cultural capital. Ultimately, Perna's nested model is based on the idea that students make a human capital decision, which states that going to college is more beneficial than not going to college. Though we can hypothesize the human capital equation anecdotally, Perna's model takes it a step further by creating a hierarchy that feeds into the human capital equation, as the actual decision-making process is far more complicated than merely asking whether attending college would be beneficial or not. Four layers impact how

college-going decisions are made: habitus, social and community context, higher education context, and social economic, and policy context, respectively.

Habitus, as used by Perna (2006), is a reflection of the demographic characteristics of the individual. Demographic characteristics include gender, socioeconomic status, and social and cultural capital. This level of Perna's model seeks to assess the individual's socialization in the context of their family. The social and community context analyzes the social structures outside of the home and the resources available to students as they make their college-going decision. The social and community context includes the resources that are available to students within their high schools as well as family friends.

The higher education context of Perna's (2006) model observes both the physical distance and ability for the student to attend a specific university, the institutional characteristics that might be appealing to the student, and a measure of how the university is marketed towards the individual student. Finally, the social, economic, and policy context "recognizes that college choice is also influenced directly and indirectly through other contextual changes in social forces (e.g., demographic changes), economic conditions (e.g., unemployment rate), and public policies (e.g., establishment of a new need-based grant program)." (Perna, 2006, p. 199)

Overview of the Research Procedures

This qualitative study was framed broadly with the research design of a case study (Yin, 2014). A case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2014, p.

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16). The boundaries are particularly important in a case study, as defining what is not included is just as important as identifying what is included. The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States.

The unit of analysis and population for this study is the rural college student at the University of Georgia. The University of Georgia is a public R1 Doctoral University. Institutions that make up this classification awarded at least 20 doctoral degrees in the 2013-2014 school year and were considered to qualify for the highest measure of research activity among the 335 institutions qualifying as a doctoral university in the United States (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.).

R1 Doctoral Universities are the strongest academic institutions in the United States, and public R1 Doctoral Universities serve as an essential bridge for intellectually successful rural college students. Public R1 Doctoral Universities are world-class in education quality and more financially affordable than private institutions. The experiences of students from rural areas are different than the experiences of students from suburban and urban areas, and this study sought to understand why those differences exist (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Case study research was chosen as the method of this study because human and social systems are complex, and often require a holistic approach to analysis. The research questions were developed to conform to the requirements of case study research and arose from gaps in the initial literature review. Yin (2014) notes that research questions for case study generally should ask "how?" or "why?" questions that only a deep analysis of a single- or multiple-case study can answer.

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The first research question asks a "what" question: "What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States? "What" questions indicate that a study is examining an exploratory topic (Yin, 2014). Since this could be among the first studies in the United States that attempts to examine the rural student experience at a top university, the interview protocol assessed all three research questions and examined the first question with the same rigor as the two "how" questions.

This project started as a pilot study in which the researcher interviewed three participants from rural Georgia. The study asked three students in a semi-structured interview about their decision to attend college at the University of Georgia. The most significant finding from that study was that the HOPE scholarship program in Georgia, which guarantees a partial-tuition scholarship for meeting a 3.5 academic requirement in high school, was the only way these students could have attended an R1 Doctoral University (Grant, 2016).

After reviewing the findings with the advisory committee of the current study, it was determined that a larger sample size and a refining of research questions would be required. The present study includes a purposeful sample ($n = 18$) of students from rural areas and that attend the University of Georgia. Data collection occurred in the form of semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol, demographic data collection through a survey, and secondary school demographic analysis through the Common Core of Data on the National Center for Education Statistics' website. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using word-for-word transcription in Inqscribe. Data was coded for analysis in ATLAS.ti for Mac.

Significance of the Study

Although the literature on postsecondary outcomes of rural students is expanding, the author can only locate one study at the time of this writing that explores the experiences of rural students at an elite university (Li, 2013). Rural students experience collegiate life differently than students from urban and suburban areas. Studies show that college access and completion among rural students fall behind the rates of suburban and urban students (Byun et al., 2015; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012).

Studies in Indiana, Oregon, and Pennsylvania show that different regions of the United States create different rural contexts (Burke et al., 2015; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015). These studies show us how rural students are performing in higher education, but they do not explain why they perform below their urban and suburban peers.

This study contributed to research in postsecondary education by exploring the unique experiences of rural students in their own words. This study's methodological significance lies in its approach to a single case study and the conceptual framing of Bourdieu's theory of practice and Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice. Bourdieu's theory of practice and sense of belonging theory complement each other as Bourdieu's theory of practice proposes that those of the lower class use education to assimilate with the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1986). By analyzing each participant's sense of belonging, this study tracked how those changes took shape.

The gap in the literature concerning the rural student experience at an elite university is vast, and this study contributes just one perspective. The findings of this

study should enrich elite public universities as they struggle to serve their rural constituents in their service areas. Moreover, student affairs staff could benefit from rural research, like this study, to be able to serve first-generation, transfer, and other special classifications of rural students.

Assumptions of the Study

The primary underlying assumption of this study was that participants shared common traits that reverberated from their self-identification as being "rural." As such, the primary assumption in this study is that each participant experienced the phenomenon of being a rural student at an R1 Doctoral University. It was assumed that a purposeful sample of participants would yield a representative account of the varying demographics of rural students attending the University of Georgia. This assumption cannot be verified, as the University of Georgia does not release student data which links where a student attended high school and their race.

This study assumed that giving a detailed history of the state of Georgia in the United States and background information on the three sites considered for case study would provide rich data that could enhanced the transferability of the findings to institutions of similar caliber and demographic consistency. Finally, it was assumed that triangulating multiple sources of data improved the validity of the study.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined within the context of the present study:

First-generation student – A college student or a prospective college student whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree; this includes students who have a parent who has attended college and completed a certificate or associate degree but did

not complete or are completing a bachelor's degree. This is the same definition used by federally funded TRiO programs (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2011)

Low-income school – A high school where at least 50% of the student population receives a free or reduced lunch benefit (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013).

R1 University – Also known as R1 Doctoral University—highest research activity. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.-a) for universities is based, in part, on the number of doctoral degrees offered by the institution and amount of research and funding generated by the institution.

Rural: Distant – Rural territory is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.-a) as "more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster" (para. 13). Urban clusters are areas that contain at least 2,500 people, but no more than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Rural: Fringe – Rural territory that is "less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 12). Urban clusters are areas that contain at least 2,500 people, but no more than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Rural: Remote – Rural territory "more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and… also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 14). Urban clusters are areas that contain at least 2,500 people, but no more than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Rural School - Schools classified as Rural: Fringe, Rural: Remote, or Rural: Distant by the National Center for Education Statistics using zip code data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Rural Student - Students enrolled in secondary education in the State of Georgia at a rural school. Rural schools are classified by the National Center for Education Statistics using data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Town: Distant – "Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 10). Urban clusters are areas that contain at least 2,500 people, but no more than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Limitations of the Study

Possible limitations exist in this study. Generalizability could be considered a limitation of this study. Most case studies, however, do not seek generalizability as a goal. The purpose of a case study is to discover what makes a case genuinely unique as opposed to broad generalizations (Yin, 2014). This study does allow for transferability, however.

According to Tierney and Clemens (2011), transferability is defined as "the ability of an author to evoke in readers an understanding of the research project in a manner that enhances understanding and presumably provokes questions regarding similarities and differences" (p. 40). By giving a detailed explanation of the research cited, a detailed look at the methods, and an overview of each participant, this study is highly transferable to scholars who study rural students in higher education and practitioners who seek to better the educational experience of rural students.

Organization of this Dissertation

Chapter 1 gives background to this study, provides evidence to illustrate the significance of the study, gives an overview of the research question and methods, and defines key terms that guided the study. Chapter 2 provides the literature review for the dissertation and examines rural college students and their college access, persistence, and completion. Chapter 3 details the research design and methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the research site, the University of Georgia. Chapter 5 contains a detailed biography of each participant, including demographic data. Chapter 6 describes the findings of this study by responding directly to the research questions. Chapter 7 concludes the study, examines the findings related to the literature, and offers suggestions for researchers and campus administrators.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The transition from home to college is particularly difficult for college students from rural areas in terms of geography, culture, and academics (Schultz, 2004).

Geography is a significant barrier for rural students at R1 Doctoral Universities if they come from a remote area of their home state. Culturally, students coming from rural homogeneous areas of the Deep South confront cultures different from their own for the first time in college. In addition to geographic and cultural challenges, rural students struggle academically as well; rural students trail their suburban and urban counterparts in college access, college persistence, and college attainment (Adelman, 2002; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012).

The researcher engaged 18 rural students at the University of Georgia in semi-structured interviews that focused on their decision to go to college and their experience once they arrived on campus. Three research questions guided this study: (1) What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States? (2) How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States? (3) How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

To address these research questions, the literature of rural students in higher education was reviewed and is presented in the current chapter. To understand what it means to be rural, this chapter

1. explores the state of rural America, the rural school, and provides a definition of rural that guides this study.

2. provides a detailed look at one relevant study of rural students at an elite university.

3. reviews the research on rural students in higher education.

4. examines college access for rural students.

5. presents research at the state and national level associated with college persistence and attainment.

A chapter summary is then offered.

Defining Rural and the Economy

Coming to a definition of the term "rural" is challenging, as there is no universal rural experience or location. Still, rural scholars do conduct research at the national, state, and local level. At a national level, quantitative researchers use longitudinal data sets to find correlations between school performance and demographic characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, gender, and race (Adelman, 2002; Anderson & Weng, 2011; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Byun et al., 2015; Gibbs, 1998; Graham, 2009; Howley, 2006; National Student Clearinghouse, 2013; Roscigno & Crowle, 2001).

State-level research generally focuses on quantitative research gathered from state agencies and regional data sharing organizations (Burke et al., 2015; Howley et al., 2014;

Legutko, 2008; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001). A small number of recent studies of rural students in higher education used qualitative research methods at the state level in the United States and at the province level in Canada (Doyle, Kleinfled, & Reyes, 2009; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Nelson, 2016). These studies used large sample sizes to improve the reliability of their data. Local-level research tends to use case study analysis focusing on longer interviews with a smaller sample size (Cairns, 2014; Calzaferri, 2014; Deggs & Miller, 2011; Harris, 2013; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016; Tieken, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. To add to the literature concerning the college experience of rural students, this section continues with an overview of the rural economy in the United States, an exploration of the history of rural education reform, and arrives at a definition of the term "rural."

Rural Education and Industry

The term rural conjures a variety of images, such as the uneducated hillbilly or the xenophobic redneck. In truth, the definition of "rural" is complex and changing, along with rural spaces themselves. As the United States economy shifted over the past 200 years from agrarian, to industrial, to post-industrial, so too did migration patterns from rural to urban. The education sector shifted along with the economy as new businesses and markets demanded emergent skills.

Education reformers worked over the past century to consolidate rural schools through policy reform (Tyack & Cuban, 2001). The classic vision of the single-room

community school disappeared under the duress of locals who reformers considered "backward yokels who did not know what was good for their children" (Tyack & Cuban, 2001, p. 21). From 1930 to 1970, the number of school districts dropped from 128,000 to 18,000 (Sher & Tompkins, 1976). State governments, with the help of the Office of Education in the Department of the Interior, aggressively closed single-teacher schools and professionalized school administration. Georgia was one of the fastest to consolidate schools in this period, as they closed nearly 75% of their schools between 1918 and 1928 (Covert, 1930).

State officials in Georgia and across the United States believed that consolidating rural schools would bring about greater economic efficiency and more advanced course offerings. In 1976, a deep analysis of school consolidation sponsored by the National Institution of Education revealed that very little evidence of school improvement through consolidation existed and that consolidation did not improve the economic efficiency of rural schools (Sher & Tompkins, 1976).

State officials underestimated the higher cost of transportation for students and the increased salary demands of administrators. Single teacher rural schools did not require a large bureaucracy to coordinate larger school districts. Moreover, parental involvement in schools decreased, which required more human capital in public schooling.

In the 1970s, school consolidation continued as education enrollments rose and the United States became more urban (Post & Staumbach, 1999). The positive effects of school consolidation are not clear, even today. A recent study did show that students from states with larger school districts earned less in life than students in states with smaller

school districts (Berry & West, 2008). As a result of the centralization of power to larger school districts, the instillation of community values was a secondary priority to preparing rural children to work in a capitalist system (Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Sher & Tompkins, 1976).

As of 2008, there were more people living in urban areas of the world than living in rural areas for the first time in human history (United Nations Population Fund, 2007). Though the population of the world shifted from rural to urban, the overall population of rural America increased between 2000 and 2010 (Johnson, 2014). Areas in the West and Southeast United States experienced the largest gains in population. Though the total expansion of people in rural areas increased, the actual rate of expansion shrank considerably; the growth rate of rural areas decreased by roughly 50% between 2000 and 2010 compared to the decade before it.

The obvious reason for slow growth in rural America is the diminishing economic opportunities afforded to its residents (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Manufacturing and natural resource extraction are still important industries in many rural economies, but coal mine and factory closures negatively impacted rural areas across the United States. For example, in Oregon, the timber industry began losing jobs in 1950 and never recovered, while the Marcellus Shale project in Pennsylvania created new rural jobs in oil extraction (Brasier, 2014; Lehner, 2012). The boom and bust cycle of local economies are alive and well in rural areas of the United States (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Rural America was once a prime destination for labor expansion. Typically, real estate costs in rural areas were much cheaper than in urban and suburban areas. As farms became more efficient, they required less human capital and manufacturing jobs quickly

took the place of farming positions (Mills, 1995). Both free trade and technological

advances over the past half century shifted labor markets to urbanized areas and out of

the United States (Barlett & Steele, 2012; Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and

the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) created opportunities for cheaper labor in spaces with

even lower costs of living than in the rural United States. Both NAFTA and TPP were

popular international agreements at the time of their proposals, but served as a catalyst

for populist politics, as their inclusion in President Donald Trump's election promises

helped bolster him to the highest office in the United States (Porter, 2016). The United

States is currently pulled out of the TPP, but free international trade and its impact on

manufacturing in America continues to be a talking point in American politics.

The United States is now much more dependent on services than on

manufacturing. Specifically, producer services exploded in the United States as the

exportation of blue-collar labor increased in the second half of the 20th century (Brown

& Schafft, 2011). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (2001), producer services are "intermediate inputs to further production

activities that are sold to other firms… They typically have high information content and

often reflect a 'contracting out' of support services that could be provided in-house"

(para. 1).

Producer services are generally thought of as accounting, finance services,

engineering, management consulting, and data processing (Porterfield & Sizer, 1994).

With their closer proximity to urban areas and better telecommunications connectivity,

suburban areas embodied the geographic ideal for new jobs created at the turn of the 21st century.

Internet connectivity is one of the drivers of the lack of development of producer services in rural America (Smith, 1993). Though the telecommunications divide between urban and rural America narrowed over the past decade, rural areas are still behind. As of 2010, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee all had less than a 55% internet usage rate among rural residents (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013). For rural areas to benefit from jobs in the new economy, they must have better internet connectivity (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Though the manufacturing industry still exists in rural America, future jobs will require greater technical skills and improved digital infrastructure.

As we approach the third decade of the 21st century, many new jobs created are independent contracting positions. The creation of these contracting positions is known as the rise of the "gig" economy. The gig economy emerged over the last five years and typically requires technological competency, high-speed connectivity, and easy access to urban spaces (Abraham, Haltiwanger, Sandusky, & Spletzer, 2016; Friedman, 2014).

Knowing the impact of the gig economy on the rural labor force is difficult to identify, as the U.S. Census Bureau and the Internal Revenue Service are struggling to classify individuals who are working one or multiple jobs (Dokko, Mumford, & Schanzenback, 2015). It can be logically deduced that low-skill jobs, like driving for a ride sharing service or renting out lodging, are mostly confined to urban space, with exceptions for those in a closer proximity to tourist locations.

If the expansion of internet connectivity continues to stagnate in rural America, the vast majority of new jobs created in the 21st century will be in urban and suburban locales. Therefore, for high school students in rural America, doing well in life probably means leaving the community. Though hesitant, members of their rural community are generally supportive.

In a study of the beliefs and values of rural Americans, Deggs and Miller (2011) found that rural community members valued the postsecondary education needs of their community's youth and were understanding about the necessity to leave. Rural community members' feelings were contradicted, however, by fierce loyalty to the community; rural community members desired for students to return when economically possible. Contradiction is a common theme in rural American research, where community members understand the economic necessity to leave, but also have a strong desire for their youth to stay or return (Cairns, 2014; Wright, 2012).

Rural Schooling

The state of rural education in the United States is a mixed bag. Rural schools have higher dropout rates and lower college enrollment numbers compared to urban and suburban schools (Lichter, Roscigno, & Condron, 2003). Moreover, rural schools have lower standardized test scores and are offered a less rigorous curriculum than urban and suburban schools (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Graham, 2009). Less rigorous course offerings mean less access to college preparatory programs for rural students in the United States (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011).

Rural schools do offer some benefits that urban and suburban schools do not, such as smaller class sizes and a higher emphasis on community attachment (Johnson &

Zoellner, 2016). Despite rural schools' lower standardized test scores, rural students tend to do nearly as well as urban and rural schools on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), which is used as a benchmark by the U.S. Department of Education (Schafft & Biddle, 2014).

Rural Defined

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. Therefore, a proper definition of rural is needed to ensure this study's transferability. The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.-a) classifies rural schools in three categories: Rural: Fringe, Rural: Distant, and Rural: Remote, becoming further away from urbanized areas respectively. Rural: Fringe is defined as areas "less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 35).

Urban clusters are areas that contain at least 2,500 people, but no more than 50,000. Rural: Distant areas are "more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 33). Finally, Rural: Remote areas are "more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and… also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 34).

These definitions provided by the National Center for Education Statistics are based on locale codes of urbanicity. Locale codes were developed to correspond with a

U.S. Census Bureau geographic database to classify areas of the United States according to population density (Provasnik et al., 2007). The new codes were developed after 2000 and measure "urban-centric" locations to better differentiate between suburban and rural areas by adding a new classification: town. This study analyzed the experiences of students from rural areas, as defined by these new urban-centric locale codes.

Students eligible for this study attended and graduated from a school with a rural locale code, with a couple of exceptions. School consolidation practices of the past twenty years problematizes locale codes, because they classify schools and not students. Locale codes are not a perfect indicator of rural status, but they are an improvement over the old codes and provide an excellent base line for the transferability of this study.

Two participants from non-rural locale codes were also included for this study. One participant, Roland, identifies himself as a rural student, and volunteered for this study. His high school is a consolidated county high school with a "Town: Remote" classification, which may be located closer to an urban area than his actual home, as the codes are attributed to the schools and not the students. Town: Remote is defined as "Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area," (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 11).

The other student, Magnolia, is an African American female, who identifies herself as a rural student and attended what she considered a segregated high school. Her school, however, uses a "Town: Distant" locale code, which is defined as "territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area," (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 8). Other studies

of rural students included "Town" classifications to more accurately depict what is rural (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011).

The Experiences of Rural Students at Research Universities

To date, the researcher could only locate one study that attempts to analyze the experiences of rural students at a research university: Li's (2013) qualitative study of 10 rural Chinese students at an elite university in Beijing. Using Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice, Li interviewed rural students to assess their experiences in an elite academic environment. In Li's (2013) study, rural students felt anxiety because they came to the university with a different set of knowledge than their peers.

The rural students in Li's study all had a formal education, but many felt that they did not watch the right movies, read the right books, or know how to talk to their peers. One student said, "…my classmates from big cities can talk with strangers with ease and assurance. But I can't. I'm too shy to do so" (Li, 2013, p. 835). Students from rural areas are accustomed to seeing the same people every day for years at a time, and so talking to strangers is something done rarely and often formally.

Students in the Li (2013) study who had once been academically outstanding and involved in extracurricular activities in their community were now dealing with identity crisis, "I was very upset at the beginning and rang my mom and told her that I felt so inferior to others" (p. 836). Because of their unique rural experiences in college, many of the participants aspired to lower career expectations than their peers. The rural students in this study were pre-occupied with short-term financial detriments and did not believe they could afford to spend more time in school to aspire to professions that required education beyond undergraduate work.

Educational Aspirations of Rural Students

The educational aspirations of rural youth are important to consider, because students who aspire to graduate and professional school are more likely to leave college with a degree (Howley, 2006). The literature shows that, overall, rural students do wish to go to college now more than ever (Doyle, Kleinfeld, & Reyes, 2009; Howley, 2006; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, & Farmer, 2016).

Rural youth face a crisis in making their decision; leaving their community means leaving others behind and rejecting community norms (Cairns, 2014; Wright, 2012). Community members want their best and brightest to leave and be successful, but, perhaps equally, they want their best and brightest to get a college credential that leads to a practical career within the community (Tieken, 2016).

The advice to parents and community who wish to encourage rural students to finish their education over the past half-century remained mostly the same, only now college, rather than high school, is the end-goal:

> If parents and youths could be influenced to adopt more favorable attitudes concerning the value of formal education, if rural youths could be relieved of some unpaid work at home and the community could provide more part-time paid work for them during the school term, if school personnel would assist low-status youths in finding an acceptable role in extracurricular activities, and if teachers would deliberately encourage them to remain in school, a larger percentage of rural young people could be influenced to obtain the benefits of a high-school education. (Youmans, 1959, p. 21)

Youmans (1959) described an increase in social, cultural, and human capital to increase the educational aspirations of rural youth.

If parents, school personnel, and policymakers are to encourage youths in their communities to attend college, rural students must possess a greater understanding of the admission and financial aid process. To gain a more positive attitude towards college attendance, rural students must be engaged with their community and school through extracurricular activities and teachers must encourage students to continue their education.

Rural community members are concerned, however, that by encouraging their best-and-brightest to leave for college, they are exporting their most valuable human capital (Cairns, 2014; Wright, 2012). This effect is known as "hollowing out," and it is a legitimate concern as many advanced jobs require placement near a metropolitan area (Artz, 2003; Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Hollowing out was also the reason for the HOPE scholarship, as policymakers in Georgia wanted to stop Georgia's best from leaving the state (Barlament, 2007).

In the respect of preventing brain drain, the HOPE scholarship was successful in keeping high achievers in the state of Georgia for their undergraduate studies, while also inflating the cost for non-recipients (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014; Long, 2004). Rural students who benefit from the HOPE scholarship will be more likely to find employment in urban areas of Georgia rather than rural areas as a result of technology demands of new jobs in the 21st century. There are exceptions in the current study, where some students seek careers in public service and medicine.

This section outlines the literature concerning education aspirations of rural youth in the United States, including their intrinsic desire to go, the messages they receive from home about college, and how minorities' aspirations differ from their white counterparts.

Desire to Go

Studies of rural educational aspirations reveal that students from small towns do wish to go to college now more than ever (Doyle et al., 2009; Howley, 2006; Irvin et al., 2016). Previous work in rural education found that rural students aspired to college less frequently than urban and suburban students (Hu, 2003). More recent studies using state and national data show an increased desire to and perceived necessity to attend a postsecondary educational institution among rural students (Irvin et al., 2016; Legutko, 2008).

Though it is believed that rural students currently aspire to a bachelor's degree level of education at roughly the same rate as urban and suburban students, the aspiration level for rural students beyond a four-year degree still lags their urban and suburban peers (Howley, 2006). Rural students of a higher socioeconomic status tend to aspire to a higher level of education (Howley & Hambrick, 2014). Explanations for the increased aspirations of rural youth are limited in the current state of the literature, and the mixed messages students receive in their home community contribute to this conflicting portrait of rural life in the 21st century.

Messages from Home

No two communities or schools are created or exist equally, thus each study concerning national, regional, and local data should consider that that the culture of each community is different (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). Studies of the educational aspirations of

rural students reveal a dualism between a push from community members for students to go out and seek an education beyond the local community and to retain the values of the community.

A study of rural girls in Canada revealed the same juxtaposition in how they constructed their futures. The female participants in the study who desired to be working women also desired to leave the rural space. For these young females, they must leave their home communities where they are bound to traditional gender roles (Cairns, 2014). For rural girls, deciding to seek higher education also means rejecting a community norm. A study in Central Appalachia uncovered a similar pattern amongst both young men and women. Students were just as likely to desire going to an urban area to pursue a career, as they were to seek a degree that enables employment in the local area (Wright, 2012).

Rural students receive messages from school officials regarding postsecondary education as well. The message is often that going to college means getting a practical degree that will lead to a traditional career path (Tieken, 2016). Rural K-12 school officials in rural areas, therefore, see undergraduate education as a vehicle to better job. Positive messages from teachers lead to higher educational aspirations.

Students who have a positive perception of their ability, have a high sense of belonging, and feel prepared for postsecondary education are more likely to aspire to higher education after high school, regardless of their school's status of low- or high-poverty (Irvin et al., 2011). Indeed, better instruction on the college-going process and supportive policies increase rural students' desire to go to college after high school (Engber & Wolniak, 2010; Irvin et al., 2011).

Minority Aspirations

The literature on the aspirations of rural minority students is limited. From the few studies that have analyzed the aspirations of rural minority students, it was determined that minority students aspire to college at roughly the same rate as white students (Doyle et al., 2009; Irvin et al., 2016). Aspirations are not always enough to push students into a postsecondary institution. The students in Doyle and colleagues' (2009) study who did not attend college after high school reported that they could not get the information they needed about college from the adults in their lives.

Rural African American students found the lack of first-hand knowledge of the college-going process by adults as a serious impediment in making the decision of whether to attend. In a national study of rural student aspirations, it was found that students of all ethnic groups aspired at college at roughly the same rate as white students (Irvin et al., 2012). Despite aspiring to college at the same rate as other ethnic groups, Native American, Latinx, and African American rural students attended schools of a lower caliber than white students.

College Access for Rural Students

There was a time when students from rural areas could enjoy a successful career without attending a postsecondary education (Brown & Schafft, 2011). As industrialization and post-industrialization changed the face of labor, so too has the necessity for education changed for students away from urban centers (Anderson &Weng, 2011). Although our labor needs shifted over the past half century, and total

college enrollment increased, rural students remain behind their peers from urban and suburban schools in the United States in terms of college enrollment (Adelman, 2002).

In fact, high schools that are classified as "high-poverty rural" across the United States have the lowest average persistence and enrollment rates (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013). Why differences exist between urban, suburban, and rural students is still not certain. This section assesses the literature on rural access to higher education. This review (1) includes general studies of rural students' college access to higher education, (2) rural minority student access to higher education, (3) international studies of rural access to higher education, and (4) a discussion of the community college option.

Studies of Rural Students

Studies that analyze students' decision to attend college in the United States often use Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice (Calzaferri, 2011; Grant, 2016; Harris, 2013). Perna's model is utilized frequently because it allows researchers to add the context of place in evaluating a student's decision if and where to go to college. The model serves as a hierarchy, where the bottom piece is the most essential to the student's choice: a cost-benefit human capital analysis (See Figure 2.1). Every decision a student makes to go to college culminates in a cost-benefit analysis of time and money. Other layers factor into the cost benefit analysis of the decision, though.

The first layer of Perna's (2006) model is habitus, which contains a student's demographic characteristics, cultural capital, and social capital. Here, Perna adopted Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus to describe the internalized classifications students are assigned and assign to themselves because of their location in society. Perna's version

of habitus is simplified, which enhances the performance of the model in analyzing college-going decisions.
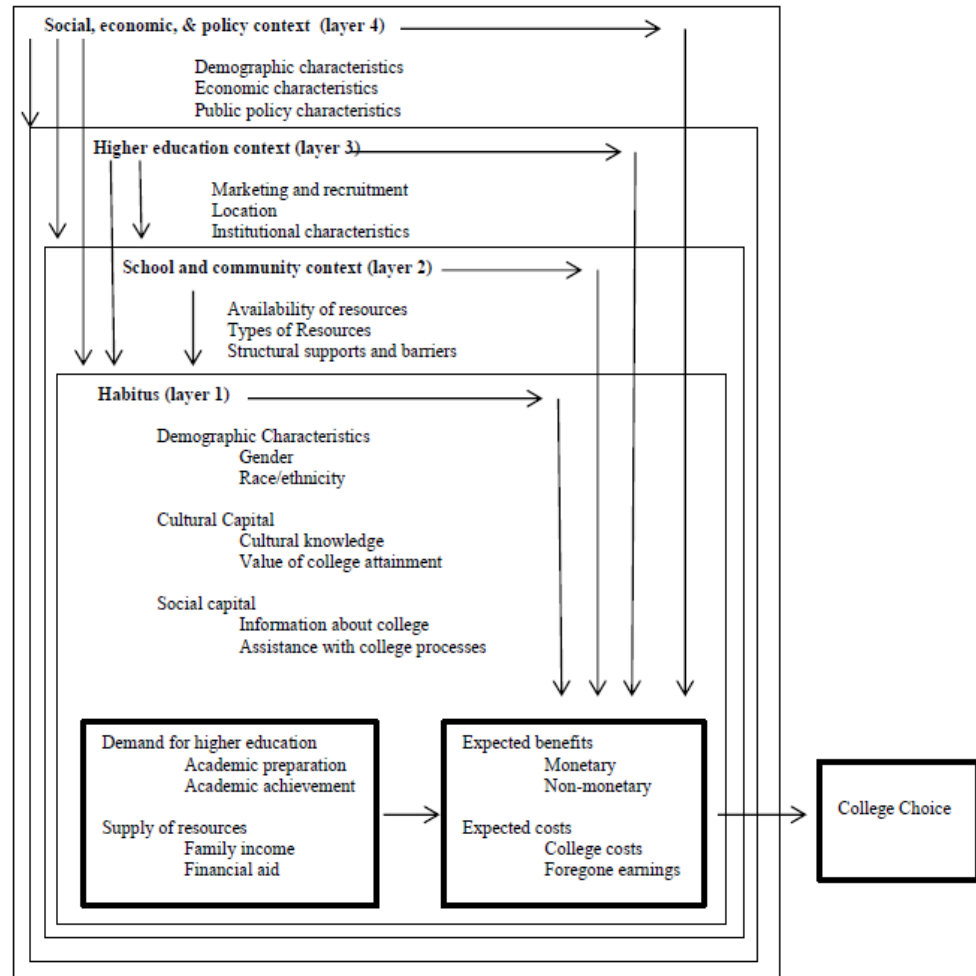
Figure 2.1. Perna's conceptual model of nested college choice. Adapted from Perna (2006).

A person's habitus influences life decisions, regardless of whether they choose to acknowledge it. The second layer is school and community context, followed by higher education context (layer 3), and social, economic, and policy context (layer 4). Perna's model contends that these levels of context feed into a student's analysis of the potential

benefits of college and are roughly prioritized according to the levels of layers within the model.

Grant's (2016) ethnographic study of three freshmen from rural high schools at a public flagship university in the Southern United States revealed that the higher education and policy context can have a significant impact on a student's decision to go to college. All three students interviewed attended their public flagship university because they were all supported by their state's merit-based scholarship. According to the participants, the state policy that afforded these scholarships had the biggest impact on their decision of where to go to college.

When analyzing the college-going behavior at the student level, assessing how students weigh various factors can be complicated. Calzaferri's (2011) study of rural women, for example, found that women were often making their decision about where to go to college based on the plans of their significant other.

Similarly, Harris' (2013) study of four students in rural Kentucky varied as a result of advice they received from adults in their school. Three of the students decided to go to a local non-selective school after receiving advice from adults who were not their parents. The fourth student enrolled at a private selective university as a result of an expanded college search. The young woman's decision came despite her lower socioeconomic status and family income when compared to the other three participants.

The juxtaposition of the varying quality of college choice in both studies show that students do not always make optional college-going decisions. In fact, students are swayed towards postsecondary institutions for a variety of reasons that appear nonsensical from external observation. Both studies show that the quality of the students'

college-going decision and the quality of the advice students receive from adults can significantly impact their college-going decision (Calzaferri, 2011; Harris, 2013).

Another way to classify decisions is by socioeconomic class. McGrath, Swisher, Elder, and Conger (2001) found that rural students whose parents were well educated relied on parental support for help in making the college-going decision. Students who did not have well educated parents depended upon their parents' social capital in receiving help from the community. Those without well connected or well-educated parents had to be their own educational entrepreneurs, seeking help through ambition in the public-school system.

The college-going process is messy at best, but the literature allows for some generalizations. Rural students are less likely than students from suburban and urban areas to choose to attend a selective institution, also known as undermatching (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). The definition of "selective institution" varies from study-to-study, but we can assume that selective means that an institution does not have an open enrollment policy and rejects first-year students who were not successful in high school.

The cause of rural students undermatching when selecting a college is not clear, as the studies conducted were primarily quantitative. For example, in Indiana, about a third of students from rural areas went to schools that were less selective than ones that they were academically qualified (Burke et al., 2015). Undermatching is troubling, because students who attend more selective schools are more likely to graduate and more selective institutions are likely to have more resources to aid in student success (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

Nelson's (2016) analysis of social capital in rural communities took a back-end approach by drawing a sample of participants from students who completed college. The findings of the study of 30 rural students revealed that higher levels of social capital contributed to college-going success. Simply put, social capital is the value of the network of social relationships that a person maintains (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital benefits students in their local community because they have a higher chance of interacting with others who have experience in the process of applying for and attending postsecondary institutions.

The benefits of social capital for college access have their limits, however. In Nelson's (2016) study, social capital helped students go to college, but the quality of their decision was correlated with parental education and income. Therefore, connectedness to a student's community can predict college-going decisions, but ultimately socioeconomic status has an overriding effect.

Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins' (2012) analysis of the social capital of college-going rural students problematizes Nelson's (2016) findings. Using national data, Byun and colleagues found that higher levels of social capital predicted higher educational attainment, despite socioeconomic factors. In fact, conversations with parents about college were positively related to the educational aspirations of rural youth.

At a macro level, we cannot ask what the quality of conversations were between students and parents about college, and it could be hypothesized that students who talked to their parents about college more had parents with more educational experience and, thus, more to talk about. From the findings of these studies, it can be said that the more connected to the community a student is, the more likely they are to go to college, and

parents play a vital role in their path. Upon closer inspection of the data from the perspective of minority students, however, the picture becomes more complicated.

Minority Students

Rural students encounter unique difficulties when it comes to accessing higher education (Adelman, 2002; Burke et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2015). Rural students who exist at the intersection of rural and minority status are at an even larger disadvantage. African American and Latinx students in rural areas are the most likely to experience barriers to higher education, compared to their white peers (Irvin et al., 2012; Provasnik al., 2007). Barriers to higher education do not exist as a lack of desire to attend college (Doyle et al., 2009; Irvin et al., 2016).

In a recent study, African American youth were encouraged to attend college throughout their life by family members, family friends, and members of the community (Means et al., 2016). The effects of encouragement were limited, however, as the adults who reinforced college-going behavior possessed little experience engaging in the college-going process. Even though these rural minorities desired college and received encouragement, they had a difficult time accessing adults who had experience navigating the college-going process. The study revealed that students had tremendously limited knowledge about the financial aid available through the government or through specific offices of financial aid at colleges in their state.

Limited knowledge is a massive barrier to higher education considering its importance in Perna's (2006) model of college choice (See Figure 2.1). Perception of the benefits of college is ultimately the link between the desire to go to college, and the

actual choice to attend. Minority students in rural areas are at an increased disadvantage

when they seek to attend postsecondary institutions.

International Research

The expansion of rural education research in the United States continues but

remains limited in scope. Other countries in the developing world are dealing with similar

rural education issues, and it is useful to reflect on international rural research to observe

similarities and differences. Rural education research developed quickly in Asian

countries like China in recent years (Li, Loyalka, Rozelle, Wu, & Xie, 2015).

Starting in 1998, the Chinese government expanded higher education

opportunities (Yang, 2010). Rural students in China are still underrepresented in the

Chinese system of higher education. Scholars return to barriers to access when evaluating

why more rural students are not reaching institutions of higher education (Li, 2013). For

example, rural students in China are up to seven times less likely to access any form of

postsecondary education when compared to their urban counterparts, and these gaps

widen for females and ethnic minority groups (Li et al., 2015).

To aid rural students in overcoming barriers, institutions in China created a new

program where students commit to a college in their senior year of high school, and the

college informs students of what financial aid they will receive a year before

matriculating (Liu et al., 2011). Similar programs exist in the United States, but they are

used at elite colleges to solidify commitments from students who perform well on

standardized tests by offering a waiver on specific application requirements. Rural

students in the United States reported that applying using this early action application

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alleviated stress in the application process at an academically competitive public institution of higher education (Grant, 2016).

In the Eastern-European country of Georgia, students from rural areas receive tuition assistance equally when compared to their urban peers, but the quality of the institution that they are likely to go to is of lesser quality (Chankseliani, 2013). The result is that rural students receive less total revenue from the government of Georgia and share the same out-of-pocket expenses as urban students.

Undermatching, or the practice of attending an institution of lesser prestige than one is capable of, is a shared phenomenon in the United States and internationally (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). Acknowledging undermatching is important, because students who attend more selective schools are more likely to graduate (Bowen et al., 2009).

The Community College Option

In the introduction to their chapter on college access in rural America, Katsinas and Hardy (2012) quote Brawer and Cohen (2008), "For millions of students the choice is not between a community college and another institution, it's between a community college and nothing" (p. 453). For many rural students in the United States, community college is the only option for gaining access to high quality public and private postsecondary institutions (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012).

A common method for gaining access is transferring to a four-year institution after a year at the community college level. The combination of a "tidal wave" of college-aged students, increased education demands from the economy, and periods of Pell Grant expansion led to an overall increase in demand and use of community colleges overall (Hardy, Katsinas, & Bush 2007; Katsinas, 2013).

There is evidence that community colleges have not been able to keep up with the demand for many of their services and programs. When surveyed, the clear majority of community college system leaders admitted that there was no long-term financial planning in place to expand community college infrastructure (Friedel, D'Amico, Katsinas, & Grant, 2013). A more recent survey revealed that many state directors of community college systems felt that there was an immediate need to expand high-cost programs, as state investments have declined over recent years (D'Amico, Morgan, Katsinas, & Friedel, 2015).

An additional issue for community college systems and students is a lack of articulation agreements that would ease the transfer of credits from one college to another. Articulation agreements between community colleges and universities are pivotal in ensuring that rural students waste no credit hours in their college education.

The University of North Carolina (UNC) System's agreement with community colleges includes the automatic acceptance of students into a UNC System school who complete an associate degree with a 2.0 grade point average (Jaeger, Dunstan, & Dixon, 2015). Community colleges serve an important role for access to higher education for rural students, but individual institutions face funding restrictions and articulation barriers to best serve their students.

College Persistence and Attainment for Rural Students

College persistence and attainment are often used interchangeably in the rural literature. College student persistence means that the student continued their education in their second year at any institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center,

2015). Educational attainment refers to the actual completion of degrees and is often measured in terms of the first six years of a student's education toward a bachelor's degree (Tinto, 2012). The research on college persistence and attainment among rural students is minimal, so they are included together in this section. In this field, the studies at the national level and state level differ, emphasizing the need for further context in rural education research. As a result, they are presented separately.

State-Level Research

Rural education research in the United States is shifting. New studies of college persistence analyze the performance of rural students from a state perspective, rather than a national perspective (Burke et al., 2015; Howley et al., 2014; Pierson & Hanson, 2015). The purpose of researching students at a state level is to promote local context to the study of rural America. In Pennsylvania, rural students persisted at colleges and universities at a higher rate than city students, but lower than town and suburban students (Howley et al., 2014; Provasnik et al., 2007). An analysis in Oregon was not as positive however; rural students persist at a lower rate than their urban and suburban peers.

Moreover, this lower persistence was uniform across all levels of high school achievement (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). State studies of college persistence and other analyses should be emphasized when state policymakers seek answers for their constituents. After discovering findings contrary to national data analysis, Burke and colleagues (2015) called for state-based studies that "examine the unique characteristics of [state policymakers'] own rural populations whenever possible and act cautiously when using information from studies of nationally representative samples of students"

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(pp. 17-18). The present study is an answer to that call in the state of Georgia in the Southeastern United States.

National Studies

Studies of the college persistence and attainment of rural youth are largely national studies based on longitudinal databases. In bachelor's degree completion, rural students still lag their suburban counterparts, but the gap is closing with urban students (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). However, rural Latinx students are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than Latinx students from urban and suburban areas (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012).

To account for the difference in attainment, Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) analyzed the social capital of rural students and found that they were less advantaged in social resources than their urban and suburban counterparts. Moreover, students who reported higher social capital were more likely to complete their bachelor's degree. Social capital is not enough to make up for the difference in rural attainment from urban and suburban, and a correlation exists between socioeconomic status and completion (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). Not all rural schools are the same, however, and high schools that are classified as "high-poverty rural" across the United States have the lowest average persistence and enrollment rates when compared schools of all other classifications (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013).

A gap exists between the best and worst rural schools, as they represent the best and worst matriculation rates respectively. Only high-income, low-minority urban schools reported a higher proportion of students enrolling for the first fall after high

school graduation (70%) than high-income rural schools (65%), while low-income rural schools reported the worst: only 50%.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began by reviewing the purpose statement of this study and laying out the research questions. Then, the issue of "being rural" and the educational and industrial realities of rural students was discussed; in rural America the relationship between industry and education is unique and its purpose shifted over the past 50 years from institutions that instill community values to ones that prepare young people for careers (Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 2001). The rural school is a mixed bag according to national research, which finds it lacking in standardized tests and curricular offerings, but robust in unique teacher-student relationships and college aspirations (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Graham, 2009; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016). To define rural for this study, the National Center for Education Statistics' (n.d.) definitions of Rural: Fringe, Rural: Distant, and Rural: Remote were used.

A deep analysis of Li's (2013) case study of rural students at an elite university of China followed, leading to the examination of educational aspirations of rural students, who roughly aspire to college at similar rates to urban and suburban students, including minorities (Doyle et al., 2009; Howley, 2006; Irvin et al., 2016). Students often receive conflicting information from their home communities, however, as community members acknowledge the need for education, but also want to retain their best and brightest (Cairs, 2014; Tieken, 2016).

To review the literature on college access, an explanation of Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice was provided, as many studies of rural student access use this model to explain the complexities of rural students' decision to attend college. In making the college-going decision, rural students go about their choices differently than urban and suburban students, considering the desires of family, significant others, and the short-term fiscal impact of their decision (Calzaferri, 2011; Grant, 2016; Harris, 2013; McGrath et al., 2001).

Moreover, rural students often leverage social capital in unique ways by depending upon themselves or members of the community to gain more information about accessing college (Byun, Meece et al., 2012; Nelson, 2016). The literature on college persistence and attainment for rural students revealed a divide between state- and national-level data. Overall, rural students perform nearly as well as urban students, but not suburban students (Byun, Meece, et al., 2012; Howley et al., 2014; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Chapter 2 provided an overview of the relevant research concerning this study. Chapter 3 will detail the research design and methodology used.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The previous chapter gave an overview of the literature related to this study. This chapter details the research design and methodology of the current study.

The researcher employed semi-structured interviews, demographic data collection, and descriptive statistics to gather data from the field. The participants of this study included 17 undergraduate students and 1 graduate student enrolled at the University of Georgia. All participants attended a rural Georgia school or were zoned to a rural Georgia school and attended a private school or were homeschooled.

This chapter includes the research questions, the theoretical framework that guided the research, a description of the research design, the data sources, an overview of the analysis of the data, and the ethical considerations of the study.

Research Questions

National studies of rural students in collegiate environments explore overall trends but fail to meet the context of various regions of the United States. Much of the state-based research gives context but does not provide explanatory power as to why differences exist between rural and non-rural students. This inquiry seeks to break that trend by conducting a case study analysis of rural students at the University of Georgia.

Data collection methods were used to explore, analyze, and understand the perspectives of 18 rural students at the University of Georgia. The study asked the following overall research questions:

1. What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States

2. How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

3. How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

Conceptual Framework

The terms "theoretical framework" and "conceptual framework" are often used interchangeably to describe the concepts and theories that serve as the foundation for a research study. Scholars who choose qualitative research methods often prefer the term "conceptual framework," as it emphasizes the distinction between formal theories, concepts, and quantitative models (Maxwell, 2013). Others prefer the term "theoretical framework" as they believe a study that does not employ some theory is impossible to undertake (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schwandt, 1993).

This study employs both theories and concepts and uses the term "conceptual framework." The three concepts included in the conceptual framework of this study were Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital, sense of belonging theory, and Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice.

Bourdieu's Social and Cultural Capital

The use of social and cultural capital originates from Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice. Bourdieu's theory of practice uses a variety of concepts to explain how the dominant class in society creates a distinction between itself and lower classes. In this study, the researcher was particularly concerned with the terms social capital and cultural capital. The term capital most commonly means wealth in the form of money and assets. Bourdieu refers to capital as any useful resource or power. There are four forms of capital that Bourdieu recognizes: economic, human, social, and cultural (Sablan & Tierney, 2014).

Economic capital refers to cash or property which can be exchanged for goods and services. Economic capital is the only capital that is or can be liquefied into currency. Other forms of capital require deeper analysis. Human capital pertains to skills acquired and talents inherited which allow individuals to gain access to jobs (Becker, 1994). Social capital involves a person's inclusion in a single or variety or social groups, and the value social networks represent for the individual. Cultural capital refers to an individual's disposition toward cultural artifacts.

Cultural capital, as explained by Bourdieu (1986), consists of cultural goods and personal preference toward cultural goods. Cultural capital is the means in which class structures are reproduced through the awarding of advantage to individuals who have access to and are disposed toward an elite culture. As cited in the first chapter of this study, Sablan and Tierney (2014) define cultural capital as:

> Cultural resources that have a concealed exchange value and that enable or foster
> social and educational advancement. These resources are not just material

resources such as books or computers, but can also exist in more subtle forms, such as the dispositions of upper classes. Their properties explain the perpetuation of the privileged class's advantage. (pp. 155-156)

Cultural resources can be conscious artifacts, like books in the home, or unconscious affinity to the dominant culture.

Bourdieu (1986) initially conceptualized cultural capital while observing schools in France. Bourdieu noted that schools are not neutral entities that educate children to their highest potential. Rather, schools socialize students based on their parents' socioeconomic class as a means to reproduce social classes. Bourdieu (1986) theorized that students bring their own cultural capital into the school and react academically and culturally amongst their peers according to the capital they bring from home. Schools can have the effect of giving students more cultural capital, but, according to Bourdieu, often the children of working class students are too far behind to ever catch up.

Social capital is a measure of the value of an individual or group's network. Bourdieu (1986) refers to social spaces, like a community, as a "field" where individuals interact to exchange capital. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition… which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249)

Social network is of importance in this study.

As rural communities consist of small populations, it is reasonable to believe that the social networks within a rural community are less extensive than those of urban and suburban communities. It is also reasonable to believe that an individual may be a member of social networks that extends beyond the local community, but when looking at the community, there are simply fewer people in which to interact. The decision of college choice is heavily influenced by both social and cultural capital. In terms of social capital, individuals who have more knowledge about an institution are more likely to attend (Perna, 2006).

Though rural students perform similarly to national measures of academic success at the elementary and secondary level, the same is not true at the postsecondary level. According to Brown and Schafft (2011), "only 19 percent of rural adults 25 and older have bachelor's degrees, as compared with nearly 30 percent in cities and 31.5 percent in suburban areas" (p. 63). In small rural communities, especially in the "Black Belt" region of the Deep South, there are fewer college graduates for rural students to access, and thus less valuable social networks when it comes to college-going (Means et al., 2016).

Cultural and social capital are important aspects of this study, as they correlate with academic success. (Adelman, 2002; National Student Clearinghouse, 2013; Perna, 2006; Schultz, 2004; Youmans, 1959). This study asks the question of why rural students differ from their urban and suburban peers in terms of college attainment and also explores their experiences at a R1 Doctoral University.

Sense of Belonging Theory

The third research question of this study is: "How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United

States?" With its roots in psychological research, sense of belonging theory explains how a person's comfort in a social space or institution can lead to academic success (Strayhorn, 2016).

Sense of belonging theory is part of a larger family of student development theories and focuses on how comfortable students feel in various contexts at their respective institutions (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). According to Strayhorn (2016), there are seven core elements to sense of belonging theory:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need.

2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior.

3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts or (b) at certain times.

4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering.

5. Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging.

6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes.

7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and is likely to change as circumstances, conditions, and contexts, change.

These seven core elements will be described, and then tied back to the current study.

Sense of belonging is a basic human need. The need to feel a sense of belonging to others is integral to our survival as human beings (Murray, 1938; Putnam, 2000). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is the most commonly taught personal-need theory in survey psychology classes and serves as the foundation for which other motivation theories that have emerged. Belonging is an integral part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, just above safety.

According to Maslow (1943), humans have needs that correspond to a hierarchy. At the bottom of the hierarchy are physiological needs. We can think of these as our basic survival needs. Above physiological needs are safety needs, like shelter and security. These two layers of the hierarchy are our basic needs (See Figure 3.1). Without them, we cannot survive, and certainly cannot be motivated to complete advanced tasks beyond survival.
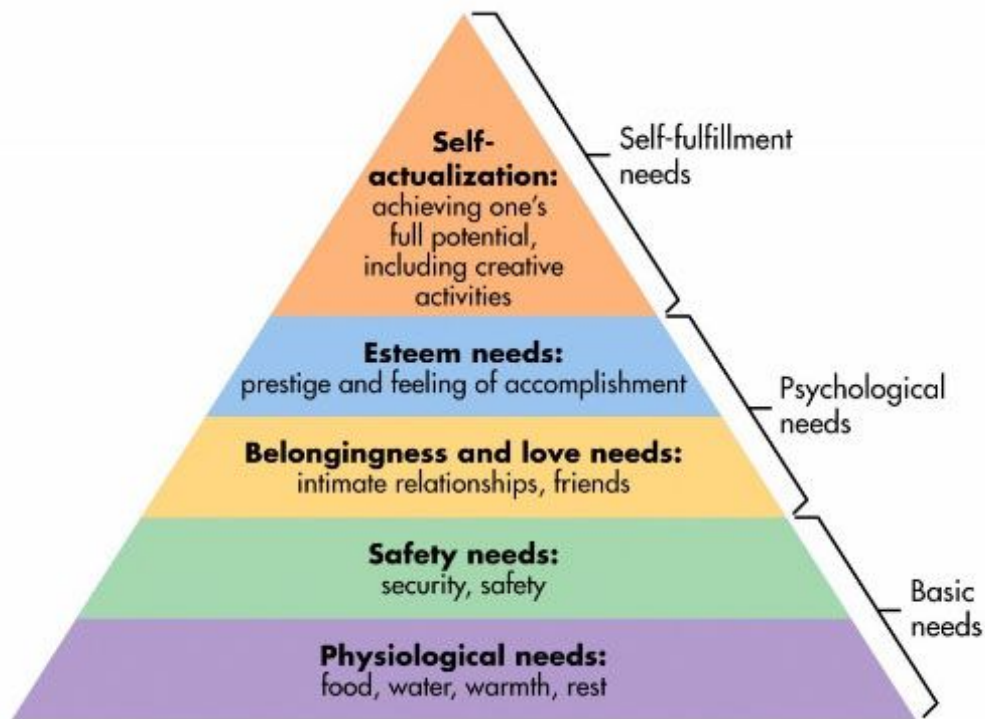
Figure 3.1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Adapted from SimplyPsychology (n.d.)

The next two layers are psychological needs. Psychological needs consist of belongingness and love as well as esteem needs. Psychological needs deal with our mental health and its impact on human ability to perform tasks. This study concerns itself with belongingness and love. Belongingness is a general sense that one belongs and has relationships with others. Humans are social creatures; participating in relationships is

vitally important. The degree to which rural students feel that they belong in an academic community is, therefore, equally important.

Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior. To satisfy sense of belonging needs, humans will take actions that they might not otherwise (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The drive toward human behavior can be a positive or a negative; participating in illegal hazing activities that put fraternity and sorority pledges in danger to feel belonging is a negative behavior. Joining the military to feel a sense of belonging in a platoon could be a positive behavior.

Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts or (b) at certain times. According to Strayhorn, (2016), individuals who are new to a group are more likely to desire to a sense of belonging. Moreover, during late adolescence, humans are more likely to feel that they need to belong amongst their peers (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students at an intersection of marginalization also have a more intense desire to belong (Strayhorn, 2016). Students at an intersection of these three criteria would feel an intense need to belong in their first year on a college campus.

Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering. Mattering "refers to feeling, rightly or wrongly, that one matters, is valued, or appreciated by others" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 21). If someone feels that they matter, they are more likely to believe that they belong in an organization or on a college campus.

Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2016) claims that students who exist at an intersection of marginalization are more likely to feel that they do not belong. Strayhorn (2016) believes that marginalization is particularly important along the lines of "race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion"

(p. 44). Both geography and social class are also important social identities that should not be overlooked in how a student perceives their belonging.

Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes. Strayhorn (2016) states that there is a link between sense of belonging and positive life outcomes, including community service, happiness, and overall health. Positive outcomes as a result of sense of belonging can be linked to Putnam's (2000) social capital theory, in which communities benefit from social connections.

Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and is likely to change as circumstances, conditions, and contexts, change. Indeed, as environments change, so does sense of belonging. For every student in this study, their environment changed and, thus, their sense of belonging changed. For some students, the transition was easier than others, as sense of belonging is also based on the seven core elements in this list.

Of importance to this list is "social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging" (Strayhorn, 2016, p. 44). Strayhorn (2016) lists the social identities of "race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion" (p. 44). This list is incomplete, however; rural students are another social identity which can affect sense of belonging.

Even intelligent rural students with superior academic performance are less likely to attend a four-year college if they come from a background of low income, compared to their urban and suburban peers (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013). Rural students are a minority at institutions around the United States, and especially at the University of Georgia. In fall 2014, only 17% of first-year students came from a rural

high school, compared to 27% of the state of Georgia's high school class of 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a; UGA Office of Institutional Research, 2016).

Rural students are less like to attend an R1 Doctoral University and are therefore less likely to sense that they belong on a college campus, which is primarily occupied by students who are from suburban and urban areas. Strayhorn (2016) uses the example of two white students to explain how social identities affect sense of belonging:

> Take two white college students. One may feel at home on campus, ready to interact with others and establish meaningful relationships that *matter* (emphasis in text) from the first day of school. The other, however, may struggle to connect with others who are different from themselves or they may choose to join a fraternity, drama club, or sports team as a way of satisfying their need to belong. Similar students, similar needs, but different strategies – this feature of intersectionality is relevant to a discussion of belonging (p. 44).

Strayhorn's example does not appreciate how class and geography can affect a student's sense of belonging. Greek organizations are costly to join, drama clubs at large universities can be selective, and athletic prowess is bound by physical limitations. Indeed, many social identities can affect a student's sense of belonging.

The context of the institution is just as important as the student, as communities in a college can be as diverse and dynamic as the students themselves. In their seminal work in the related field of "sense of community," McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined sense of community in four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

Membership means that the individual belongs as a result of investing in the group. Therefore, membership implies that some individuals belong, and some do not; community membership has boundaries. Influence means that the individual has influence over the group and that the group has influence over the individual. Integration and fulfillment of needs addresses the motivation of members of the group to achieve cohesion. Finally, shared emotional connection implies that the more members interact with each other, the more they share a history and will continue to interact.

Sense of community relates to sense of belonging because rural students who begin attending a new institution must integrate into its community. How a student senses belonging affects their feeling of community membership. It is difficult to be an effective participant in a community of which you feel that you do not belong.

Research in belonging and community affiliation affirms the link between the two concepts. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Latino students who engaged in out-of-class discussions with their classmates in their first two years in religious and social organizations were more likely to believe that they belonged at their institution.

Freeman, Anderson, and Jensen (2007) found in a large study ($n = 238$) of college freshmen that students who were comfortable in the classroom received encouragement to participate in extracurricular activities and had an overall high level of belonging. Finally, a study of 2,967 first-year students found that African American, Latinx, and Asian students feel a lower sense of belonging than white students, as they were not the majority race on most campuses (Johnson et al., 2007). Community and belonging are therefore linked as it relates to collegiate environments.

Perna's Nested Model of College Choice

Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice is a hierarchical approach to analyzing college-going decisions. The purpose of the inclusion of Perna's model is to aid in the answer of research question two: How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States? In Perna's model, students determine whether to go to college based a variety of environmental and social factors, such as social and cultural capital. Ultimately, Perna's nested model is based on the idea that students make a human capital decision, which promotes that going to college is more beneficial than not going to college.

Four layers impact how college-going decisions are made: habitus, social and community context, higher education context, and social economic, and policy context, respectively. Habitus is a term borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu (1986) but repurposed for Perna's (2006) model. According to Perna (2006), habitus is a reflection of the demographic characteristics of the individual. Demographic characteristics include gender, socioeconomic status, and social and cultural capital. This level of Perna's model seeks to assess the individual's socialization in the context of their family.

The school and community context adds the context of the community around the student. No two rural areas are the same or have the same resources. The school and community context include the resources that are available to students within their high schools, in church, and with family friends. The higher education context of Perna's (2006) model observes both the physical distance and ability for the student to attend a specific university, the institutional characteristics that might be appealing or revolting to

the student, and a measure of how the university is marketed towards the individual

student.

Finally, the social, economic, and policy context "recognizes that college choice

is also influenced directly and indirectly through other contextual changes in social forces

(e.g., demographic changes), economic conditions (e.g., unemployment rate), and public

policies (e.g., establishment of a new need-based grant program)" (Perna, 2006, p. 199).

The social, economic, and policy context are particularly important in this study,

as the HOPE scholarship provides a significant incentive for students to attend college in

Georgia. In fact, every participant in this study mentioned the HOPE scholarship as a

reason for their decision to attend the University of Georgia over another institution.

Epistemology

Epistemology is a theory of science or a theory of knowledge (Crotty, 1998;

Stone, 2008). In qualitative research, an epistemological stance grounds the researcher,

the project, and the analysis thereof in a theory of knowledge. This study takes the stance

of social constructivism. Constructivism notes the lack of objective reality and places an

emphasis on individual experiences of people through their senses. Social constructivism

notes that the creation of culture and human history is not a result of an objective reality,

but rather the "intersection of politics, values, ideologies, religious beliefs, and so on"

(Constanto, 2008, p. 119).

In this study, social constructivism is used to show that participants have unique

experiences in their small rural communities and in the larger collegiate environment.

The researcher rejects the notion that an objective world exists, but rather that reality is

constructed by individual experiences, which should be studied to better understand

social phenomena. The researcher, therefore, accepts that each student may experience the same phenomenon, but react to it in multiple ways because of their own subjective experiences, beliefs, and values in the specific context of their home community or family.

Research Design

Over the past 35 years, the use of case study methodology has more than tripled in in published books (Yin, 2014). Case study research focuses on setting the boundaries of a study to clearly define the elements of the phenomenon being studied. The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The phenomenon being studied, then, is the rural student experience.

The current study adopts the tradition of the single-case study design (See Figure 3.2). Yin (2014) notes that single-case studies ought to have a central rational. These five rationales are "critical, unusual, common, revelatory, or longitudinal case" (Yin, 2014, p. 51). This study serves as an unusual case in the study of rural students at an R1 Doctoral university in the Southeastern United States.

At the time of writing, the researcher could locate no other study of the rural student experience in the United States. Georgia's unique higher education policy environment with the HOPE scholarship also makes this case unusual, as the vast majority of students at the site of this study have partial or full tuition scholarships.

This study was situated in the context of an R1 Doctoral University, the University of Georgia, in the Southeastern United States. This study employs Yin's (2014) definition of case study, "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a

contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16).

This study was designed to gather data from multiple sources to achieve triangulation (Fielding & Fielding, 1986). Maxwell (2013) states that "[triangulation] reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the biases of a specific method and allows you to gain a more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating" (p. 102). This study achieved triangulation by gathering data from semi-structured interviews, demographic data collection, and descriptive statistics.

Single-Case Study*

CASE CONTEXT

CASE

University of Georgia

Individual
Participants
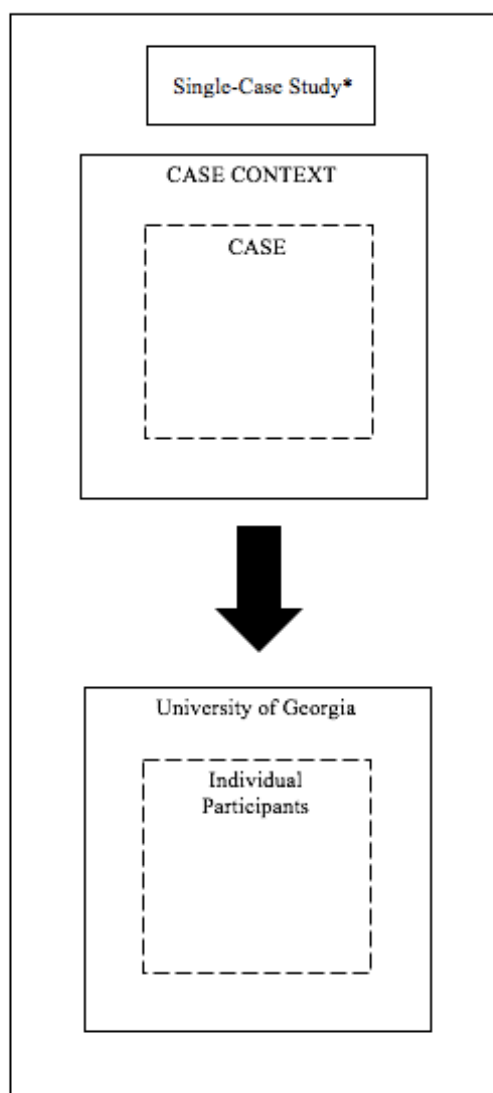
Figure 3.2 Single-case study design.

[*Modeled after Yin's (2014) Basic Types of Designs for Case Studies, p. 50]

The unit of analysis and population for this study is the rural college student at the University of Georgia. The University of Georgia is a public R1 Doctoral University. Institutions that make up this classification awarded at least 20 doctoral degrees in the 2013-2014 school year and were considered to qualify for the highest measure of

research activity among the 335 institutions qualifying as a doctoral university in the United States (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.).

R1 Doctoral Universities are the strongest academic institutions in the United States, and public R1 Doctoral Universities serve as an essential bridge for intellectually successful rural college students. Public R1 Doctoral Universities are world-class in education quality and are more financially affordable than private institutions. The experiences of students from rural areas are different than the experiences of students from suburban and urban areas, and this study sought to understand why those differences exist (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Methodology and Research Question Alignment

As previously mentioned, case study research was chosen as the method of this study. Case study was chosen because human and social systems are complex, and often require a holistic approach to analysis. Three research questions were developed to conform to the requirements of case study research and arose from gaps in the initial literature review. Yin (2014) notes that research questions for case study generally should ask "how?" or "why?" questions that only a deep analysis of a single- or multiple-case study can answer.

The first research question asks a "what" question: "What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" "What" questions indicate that a study is examining an exploratory topic (Yin, 2014). Since this could be among the first study in the United States that attempts to examine the rural student experience at a top university, the interview protocol assessed all three research

questions and examined the first question with the same rigor as the two "how"

questions.

Pilot Study

This project started as a pilot study in which the researcher interviewed three

freshmen students at the University of Georgia who came from rural Georgia. The pilot

asked three students in 60-minute semi-structured interviews about their decision to

attend college at the University of Georgia. The most significant finding from that study

was that the HOPE scholarship program in Georgia, which guarantees a partial-tuition

scholarship for meeting a 3.5 academic requirement in high school, was the only way

these students could have attended an R1 Research University (Grant, 2016).

The findings of the pilot study were reviewed by the advisory committee of the

current study. It was determined that the information gathered about the rural student

decision to attend an R1 Doctoral University needed expansion. The previous interviews

provided great depth about each student's decision but lacked the breadth necessary for a

full dissertation study. The small sample size also limited the transferability of the

research findings.

The researcher increased the sample size to 18. The research questions were

refined to both explore the rural student experience and to understand rural student

belonging at a R1 Doctoral University.

Site Selection

The site for this research study is the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens,

Georgia, USA. UGA was chosen as the research site because of its academic rigor, its

classification as an R1 Doctoral University, and its status as the public flagship institution

of the state of Georgia (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.).

The University of Georgia's (2011) mission includes to be "the most diversified

institution of higher education [in Georgia]" (para. 1). Diversity ought to include

geographical diversity when it comes to rural students in Georgia.

The researcher determined that creating a pseudonym for the research site would

be counter intuitive for several reasons. First, the state of Georgia must be mentioned,

because of the HOPE scholarship, which is a state-based policy. The HOPE and Zell

Miller scholarships are awarded to students in Georgia based on academic merit. HOPE

scholarship recipients receive 75% of their tuition for maintaining a 3.0 GPA in high

school and college, while the Zell Miller Scholarship provides 100% of tuition, excluding

fees, for students with a 3.7 GPA in high school and maintaining a 3.3 GPA in college

(Georgia Student Finance Commission, n.d.). The HOPE scholarship is a significant

factor in both rural Georgia students' decision to attend and their ability to stay enrolled

in the University of Georgia.

Second, by providing data on the University of Georgia using a pseudonym would

make the true identity of the institution easy to ascertain. Federal data obtained through

the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System can be easily accessed by anyone

with an internet connection.

Other than the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), the University of

Georgia has the most rigorous admissions standards of any public university in Georgia

(See Table 3.1). Additionally, UGA has the same graduation rate as Georgia Tech at

84%.

Table 3.1

Institutional Characteristics of R1 Doctoral Universities in Georgia, 2014-2015

Institution	Admission Rate	Graduation Rate	% Men	% Women
Georgia Tech	31.17	84	64.60	35.40
Georgia State	56.65	56	41.01	58.99
University of Georgia	52.88	84	43.07	56.93

(U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a)

Selection Criteria

Each participant was an undergraduate student at the University of Georgia. One participant attended the University of Georgia as an undergraduate student, moved directly into a graduate program, and was still enrolled at UGA at the time of the interview. This study underwent two phases of recruitment. The first wave occurred in September 2016 and the second occurred in January 2017. The participants were originally limited to sophomores through seniors through credit hour production. After the first wave of recruitment, freshmen were also included in the sample, because of the lack of diversity among participants.

To assess eligibility, students who inquired about the study via e-mail were asked which high school they attended. The high school was then located in the Common Core of Data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.-b). Under the "school details" section, the locale code of the school is provided.

In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics worked with the U.S. Census Bureau to create new location codes for schools to standardize the language around geographic classification of schools (Provasnik et al., 2007). Using geocoded data and the

United States Office of Management and Budget's 2000 census data, location codes were altered to rely less on population size and more on proximity to urbanized areas.

Table 3.2

Urban-Centric Locale Codes

Locale	Definition
Town: Fringe	Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area
Town: Distant	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area
Town: Remote	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area
Rural: Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster
Rural: Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster
Rural: Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster

(Provasnik et al., 2007, p. 2)

The codes are a means to distinguish between "rural" and "non-rural" potential participants (See Table 3.2). After two early interviews, the researcher discovered that while these codes are the best means to standardize rural schools at an aggregate level, locale codes do not perform well at the micro level.

Two participants came from a school with a "Rural: Fringe" code, but over the course of their interviews, the researcher discovered that the town evolved and now more closely resembles a suburb of Atlanta since the development of these codes 12 years ago (See Table 3.3). Both participants relocated to the area for their parents' work in Atlanta, identified themselves as suburbanites, and experienced an uncharacteristically advanced curriculum for a public rural school in Georgia compared to other participants in this study. These students were included in the sample of this study to provide a means for comparison.

Simultaneously, the researcher initially denied eligibility to potential participants with the "Town: Remote" code, as they were not technically rural. After speaking with one of these individuals who lived on a dirt road in the attendance zone of a school that recently went under consolidation, the researcher realized that the codes refer to the latitude and longitude of the school itself, and not necessarily where the student lives.

Indeed, several participants in this study discussed riding the school bus for over an hour to get to school, as there is only one high school in the county. In the second phase of recruitment, the researcher began allowing participants with the "Town: Remote" locale code to participate if they identified themselves as a "rural person."

Table 3.3

Participants' Race and High School Locale Code

Pseudonym	Race	High School Locale Code
Roger Bird	Latino	Rural: Fringe
Lauren Brown	White	Rural: Fringe
Faith Buford	White	Rural: Distant
Magnolia Carter	African American	Town: Distant
Abagail Chase	White	Rural: Distant
Mary Clark	White	Rural: Fringe
Rachel Daughtery	White	Rural: Distant
Margaery Eubanks	White	Rural: Fringe
Ben Gates	White	Town: Distant
Ernest Godwin	White	N/A
Michael Lopez	Latino	Rural: Fringe
Adeline Moates	African American	Rural: Fringe
Jaime Perez	Latino	Rural: Fringe
Roland Poole	White	Town: Remote
Lawrence Ramsey	White	Rural: Distant
Thomas Rowan	White	Rural: Fringe
Audre Sutherland	White	Town: Distant
Julia Taylor	White	Rural: Distant

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Data collection occurred in the form of semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol, demographic data collection through a survey, and secondary school demographic analysis through the Common Core of Data and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) on the National Center for Education Statistics website.

Interview participants were recruited through various means. The researcher acquired permission from several professors in lecture-style classrooms to attend the first 10 minutes of class to briefly introduce the study, provide a list of eligible high schools, and to leave a contact e-mail with the instructor for students who are eligible for the study and wished to participate. Second, the researcher posted a call for participants in the "Class of…" Facebook groups at the University of Georgia. These groups are very active and have an average membership of over 2,000 students.

In the second wave of recruitment, the researcher advertised through traditional 8x10 signs at commonly visited locations on campus (See Appendix C). Surprisingly, many of the participants noted that the signage was means in which they discovered the study. Finally, I e-mailed the staff of colleges and academic divisions to request that they send out an image file of my flyer to distribute to their undergraduate students. A total of 19 students were recruited for this study, but only 18 made it to the final analysis. The last participant declined inclusion in the study after the interview.

The sampling of this study resulted in the recruitment of 12 white, 4 Latinx, and 2 African American participants. Table 3.4 compares the race of University of Georgia undergraduates with the race of students in this study. Considering the sample size of 18,

this study adequately represents Latinx and African Americans at the University of Georgia in comparison to the total population.

Unfortunately, it is not known the race of University of Georgia students with regard to their geography. Therefore, the race of the undergraduate population at the University of Georgia is the best-known measure of the demographics of rural students, despite lacking data from the primarily white regions of North Georgia and the primarily African American regions of South Georgia.

Table 3.4

Proportion of Race of University of Georgia Undergraduates and the Current Study

Race	University of Georgia	Current Study
White	71.7	72
African American	7.7	11
Hispanic	5.3	17
Asian	9.1	0
American Indian	0.1	0
Native Hawaiian	0.1	0
Two or More Races	3.3	0
Unknown	0.9	0
Nonresident Alien	1.9	0

Note. University of Georgia population based on 2014-15 undergraduate unduplicated headcount from the IPEDS database.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study took three forms: semi-structured interviews, demographic information sheets, and descriptive statistics.

Interviews

The interview has been used extensively by researchers in social science to generate data for qualitative research problems (Platt, 2002). In this study, the interview was the primary source of data used to analyze the unit of analysis: the individual participant at the University of Georgia. Participants in this study were purposively sampled; every participant in this study is a student from rural Georgia enrolled at the University of Georgia.

Therefore, the researcher engaged in phenomenological interviewing. According to Roulston (2010), "the purpose of [the phenomenological] interview is to generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of human experiences. Thus, questions that generate detailed information concerning these experiences as well as the participants' responses to the phenomenon of investigation are crucial" (p. 16). The purpose of the interview in this study was to ask questions that represented the rural student experience.

The interviews in this study were semi-structured, as recommended by Seidman (2006). The interview followed the interview protocol developed by the researcher in conjunction with the advisory committee of this study (See Appendix A). The protocol contains primary questions that guide data extraction toward alignment with this study's research questions. In addition to these questions, the researcher asked the participants to give vivid examples of times they felt an emotion or went through a unique experience at the University of Georgia.

Interviews with participants took place on the campus of the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, USA. After contacting participants via e-mail, the researcher scheduled time in the presentation practice room in the Miller Learning Center (MLC).

The MLC was chosen as a location for interviews because it serves as a central location on campus that the vast majority of students are familiar with. The MLC has been described as a library without the books; it is a large four-story building containing classrooms, private study rooms, computer labs, and a coffee shop.

Interviews were audio-recoded using the iPhone's standard voice recorder application. The iPhone standard voice recorder was chosen, because of its ability to automatically upload into iCloud. The purpose of using iCloud as a storage device was twofold. First, iCloud instantly creates a backup recording in case the recording device is destroyed. Second, iCloud is protected by two-step verification, which means an individual would need the researcher's iCloud password and have access to the researcher's phone to access the iCloud drive. The researcher's iPhone is also protected with a six-digit security code.

Immediately after the interview, the researcher downloaded the interview from iCloud and placed the file in a Google Drive folder. The researcher's Google Drive account is also protected by two-step verification. The interviews were transcribed, word-for-word, in the program Inqscribe (Paulus, Lester, & Dempster, 2013).

Demographic Information Sheets

The demographic information sheets were an attempt to collect participant-level data in a standardized manner (See Appendix B). The participants were given the option to select male, female, or other on their sheet. Nine males and nine females participated in the study; no participant chose to opt for a non-binary gender. The second question, "How would you describe yourself?" asked the participants to indicate their race, based on how the IPEDS database collects data for comparison.

Family income was measured from under $10,000 to $95,001 and above. The five measures between "under" and "above" were banded at $15,000 increments. Both SAT and ACT scores were requested by the researcher. Unfortunately, many participants indicated that they do not remember their score. The researcher followed up with all participants after their interviews, and very few responded. Six participants reported their SAT score and eight reported their ACT score. These measures had limited usability broadly but were used as a measure of aptitude for participants who were able to provide their scores.

Finally, requesting high school on the demographic information sheet allowed the researcher to pull descriptive statistics from the Common Core of Data.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were gathered from the Common Core of Data and Integrated Postsecondary Educational Database System (IPEDS) for the high school level and for University of Georgia institutional data. High school data was used to analyze the unit of analysis of the study: the individual participant. IPEDS data was used to provide context for the study.

The Common Core of Data provided several key data points for each participant. First, the urbanicity code for each school was provided, to determine the student's eligibility. Second, the student-to-teacher ratio could be calculated with student and teacher data. Third, the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch could be calculated with the data provided, which is currently the best means to measure poverty at the school level (Snyder & Musu-Gillette, 2015).

Data from IPEDS provided information about the context of the study. In addition to IPEDS data, the researcher was able to obtain the high school of each member of the freshman class of 2014, if they attended a Georgia high school. Using data from the Common Core of Data, the researcher was able to compare the proportion of rural students to urban and suburban students at the University of Georgia. The next chapter, Chapter 4, examines the context of the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred primarily in ATLAS.ti for Mac, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package. The following review of data analysis comes from the researcher's research journal kept as a memo in ATLAS.ti. After performing any action, the researcher recorded the action and its impact on the study.

After each interview was transcribed, it was assigned a participant number and loaded into ATLAS.ti. Demographic information sheets were scanned into a PDF, were assigned the corresponding participant number, and were loaded into ATLAS.ti.

The researcher began by reading the transcripts through completely at least one time without creating any codes. Codes are, "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to data 'chunks' of varying size" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, pp. 71-72). After an initial read of the transcripts, the researcher developed deductive codes based on Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice.

Deductive codes are a "provisional 'start list' of codes," typically used in the early stages of data analysis (Miles et al., 2014, p. 81). Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice provides the researcher with a hierarchy of measurable variables. The purpose of

deductively creating a set of codes with Perna's (2006) model was to answer the second research question: "how do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?"

After all transcripts were coded for Perna's model, the researcher created document groups based on demographic information provided by participants. These documents groups function as attribute codes, which "logs essential information about the data and demographic characteristics of the participants for future management and reference" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 69).

These groups included high education, medium education, low education, high income, middle income, and low income. High education was defined as a student with at least one parent with a graduate degree. Medium education was defined as a student with a least one parent with a bachelor's degree but no graduate degree. Low education was defined as any student with no parent with a bachelor's degree.

High income was defined as family income at or above $95,001 per year. Medium income was defined as family income between $40,001 and $95,000 per year. Low income was defined as a family income up to $40,000 per year. These income figures are based on Census data, which show that rural families have a lower median household income compared to urban families (Bishaw & Posey, 2016).

The researcher began creating inductive holistic codes after deductively coding for Perna's (2006) model. Inductive codes rise up from the data source in order to "condense raw textual data" and to "establish clear links between the… research objectives and the summary findings" (Thomas, 2006, p. 237). Holistic codes are broad

"lumping" codes that allow the researcher to capture the essence of a data segment (Saldaña, 2011).

The researcher experimented with many "guesswork" holistic codes while re-reading the transcripts in order to find patterns, such as a "jail" code, as many participants in this study have parents who work in the prison system. The hunch to explore the jail code, however, did not result in any meaningful discovery. Incarceration is an expanding industry in rural areas, and its inclusion in the data is not surprising (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Figure 3.3. Use of the code document table in ATLAS.ti.

Other holistic codes provided more meaningful insights, such as the "dorm" code, which was used any time participants mentioned the residence hall. After reviewing the data segments, the researcher discovered that rural students were using the residence halls to make connections with students from suburban Atlanta.

Another example comes from the "distance" code to mark when participants indicated how their distance to the university affected their decision to attend. The researcher then created a magnitude code for distance, which indicated when students were close, a medium distance, or far away from the University of Georgia (Saldaña, 2013).

After reading through the transcripts at least five times, the researcher began exploring emotions experienced by the participant to answer the third research question concerning sense of belonging. Emotion codes "label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 105).
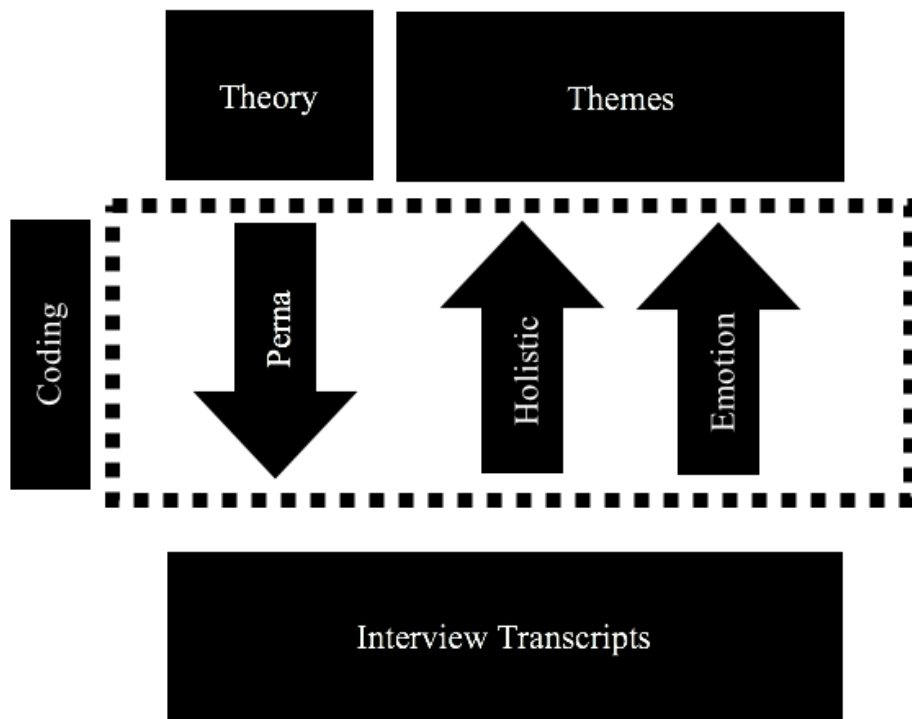
Figure 3.4. Visualization of data analysis process
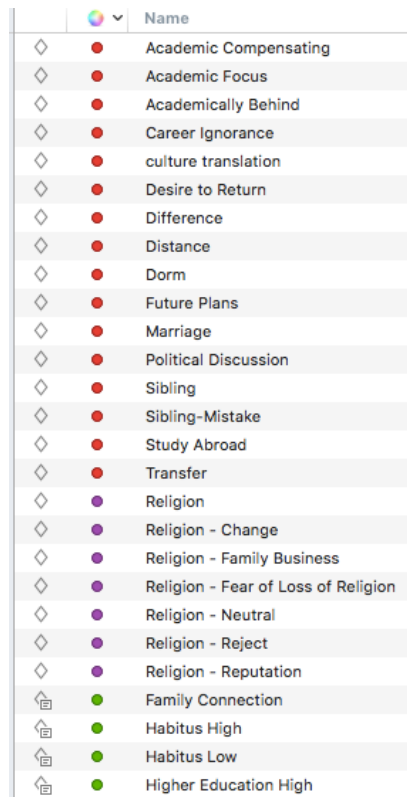
Emotion codes were also useful in uncovering patterns as they relate to the first research question concerning the rural student experience as well. For example, in a theme presented in the sixth chapter of this study, it was discovered that a curricular disadvantage exists for students from rural Georgia. This theme emerged as a result of coding instances where students felt left behind in class.

By implementing document groups, the researcher was able to employ the "code document table" function of ATLAS.ti. The code document table allows the researcher to view when codes were applied to transcripts of varying demographics. As shown in Figure 3.3, the researcher found that no student of low education or income was able to study abroad. The numbers in the Code Document Table are indicators of how many times the code appeared in a transcript, but the quantity is not as important as the relationship discovered between the code and the demographic information.

Figure 3.4 provides an overview of the data analysis process. The first codes were created deductively using Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice. Then, the researcher began creating inductive holistic and emotion codes. These codes segmented data, which aided in the development of themes.

After three cycles of coding, the researcher continued to deeply read the quotations coded to discover patterns. These patterns were then assigned a color to indicate which research question they answered (See Figure 3.5). Red codes related to the rural college student experience; green codes related to college choice; orange codes related to sense of belonging. Additionally, codes that were hypothesized to be meaningful were assigned a black color, and the "religion" code was assigned purple, as it was a particularly important finding across many transcripts.

For the first research question, "what is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" three themes emerged. The first theme, "curricular disadvantage sets rural students back, especially in STEM," emerged late in the analysis. After deductively coding each transcript for Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice and inductively coding emotion codes, the researcher began lumping instances where students felt academically behind with the code "curriculum disadvantage."

Figure 3.5. Use of color in code management.

The researcher then studied the coded quotations and discovered that AP courses in STEM areas were not being offered to the participants. Moreover, it was discovered that only two participants were able to use dual enrollment credits, though dual enrollment is thought to be a pathway for students who are not offered AP credit.

The second theme, "socioeconomic status mediates experience," emerged early in the analysis. The researcher noticed that students who came from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds also tended to view their experience in college as positive. Participant Ben stood out as an excellent example; his parents' higher income and ability to enroll him in a private school, the superior economy of his rural town, and the social networks he carried from his high school years to college improved his college experience.

The researcher also created holistic codes for study abroad experiences. Using the code document table, the researcher discovered that only students from a background of middle income were able to study abroad. These students also sought out degree programs and career paths that necessitated international experience.

The third theme, "rural students alter their religious views in college," emerged from inductive coding. The researcher realized that students often talked about religion in their interviews when talking about the culture of their hometown. A holistic "religion" code was created in order to lump all instances of religion being mentioned. Then, the researcher began splitting the codes into meaning. These codes included:

1. Religion – Change

2. Religion – Family Business

3. Religion – Fear of Loss

4. Religion – Neutral

5. Religion – Reject

6. Religion – Reputation

Codes for the second research question, "how do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" were created deductively using Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice. After assessing the codes, the first theme, "poor college advising in rural public schools," emerged as several participants spoke of receiving very little help in their quest for higher education. After looking at data segments coded with "School and Community Context – Low," the researcher began creating new magnitude codes "Advising – Positive" and "Advising – Negative" to denote the quality of the participant's experience.

The second theme, "geography as a dynamic barrier," emerged using both holistic codes and observations by the researcher throughout the process. Holistic codes, like the "distance" code, aided the researcher in finding examples of when geography impacted the college-going decision.

The third research question asked, "how does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" To answer this research question, the researcher relied on emotion codes to understand in what situations rural students felt that they belonged and when they did not. Emotion codes were primarily useful for the first theme, "rural students experience a shift in cultural and academic expectation."

Rural students felt that they did not belong at the University of Georgia when they experienced something that conflicted with the culture in which they grew up in or when they did not measure up academically. Many emotion codes were created and were eventually lumped together. For example, to understand being behind academically, the researcher created the following codes, that were eventually lumped together:

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1. Academic compensating

2. Academic focus

3. Academically behind

4. Difference

5. Curriculum disadvantage

For the second theme, "residence halls create cultural bridging opportunities for rural students," the researcher explored the holistic code "dorm" which lumped together instances in which the residence hall was mentioned. After looking at the coded data segments, the researcher found that students from rural areas who lived in residence halls their first year benefitted from the social capital of their roommates.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were taken throughout the research design, implementation, and reporting process. This case study and the materials associated with it was approved by the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in 2015. IRB considered this study "exempt" meaning that none of the participants were of a protected group of individuals, such as children or prisoners. The researcher held no position of power over the participants.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary and there was no incentive provided for participation. Participants of this study signed an informed consent form and were offered the opportunity to withdraw at any point. Participants were given a second opportunity to withdraw from the study, as the researcher sent a copy of the interview transcript to each participant to ensure nothing was misrepresented in interview.

To protect the identity of each research participant, several precautions were taken along the way. The first is the assignment of a pseudonym for each participant, their high school, and hometown. Additionally, if the participant gave the name of a teacher, friend, or landmark, those names were also changed. The researcher stored the audio file and text transcription of the interviews on iCloud and Google Drive, which are protected by two-factor authentication. Every effort was made to protect the identity of the participant and anyone related to the participant.

Trustworthiness

In addition to a limitations section, a section on trustworthiness is included, as suggested by Tierney and Clemens (2011). Trustworthiness does not pretend to carry the nomological burden of scientific law. Providing trustworthiness does allow qualitative methodologists to ensure that studies are of a high quality. Similar to external validity, transferability notes that a study will be useful to researchers and research consumers who are attempting to answer similar problems (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Shifting our explanation of what we know by qualitative research is important because "public policy is less well informed by the lack of qualitative work" (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 20). There are virtually infinite gaps in the public policy literature, especially as it relates to education. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the researcher was very explicit about its parameters. For example, all of the students attended a high school in Georgia whose locale code corresponds to Rural: Fringe, Rural: Distant, Rural: Remote, Town: Distant, Town: Remote, or Town: Distant (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a).

Students were actively recruited in order to provide for the rural diversity of Georgia in terms of geographic location, race, and gender. Finally, the direct results of this study can only be generalized to one university in Georgia, but the findings are transferable to multiple rural contexts in the United States and beyond (Tierney & Clemens, 2011).

Credibility

The credibility of a study is based on its internal validity. In order to ensure the credibility of this study, several steps were taken. First, when major analytic decisions were made, the researcher noted them in a research journal kept throughout the process of analysis. Second, the researcher gathered descriptive statistics from national databases managed by the United States Department of Education, which has proven to be a reliable source of data. The researcher used every available opportunity to use reliable data and analytic strategies.

Limitations

The limitations of this study fall in line with limitations of typical qualitative studies. This study took place at one institution in the Southeast United States. Every state in the Southeast has its own culture and policy environment that influences where and how students matriculate. Therefore, the results of this study are only directly applicable in this institution. The purpose of this study is not to make sweeping statements about the experiences of all rural students in the United States, however. While policies like the HOPE scholarship affect the transferability of this study, it serves as an example for those who hypothesize about a free-college tuition model.

Chapter Summary

This chapter gave an overview of the methodology of this study and the research procedure. This study implemented a single-case study at the University of Georgia. A total of 18 individuals participated in this work. Data collection occurred through interviews, demographic information collection, and descriptive statistics. An overview of the data analysis was provided, along with statements about ethics, trustworthiness, and credibility.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, provides the context for the study at the University of Georgia. An overview of the history of the University is provided, along with a description of the undergraduate population.

CHAPTER 4

STUDY CONTEXT: UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The previous chapter gave an overview of the research method used in the current study. This chapter provides an overview of the site of this case study, the University of Georgia. The context details the racial dynamics of enrollment at the university and provides descriptive statistics about the racial and geographic makeup of the University.

Context of the Research Site

The University of Georgia (UGA) is a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeast United States. The introduction of the University's mission statement is as follows:

> The University of Georgia, a land-grant and sea-grant university with statewide commitments and responsibilities, is the state's oldest, most comprehensive, and most diversified institution of higher education. Its motto, "to teach, to serve, and to inquire into the nature of things," reflects the University's integral and unique role in the conservation and enhancement of the state's and nation's intellectual, cultural, and environmental heritage. (University of Georgia, 2011, para. 1)

The University serves as both a land-grant institution and the flagship university of the state of Georgia.

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As a land-grant university, UGA provides teaching, research, and service to the state in veterinary medicine, engineering, agriculture, and other vocation-based fields. As the flagship university of the state of Georgia, UGA has a statewide commitment to serve the people of Georgia. This section continues with a brief history of the state of Georgia and the University of Georgia.

The State of Georgia

Georgia is uniquely situated in the Deep South as an original colony. South Carolina is the only other original colony in the Deep South. Though Georgia's Trustees warned fiercely against slavery, the period after the American Revolution saw a dramatic increase in slave-owning and cotton production. The invention of the cotton gin served as a catalyst for the expansion of cotton production in Georgia, which drove both the production of cotton and the expansion of human bondage throughout the state. After slavery was outlawed, African Americans in the Deep South were still bound to plantations as sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

African Americans were denied rights with the creation of Jim Crowe Laws (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Zinn, 2015). Though the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s integrated the public-school system, ensured interracial marriage, and guaranteed voting rights to African American, the legacy of slavery is still evident in the United States' Black Belt. The Black Belt stretches from Texas to South Carolina and contains 80% of the nonmetropolitan African American population in the United States (Harris & Worthen, 2003). In the rural Southeast, generations of poverty exist in the black diaspora of the Black Belt. It is true that the rural regions of Georgia tend to be more

homogeneous in racial makeup than urban areas, but homogeneous does not necessarily mean white.

Though the homogeny of rural Georgia remains, the region is experiencing a change in its demographics. Georgia is home to the New Rural Latinx Diaspora. Over the past three decades, Latinx immigration shifted from the traditional states of California, New Mexico, and Arizona to less traditional areas of the Deep South and East Coast. Specifically, Latinx immigrated to North Carolina, Indiana, Illinois, and Georgia (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002). This new shift is known as the New Latino Diaspora.

The New Latino Diaspora was driven by the need for labor. In the 1980s and 1990s, carpet companies in North Georgia encouraged Latinx people to immigrate, both legally and illegally, to work in the still booming manufacturing industry (Hamann, 2008). As the manufacturing industry slowed and shrank in the new century, so too did the North Georgia jobs. More recently, the migration of the meat packing industry from urban areas to the rural South continues to attract Latinx people (Gill, 2010).

Integration at the University of Georgia

Georgia's history with educating minorities is troubled. Like many other Deep South states, Georgia prevented African American students from attending public universities until the 1960s. The path to admission for African Americans began in 1950. In that year, Horace T. Ward applied for admission to the University of Georgia's law school (Dyer, 1985). The University did not reject Ward outright; rather, they erected administrative hurdles over the course of a year hoping Ward would give up and apply to a school in the North. For example, universities in Georgia began requiring

recommendations from alumni for consideration for admission to white institutions (Daniels, 2001).

Eventually, the University of Georgia's Law School outright refused Ward's acceptance, denying that his race played a role. With the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Ward sued the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. After Ward was coincidentally drafted into the Army, he withdrew his suit. Ward was accepted at Northwestern University's law school after his return from service two years later.

Integration attempts continued in Georgia throughout the 1950s. In 1952, Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin briefly refused to allow the Georgia Institute of Technology's (Georgia Tech) football team to compete against the University of Pittsburgh in the Sugar Bowl, because the University of Pittsburg's roster included one African American player. After Georgia Tech students burned an effigy of the Governor in front of the Governor's Mansion, Griffin reversed his decision, but stated that future Georgia football teams would not be allowed to compete against integrated football teams (Dyer, 1985).

Horace Ward returned to Georgia in 1960 to serve as a partner in Donald L. Hollow's law firm, who previously represented Ward in his first suit against the University System of Georgia (Daniels, 2001). Ward served as council on the case that would desegregate the University System of Georgia in *Holmes v. Danner*. Hamilton Holmes was an exemplary football player and student at Morehouse College, but was denied admission at the University of Georgia for a variety of administrative reasons, such as inadequate space in campus dormitories.

During the trial, Hollow cross-examined the President of the University of Georgia, Omer Aderhold, and revealed that Ward, who was serving on the plaintiff's legal counsel, was deemed unfit for admission to the University of Georgia, but was, in fact, good enough for Northwestern's more prestigious law school. Hamilton Holmes won his case due in part to Aderhold's testimony, and he became one of the first two students at the University of Georgia, along with Charlayne Hunter (Daniels, 2001).

Desegregation at all University System of Georgia schools soon followed. The first African American students at the University of Georgia did not have a pleasant experience, however. Mary Francis Early, the first African American graduate of the University of Georgia, recalled a line of white students standing in front of the library denying her entry and yelling, "I smell a dog" (Pratt, 2002). Charlayne Hunter, who was admitted at the same time as Hamilton Holmes, felt pushed out of *The Red & Black* student newspaper in spite of having prior experience working in professional newspapers (Trillin, 1991).

The University of Georgia's racial history is still alive today. The academic building bearing the name of Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes experienced vandalism on January 29, 2017 when the glass door of the African Studies Institute was destroyed (Young, 2017).

The University of Georgia Today

Table 4.1 shows the unduplicated headcount of undergraduates at the University of Georgia in the 2014-2015 academic year next to the population of the state of Georgia. Unduplicated headcount is the optimal accounting of students at a university, as it reflects the total amount of students who attended throughout an academic year.

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According to data accessed in the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System, African Americans are extremely underrepresented in the undergraduate population at the University of Georgia (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), African Americans make up 32% of the state of Georgia, but only make up 7.7% of the undergraduate population at UGA. The difference between 32% at the state level and 7.7% at the university level means that the University of Georgia needs four times more African American students to represent African American people in the state.

Table 4.1

UGA Enrollment and Georgia Population Proportion by Race

Race	University of Georgia	State of Georgia
White	71.7	61.2
African American	7.7	32.0
Hispanic	5.3	9.4
Asian	9.1	4.1
American Indian	0.1	0.5
Native Hawaiian	0.1	0.1
Two or More Races	3.3	2.1
Unknown	0.9	N/A
Nonresident Alien	1.9	N/A

Note. University of Georgia population based on 2014-2015 undergraduate unduplicated headcount from IPEDS database. State of Georgia data comes from the July 1, 2016 population estimate. Both are the most current data available at the time of writing.

Two groups are overrepresented at the University of Georgia: white and Asian students. White students comprise the vast majority of undergraduate students at the University of Georgia, with nearly 72% of the undergraduate population and only 61.2% of the population of Georgia. Asian students make up 9.1% of undergraduate students, but only 4.1% of the population of Georgia.

In addition to African American students, Hispanic students are also underrepresented at the University of Georgia. Only 5.3% of the undergraduate population at the University of Georgia are Hispanic, and yet 9.4% of Georgians are Hispanic. One of the drivers of under enrollment of Hispanic students is the University System of Georgia's unique policies as it relates to undocumented students (Pérez, 2014).

Only South Carolina has a more restrictive policy on undocumented students than Georgia. Unlike South Carolina, Georgia restricts undocumented students from attending institutions that rejected academically qualified students, including the University of Georgia and the Georgia Institute of Technology.

USG policy 4.1.6 states that "A person who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible for admission to any University System institution which, for the two most recent academic years, did not admit all academically qualified applicants (except for cases in which applicants were rejected for non-academic reasons)" (USG, n.d.-a, para. 8). Georgia is the only state in the United States with this admissions restriction. Other states allow undocumented students with legal status in the United States through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

DACA defers government action on deportation for individuals who immigrated

to the United States before they turned 16 and were under 31 as of June 15, 2012 (U.S.

Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). A DACA approval gives undocumented

residents employment authorization and a Social Security number. This allows students

to apply for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which gives students

a metric to measure need through an estimated family contribution. This does not give

DACA students the right to federal student aid, however.

Georgia is also one of 32 states that deny in-state tuition to undocumented

students. USG policy 4.3.4 states that:

> Each University System institution shall verify the lawful presence in the United
>
> States of every successfully admitted person applying for resident tuition status,
>
> as defined in Section 7.3 of this Policy Manual, and of every person admitted to
>
> an institution referenced in Section 4.1.6 of this Policy Manual. (USG, n.d.-b,
>
> para. 16)

Despite current access to non-selective institutions, undocumented students are still at

risk of being denied access to any public institution in Georgia. In 2011, a bill failed in

the State House of Representatives that would have banned undocumented students from

attending any public institution in the state of Georgia, even if they were willing to pay

out-of-state tuition (Georgia General Assembly, 2011).

Under the current policies, academically qualified students are being denied

access to the state's best public institutions. In 2014, Eduardo Samaniego was denied

access to the University of Georgia despite living the majority of his life in Georgia,

being his school's student council president, and graduating high school with honors

(Jones, 2014).

Table 4.2

Geographic Location of University of Georgia 2014 Freshman Class

High School Code	Enrollment	As a %
City		
Large	160	3
Midsize	186	4
Small	518	12
Suburb		
Large	2,484	55
Midsize	56	1
Small	31	1
Town		
Fringe	83	2
Distant	149	3
Remote	50	1
Rural		
Fringe	694	15
Distant	92	2
Remote	8	1
Total	4,511	100

More recently, Garcia Gonzalez was denied access to Georgia's best public

schools in spite of completing more than two dozen Advanced Placement courses and

living in the United States since the age of 6 (Jackson, 2016). Because Gonzalez was so academically successful in school, she was accepted to Dartmouth.

Geographic Location of University of Georgia Freshmen

Through a freedom of information request, the researcher obtained a demographic profile of the fall 2014 freshman class. The data set included the high school attended by the student, if that student went to a Georgia high school. Table 4.2 displays the high school code that corresponds to Locale Code.

Table 4.3

Geographic Location of Georgia High School Class of 2014

High School Code	Enrollment	As a %
City Large	2,562	2
City Midsize	4,358	4
City Small	8,652	8
Suburb Large	45,826	44
Suburb Midsize	1,197	1
Suburb Small	966	1
Town Fringe	2,545	2
Town Distant	7,798	8
Town Remote	2,534	2
Rural Fringe	21,230	21
Rural Distant	4,722	5
Rural Remote	704	1
Total	103,094	100

Locale codes were developed to correspond with a U.S. Census Bureau geographic database to classify areas of the United States according to population density (Provasnik et al., 2007).

The majority of Georgia resident students at the University of Georgia come from suburban areas, at over 55%. The second largest geographic origin of students is the city classification, where 19% of students originate. Suburban and urban categories make up nearly 75% of the freshman class of 2014 at the University of Georgia. Table 4.3 shows the geographic location of every senior in the high school class of 2014. This data is used to compare the makeup of the high school senior class of 2014 with the freshman class of 2014 at the University of Georgia.

Of the entire high school class of 2014, only 46% come from suburban areas of Georgia. Only 14% come from city locations. Together, urban and suburban students made up 60% of high school senior class and 75% of the University of Georgia's freshman class in 2014. As is shown in Table 4.4, both Town and Rural students are underrepresented at the University of Georgia.

Table 4.4

UGA Fall 2014 Enrollment Compared to High School Class of 2014 by %

High School Code	Fall 2014 Enrollment As a %	High School Class of 2014 As a %
City	19	15
Suburb	57	47
Town	6	12
Rural	18	26

The comparison of the Fall 2014 freshman class enrollment and the high school senior class of 2014 reveal an underrepresentation of rural students at the University of Georgia.

Conclusion

This chapter described of the site of this study, the University of Georgia. In qualitative research, context is an important aspect for examining the findings. Historically, the University of Georgia has had a troubled history with adequately serving all groups of people in Georgia.

The next chapter, Chapter 5 provides a detailed profile of each of the 18 participants of this study. Each participant's demographic data is provided at the beginning of every participant profile. Profiles include an overview of the participant's journey to and experience at the University of Georgia.

CHAPTER 5

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The previous chapter gave an overview of the research site and the context of the University of Georgia. This chapter provides short biographical sketches of each of the 18 participants in this study. Each participant, their hometown, their high school, and any formal name provided of teachers or friends were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

The sampling of this study resulted in the recruitment of 13 white, 3 Latinx, and 2 African American participants. The average high school GPA was 3.91 ($SD = 0.1$). All of the students were traditional college students, meaning that they attended college immediately after graduating from high school. The age of participants varied from 18 to 23, with the average age being 20. The gender of the participants was split evenly with 9 males and 9 females. None of the participants opted to indicate a non-binary gender. Table 5.1 gives an overview of the participants' degree program at the time of interview.

Table 5.1

Participants' Degree Program

Pseudonym	Degree	Major
Roger Bird	Bachelor's	Criminal Justice
Lauren Brown	Bachelor's	Natural Resource Management
Faith Buford	Bachelor's	International Affairs & Journalism
Magnolia Carter	Bachelor's	Psychology
Abagail Chase	Bachelor's	Journalism & Geography
Mary Clark	Master's	TESOL & World Languages
Rachel Daughtery	Bachelor's	Sociology & Biology
Margaery Eubanks	Bachelor's	Undecided
Ben Gates	Bachelor's	Computer Science
Ernest Godwin	Bachelor's	English Literature
Michael Lopez	Bachelor's	History
Adeline Moates	Bachelor's	Exercise and Sport Science
Jaime Perez	Bachelor's	Communications & Statistics
Roland Poole	Bachelor's	English Education & Theatre
Lawrence Ramsey	Bachelor's	English & Political Science
Thomas Rowan	Bachelor's	English & Film
Audre Sutherland	Bachelor's	Ecology
Julia Taylor	Bachelor's	Geology

Roger Bird

Roger is a Latino student from Central Georgia. Unlike other participants in this study, Roger's experience as a rural student began in Indiana. His father is an Air Marshall and worked out of a regional office near the small town in which his mother was raised in, "So, we moved because my Mom wanted to, but my Dad couldn't get a job. He couldn't move the job he had… so he continued driving for like four hours to commute two or three times a week."

Table 5.2

Roger Bird Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Roger Bird
Region of Georgia	Central
Race	Latino
Major	Criminal Justice
Parents Income	>$95,001
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	23%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

Roger reported that his father's commute caused division in his parents' relationship, which led to their divorce when he was in high school. Roger decided to move to Atlanta with his father in the middle of his high school career. His high school in Indiana was extremely small, enrolling less than 500 students between 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade.

Though the high school Roger relocated to in Georgia is considered a "Rural: Fringe" school according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the area is more suburban since classification in 2007 (Provasnik et al., 2007). Newark is a growing town south of Atlanta, which is just close enough for those who work in Atlanta to commute. Roger considers himself a "rural" student, and the high school he attended in Georgia does correspond with a rural code. Therefore, the researcher decided to include Roger in the sample for this case study.

Roger struggled at first to adjust to his new school in Georgia, "So I went from a school of less than 500 in Indiana to a high school of 1,800 plus kids, and I was terrified to say the least… It was a big change." It was not just a different environment for Roger, however, as the academic transition was intense:

> It was also, I was in much more rigorous [classes] at Northside High than I was in Indiana, and I basically went from not doing homework most nights like four out of five nights a week to doing homework every night for at least 2 hours at Northside.

Roger emphasized that the two high schools he attended had different priorities and expectations of their students:

> It was a completely different environment in high school. I guess, just preparing me much more for college at Northside than it was in Indiana, because it was two-thirds of the town was pretty impoverished… so they were just trying to get people through high school. [Northside was] getting us towards college.

Roger was lucky, though, because he grew up in a household that emphasized the importance college, which manifested itself with a specific plan to attend college at a

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young age, "I had the plan that I was going to go to Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. But that didn't really happen, and so I moved down [to Georgia]."

Roger comes from a family that emphasizes sciences; his step-mother comes from what he described as a "family of Ph.Ds." and his brother is currently attending medical school. Additionally, Roger spent more time in high school with students slightly older than him that he met in his AP classes. These individuals ended up going to Georgia Tech:

> I took a lot of classes that were for seniors my junior year, and so I made a lot of senior friends. They exposed me to going to Georgia Tech, and I thought that was what I was going to do… you know the campus actually resembles Purdue quite a bit.

Ultimately, Roger did not even apply to Georgia Tech, however, for a combination of reasons, "My SAT score was not where it needed to be to go to Georgia Tech… But I also had friends… and they all told me about how much they hated their life. I didn't want to hate my life." Though science had been emphasized in his home, it simply did not appeal to him as much as the humanities, which led him to go to the University of Georgia, and ultimately to a major in Criminal Justice and Sociology.

Roger's transition to the University of Georgia was easy, because his transition to the high school he attended in Georgia prepared him for the jump, "I thought I was behind, because everyone else had been used to doing homework every night … Like I felt like I was intelligent, but I just felt like I had been robbed of the experience." Every night, Roger was playing video games rather than doing homework, because, in Indiana, doing homework was not required to do well in school. When he was asked if his

transition to a more rigorous school helped him when he came to college he replied, "Yeah most definitely."

At the time of his interview, Roger was in the second half of his sophomore year and was enjoying his new course of study after switching from pre-pharmacy, "I was pre-pharmacy when I came in… and I hated it… so I took intro to Sociology, and that's been by favorite class in college." Roger said that he learned the "facts" about mass incarceration in his first sociology class, which led him to an interest in criminal justice and a career as a parole official.

When asked about why he was interested he said, "[it's] more, you know, getting people out and reintegrating them into society rather than just locking them up." Roger looks up to his father for taking on a noble profession and for his lengthy career of military work and law enforcement. He wants the same thing out of a career, but he views the field of law enforcement as problematic:

> [My father and I] talked about drug trade and mass incarceration, small end drug dealers, and stuff like that… I know a lot of people that do [smoke marijuana] and it's, a lot of people get caught up in, in inner-cities especially, they have to do this. And, I, you know, it's a way of life when there aren't any actual opportunities, it's what they have to resort to, no matter if they want to or not. But he sees it as, it doesn't matter they're still breaking the law, the law still has to be held in a super high regard no matter what you shouldn't break the law.

The summer after the interview, Roger visited Bulgaria with his girlfriend, and plans on graduating in the Spring 2019 semester. He will pursue a career in law enforcement as a parole officer and continues to support the decriminalization of marijuana use.

Summary

Roger is a Latino male from Indiana but comes to the University of Georgia as a result of his father moving to Georgia for work. He struggled to handle the academic rigor of his new high school in Georgia, but eventually caught up with his peers. Roger says that his big transition made his first year of college much easier, which makes him more confident about the future. Roger is majoring in Criminal Justice and Sociology and is seeking a career as a parole officer.

Lauren Brown

Lauren is a white female from the Northwest Georgia. She comes from a working-class family and is a first-generation college student. The town she is from is very small:

> There's not much there at all… There's like a few shops and gas stations…There's a sod farm on my road and lots of cattle. Most of my neighbors have cows or chickens or horses. Everything's just really small.

When we think about the term "rural," Lauren's town comes to mind. Her parents grew up in the area, and never left. Despite being a first-generation college student, Lauren will not be the first in her family to go to college; her brother attended Georgia Tech and is currently a mechanical engineer for a major chemical company in the United States.

Lauren's primary motivations to attend school were twofold: she wanted to go to college away from her hometown, and she wanted to use the HOPE scholarship for free tuition. Following these criteria, she saw Georgia and Georgia Tech as the only two possibilities. Kennesaw State University, which is a nearby regional university in

suburban Atlanta, was where several people from her high school went, and she felt that she would not be challenging herself if she went there.

Table 5.3

Lauren Brown Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Lauren Brown
Region of Georgia	Northwest
Race	White
Major	Natural Resource Management and Policy
Parents Income	>$95,001
First Generation?	Yes
High School GPA	3.8
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	9%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

Her high school gave her the opportunity to visit colleges as a group with her classmates, but strangely they never visited the University of Georgia or Georgia Tech, the two most prestigious public postsecondary institutions in Georgia:

We had a couple of college field [trips]… like [to] Kennesaw, which I knew I didn't want to go there, Dalton State which I really didn't want to go there, and then Tennessee Wesleyan; I don't know why we went there. That's the one that I went on because it seemed like it… It was like a combination of three different [schools] and it was like Tennessee Wesleyan and UTC at Chattanooga and one other. And I think that I just chose that one to get like out of class and because I

just like Chattanooga… I guess I briefly considered UTC and then I went on that

trip and they told us how much tuition costs, and I was like, "What the crap?"

Indeed, Lauren's school chose to send their students on a fieldtrip to a regional university

out-of-state rather than to the two best public options in-state. Lauren claimed that this

unusual choice of a college field trip was just one example of the subpar assistance she

received from her guidance counselor.

Lauren reported that 11 students were admitted and matriculated to the University

of Georgia and Georgia Tech after graduation:

And also, we didn't have much involvement with our guidance counselor at all.

I'm trying to remember any time that I actually had to go to our office other than

to get stuff like signed and sent to colleges like transcripts. I think I sat down and

talked to a guidance counselor probably twice in my high school career.

Lauren was able to navigate the college application process with the help of her parents.

When Lauren compares herself to her peers at the University of Georgia, she feels

that she does not stack up. She blames her high school curriculum for not adequately

preparing her for college:

All my friends that go to UGA went to schools like in the Atlanta region… their

high school just sounds so much different than ours. It's just so big. One thing is

like they had so many AP classes that they have tons of credit coming in and my

school didn't offer that many. So, I only got like three credits. I took as many as

would fit my schedule. That's not much. So, I feel like I'm at a disadvantage

because of that.

Lauren continued with this insight:

> And also, I have friends that dual enrolled at colleges that are close to them and
> you technically can do that at my high school, but no one really talked about it
> ever or like presented it as an idea. Like I only knew one person that did it for my
> high school. And that's something that I really would have liked to have done to
> get tons of credit… The closest college would have been like 30 minutes too. [I]
> don't think my dad would have wanted me to drive like 30 minutes in morning
> traffic anyway.

Like other participants in this study, Lauren did not see dual enrollment as an option to
enrich her college transcript.

Lauren went from being at the top to the middle of her class from high school to
college. She was used to comparing herself to her peers and being among the best. Her
friends form the Atlanta metropolitan area were Sophomores and Juniors by credit hour
when they arrived on campus. Lauren was still a first-semester freshman, even with some
AP credits:

> I have a friend who is a sophomore as well. Exactly the same age as me and she's
> starting to take grad classes this semester because she has so much dual
> enrollment credit that she's going to get her master's by the time that I graduate
> with my bachelor's. Yeah, I graduated like number three in my class. And so, like
> graduating from [my high school] I feel like I'm pretty smart. And then I come
> here and everyone like knows so much more than me.

Lauren's story is not unique, as several other participants in this research study noted that
the curriculum of their rural high school was years behind that of their urban and

suburban peers. Despite being at the top of their class and taking the most rigorous classes available to them, these students fall behind their peers when they arrive in college.

Lauren struggled in her chemistry class while her classmates were excelling. She noted that her classmates were reviewing material they learned in high school. Her high school chemistry class did not prepare her for college curriculum. Lauren actually dropped a class in order to focus more time on chemistry:

> But last year I did struggle, and I made a C in chemistry which was a really big deal for me… I was always doing work for that… And then I dropped one class because I was like, I can just take this another time. And if I have less hours, I'll have more time to study for chemistry.

Lauren did end up completing chemistry and made up the course she dropped to focus on it. The experience, however, was humbling for her. But still, she persisted, "It discouraged me a little bit. I didn't change to a non-science major, like I guess so many people do. I'm proud of myself for not dropping."

Like all the students in this study, Lauren is lucky. Lauren managed to leverage her cultural capital and social capital into a degree program that will lead her to a career she is passionate about:

> I'm in Warnell, so natural resource management and policy… I'm happy with it… I really like the outdoors and doing stuff outside hiking and going to parks. I live right next to the Cherokee National Park… and I can walk to it from my house pretty much. I was there every week of my life, basically. And so that made me care about the park system and the public lands.

In addition to living near a national park, Lauren also has a roommate whose father has been employed by the National Park Service for years. For a project, Lauren interviewed her roommate's father and learned about national parks in Alaska and the Grand Canyon and what it is like to have a career in the Park Service.

Despite her rocky start, Lauren is adjusting well to life at the University of Georgia. She has a small contingent of what she says are the best friends she has ever had. Lauren does report that she is different than her friends because she is from a different region of Georgia than they are, but that it does not get in the way of their friendship.

Lauren is continuing to use her social capital to move forward with her academic career by tapping into the social networks of her friends from suburban Atlanta. Lauren met her friends in her residence hall her first year, as all first-year students are required to live on campus. This requirement serves as a unique opportunity for rural students to interact with their urban and suburban counterparts on a regular basis.

Summary

Lauren is from a rural area in the North Georgia mountains. She is a first-generation college student and is the second in her immediate family to go to college. Lauren reported that her guidance counselor gave her very little help in her college-decision process and the HOPE scholarship played a major role in her decision to apply to the University of Georgia. At first, Lauren struggled in her courses and felt behind her peers as a result of the course offerings at her high school. Lauren is adjusting well in spite of being behind her peers academically for the first time in her life. She plans on pursuing a career with the National Park Service.

Faith Buford

Faith is a white female from the North Georgia mountains. Faith describes herself as middle class, but states that her family is better off than most other people in their community. She knew growing up that other children in her school had less than she did, as it was common knowledge who was on free or reduced lunch.

Table 5.4

Faith Buford Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Faith Buford
Region of Georgia	North Central
Race	White
Major	International Affairs, Journalism, Spanish
Parents Income	$70,001 - $95,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	55%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Distant

Faith did not truly appreciate her family's socioeconomic status until she went on a trip with the youth group at her church:

> I remember my youth group went on a shopping trip… I would say that a lot of people hadn't even gone to the mall before, and it's like this big expedition… and I remember my parents sent me with 50 dollars to go buy stuff. And no one else brought money to go to the mall, and I was just very confused.

Faith's mother is a school guidance counselor and her father owns a car dealership. She describes her high school experience as typical for her area but says that she was one of few students who received a new car from her parents when she turned 16.

Faith had a 4.0 GPA in high school, came to college as a second-generation college student, and understands her privilege as a both a white person and as someone from an upper-middle class family. Yet, Faith had difficulty adjusting to the university's curriculum, which led to confusion about what she wanted to do with her life.

Early in her interview when asked what her career aspirations were, Faith said that she wanted to represent non-profit organizations that work on human rights issues. When pressed on her current post-graduate plans, though, she was less confident and noncommittal about her ability to achieve her dreams:

> My plan right now is to be a journalist for a couple of years and see if that's what I enjoy and if not then I would like to go to law school. I would really like to go to law school, ideally.

Truthfully, Faith does not want to be a journalist, which she admitted later in her interview, "So I would really like to work for like Southern Poverty Law Center, [that] would be like my dream job." Faith reported that a year before this interview took place, she feared the idea of applying to law school, rejection from law school, and the amount of debt she would gain from attending law school.

Faith is terrified of failure, because, like many students rural, urban, and suburban alike, she experienced it for the first time in college:

> My first couple of weeks at UGA, when I realized that I may have read about a lot of things, and I may care about a lot of international issues, there are people

who… have lived it or they have had the opportunity to be abroad and stuff like [that]… I contemplated changing my major from international affairs because although that's something I enjoy learning about, I was like, is this even going to be practical for me?

Faith was in the top of her class, had a parent in the school system, and was doing everything she needed to do to go to college, but when she arrived, she suddenly realized she was behind.

Her peers from suburban areas of Atlanta already had practical experience learning foreign languages and taking trips abroad. Faith was not alone:

I came to UGA knowing three other people who had graduated with me in my graduating class. We were all the top 10… I remember having a conversation with someone that I graduated with like very early on and she said, "I'm just very overwhelmed."

Faith and her classmates were not at the same level as their suburban and urban peers.

Like other rural students in this study, Faith described a significant increase in difficulty that she had never experienced before coming to college:

[I was] very unprepared coming to college… I was a big studier in high school, a big school person. And I don't say that to say, "Oh, I'm super smart." It's not that I'm smart, I just study a lot. I'm not like one of those naturally intelligent people, I just care… But the gap between like where I was, or at least the way I perceived it, it seemed pretty substantial…

It was particularly difficult for Faith to enter school and be behind her peers in a topic she cared so much about: international affairs. She considered herself to know more about international affairs than others in her high school class.

When she came to UGA, however, she felt like she knew nothing at all:

[My high school was a] small school. International affairs was not a topic, like not a class. I took world history which was like the closest to international affairs… I remember we were having a discussion about Israel and Palestine one day in one of my classes [at UGA]. I had never studied that in a classroom setting. I had never learned about Israel and Palestine. Like, I had read about articles about it. I just remember everyone else was having a very informed discussion. [They] just knew about it…They had been well read well studied, and that's when I realized that I've got some reading to do.

Being so far behind her peers made an impact on Faith when she arrived in Athens. So, she started doing everything she could to catch up by studying abroad in South Africa and expanding her reading time each night.

Faith began to realize, though, that her geographic disposition as a rural person was impacting her future:

I would still say that there is no way that I can compensate for my upbringing in this particular field, because I've done everything I can in college to be competitive, but there are some things that you can never make up for… I was talking to one girl who volunteered because she lived in Atlanta, and so she volunteered at the ACLU, like her senior year. I was like, "Wow, that would have been cool. I sure would have loved to have done that." That's something that I'm

trying to achieve my junior year of college, and I just feel like that's such a big

gap.

Another step Faith took to become more competitive in the field of International

Relations was to attempt to join student organizations that would be relevant to her field.

She went to over 50 meetings in her first semester of a variety of student organizations

but could not find a particular fit.

In one instance, Faith talked about trying to join Model UN. It is clear that Faith

feels that her attempt to join Model UN was one of the greatest disappointments of her

life:

> I was like super involved in high school. I was in like all the clubs, and so I was
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> determined to be the same way in college. And I remember I went to a freshman
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> orientation at one particular organization and everyone there already knew each
>
> other because they were all from Gwinnett County, Fulton County, and they had
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> all just met each other through that organization like at their respective schools,
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> and they also knew people who were involved in the [college] organization
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> currently. And so, they were having a Q&A part of the forum, and there was one
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> girl who was talking to the people leading the Q&A, and she was referring to
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> them by their first names, because like she already knew all of them. And I was
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> like, uhh there's no way I'm going to get into this club. And so, I was
>
> automatically discouraged, because [of] networking.

Faith did not have the social capital needed to join this organization. The undergraduate

students already had a vast social network they gained from high school.

Moreover, Faith did not have the cultural capital necessary to make up for her deficiency in networking. In the following example, Faith committed a critical *faux pas*, which marked her as an outsider:

When you're speaking you're supposed to refer to the person you're speaking to as general secretariat. My internet querying before I went into this meeting did not tell me that in detail… I went first, and I didn't address like whoever it was, the general secretariat. It's like a formality when you're talking, and other than that like, I did ok, it was fine. But then everyone else after me did the formality, and I was just like, it's like very apparent that I've never done this before. And I didn't get it. I saw the girl who did try-outs a couple of months later at a bar and I had a class with her after that, so we had gotten to know each other.

Faith continues:

We were talking, and she was like "I really like really wanted to let you in, I just knew a couple of people." She like told me that she had known people who she had graduated with and was like "You should try out again next year!" And I was just like, I just don't want to do that. But so that was kind of like confirmed [it]. She was like, "You did fine, it was just it was just like a year where we knew a lot of people."

This defeat set Faith back significantly. She attended meetings for Student Government Association, Freshman Forum, Student Judiciary, Mock Trial, and Moot Court.

Faith explained that she applied for none of these organizations, because she did not want to experience rejection again as she did with Model UN. Faith said that she did not see how she could join these organizations if there were other people competing with

her for spots that went to high school with people already in the organization, "No, I didn't go back… I just I gave up completely… I gave up."

Faith did eventually find an organization that would accept her: *The Red & Black*. *The Red & Black* is a student newspaper at the University of Georgia. Faith mustered the courage to apply to *The Red & Black,* because the editors promised a blind review process, preventing Faith from being rejected for lack of social capital. She began working for the newspaper her sophomore year, which led to many more successes. In addition to *The Red & Black*, Faith applied to be an ambassador for the School of Public and International Affairs. She explains in this excerpt how she learned from her failure applying for Model UN:

> I knew someone who was a SPIA ambassador from one of my classes. I had like been in group projects with her. I still had her phone number. I reached out to her and told her I was interviewing. She ended up being on the panel of professors and people who were interviewing me. I did the thing I saw people do my Freshman year, and I was like "Hi Betty," and everyone know that I knew Betty and I honestly think that's one of the only reasons I got it, is because I knew somebody.

Faith worked her way up from being an occasional writer for *The Red & Black* to being the News Editor. Her success working for the newspaper led her to add journalism as a major to both delay the law school timeline, and to acquire what she described as a "practical" major that would immediately lead to a job.

Despite having more interest in becoming a lawyer, she felt supported by her journalism advisor. In fact, she noted that one advisor allowed Faith as much time as she wanted for advisement, while her International Affairs' advisor did not.

If nothing else, journalism gave Faith what she describes as high-quality academic advising, a job with career-relevant experience on campus, and a much-needed dose of self-confidence. Faith did not get any of those things from either her International Affairs major or her pre-law advisor, who encouraged her not to seek out a career in law. Faith did not share with me the exact reason why the pre-law advisor suggested her career change, but quoted her as saying, "Don't go to law school. All lawyers get divorced and are alcoholics… It's very expensive, and there are too many lawyers in the world. This is not something you want to do."

At the time of her interview, Faith was deciding what to do with her summer, and what to do when she graduates from college. The following summer, she was deciding between working at *The Red & Black* and living in Athens in her apartment that she is leasing, or sub-leasing her apartment and interning for a non-profit organization in Atlanta. Faith feels limited by geography, because her peers can live at home and intern in Atlanta without having to pay additional rent or to pay for food.

For students in rural areas, interning for no pay is an expensive enterprise. Moreover, Faith is deciding what to do when she graduates from college, because she does not want to go directly to law school. If she interns at a non-profit she will consider trying to work for one for a couple of years after she graduates. If she stays at *The Red & Black*, then she will consider a journalism job for a couple of years before law school.

In October 2017, the researcher followed up with Faith about her big decision in the previous semester and her current career goals. Her reply follows:

At the end of my summer job search, I ended up at the Carter Center working on The Forum on Women. This gave me a lot of insight into the nonprofit sector and was a good introduction to the work of international law. I'm still not sure that law is exactly what I want to do, but it was a good foot in the door. Currently, I'm still undecided when it comes to my ultimate career goal. However, I'm trying a lot of different avenues. Right now, I'm studying for the LSAT and applying to journalism jobs as well. Upon graduation, I plan to take a journalism job (if they'll hire me), try it out for a few years, and if I don't like it, apply to law schools.

Summary

Faith is an upper-middle class student from North Georgia. Despite being a very successful student in high school, she struggled significantly in her first year at the University of Georgia. Faith reported that she felt behind her peers academically and socially. She had a hard time meeting people and joining organizations. She was particularly affected by not being selected for Model UN in her first year. She found success with the student newspaper and is currently struggling between a career in journalism or law.

Magnolia Carter

Magnolia is an African American female Southwest Georgia in the heart of the Deep South's Black Belt. "Shelton is segregated. There is a railroad system; the railroad track cuts straight through town. One side is black people, one side is white people. It's cut and dry, just like that." The railroad serves as a literal dividing line in which black

and white residents live on their respective side of town. In her county, there are two public high schools: a traditional high school and a charter school that most of the white students in the area attend.

Table 5.5

Magnolia Carter Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Magnolia Carter
Region of Georgia	Southwest
Race	African American
Major	Psychology
Parents Income	$25,001 - $40,000
First Generation?	Yes
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	89%
High School Locale Code	Town: Distant

Because of school consolidation, Magnolia's school is labeled as a "Town: Distant" school. The Town: Distant classification is defined as "Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a, para. 10). Agriculture, and the legacy of slavery, are evident in Magnolia's town:

> Well, it's a small town. I'm not even sure if it's 1,000 now, the way things have been going. Rural community, farming community. Everything surrounding it is farms. It doesn't really have a set beginning or end… Very racially divided. The school that I went to is not in the town itself; it's mainly the county. You have my

hometown, another slightly larger, much larger, really, town, and then the school is pretty much in the middle of nowhere as well.

The community Magnolia lives in no longer has its own school. The smaller schools consolidated, creating the need to bus in students from all over the county to one high school:

My bus ride my senior year… was two hours, no, one to two hours depending on if the bus broke down or not. I would have to get up at 5:30 every morning senior year just to make it to school. By the time we got out of school I didn't get home till five o'clock.

Neither Magnolia nor her family considered sending her to the private school or the charter school. "I mean, it was possible, but we never really thought about it. It was never really in the cards for me. I never talked about it."

Magnolia felt that she would not be welcome in the charter school or the private school because she was black. Magnolia would rather spend four hours a day on a bus than enroll in the public charter school, which was closer and predominantly white.

Magnolia was inspired by her seventh-grade teacher to leave her small farming community through higher education:

He had a habit, he would, instead of teaching he would lecture us the entire class period. Okay, the mentality of where I'm from is that you're not going to amount to anything because you're black, you're poor, so you're not going to do anything. He would always lecture us, "You have options. There's more to life than just this." I decided then to shoot for the best.

Her school was short on advice on how to get into college and leave her town, but she used the information that was available to her, "I knew I wasn't going to make it getting a scholarship in athletics early on, so I figured academics was my best chance."

In Magnolia's school, one person in the 1980s played football for the Georgia Bulldogs. Very few students since then made it to Athens, Georgia to attend school; it was not something many students aspired to. "Yeah, a couple people that actually came to Georgia. The only two to ever really make themselves known… from where I'm from, made it here [on an] athletic scholarship." It's impossible to know precisely how many students from Magnolia's school came to the University of Georgia since the 1980s, but Magnolia does not know of any and does not recognize anyone on campus from her hometown.

Like many students in Georgia, Magnolia viewed the HOPE scholarship as the only path to higher education. The knowledge that free college was waiting for her after she graduated motivated her to make the very best grades she could. Magnolia ended up being the valedictorian of her class:

> Since I knew I was going to get HOPE or Zell by the time I got to high school, I
> immediately decided if my college is going to be paid for, why not pick the best
> one? I looked at the grades, I looked at the GPA, the requirements, so it came
> down between Georgia and Tech. I figure Tech is mainly focused more on
> engineering, sciences, so I decided to pick Georgia because I'm a psychology
> major.

But because of the administration of her high school, Magnolia almost did not get her application in on time, "I applied. I almost didn't get in because of paperwork. My school,

like I said, the administration wasn't the best, so it took them forever to get my transcripts sent out."

Magnolia says that she is having a fine time adjusting to the social and cultural aspects of college. She is enjoying being confronted with diversity on a daily basis, as the first 18 years of her life were spent mostly around people of the same race as her:

Racial diversity was the main thing that kind of hit me because I come from an area that's not really that diverse. Seeing all different, like the week where they had all the organizations tabling over by Tate, seeing all the different racial organizations, all the different clubs and stuff and different interests people had, that kind of threw me a lot.

As a child, she was used to entertaining herself, and rarely socialized. In college, she is having a similar experience, but states that she is ok with that. When asked if she had any friends in college, she replied "I guess. They're more like acquaintances because I'm not on any type of social media. I don't really connect with people very well."

Like many students in this study, Magnolia was shocked when she realized how far ahead her peers were. When asked about a time when she felt out of place, Magnolia replied:

Just like the first week. Mainly that first few week or month or so because you have kids coming from high schools with thousands of students taking AP classes their entire high school career. I kind of felt out of place like, am I really smart enough to be here?

Magnolia is stuck evaluating her own self-worth as a result. When she talked about her personal preparation for college, she talks about conducting hours of research on colleges, programs, and career opportunities for psychology majors.

And yet, Magnolia also uses negative words to describe herself in the present. When asked about her dedication to academics in school she said:

Procrastination still is my thing. [My high school success] wasn't an effort. Like I said, standards, academics, funding made my school one of the lowest in the state. Still is. It wasn't that hard to be the best, at least from my perspective.

When asked if she had a minor she replied, "Not yet. I kind of want one, but I'm also lazy and don't want the extra work load on myself. I might need a minor considering how my credits are going."

Magnolia reports being lazy and perhaps not having the intelligence necessary to attend the University of Georgia. The data generated from this study suggest otherwise. In her interview, Magnolia stated that she received no help researching or applying to colleges and understands the graduate-level requirements of her liberal arts major. Magnolia retained a 4.0 grade point average in high school and scored a 30 on the ACT. According to ACT (n.d.), a 30 on the ACT in 2013, 2014, and 2015 ranked in the 95th percentile; only 5% of students who took the ACT scored better than Magnolia.

Of all the students in this study, Magnolia is in the most danger of not completing her degree at the University of Georgia. Despite having a full scholarship through the HOPE scholarship program, Magnolia is having trouble making ends meet from semester to semester. Most recently, she was denied a loan from financial aid, because her step-

father's newly added income caused her estimated family contribution to increase, reducing her aid.

Magnolia's mother and step-father were married two years ago, and his income is now part of her FAFSA application.

> I started in February [with] financial aid… it took me until… a week or two before we got here in August to have it finalized. It looks like it's going to be that way again for next year… I guess they didn't believe it. I don't know. I had to send in tax transcripts, actual copies of the entire tax return, both my parents. All these different forms and stuff… The whole time I was terrified because the final bill was going to be about $3,600 and I knew my family didn't have that. We couldn't get the loans because they wouldn't approve them… I was terrified that entire week that I wouldn't be able to get in.

As a first-generation black female rural student from a low economic background, Magnolia has a tough road ahead. Indeed, she would not be at one of the best public higher education institutions if it were not for the HOPE scholarship program, but it may not be enough to keep her in school beyond or sophomore year.

Moreover, Magnolia knows that many careers in psychology require graduate school, and she does not know where to begin to plan for that, "Well, I don't know how I would go about that process yet. I [will] probably talk to my advisor about that when I start getting closer to it."

Summary

Magnolia is an African American student from the southwest corner of Georgia. She is the first in her family to come to college and is one few in her hometown to attend

college after high school. She is currently in danger of dropping out because the HOPE scholarship is not enough to cover her full cost of college.

Abagail Chase

Abagail is a white female from West Georgia near the Alabama state line. She comes from a working-class family in which both of her parents have secure jobs; her father works at a local food product packaging facility and her mother is the Child Health Coordinator for her county's health department. Moreover, Abigail attended the most prosperous high school in the sample of this study; only 44% of students in her school received free or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a).

Table 5.6

Abagail Chase Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Abagail Chase
Region of Georgia	West
Race	White
Major	Journalism and Geography
Parents Income	$40,001 - $55,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	44%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Distant

Though her family is middle income, Abagail is fortunate to have high social capital and to be able to adapt to the culture of the university:

I did know the one girl, like I said that came a few years before me… And so, my

sophomore year, after I decided that I wanted to come here, I ended up visiting

her, which was cool…We walked around campus, and I hung out with her friends.

Abagail knew someone from her high school who was able to gain admission to the

University of Georgia. They were close enough that Abagail felt comfortable staying

with her friend for the weekend to get a taste of what university life would be like in only

her second year of high school.

Abagail's mom encouraged her to make trips like this to see what college would

be like, and to expose her to Greek Life:

She got married at 20… she was engaged at 18 and was going to a community

college. She always had wanted to be in a sorority, and regretted that she… got

married so young, regretted that she didn't join a sorority. So, I guess, she had to

have planted that idea really young, because I've always known that I wanted to

[join a sorority].

In addition to social capital, Abagail also has high cultural capital, which she is able to

adapt.

When she was growing up, Abagail was heavily involved in her church's youth

group, "I did go to church every Sunday, mostly because my parents made me, but I did.

I tweeted bible verses." Though she presented herself to her community as a Christian,

Abagail had doubts about her faith throughout high school. When asked if tweeting bible

verses was an authentic version of herself she replied:

See, no. Okay. But, I knew that I was doing it. Does that make sense? It's like I've

always valued authenticity, but I wanted that to be who I authentically was. And I

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kind of thought, you know how you can think that you're happy if you just keep

telling yourself sometimes that you're happy, or you're having a good day… [I

went to] a lot of Methodist youth camps… and you know they always said, "Just

pray and be saved." I kept trying that and it just wasn't working. I was like, "Hell,

this doesn't work," but I wanted it to work.

Even though Abagail did not feel like a religious person, she had a desire to participate in

the culture of her community; she wanted to belong, and she wanted to participate.

When she moved to college, Abagail transitioned into the culture of Greek

system. She began behaving differently because of those around her. She saw her peers

from suburban and urban Atlanta who already had connections in Greek houses, and she

knew that she was going to have to change herself to stay competitive in the rush process:

But there were girls [during rush] that knew other girls in every single house, and

I didn't. I was just winging everything. Also, the things that I wore. I wouldn't

wear them again, it was definitely very "church-y," because fashion back home is

like very southern… Here, chokers are like a daily staple for me. You know? Like

it's different. I wear different clothes. Clothes that I like more. I choose to wear

these clothes.

Because Greek Life was emphasized by Abagail's mother, she knew that she had to

change herself to fit in, "I've known that for a while, that I wanted to be in a sorority,

because my mom kind of planted that idea. It was one of those things that she never got

the chance to do."

Abagail thinks in terms of reputation, both her personal reputation and the

reputation of the organizations of which she participates:

I was really, really, really stressed in high school, because I was very reputation

obsessed, because I was popular in high school, and I had a very "goody two-

shoes" reputation, even though I really didn't … That's not who I am at all,

anymore. I was really obsessed with maintaining that.

She maintained her reputation throughout high school, but changed her values hastily

after joining her sorority, "I just wanted to get friends here… I go out a lot. It pushed me

out of my comfort zone in terms of the whole no drinking thing in high school. I mean,

that changed real quickly."

Abagail's hometown valued abstinence from alcohol consumption, which Abagail

followed. Once she moved to the University of Georgia; however, her values changed

with the values of her environment. Abagail attributes her drinking directly to her

participation in her sorority, "People that act like Greek Life isn't significantly drinking

are lying, in my opinion. I mean you can chose not to drink, but you can't deny that Greek

Life pushes drinking."

The reputation of Abagail's sorority is also important to her, "As far as reputation.

Selectivity, I mean, sororities at UGA, a lot of girls get cut. We're all pretty selective, I

guess." Fraternities and sororities know where they rank in terms of reputation, too:

There's also a website called, Greek Rank, where you can put fraternities and

sororities in order on different campuses. I mean, there's that, that reinforces it. In

terms of how I know someone's in a top tier sorority, it's just top tier sororities and

top tier fraternities hang out. We hang out with people somewhere in the

middle… That kind of bothered me freshman year.

She did not let her sorority's rank affect her, which led to more self-awareness and less insecurity:

> Well, it's shitty, but I think people are people. I think that there's a tier system everywhere in life and that some of them suck more than others. I don't think that this is the worst one, because for me at least, it doesn't matter where my sorority falls, because I love it, and I love the girls that I've met, and I'm super good friends with a lot of the guys that I've met, too.

Abagail describes herself as ambitious but is forced to describe her ambition within the confines of her status as a woman, "I've known since I was really young that I don't plan to take my future husband's last name. That's just a personal thing for me. I think my name is my identity." She says that her small-town values the tradition of the changing of the last name for women upon marriage. In fact, in two separate instances in the interview, she brought up conversations with adults in the community and peers in school in which not changing her last name would be considered taboo.

She was challenged in high school, as others underestimated her because she is female, "I gravitate toward leadership roles, which I did in my high school, mostly because no one else was going to do it." Here, Abagail is underselling herself as a leader. She was valedictorian of her class, a leader in student government, and is considering running for president of her sorority and student government at the University of Georgia in the next year. She is a leader for far more reasons that the lack of others' participation. Her goals, however, are both professional and personal, "The 15-year plan is go to law school and I meet a guy that I just really like, and we pass the bar in the same state, and I become a criminal defense lawyer, and then get married."

A traditional marriage is a space where the culture of her hometown and the sorority overlap. Sororities often engage in date parties with the idea that you will meet someone before you graduate. In fact, some sororities hold special candlelight meetings to celebrate the engagement of a sister, and then have a flower ceremony at the wedding reception for all sorority sisters present. It, therefore, makes sense that Abagail has made this an integral part of her plan:

> Before I turn 40. It seems like perfectly reasonable time for me to do that. Yeah. No. My career totally comes first, for me, at least. I would just like to meet him in law school, because that seems super ideal to me, because my parents lived together before they got married and I don't think that they have the perfect marriage, but I think that that's important.

Summary

Abagail is an ambitious sorority girl from West Georgia. She comes from a middle-class family and has ambitions to attend law school and become a criminal defense lawyer. Her ability to adapt to the culture of the university is at least partially responsible for her smooth transition to college.

<div align="center">

Mary Clark

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Mary is a white female from Central Georgia. She is the only participant of this study that completed her bachelor's degree at the University of Georgia; she was in the process of finishing her master's degree at the time of her interview. Mary is the oldest participant of this study at 23 years-old. Both of Mary's parents hold graduate degrees in education, teach in the school she attended, and make over $95,000 per year. As an undergraduate, Mary studied Romance Languages and immediately enrolled in a master's

program in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) and World Language Education.

Mary's decision to study romance languages in college stems from her early experience in school:

I was the only kid in my gifted program in my class in my elementary school, so I got a lot of one-on-one time with my gifted teacher, and one of the things that she taught me was some basic Spanish.

After studying Spanish in elementary and high school, Mary decided to major in it in college, and picked up French, primarily because her father speaks French, "That kind of guided me on my choice. I mean, I was pretty sure that was what I wanted to do. I was obviously open to changes, because most people change their major, but it just stuck."

Table 5.7

Mary Clark Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Mary Clark
Region of Georgia	Central
Race	White
Major	MEd TESOL and World Languages
Parents Income	>$95,001
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	3.8
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	54%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

Mary wants to be a teacher, despite the warnings from her parents, "At first, I was really against teaching, because both of my parents are teachers, and they were like, 'Don't do it!' They love their jobs, but being a teacher is hard." Teaching is a family tradition in Mary's home. In her first couple of years, she began tutoring students who were struggling with English, and she felt that she had found her calling:

> Eventually, I got involved with a tutoring program that caters to Hispanic children in Athens, and I was like, even though all this time I said I would never teach, that's probably where I'm going to end up. Then I enrolled in the master's program.

Of all the students in this study, Mary had the most advantages when it came to attending college.

In addition to having parents who are teachers and are knowledgeable about the college-going process, Mary knew several people who attended the University of Georgia, which influenced her decision to attend, "Well, so, a lot of people in my family have gone here. Not my immediate family but extended. My family has always kind of been UGA fans." Moreover, Mary said that her parents were very directly involved in her application process.

"Crazy, in a word," is how Mary describes her first-year experience. Despite handling the academic adjustment well in the first year, Mary struggled to find people she knew. She noticed other people she lived around were already connected to others when they arrived on campus, "I was two and half hours away from home… I knew some people who went here already, but I didn't know a ton of people, so I had to make a whole bunch of new friends."

Being around so many people all the time was also a big adjustment for Mary:

My parents' house is just in the middle of a bunch of farmland. There's no one within a mile from our house. Learning to deal with loud people around pretty much all the time in a dorm room, and even now, in an apartment, was a change, something to adjust to, for sure.

Compared to other participants in this study, however, Mary's struggles in college appear typical for the average college student. As a rural student, Mary experienced the change in geography, the proximity to people, and the feeling of not being connected to an established network of people as others did in the sample of this study.

Much of the conversation with Mary revolved about her changing values in college as it relates to religion:

My perspectives broadened a lot [in college], and so, now I'm… not externally but internally kind of like rejecting organized religion, because it just has so many flaws, especially, like, Southern Baptist Christianity. It uses the Bible to condemn a lot of people, and that's just not something that I want to be a part of…Yeah, so, I guess, I don't really know what I would call myself at the moment, because I just have been really turned off of organized religion.

People in Mary's community were surprised that she was going to the University of Georgia immediately after high school rather than attending the local community college and transferring.

Moreover, community members were worried that Mary would lose her faith, "There was a lot of … people concerned with maybe religious aspects of coming to college … there's this kind of stigma that all professors are atheists and they're going to

challenge your religious beliefs and change you." Mary's parents were not concerned about Mary losing her religion in college.

Mary struggled with the acceptance of the existence of gender roles when she came to college as a direct result of her religious upbringing and the culture of her town, "in our hometown, being gay or lesbian was very, very taboo, and, unacceptable." Interacting with people who were not white southerners for the first time changed her life:

> When I got in college and saw how all these different people with different races, ethnicities, languages, sexual orientations, all these different identities, I guess, just worked together and lived together cohesively, I was like, this is pretty amazing to me. As someone who comes from a place where anything that is not the norm, which is white, heterosexual, is just kind of rejected and considered an outlier.

Currently, Mary does not know where her career will take her.

As of the interview in late 2016, Mary had accepted a job offer to teach English to students in Guatemala. Her contract extends to the end of 2017, at which point she will return or stay. Simply put, Mary's career goal is:

> to just have the most positive impact that I can, even if it's just on a limited amount of people. That's pretty much it. I mean, I don't have any really, I guess, professional goals. I don't have a certain job that is like my dream job that I definitely want to have at some point in my life. I kind of foresee myself doing a lot of different things.

Summary

Mary is a graduate student at the University of Georgia, studying TESOL and World Language Education. Much of Mary's success can be attributed to her dedication to hard work, and her parents' willingness to be directly involved in her college application process. In college, Mary experienced some trouble in her adjustment, but had a very typical college experience. In 2017, Mary taught TESOL in Guatemala, and is unsure where her future will take her.

Rachel Daughtery

Rachel is white female from South Georgia. She is the last of three children to attend college in her family. Her half-brother, who she never lived with in the same home, received his bachelor's degree and juris doctorate from the University of Georgia in the 1990s. Rachel's sister attended Mercer University in Macon, Georgia and still resides in Macon where she works as a marketing coordinator.

Rachel's mother is a paraprofessional at a local elementary school, and her father is a counselor at a state prison. Rachel's family is middle class, but more well off than many in her area, "I don't think that my friends know that I am actually a little bit economically challenged. My family is very well situated for where we are. I was one of the probably wealthier students in high school." Rachel is majoring in Sociology and is planning on attending medical school.

Rachel considered several universities, "I only applied to UGA, Mercer, Auburn, and University of Virginia. And I got in everywhere. I knew I didn't want to go to Tech because it's math-y and that just wasn't me." Mercer was Rachel's sister's alma mater,

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and Rachel traveled to visit her sister in college, which gave her experience on a college campus.

Table 5.8

Rachel Daughtery Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Rachel Daughtery
Region of Georgia	Southwest
Race	White
Major	Sociology and Biology
Parents Income	$55,000 - $70,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	98%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Distant

Rachel's decision to come to the University of Georgia ultimately came down to the finances:

> Like, I had practically a full ride at Mercer and then got a really good scholarship offer here, the Bernard Ramsey Honors Scholarship. And once I had that, it was just really hard to turn down. Like I knew I wanted to stay in state. I had to be semi-close to home. My dad really wanted me to go to FSU, because it's closer, maybe just like an hour from our house. We're way down south… But, you know, I had the money here and it's a wonderful school.

College was never a question in Rachel's home. Her mother emphasized college as the next step in education past high school at an early age, "My mom was in education. She

[said] we were all going to college, and that's what it was going to be. And so, it was really a question of where."

Rachel recognized early that her experience in high school was different than the experience of her peers from suburban Atlanta:

[My accent] was very apparent, and I honestly think being in that honors environment made it more apparent, since I was on this like science-y track. And a lot of those kids are from like Atlanta suburbs, and stuff like that… My high school had the saddest science department ever. I loved my school, got a great education there, but we just don't have the resources to fund a good science program. So, I was so behind all the time. And everyone had taken AP Biology and AP Chemistry. We had Physical Science and that was it.

Rachel managed to be admitted to the honors program, but quickly realized that being a first-year student at the University of Georgia did not necessarily mean having the credit hour production of a freshman, as she noted many of her peers had over 30 hours, making them sophomores in their first year.

Despite being the valedictorian of her high school class, she was behind her peers in college academically:

I was in a study group for my first honors general chemistry class. And everything that I covered in my high school chemistry class was in the first chapter of my college chemistry book. And I was sitting around in a study group with a couple of people, and we were working out like zoochemistry problems, and I was like, "Does anyone know the conversion for water from grams to liters?" And someone turns to me and goes, "It's one-to-one, it's the foundation of the whole metric

system." And I was like, "Well shit!" It's probably like the dumbest I've ever felt in college.

Rachel laughed when she told this story, but it was apparent that it was a painful experience for her. She was not used to not meeting the academic standard being set for her. Throughout her educational experience before attending the University of Georgia, she was the best student in her class, and always made straight As.

Being in the honors program at the University of Georgia was both an incredible opportunity and a humbling experience:

> I failed every [organic chemistry II test]. I did make an 82 on the final… I went in and talked to my professor. And he had me bring in all the work I had been doing for the class. I brought in like 4 notebooks. And he was like, "Ok your grades are definitely not reflecting what you're doing." It was like PTSD. It haunts me. But that's the first time that I wasn't able to do something. It's honestly still really hard for me to think about.

In this scenario, Rachel survived the jump from high school to college. If she had failed her organic chemistry class, however, she may not still be on track to attend medical school.

Rachel says that she was successful at making the jump to college for two reasons. First, her brother who went to the University of Georgia in the 1990s was also the valedictorian of his class, and nearly lost his scholarship in his first year because he made the mistake of taking too many classes. As a result, she only took 12 hours her first semester. Second, Rachel was able to learn from her peers who were more academically advanced than she was in study group sessions. As part of the honors program, they lived

together in the honors dorms and had classes together, which led to the formation of natural study groups, according to Rachel.

Rachel felt that she was different because she was from rural South Georgia culturally as well as academically, "I think that [feeling different] would have been an issue had I decided to rush, honestly." Rachel did not feel that she had a good chance of getting into a sorority if she had decided to rush. Beyond not feeling welcome, Rachel did not feel that she was connected to the same social networks that others came to college with:

> I know a lot of people, who are like, "Oh my dad used to work with him." And my dad, is a prison counselor in Southwest Georgia and doesn't know anyone. So, most of the friends I have… [get more opportunities] through family connections [rather] than through high school stuff.

Rachel's motivation to be a doctor increased dramatically when she enrolled in a Sociology of Healthcare class in her first year. The course focused on the different experiences individuals have with the healthcare industry depending on socioeconomic class or geography.

As a child, Rachel remembers driving with the elderly family members from their rural homes to doctors' appointments, "We drive like one hour, two hours, three hours, [or] four hours for the doctor depending on what it is." She realized that her family members were exhausted from traveling to just one doctor's appointment, "I don't want to work in one of the big cities and have people drive four or five hours to see me."

After finishing the course, Rachel describes that everything "clicked" into place; she saw what she wanted her career to look like, and she realized the kind of work she wanted to do:

We talked a lot about how like America is great at emergency medicine. We can create this amazing procedure to save you, because you're about to collapse… But we're not great at the preventative care to prevent you from getting there. And that's what's more important. That's what will save us more money in the long run.

Rachel wants to work one-on-one with patients from her rural community with managing their long-term illnesses:

So, with primary care, you're really working with the patients. Helping them manage their long-term illnesses. It's more of a partnership… I can tell a patient to do this, but if they're not going to do this, it's not going to work at all. So, let's work with something that will actually fit into their life. That's just really the way I'm going to practice medicine.

Currently, Rachel is applying to gap-year programs that will boost her resume for medical school. At the end of her sophomore year of college, she did not think she would be competitive enough for the medical school application process, and so she delayed preparation for the MCAT exam that every medical student must take. As it turns out, Rachel was being too hard on herself, and believes that if she had gone through the medical school application process her senior year of college, she would have been accepted:

I kind of decided that I wanted to do a gap-year my second year here. And I think that's a lot from feeling like I wasn't measuring up to my classmates. That's before

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I kind of had the revelation that we're not doing the same thing. And so, I was just like, oh I don't have as much stuff on my resume. I haven't done as much research. And just felt like I wouldn't have gotten into medical school if I applied right now. Now I 100% feel that I would have gotten into med school if I had applied this cycle. But I just didn't feel like I was measuring up to my counterparts. But then, like, some of them are trying to get into Harvard Med School, and I don't need to get into Harvard Med School. I need to get into, like, a Georgia med school.

Though Rachel is excited to return to her community after she finishes medical school, she will miss the perks of living in a larger city:

I still absolutely love where I grew up. I mean, I love living out in the middle of nowhere. I love, like, not really having neighbors. I love being able to do whatever you want whenever you want. You never have to worry about disrupting someone else. I love being around so much family. I have definitely missed that being in college, because if anything happens at home, this is my aunt, this is my uncle, and this is my neighbor I've gone to church with since I was born. It's just a lot better support system I guess if anything were to ever happen. And so, I love that and have really enjoyed my time in Athens too. I will go back to that one day, so I guess if I had to choose between the two it would be that. But I still love Athens.

Rachel is objectively an excellent student, and it is likely that she will be a high quality empathetic rural physician one day.

Summary

Rachel is a middle class white student from Southeast Georgia. Though she was the valedictorian of her class in high school, Rachel faced significant academic hardship in college. In particular, she nearly failed her organic chemistry class. Despite her academic setback, Rachel is still planning on applying to medical school and becoming a physician in her rural community.

Margaery Eubanks

Margaery is a middle class white female from Southeast Georgia. Margaery's parents both went to college, and her father is a small-town doctor in her rural community. She is the second in her family to go to attend the University of Georgia; her older sister is currently a senior. Margaery is a freshman, and like many freshmen is not sure what she wants to do with her life. "I just don't know really at this point. I know things that I like. I know things that I think I'm good at, but it's just, I've never had one thing that's been, 'Yes this is what I'll do.'"

Like many rural communities, Margaery's hometown was built near a railroad stop and was once an economic center for the area:

> Something that kind of always bothered me was there was never anything to do. You know, I mean we had some stuff, some extracurricular after school, but really that's about it… The largest shopping or grocery stores is like Dollar General… I mean, it's a southern town, so I feel like everyone kind of thinks the same.

From an early age, Magarey felt that she was different from her peers, "I would say around middle school when I really started to form my own opinions about things." As a result, she wanted to go to college away from her small town.

The most obvious university to attend for Magarey was the University of Georgia for several reasons. First, Magarey's sister was attending the University of Georgia when she applied. Magarey says that her sister's attendance impacted her decision but was not the ultimate deciding factor. Second, because of the HOPE scholarship, Magarey realized that the University of Georgia was the best public school she could attend other than Georgia Tech, "If [I] decided to go to Georgia Tech… [and] if I decided that I wanted to be a teacher, there's really nowhere for me to go. I just feel like we have a lot of options [at UGA]." Finally, Magarey's decision was a convenient one; UGA was her number one choice; she used the early application, and received admission before the standard deadline, so there was no need to apply to any other school.

Magarey's sister tremendously impacted many of Magarey's curricular decisions in her first year at the University of Georgia:

> My sister graduated third in her class. She was a bit higher up than I was. But she… was pre-med at that point. And her advisor was apparently bad, and she took really really hard classes, and she just couldn't take it. It was just way too much, and she had to take a semester off and go back… And so, I knew, I mean, she's incredibly smart. I mean she took Calc II her first semester and made like a B in it. So, I already knew, like I couldn't do that. And then if you put too much on your plate, it's not going to go well. You get to a point where there's diminishing returns when you're taking too many classes… And so, I knew, alright so let's take it easy.

Because of her sister's experience, Margaery did not dedicate herself to a major or career path in her first year. As a result, she's studying a variety of courses based on her

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interests, "I'm really interested in anthropology. So, the goal right now is to explore

that… Just sort of taking a bunch of different classes is the only way I know how [to find

a career path]."

Table 5.9

Margaery Eubanks Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Margaery Eubanks
Region of Georgia	Southeast
Race	White
Major	Undecided
Parents Income	$55,001 - $70,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	51%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

Unlike many other participants in this study, Margaery appears to be well

adjusted. There are four possible explanations for her success:

1. She comes from a background of high socioeconomic status.

2. She heeded her sister's advice and did not go directly into courses in the hard

   sciences.

3. She had access to dual enrollment courses in high school.

4. Her parents were actively involved in the academic process by assisting Margaery

   in writing her admissions essay and suggesting job shadowing experiences using

   their social capital in their community.

Margaery knows that she does not want to be a doctor like her father, and her parents are actively using their social capital to gain her more educational opportunities, "My mom's like, 'Oh I have a friend who works at a tax office, one that's a dentist.'"

Though she is not excited about some of the current shadowing opportunities her parents set up for her, she believes that she will find something too. She also has a mature attitude about career outcomes:

If you get a degree in accounting, I'm not really sure what that entails, you know day-to-day. It's also that, I don't really know what people do in their jobs. You know, you think lawyers everyday they're in the courtroom arguing with people or something. But the brunt of it, I imagine, is just boring paperwork or something, you know?

Margaery is not sure what she wants to do with her life but believes that she wants to leave the Deep South after she finishes school. She plans to explore anthropology as a possible major but is not yet willing to commit to anything just yet.

Summary

Margaery is a freshman from Southeast Georgia. She benefitted tremendously from her parents' advanced socioeconomic status and her sister's matriculation to the University of Georgia. She currently is not decided upon a major, and her parents are encouraging her to explore a variety of careers.

<div align="center">

Ben Gates

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Ben is a white male freshman from the Northeast Georgia mountain region. He is the only participant in this study who attended a private school. His attendance at Bright Mountain School, a boarding school in his community, was a result of his family's social

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capital. Ben is a second-generation college student. His mother is a bureaucrat working for a state agency that coordinates charity efforts in his local community. His father is a former golf instructor that now works as a foreman for a construction company.

Ben describes his hometown as rural, but with features that are not so common to rural spaces in Georgia. In one section of town, there are lake homes of the wealthy, while in other sections of town people struggle to pay their bills. According to Ben, everyone in town felt the recession after 2008, but his family was lucky:

I mean 2008, it being a tourist area [and] everyone couldn't afford to vacation for a couple of years… That did hurt a lot of businesses… We didn't feel the recession too bad. We definitely felt it, but we weren't like knocked out by it or anything.

Table 5.10

Ben Gates Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Ben Gates
Region of Georgia	Northeast
Race	White
Major	Computer Science and History
Parents Income	$40,001 - $55,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	N/A
High School Locale Code	Town: Distant

After the country club that Ben's father worked for closed, he quickly found a job

working for a construction company. Ben's mother worked at the same country club but

was able to easily find work as an accountant for a state agency extension office.

Years after the recession, Ben was afforded the opportunity to attend the private

boarding school in his community that served students from international communities in

addition to the local community. Ben's ability to attend comes in part from his family's

social capital:

> I had a cousin and a friend of mine who went there… My parents had friends who
>
> taught there… My parents asked, "do you want to look at the other two schools?"
>
> So, I said yes, and I toured [the private school and the public school]. I liked
>
> Bright Mountain more… [and] Bright Mountain was able to offer enough
>
> financial aid to make it work for me to be able to go there.

In addition to Bright Mountain, there was another private school in the area that Ben

could have attended. Ultimately, he chose to attend Bright Mountain.

Ben reported that the major reason why he decided to attend Bright Mountain

rather than the local public school was the class sizes. In math classes in elementary and

middle school, he felt like the teachers were "spread thin," and that he was not getting the

amount of one-on-one help from his teachers that he wanted. At Bright Mountain, Ben

reported that in their senior year Calculus course, his class size consisted of only 17

students. Ben says that the small class sizes in math made the transition to college-level

content much easier for him.

Bright Mountain also offered college credit in school. Rather than offering AP

courses, Bright Mountain worked with a local college to bring professors into the school:

They partnered up with the local small college and they said, "We understand that all you guys want to do dual enrollment and earn credit," kind of like AP. "We decided instead of offering AP, we'll just offer the dual enrollment credit, bring in professors from the local college and they'll teach classes here on campus."

Ben and his classmates were able to take college-level classes with an incredibly small class size, since the courses were taken at Bright Mountain rather than the local college.

Bright Mountain improved Ben's college-going decision. Ben reported that his peers in the public-school system were not necessarily expected to attend college. At Bright Mountain, however, college attendance was part of the curriculum, "We had a senior project that was part of [our] final grade... As part of that, you had to apply to three schools. They really… wanted you to try and actually look at different options and see everything."

Ben chose between the University of Georgia, Kennesaw State, and Georgia Tech when he was applying to colleges his senior year. He chose not to attend Georgia Tech, because he felt that he wanted the liberal arts to be part of his education in addition to computer science. Kennesaw State's computer science program was attractive to Ben, but ultimately, he chose the University of Georgia, because he wanted to either minor or double major in History. "Mom and my grandfather were happy when I picked UGA since that was their school." Ben's family connection to the University also made it an attractive destination.

Ben reports that the transition to college was eased by his experience as a camp counselor for several years in his rural tourist city. In fact, most of his friends at the

University of Georgia he already knew from working at this camp for several summers in high school. He still goes back every summer to work for the camp.

For Ben, spending time with his friends from camp has been very good for his adjustment to a bigger city and the university community. The increased vehicular and foot traffic were big changes for Ben when he moved to Athens, but he says that he is handling them well. Moreover, Ben enjoys the many cultural opportunities Athens affords. He mentioned the increased opportunities for concerts, sporting events, and stand-up comedy. When asked how he liked it compared to his hometown he said, "I think that's good. It's something I really enjoy having, you know, places to go out and meet people. Back home the habit was you go from… school [to], practice [to], home [to], school [to], practice [to], home."

Generally speaking, Ben is happy with his decision to come to the University of Georgia. He feels that he adjusted to college life successfully and is looking forward to staying all four years, "I'd say I've kind of adjusted to campus life. Like I definitely enjoy it. I'm comfortable living here. I wouldn't say it's a downside to going to UGA. I'd say it's definitely a good thing."

Ben was one of the few participants in this study that would not rule out a return to home:

I thought about that and I think maybe depending how career goes. I mean… [I] loved living there. And I would like to keep living there but it's kind of like I wouldn't put living there on top of some other places just because I'm from there. Like if the job came out somewhere else… I probably wouldn't like living in like Atlanta or some other sized city.

It is possible that Ben's career will bring him back to his hometown.

At the time of the interview, Ben was considering switching majors to History and minoring in computer science to explore a career in education. Most of the jobs in Ben's community are in tourism or government services, however, with a state park nearby. It may be difficult for Ben to return home, but he says that he prefers a rural space compared to an urban one:

> Right now, my goal is if I stay with computer science and all that would be to go into software development for, I'd like to go work for a university, but in software development.

Ben has a cousin that works for the library at Emory University, and likes the idea of creating programs for educational purposes.

Summary

Ben Gates is a white male form the North Georgia Mountains. He attended a private school, which he gained admission to in part because of his parents' social capital. He is majoring in computer science and is looking forward to a career that integrates his passion for education and his interest in computer software development.

Ernest Godwin

Ernest is a white male from Central Georgia. Ernest is the only participant in this study that was homeschooled. He is a first-generation college student who also transferred from a two-year college near his hometown. Both of his parents have a high school education and his father owns his own wood shop that makes artisan furniture. Ernest was in line to take over the family business when he finished high school.

Academics were not a focus in Ernest's household, "Well I didn't know I would go to college. That was not something my parents talked to me about." The vision of college for Ernest was to attend a local two-year institution, to major in business, and to take over the family business when he returned. His parents did not approve of this plan, but went along with it:

> Even though it wasn't pushed by my parents who thought I could do without it, it was something that I thought would better prepare me. And the goal was just to go there for a little while, more approaching it as a trade school format.

Table 5.11

Ernest Godwin Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Ernest Godwin
Region of Georgia	Central
Race	White
Major	English Literature
Parents Income	$70,001 - $95,000
First Generation?	Yes
High School GPA	3.9
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	N/A
High School Locale Code	N/A

Ernest loved going to class and interacting with his professors. He was surprised at how much he enjoyed going and talking about works of fiction. He had never conceptualized the idea of reading a text, going into a room, and having a meaningful conversation in which everyone had a differing opinion. Ernest is bright and has a blue-

collar background, which led to a 4.0 GPA at his local two-year college. Two of his professors convinced him that he should consider continuing to study at a four-year institution:

> I came [home] one day and I was looking at UGA. And I found out that in one week their admissions were closing and I said, "Well I've got nothing to lose." So, I applied only to UGA.

Ernest did get into the University of Georgia, but it was only the beginning of his struggles.

His parents did not encourage his attendance at the two-year school, but they outright rejected his attendance at UGA, "my parents didn't want me to go. They actually have tried to get me to drop out of college a number of times to take over the business." Ernest used the word "bribe" to describe his parents' efforts to convince him to drop out of school; their offers included a new car and exclusive rights to take over the family business immediately. Moreover, Ernest's parents provided virtually no financial assistance for him during his time in Athens.

Ernest did make ends meet in Athens, however. He received help from unlikely sources. A friend from home was doing odd jobs for people around Athens and mentioned Ernest to clients who needed carpentry work done in their home. Those jobs provided extra money for rent and groceries. He also met several professors, who helped him financially and academically:

> I took a seminar in his class. He asked someone to take notes in his class one day… [he] thanked me and we continued a conversation and somehow, he just wanted to get to know me as a person.

Ernest's professor gave him the opportunity to complete construction jobs around his home, like assembling playground equipment, installing crown molding, and completing yard work. Their increased interactions led to deeper conversations about his future:

> Before long it was just him questioning what I'm doing in the future, what my plans were, and one thing led to another, and he got me seriously interested in post-graduate studies, which I had not been.

Ernest tried to take advantage of life in an urban area. He grew up on a dirt road in Central Georgia. If he had gone to a public school, it would have been a consolidated county school 30 miles from his home.

Being able to go out for entertainment on a regular basis was a foreign concept for him. At his core, Ernest is an adventurer. When he was attending the two-year college near his hometown, he went to a concert in Atlanta for the first time and was almost mugged in the bathroom.

One year while at the University of Georgia, he hitchhiked to New York City for New Year's Eve and slept on the street, because he did not have enough money to afford a hotel room. He recalled waking up to loose change on the coat covering him as passersby mistook him as a homeless person. In a second hitchhiking expedition, Ernest traveled over 2,000 miles from Athens to California. He rode a bus to Phoenix and was unsure of how he would make it to San Diego in the next week for a one-way flight he booked back to Atlanta.

He managed to trade a hammock for a ride from Phoenix to San Diego and flew

back to Atlanta. Ernest compared these experiences in contrast with his parent's outlook

on adventure and education:

> But those things have never interested them. They like to stay at home. They own
>
> the land on which the business and their house sits on and they enjoy that life…
>
> And I mean my parents even kind of vilify the educated, which is the exact
>
> opposite of myself.

By seeking education, culture, and entertainment away from his hometown, Ernest was

driving a wedge between he and his parents.

By all accounts, individuals who are first generation college students, who have

employment lined up without further education, and whose parents actively work against

them attending college should not be successful in higher education. The notion that this

individual would have the determination and desire to further their education goes against

what we know about rural college students (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013).

Ernest's success can be explained in relation to the help he received from

professors, an innate fearlessness, and a passion for learning. Ernest also believes that

homeschooling was good preparation for college:

> With homeschool and self-teaching, even when it's guided by your parents, a lot
>
> of the teaching you do on your own. And it predisposed me for college. It really
>
> set me up in places where I could receive the teaching and then go home and still
>
> kind of learn more on my own.

At the time of his interview, Ernest was on the verge of graduating and would spend the

next year in Alaska in outdoor recreation. He returned to the University of Georgia in the

fall 2017 semester to pursue a Master of Science Degree in Natural Resource and Recreational Tourism. Ernest is not sure what his future will hold, which is a disposition he prefers.

Summary

Ernest is a white male from Central Georgia. Though his parents did not want him to attend, he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Georgia. Afterwards, he spent a year in Alaska working the tourism industry and returned to the University of Georgia in August 2017 to pursue a master's degree.

Michael Lopez

Michael Lopez is a Latino male from Central Georgia. According to the high school locale code, Michael's school is considered "Rural: Fringe." Michael's description of his hometown is an example of how the codes do not adequately capture rurality in ever-expanding Atlanta:

It was very suburb; very very typical I think. It was mostly, demographically, mostly white, with a minority population of black and Hispanic… [My high school] was in Cowsert County, which I would consider redneck or po-dunk.

Michael describes his hometown and his high school to be suburban, but the area around it is rural, by both his description of the geography and the people who live there, "There were lots of what I would consider to be less educated people… ignorant. There were racist elements, there were sexist elements. It was generally overwhelmingly white conservative."

Michael describes seeing racism in his community, but that racism was generally directed towards African American people:

Yeah but it was never directed towards me. I remember at one point a teacher of

mine said that schools in Cowsert County. It didn't fully integrate until the 1970s

so I think you can still kind of feel that later on even, three four decades later.

Michael benefits from being a light-skinned Latino person. In fact, according to Michael,

most people do not know that he comes from a Latino background. As a result, Michael

hung out with the white students in his high school.

Table 5.12

Michael Lopez Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Michael Lopez
Region of Georgia	Central
Race	Latino
Major	History Education
Parents Income	$70,001 - $95,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	3.9
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	23%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

Michael's school district is segregated. He describes his high school as the "brain

school," while the other high schools focus on athletics:

I know the other two high schools had a lot more tension, especially since there

were some low-income, mainly black areas and then some very high-income

white areas that were conflicting in the same high school. But in mine it was

mostly just the white kids that kind of just grouped together and the black kids

that all kinda grouped together, you know. It was sort of that natural division that

I saw more than anything.

Michael fell on the white side of the "natural division" he saw in his high school between white students and black students.

Michael is not sure why his family ended up in his hometown. His father works at least 60 miles away on the east side of Atlanta. At the time of his interview, Michael reported that his father and stepmother are not very attached to their town, "They were talking about it for whatever reason my stepmom's job relocated them they wouldn't be too upset, because it's getting wild. It's turning into another burrow of Atlanta."

Michael comes from a background of high education attainment in his family, "I'm not a first-generation college student by any means. I actually am the third generation UGA student here. My Dad went here, his sister went here too, and then my grandmother took classes here." Additionally, Michael's grandfather is a psychiatrist. Michael's mother went to the University of Florida and then to Columbia Seminary.

"When it comes to college, it was all engrained to me… The whole spiel is that… you're going to go to college, like it wasn't a question. It was never if or how. We'll make it happen." Michael's parents and extended family were all college graduates, and so Michael knew from a young age that it would be his next step after high school.

Because of a combination of factors, including the HOPE scholarship, Michael's number one school was the University of Georgia, "I really settled on Georgia because of the options, how big it was, the scope of things, I would be able to explore here." Currently, Michael is planning on becoming a high school History teacher. He is

interested in becoming a teacher because he wants to improve himself and those around him. Michael attributes this to his family:

> My grandfather is going to be 88… he teaches science to illegal immigrants in Atlanta... my Dad is teaching himself Italian I think. My mom is talking about going back to school to get a Ph.D. So, I'm surrounded by people who are always looking to move forward, not necessarily in one direction or another, but you know, making myself a full more well-rounded person is definitely something I'm interested in.

Summary

Michael Lopez is a Latino male from Central Georgia. He grew up in a small town that has since transformed into a suburb of Atlanta. He comes from a very well-educated family, which he attributes to his academic success. Michael plans to become a high school History teacher after he completes his studies at the University of Georgia.

<div align="center">

Adeline Moates

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Adeline Moates is an African American female from Southeast Georgia. She is one of two African Americans to participate in the current study. Adeline is a second-generation college student who comes from a background of high socioeconomic status. Her mother is a teacher and her father is a contractor at an Air Force Base in Georgia. Though her father did not attend college at the traditional time after high school, he is currently completing his bachelor's degree. Education is clearly important in Adeline's family.

Adeline was marginalized in her school because she was black. She reported that the marginalization came from fellow African Americans, "I had a certain group of

friends… [in] fifth grade. We were known for making good grades and I was always

hanging out with them and it just so happened that they were Caucasian. All of them

were Caucasian." Adeline reported that in her school, doing well academically meant

"acting white." She struggled with her identity in elementary school as a result.

Table 5.13

Adeline Moates Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Adeline Moates
Region of Georgia	Central
Race	African American
Major	Exercise and Sport Science
Parents Income	$70,001 - $95,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	74%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

In high school, Adeline was a member of Upward Bound, a TRIO program for

first-generation college students. Upward Bound takes first generation students to

colleges and universities in their region:

> We went to Tennessee, Louisiana, [and] Florida, of course. Yeah, it was just
>
> really good. It exposed me to a lot of different things I had not seen before… [My
>
> hometown] doesn't have a college or a state university… I was interested in going
>
> to a four-year whole deal like that. Yeah, they exposed me to a lot of different
>
> things and we even got to live as college students would during the summer.

Adeline's experience in Upward Bound got her thinking about college early in high school. Throughout high school she was focused on college as her ultimate goal.

Adeline's Upward Bound coordinator was ultimately the reason she applied to the University of Georgia. At first, she was hesitant to even consider applying, "[It was] beyond my reach. Like the people who've gone above and beyond and went to another country, built wells and saved the amphibians and yeah. I thought UGA was a place for those individuals."

The night before the early decision deadline, Adeline's Upward Bound coordinator asked her to come to her house and they would submit the materials together. Adeline was admitted early to the University of Georgia, which made her decision of where to go to college easy:

> I was so shocked. I couldn't believe it… I get in my car and something told me to check my phone, like check my status of my application. I did, and I just started yelling… Yeah. I just felt, yeah, like I couldn't believe it. Like, whoa! What? You want me to go to your school?

Adeline did not have high confidence about admission at the University of Georgia, because she feared the competition. Upward Bound encourages students to apply for the prestigious Coca-Cola scholarship, which fully funds low-income students who are academically excellent:

> When I looked at those biographies of other people who've gone above and beyond I was just like, "Whoa." The world grew at that moment. I was just like, "Whoa. I haven't done any of those things, so wow. Kudos to them for doing all that stuff."

Adeline felt like she had been doing what she was supposed to do for years: stay out of trouble, make good grades, and be active in her local community. Those were the standards set for someone truly excellent in her community. She did not realize that the competition in college would be of a higher caliber.

Thankfully, Adeline's Upward Bound coordinator convinced her that she was good enough to get into her self-described "reach" school, the University of Georgia. Adeline's transition was relatively easy. She was aided by her extroverted personality and her experience in a collegiate environment with Upward Bound. Adeline said that the world grew for her when she applied for scholarships; it grew again when she met new peers in her dorm, "'What? You're from India?' Because I had my hall mates, my first year, one, her family is from Bangladesh. One of my friends, her roommate, her family was from Nigeria."

Adeline majors in Exercise and Sport Science, because of a positive experience shadowing a physical therapist in high school. The exercise and Sport Science major is an undergraduate option for someone who seeks to study physical therapy in graduate school, according to Adeline. Since high school, Adeline changed her mind about physical therapy:

> A lot of people… would ask me what kind of physical therapy I was trying to do, and I was like, "With pediatrics. With kids" They're like, "No, sports is the way to go. They get paid the most." I'm like, "I don't want to see them breaking things. No." That always kind of got at me… I always thought about it, like, I don't like seeing people break stuff, so do I really need to go into physical therapy?

Adeline is now planning on finishing her bachelor's degree in Exercise and Sport Science. After she finishes, Adeline will enter a Bachelor of Science in Nursing program that will not force her to start her course of study over:

> I've been thinking about Emory a lot, a lot, a lot. I'm going to dig more into that research, what Emory has to offer, but it's approximately going to take me four years to finish in order to get my Doctor of Nursing.

Summary

Adeline is an African American female from Southeast Georgia. In school, she struggled with her identity as an African American woman but gained acceptance in high school. With the help of her Upward Bound coordinator, Adeline was admitted to the University of Georgia. She plans on competing a second Bachelor of Science in Nursing when she finishes her Exercise and Sport Science degree at the University of Georgia.

Jaime Perez

Jaime Perez is a Latino male from Southeast Georgia. In addition to being the first in his family to attend college, Jaime also lives in a non-English speaking family. Jaime's father is an immigrant from Mexico and is undocumented. Jaime's mother is bilingual, but he lives with his father when he is not at the university for class.

Jaime's comes from a blue-collar background. When he was a child, his father worked at a mobile home factory. He now works at a peanut factory and has an erratic schedule:

> When he used to work at [the factory], he also worked at KFC too, so he worked two jobs. That was mostly through high school and I think up until I was in college. I think he just quit about two years ago to start working at the peanut

factory. I think he makes more money there now, so that's why he only works one job. Usually he works about… seven days a week [during] peanut season… I think one week he said he worked 120 hours.

Table 5.14

Jaime Perez Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Jaime Perez
Region of Georgia	Southeast
Race	Latino
Major	Communications and Statistics
Parents Income	$40,001 - $55,000
First Generation?	Yes
High School GPA	3.8
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	90%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

Jaime's father is in a long-term relationship with a woman to whom he is not married, but who Jaime considers his step-mother, most likely because of his two half-siblings. After the recession, Jaime's family struggled to make ends meet; his father worked two jobs and his step-mother's employer went out of business.

Things improved once Jaime's father found better paying employment. When asked if there was a need for his father to continue working multiple jobs or if he needed to put in 120-hour work weeks to keep the family financially solvent, Jaime replied:

I don't think so…I think it's because he feels obligated to, just because like that's

what his job requires. He signed up for the job. I think at first when he worked at

KFC, he did because he wasn't making enough money.

Since Jaime's step-mother found contracting work in childcare, Jaime's father has not

worried as much about finances as he used to.

Race was a significant factor in Jaime's life before entering college. When asked

to describe his hometown, Jaime said:

There's a lot of diversity [at home] actually. Like there's a mix between whites,

blacks, and Hispanics, but there's usually not too much intermingling usually… I

see a lot of people at the fast food restaurants usually are black people or

Hispanic. Not too many white people usually work in the fast food chains.

When Jaime was playing football and soccer, he was spending more time with minority

students.

In high school, Jaime's situation changed. His family needed him to spend his

afternoons with his younger siblings, which necessitated he quit football and soccer. At

the same time, Jaime's school placed him on the gifted track, which was primarily

comprised of white students. Suddenly, he was no longer taking classes with fellow

minority students nor was he practicing after school with them. Jaime had never lived in

the same neighborhood as his minority friends; he lived near an affluent golf course

community, which is where many of his classmates from the gifted program lived.

Jaime is a student at the University of Georgia because of his move to gifted and

AP courses. He had not considered going to UGA until he started talking to fellow

students about their future plans:

We were talking about it, and I remember a lot of my friends were telling me,
"Yeah, you'll get into Georgia no problem." I also remember them telling me that,
"since you're Hispanic you'll get into Georgia no problem. You're Hispanic and
you're from a rural part of Georgia.

He applied without ever setting foot on campus, he simply knew that the University of
Georgia would be the best school he could attend in which he could use the HOPE
scholarship.

In fact, after Jaime was accepted, he was not sure if he wanted to attend or not,
but a friend's mother in his AP classes convinced him otherwise:

Alex, his mom invited me to come with them for a trip to UGA since we both got
accepted. She said, "If you come live with Alex at UGA in the dorms, if you guys
become roommates, I'll buy everything in the room. I'll provide the stuff in the
room for you guys." I said, "All right." I said, "Yeah, I'll go UGA," before I even
toured.

Jaime's friend Alex did end up attending the University of Georgia but decided to rush a
fraternity.

Much like Faith Buford in the current study, Jaime was heavily involved in
student government and other organizations in high school, but was not able to do the
same in college:

Freshman year I wasn't involved too much. I didn't do anything really. I tried to be
in student government, but I didn't pass the interviews or something. That was
pretty discouraging, so I didn't want to do anything after that. Pretty much
freshman year I just kind of played pick up soccer a lot.

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At the beginning of his sophomore year, Jaime was arrested for riding his bike while

intoxicated on a football game day, in which many students drink openly on campus.

After speaking with a judge, the criminal charges were dropped, but the Office of Student

Conduct required he attend alcohol education courses, complete 40 hours of community

service, and write a paper about responsible alcohol consumption. He was also fired from

his position as a Resident Assistant, which funded his housing.

In response, Jaime quit school for a semester. He lived on the couch of his friend

in a fraternity house and then moved to Atlanta to stay with a friend:

> I was really interested in this concept of like having to live life without college,
>
> like how to be successful in life without college. I was reading a lot of books then
>
> at the time, and… I was pretty resentful towards UGA. I don't know. I think I still
>
> kind of am.

Jaime felt abandoned by the University, he felt shame for getting in trouble, and he felt

like he did not fit in. Jaime was on the cusp of being a college drop-out.

Jaime said that he was influenced by the public debate going on in the news cycle

concerning skilled labor and college. He saw commercials, videos on social media, and

read books that stated that everyone did not need to go to college, and that there were

careers out there where individuals made more money without it:

> You know, you hear it now all the time in like public debate and stuff like that,
>
> like the need for technical workers and stuff like that. I was like, "I could easily
>
> become a plumber or something like that, or a carpenter, have experience like
>
> that." I was like, "If I wanted to be a plumber, I'm pretty good at precalc and I'm
>
> pretty good at calculus." Or carpentry, like that's a lot of math.

But Jaime knew that if he changed his career goals, he could never go back on them. If he decided to drop-out of UGA permanently, he may never finish his bachelor's degree.

Jaime did find his way back to school; he finished his alcohol education course, his paper, and his 40 hours of community service. Moreover, Jaime learned to be ok with himself and to stop comparing himself to his peers from suburban Atlanta:

> I was trying to fit in. Like the drinking thing, I think I tried to drink too much to fit in, or I tried to have enough money to fit in. Try to have a cool major so I could fit in or do to join a popular club to fit in or whatever, be good at a sport to fit in or something like that. I don't think I have that urge now to try to fit in. I feel pretty comfortable.

Jaime is now on path to graduate just a year behind schedule and has ambitious plans for his future; he plans on joining AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps upon graduation. He is drawn to service, and is looking for mentorship:

> If I was going to get a job, I'd want to do it in the public sector… I grew up with a lot of people that were socioeconomically disenfranchised. I worked with the same people here before many times. The thing they need, it's not like they necessarily need education, but the lack of public knowledge of like what you can do and the opportunities that you have, they're not made fully aware to everyone in the public. I'd like a job that would help people understand that there's opportunities and work for people to make opportunities.

Summary

Jaime is a Latino male from Southeast Georgia. His father is a Mexican immigrant, and English is not the primary language spoken in his home. Jaime's post-

high school plans flourished after joining the gifted track in high school. Jaime faced adversity at the University of Georgia, which almost led to his permanent departure. Jaime is looking forward to a career in public service but is unsure of his next step.

Roland Poole

Roland is a white male from South Georgia. He is a first-generation college student and transferred to the University of Georgia from a small teaching college near his hometown. Roland's parents are creative people who provide for him through the arts—his father is a musician, and his mother is an artist.

Unlike the other students in this study, Roland was not considered a star student in school growing up. Roland blames bad teaching for his academic failures, "I was one of those students who really struggled. I ended up getting held back because I struggled so much, and [my second-grade teacher] exploited my weaknesses instead of pushing me to become a better student." Roland's struggles in school continued into middle school and high school, particularly in math.

Roland's struggles were not limited to academic ones. Roland blames his self-described social awkwardness on his teachers growing up:

> Like when I'm talking right now, you're probably noticing how I'm not looking you in the eye that much. I have to look at something else… I literally cannot maintain eye contact for a period of time with people, especially outside of interviews… [It] probably stems from second grade, and other times in my life when people have cut me down.

Roland does not feel that he fits into the mold of the typical student; he is a self-described creative individual who learns from experimentation and creativity rather than rote memorization and lecturing.

Table 5.15

Roland Poole Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Roland Poole
Region of Georgia	Southeast
Race	White
Major	English Education and Theatre
Parents Income	$10,001 - $25,000
First Generation?	Yes
High School GPA	3.5
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	90%
High School Locale Code	Town: Remote

Roland places blame on his teachers for his failure, but also lofts his successes on them as well. Several times in his interview, Roland notes teachers who helped him academically:

> One of my teachers would actually encourage an alternate form of learning and it was through art or creative writing. So, if you were in a hump, so to speak, or if you were having a bad day, then you would take a certain amount of time at the beginning of the class to sort of get that funk out in an outlet that you saw fit.

In another example, Roland explained that he was failing a math class in high school for a second time, and a teacher was the reason he passed, "And I ended up doing great,

because I had an excellent math teacher that year, and I would say still to this day, he's the best math teacher I've had. He really encouraged me."

Because Roland did not perform well in school, he did not feel ready to attend the University of Georgia when he finished high school. He completed an associate degree in English at a community college, and transferred to UGA, because of the music scene in Athens, Georgia, "a lot of my decision to come to UGA, actually stems from opportunities around Athens, because when I was in the music scene in [my hometown], we all knew a lot of musicians from Athens."

Since arriving at the University of Georgia, Roland feels much more comfortable than he did before. He is majoring in English education and theatre. He says that he came to English education because he was not sure what else would fit his academic needs:

> I knew that I wanted to do something with English, but I didn't know what it was yet. I knew that my greatest strength was writing, and I thought, well there's lots of things I want to do with writing. I like creative writing. I write songs, and I've considered writing a book, but with things like writing a book, like for leisure reading, I don't really think you can find a suitable degree for something like that.

Roland also wants experience acting in case he attempts a career in performance. He knows that majoring in English education is safer, because it is more likely to lead him to a job. Roland says he will give his dream of being an actor or musician a shot, even if he does take a teaching job after college.

Summary

Roland is white male from South Georgia. He comes from a family of creative people and is the first in his family to go to college. Roland says that he never fit the

mold of a model student, but that he loves learning and wants to help other students who have diverse learning needs. He feels more comfortable at the University of Georgia, because he spent two years at a community college before transferring to UGA.

Lawrence Ramsey

Lawrence is a white male from Southeast Georgia. He is a first-generation college student and an English major. Lawrence's mother is an ophthalmologist assistant at a doctor's office and his father is a supervisor at a manufacturing facility whose workers are inmates at a nearby state prison. In Lawrence's household, college was a high priority, "My older sister, she went to Georgia Southern… That did set the tone…It was expected."

Students in honors classes at Lawrence's school were encouraged to apply to the University of Georgia, as the teachers at the school believed it to be the best option for students with the HOPE scholarship. He applied early and attended orientation. When he arrived on campus, he had a change of heart. Lawrence's girlfriend would be attending a small college near his hometown, and he did not want to be away from her for a year. In fact, Lawrence is the only participant in this study that indicated that his decision relied, at least in part, on his significant other.

Additionally, Lawrence did not like the idea of sharing his room with another person in a residence hall:

> Whenever I came up here for orientation, I was like, "Oh wow this is really what this is going to be like." I actually attended orientation. It was kind of an eye-opener. It was just a different sort of atmosphere I guess.

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Lawrence was intimidated by the sheer number of people he saw. Living in a small-town mean seeing a few of the same hundred people every day. Lawrence's impression of college was that he would be lost among all the others.

Table 5.16

Lawrence Ramsey Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Lawrence Ramsey
Region of Georgia	Southwest
Race	White
Major	English
Parents Income	$25,001 - $40,000
First Generation?	Yes
High School GPA	3.9
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	98%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Distant

His decision to not attend the University of Georgia was about distance and not about academic rigor, "I guess I had not really considered what it would be like… to go so far away, because it's a good, you know, 3-4 hours away from home." The idea of being away from his family and his girlfriend combined with his unease on campus was too much to overcome in his first year.

Lawrence spent one year at the small college near his hometown that his girlfriend decided to attend. He felt unchallenged by the curriculum and decided after the

first semester that he would be transferring to the University of Georgia the following semester. His girlfriend also decided to transfer to Georgia College in Milledgeville.

Upon transferring, Lawrence got serious about his potential career in law:

I decided that if I wanted to go to law school, I needed to try and get a job at law office to see what it was like. And I took my resume, which at that time didn't have much. I printed a bunch of copies and pretty much just went all around Athens.

Lawrence ended up with two job offers in his first year at the University of Georgia and continues to work at the same firm two years later.

Lawrence decided that he wanted to become a lawyer as a result of getting to know the father of one of his friends from high school. For a senior project, Lawrence shadowed the friend's father and had the opportunity to meet the district attorney and a judge. Lawrence was also looking for a practical way to write for a living and felt that law would be a suitable outlet for such a skill.

Lawrence's true desire is to write for a living, but he believes law to be more practical. Though, he has been feeling uncertain about his future.

Well, yeah, I guess that's where my hesitation… Lawyers tell you, "Don't do it." [The] broad message I've got is, if you want to do it that's what you need to do… Don't do it just because you want to make a lot of money. Don't do it for that reason. Most have been encouraging, but there [is] always that one or two that say it's too expensive now or it's can't find a job when you come out.

Lawrence will not be the only graduate of the University of Georgia in his family; his sister enrolled the year after he transferred. Many of Lawrence's sister's classmates were

considering attending Valdosta State University or Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, as they are located in Southeast Georgia. She changed her mind after visiting he brother:

> She came up for the Auburn game. She did the whole game thing, and she said, "You know it really is kind of nice here." And so, and I think her really close friend from high school decided that she was going to go to Auburn… [she felt] she kind of needed to stay in the competition. So, she decided that Georgia was where she wanted to go.

Lawrence will take a gap year and work full time for a law firm or will attend law school after graduation, depending on where he is admitted. He and his girlfriend are still together, and he says that he does not regret coming to the University of Georgia in his first year, even though he has seen his sister have a better experience than he did.

Summary

Lawrence is a white male from Southeast Georgia. He transferred from a small college near his hometown after his first year. His decision to not attend the University of Georgia in his first year was attributed to distance, as he did not want to be far away from his family or his girlfriend. Lawrence is pre-law and has been working for a law firm since his first year at the University of Georgia. He will attend law school when he graduates from UGA.

<div align="center">

Thomas Rowan

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Thomas is a white male from Central Georgia. He is the son of a Baptist minister, and a third-generation college student. Thomas' father was training to be a minister when

he was a child, and Thomas moved around the Southeast United States frequently in his early years.

Table 5.17

Thomas Rowan Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Thomas Rowan
Region of Georgia	Central
Race	White
Major	English and Film
Parents Income	$40,001 - $55,000
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	74%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Fringe

After Thomas' father finished seminary, they moved to what would now be considered suburban Atlanta on the west side of the state. In fourth grade, Thomas' father moved to a church in Central Georgia. When he moved schools, he noticed a change:

> You could really tell the difference between the white students and the black students… Not that it was that big of a difference, it was really just culture shock… Not that it was a problem for me. But it did change, I guess, just how I got to thinking.

Central Georgia lies in the northern cusp of the Black Belt region of Georgia, and Thomas was not used to racial the racial diversity he experienced.

At his school in suburban Atlanta, Thomas was moved into the gifted track. He continued taking gifted classes when he moved to the town in which he spent middle and high school. Thomas noticed that the gifted program was predominately white, "There was a divide between the gifted students and the people who took a little bit longer to learn everything." Thomas reported that race was a more dominant feature in Central Georgia, "[There was] a really big feeling of people kind of getting stuck in how things were 40 years ago."

As Thomas moved from city to city for his father's job, his transitions were easy. He credits the bond he, his parents, and his sister have to the ease of the transition. He also was able to continue participating in similar extracurricular activities in each location. For example, he participated in band throughout middle and high school, he was on the gifted track from elementary school to high school, and he participated in Model UN and the Y Club of the YMCA, which encourages students to be politically active. As a result, the move to college was not daunting for Thomas.

The activates that Thomas participated in gave him opportunities to visit college campuses. For example, in his sophomore year, he visited Florida State University with his high school marching band, "We got to stay there for an FSU game and after seeing FSU and how big it was… I realized like I wanted to go to a big college." Thomas also visited small Christian colleges for church camps throughout high school.

Ultimately, the college-going decision for Thomas was straightforward. He applied to three schools: a two-year college, Mercer University, and the University of Georgia:

After touring the campus and just talking to people and figuring out like most of

the financials of everything, I figured I'd rather go to UGA. And I applied to

UGA, and I got in… After that I didn't really see a need to apply anywhere else.

Moreover, Thomas liked that the University of Georgia was not too far away from his

family, "I'm about two and a half hours away from [home], which is just far enough to go

back for just like one or two days."

Thomas entered the University of Georgia as a pre-pharmacy major, but was not

prepared for the chemistry courses:

I did Chem I through dual-enrollment in high school. It didn't prepare me enough

for Chem II here. So, by the time I got to Chem II and realized that I actually had

to study, like I have to work really really hard for this… I dropped the pre-

pharmacy major.

Thomas underestimated the difficulty of the pre-pharmacy track and was too involved on

campus to balance everything. He was also in the Red Coat Marching Band, which he

says took up every weekend in the fall.

Thomas was not truly interested in pharmacy; Thomas was interested in acquiring

a stable job and people in his community indicated to him that the medical field provided

stable employment. A family friend suggested that he enter pharmacy in order to do

research, as Thomas is a creative writer and desired to write as a profession. Now,

Thomas is an English major and is seeking a career in business.

Thomas mostly spends time with his girlfriend and his friends from his

hometown. They all work at a chain restaurant and hold regular bible studies. Thomas is

not sure what his career will be but believes that he will be satisfied if he is able to write for a living.

Summary

Thomas is a white male from Central Georgia. He moved several times around Georgia for his father's job as a Baptist minister. Thomas started college as a pre-pharmacy major but is now majoring in English. Thomas plans on entering the field of business upon graduation.

Audre Sutherland

Audre is a white female from Southeast Georgia. She is a first-generation college student and an only child. Throughout her time growing up, Audre preferred being outdoors to indoors; during her time at the University of Georgia, she turned her love of the outdoors to a passion for conservation in the form of an ecology major.

Though Audre is in a very low-income bracket but is extremely intelligent. She scored a 30 on the ACT and has a natural passion for learning. When she described her childhood, she said, "I spent almost all my free time when I was younger reading. I was an only child. I don't want to sound arrogant, but I've always performed very well academically." In middle and high school, she completed most of the books in the school library and moved on to translated Russian literature, which is a minor passion of hers.

Audre pursued unique research opportunities as a high school student. By participating in Future Farmers of American (FFA) events in Georgia, she had the opportunity to visit a variety of locations in the state, including the University of Georgia, and to perform agricultural research. In her sophomore and junior years of high school, she participated in the Young Scholars program at the University of Georgia Tifton

Campus, which is a research station in Southeast Georgia. Though Audre reported that the work was boring at times, the practical research experience helped her college and scholarship applications.

Table 5.18

Audre Sutherland Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Audrey Sutherland
Region of Georgia	Southwest
Race	White
Major	Ecology
Parents Income	$10,001 - $25,000
First Generation?	Yes
High School GPA	4.0
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	95%
High School Locale Code	Town: Distant

Audre was completely on her on in her journey to college. Her parents told her to apply to schools and to figure out the finances, because they would not be able to provide any assistance. For Audre, it was all or nothing; she would not commit to a school unless financial aid covered the full cost of college. She relied completely on her own research.

Many of the schools that began sending Audre information and applications in the mail she had never heard of, and she was resistant to considering them. She determined that the University of Georgia would be the best place for her, because it offered a wide variety of studies. "We've got classes here like in Russian film and intersections of art

and science, and just some really interesting, dynamic things that wouldn't have been available at a smaller college."

When Audre first arrived on campus, she experienced a culture shock. For the first time, the space around her was surrounded by people of the same age. In her hometown, the adults dominated the social spaces. Some aspects of college surprised her:

> As far as the way people would dress and the words and the language they would use, and they would consider that casual or appropriate. Just things like that, vulgarity, like cursing and things like that. It's definitely not like I hadn't heard it before, but it was refrained from being used in public for the most part.

Slowly, over the course of her three years at the University of Georgia, she became more accustomed to the culture of the college town.

Audre, ever the student, expresses her experience in gaining comfort at the University of Georgia in terms of anthropology:

> It's very gradual stuff, like I guess reading about geography and evolutionary anthropology and things like that, and just realizing you're learning about how people make their decisions and how your background really influences everything you think. Just understanding humans scientifically from that point made me feel less judgmental.

Audre says that judgmental might not be the word to describe her view of other students and the culture of the university when she arrived; the environment was so different from where she was from that the culture seemed foreign.

At the time of her interview, Audre was not sure what she wanted to do with her life. After she graduates with her Bachelor of Science in ecology, she will take a gap year to travel or to return home to reflect on what she wants out of a career:

Communicating [science] in some degree would be fulfilling to me. I'm not exactly sure how, because I don't really see myself as a K-12 educator or anything like that. But it is something I want. That's why I want to take the gap year.

Audre is focused on not making a mistake with her career path, because she believes that her parents are not living their most fulfilling life, because her birth required them to be less nomadic:

[My father] hitchhiked across the country back in the '70s, and him and my mom would go on bike rides all over and in the Southwest and stuff. Now they're back essentially where they both grew up, and it's very frustrating to both of them… I see how outside factors can limit your opportunities… those outside factors are not working on me.

Audre misses her home but prefers being in an academic environment. Though she has dedicated the last couple of years to studying ecology and global warming, she believes that she has just scratched the surface.

Audre closed her interview by reflecting on what she loves about her home and how it drove her to her passion for the environment:

The thing I miss most is the land, and watching the fields go down over the sunsets, and the forest, and the way things smell at night, and just the birds, and hearing the frogs at night. That's why conservation matters to me. I think it's integral to our identity as Southerners to have our land and respect it and maintain

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it the way I think people used to when they were small farmers, and they realized

they lived holistically with the land. That's something that's been lost, and that

wears on me a lot.

Summary

Audre is a white female from Southeast Georgia. She is a first-generation college

student and an only child. In addition to having a high intelligence, she is also motivated

and passionate about the environment. Audre hopes to make a career in science, though

she did not know exactly what form her career will take.

Julia Taylor

Julia Taylor is a white female from East Georgia. She was born in suburban

Atlanta but spent her middle and high school years in East rural Georgia within 60 miles

of the University of Georgia. She is the daughter of a scientist at the Environmental

Protection Agency (EPA) and a teacher. She is among highest in this study in terms of

parents' income and education level.

Julia's family moved from suburban Atlanta to rural Georgia, because they

needed to build a customized house for her brother, who has muscular dystrophy. Her

father was able to find a rural space with easy access to an EPA research laboratory. Her

mother, trailing her father, found a job at a nearby school teaching computer science and

business.

Like many other students in this study, Julia was limited by the curriculum

offered in her school. When asked about the quality of her high school she responded:

Yeah, I mean it was a good school. There were some teachers that really wanted

the kids to learn, grow. It was a smaller school, so everyone kind of knew each

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other. It was like a community. There weren't as many opportunities as at other

schools… I think they only offered four AP classes.

When she came to the University of Georgia, Julia realized that her peers had taken up to

a full school years' worth of courses for college credit, and she only had four courses

worth.

Table 5.19

Julia Taylor Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Julia Taylor
Region of Georgia	East
Race	White
Major	Geology
Parents Income	>$95,001
First Generation?	No
High School GPA	3.9
High School Free/Reduced Lunch	52%
High School Locale Code	Rural: Distant

Julia's sister was attending the University of Georgia while Julia was making her

decision about where to go to college. The decision was between Georgia State

University and the University of Georgia, because she knew she wanted to stay in state:

I needed to go somewhere I got the HOPE scholarship, so I definitely wanted to

stay in state. I had looked at Georgia State [University] in Atlanta. But in the end,

I wanted to go to the bigger research university, because I wanted to do [a]

science major.

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Julia reported that her parents stayed out her decision of where to go to college, but that her sister encouraged her to join her in Athens.

The most pressing struggle for Julia was her major. She grew up with a father who is a scientist and felt that she had acumen for the fields of science and math, "When I got into college I kind of figured out that you were doing writing or math. So out of those two I wanted to do math." She started as an archeology major but found out after doing some field work that she did not have a passion for it.

Julia was unsure what to do with her life, so in the following semester she served as an au pair in the Spanish Canary Islands for a wealthy family. She did not enjoy taking care of the children of her host family, but she enjoyed her free time in another country, and decided that she should attempt to complete her college education in Europe.

When she returned to the United States, she enrolled at the University of Georgia and began preparing to change her major to industrial design. The change in majors required Julia to take more math classes than she was originally anticipating. Unfortunately, her transfer aspirations did not work out; she applied to Georgia Tech and several school in England but was not offered admission at any of the institutions.

Now, Julia is working on a major in Geology. She was led to Geology by a genuine interest in earth processes and is interested in a job in government:

I think I want to go into the government aspect of it… like government surveying. I really wanted to work outside… I wouldn't want to live in the city really… I would want to live out in a rural area. Maybe not like farms, but maybe like woods or the mountains. I'd love to live in the mountains.

Despite a great deal of agonizing over her major selection, Julia's career aspirations are not her top priority. Julia's family life is more important:

> I've always thought that when I picture my life, I was picturing more of a family as a priority, and a career as not so much I guess. It's more like where I'm living…Like how I'm living rather than like having a big successful career.

Julia says that she will not pursue graduate school, because she does not feel that she is interested enough in her field to dedicate several years to study. Instead, she will seek out a government job in order to fund more adventures, like her semester in Spain.

Summary

Julia is a white female from East Georgia. Her father is a scientist, and her mother is a teacher. After being unsure about what to major in, Julia spent a semester in Spain serving as an au pair. She failed to transfer to a school in England and chose to remain at the University of Georgia to complete a degree in Geology. She will seek a government job and will not seek graduate school.

Conclusion

The biographical sketches revealed stories of success and strife, often along the lines of socioeconomic status. Most of the participants in this study were admitted by early action, before the regular application deadline. Three of the participants transferred from small colleges near their hometown. All of the participants were drawn to the University of Georgia as a result of its perceived quality in light of the HOPE scholarship.

The next chapter, Chapter 6, explores the thematic findings of the current study. In addition to the presentation of seven themes, the following chapter answers the three research questions of this study:

1. What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

2. How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

3. How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

CHAPTER 6

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather data from 18 participants from rural Georgia. The analysis of these 18 interviews are presented as responses to the three research questions below. The results are presented as seven themes.

This chapter presents the research findings of the three research questions:

1. What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States

2. How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

3. How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

Research Question 1: What is the Rural Student Experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

The central research question of this study was "what is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" To address this question, the researcher engaged in a textual analysis of the transcripts and engaged

in open coding to capture the essence of the rural college experience. Three themes emerged:

1. Curricular disadvantage sets rural students back, especially in STEM.

2. Socioeconomic status mediates experience.

3. Rural students alter their religious views in college.

Theme 1 – Curricular Disadvantage Sets Rural Students Back, Especially in STEM

There is a difference between the curricular options that exist at suburban and rural schools in Georgia. Participants in this study reported being behind their peers academically, because they were not offered the same number of AP courses. AP is an acronym for "Advanced Placement," a product offered by The College Board (2018a). AP is now the formal name of the offering rather than Advanced Placement; therefore, it will be referred to as AP in this study.

AP offers outstanding high school students the opportunity to receive college credit for their high school classes. Unlike regular high school courses, the curriculum is set by The College Board, the teacher is certified to teach the course by The College Board, and the student takes a standardized test to determine the grade that will go on their college transcript. The fee for each AP test is $94, but schools often subsidize the cost (The College Board, 2018b).

AP has been criticized for its poor participation rates among minorities (Klopfenstein, 2004). Moreover, participation in AP does not guarantee student success in college, unless students are exposed to AP courses in STEM fields (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and math (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b). AP participation, particularly, in STEM courses, falls

along racial and socioeconomic lines. AP offerings have also been found to be limited to "school within a school" structures not available to every student; magnet programs and gifted tracks are examples of schools within schools (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

A major finding of this study is that there is a curricular gap that exists between rural and non-rural students in Georgia. Participants in this study were offered fewer opportunities to engage in AP courses. Participant Julia shared:

There weren't as many opportunities [as there were] at other schools, like the kind of classes, like the AP. I think they only offered four AP classes. But I don't know if I was at an advantage of getting into UGA because of, you know, the smaller school.

The idea that rural students have softer admissions standards than suburban students is a common conception among parents of future college students in Georgia (Downey, 2016).

The University of Georgia (UGA) takes academic rigor into consideration when making admissions decisions. On their admissions website, the UGA discusses academic rigor as follows:

To be most competitive, you should challenge yourself by pursuing the most rigorous courses available in your high school that you, your parents, and your guidance counselor deem appropriate to your level of ability. The number of courses taken… designated as advanced, Honors, gifted, AP/IB or dual enrollment—will be considered in the admission process. In fact, in recent years, 98% of first-year students admitted to UGA pursued an honors or advanced level

curriculum track. (University of Georgia Undergraduate Admissions, n.d.-a, para.

4)

Therefore, UGA does not punish rural students who are not offered as many AP courses as their urban and suburban counterparts. An unintended consequence of UGA's admission policy is that rural students come to UGA up to two years behind their classmates with more AP offerings.

Participant Mary realized when she arrived at the University of Georgia that she was not afforded the same opportunities as her peers from metropolitan Atlanta:

> I have a lot of friends who are from the Atlanta area, because a lot of people at
> UGA come from that area. We would just talk about differences in high schools.
> They would talk about all the different AP classes that were offered, and we only
> had, I want to say three or four, tops.

Though the number of AP credits is important, perhaps equally important are actual courses being offered.

The College Board offers 38 AP courses of which high schools can choose to offer if they have certified teachers. Most AP course are not taken in STEM fields, however. In May 2017, the top five most commonly administered AP tests were English Language, United States History, English Literature, Government & Politics – United States, and Calculus AB (The College Board, 2017). Over 500,000 students took the English Language and United States History AP exam, while only around 300,000 students took Calculus AB.

Participant Lauren reflected on her experience in relation to her classmates from Atlanta:

All my friends that go to UGA went to schools like in the Atlanta region like

Forsyth [County]. And their high school just sounds so much different than ours.

One thing is they had so many AP classes that they have tons of credit coming in

and my school didn't offer that many. So, I only got like three credits. I took as

many as would fit my schedule. That's not much. So, I feel like I'm at a

disadvantage because of that.

Lauren's friends were already sophomores when they arrived at the University of Georgia

by credit hour. Lauren, despite taking the most rigorous curriculum offered in her high

school, was still a freshman in her first year.

In her second year at UGA, Lauren discovered that one of her peers her same age

was far ahead of her in her studies:

I'm a sophomore and I have a friend who is a sophomore as well. [She's] exactly

the same age as me and she's starting to take grad classes this semester because

she has so much dual enrollment credit that she's going to get her master's by the

time that I graduate with my bachelor's., I thought I would be well-prepared to

come here and I have a good GPA, but I just don't think I learned nearly as much

in my high school as everyone else did.

Despite having up to two years of coursework, many students at UGA continue to stay

for four years, adding degrees and certificates. In response, UGA created the "Double

Dawgs" program, allowing students to enroll in graduate programs simultaneously with

their bachelor's degree (Fahmy, 2017).

Of importance to Lauren was her preparation for STEM courses. On the first day

of class, she realized that she was not prepared for the leap she would have to make:

I had to take Chemistry and I didn't learn anything in my chemistry class in high school, even though it was honors. And so, that was really hard for me to learn all the stuff that everyone else knew. That was stressful. I didn't learn anything about math either. I was in honors math classes and then I took two honors and two regular math classes, and I don't think I learned any pre-calc at all. I felt like I had never seen this stuff before in my life.

Georgia is currently experiencing a teacher shortage. Teachers are particularly needed in math and science in rural communities (Percy, 2016). Without experienced math and science teachers who are certified to teach AP courses, rural schools will remain behind. There is a curriculum mismatch between the K12 and higher education systems in Georgia.

STEM is particularly important for students seeking a career in medicine. Rachel was required to take several STEM courses in her first year because of her desire to be a rural doctor. She is a Ramsey Scholar, which is the second highest honor bestowed upon excellent incoming freshmen. She lived with other Ramsey Scholars who were also planning for careers in medicine and realized that her study habits were not the same as her classmates, nor was her preparation:

I never really worked for my grades in high school. Like studying for a test was looking over your notes in the class period before. And I always thought I was studying with my freshman year introduction classes. And then as things got harder. I can't believe that I ever thought that [general chemistry] was challenging [compared to] where I am now and how I work now. I was so behind all the time.

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And everyone had taken AP Biology and AP Chemistry, and I was like no... Not

at all. We had Physical Science and that was it.

In Rachel's first general chemistry class, she realized that she was far behind her suburban peers. Later, she realized that her years behind stifled her growth in more advanced courses.

Rachel was particularly embarrassed in one story in her first semester when she began studying with a group of fellow Ramsey scholars:

I was in a study group for my first honors general chemistry class. And everything

that I covered in my high school chemistry class was in the first chapter of my

college chemistry book. And I was sitting around in a study group with a couple

of people, and we were working out zoochemistry problems, and I was like,

"Does anyone know the conversion for water from grams to liters?" And someone

turns to me and goes, "It's one-to-one, it's the foundation of the whole metric

system." And I was like, "Well shit!" It's probably like the dumbest I've ever felt

in college.

Rachel's story exemplifies the curricular gap that exists at rural schools in Georgia. To overcome the curricular gap, rural students must weather the storm of advanced curricula in order to survive and continue their study, especially in STEM majors. Students with more access to AP courses in STEM experience this bump in high school.

It is ideal for students to experience a curricular bump in high school because the stakes are lower. AP students have the option to not report their AP score to colleges for inclusion on their transcript. Additionally, students in high school still live at home and enjoy the benefits that come along with that. When students come to college, they must

learn new skills, like how to live with non-family members, how to do laundry, and how to manage their own schedule.

When students are taking an academic leap in addition to adjusting to college life, increased stress can occur. Students need room to fail in order to be successful, but the competitiveness of applications for graduate school, medical school, and law school increase stress and anxiety. Participant Rachel reflected on how she survived the demanding STEM curriculum after being the valedictorian of her high school class:

> I had to experience a couple of failures, honestly. I read the chapter and that wasn't enough, and so at every step I hit a backslide. You have to think that you can overcome [failure]. I got to [organic chemistry] 2, and by then I actually was working my butt off. I failed every [test]. I went in and talked to my professor, and he had me bring in all the work I had been doing for the class. I brought in like 4 notebooks. And he was like, "Ok your grades are definitely not reflecting what you're doing. And I still don't really handle that well when I think back to that time. It was like PTSD. It haunts me. I did end up passing the class, because he saw how much work I was putting into it.

Rachel figures that the only difference between her and her peers is the STEM offerings in her high school.

Some students do have access to AP credits and STEM credits. Participants Michael and Roger both attended the same high school which is coded as a "Rural: Fringe" school. This school's classification should be readjusted, however, as the metropolitan creep of Atlanta south of Interstate 20 has included their small town since the classification were established in 2007 (Provasnik et al., 2007). Both students went to

the primarily white high school in their district, which Michael described as the "brain school." Michael stated:

> I really enjoyed the high school experience. I'm enjoying college more, mind you, but the high school experience was good. It taught me a lot, it did get me prepared for history at Georgia. Especially the good history teachers, the good English teachers that pushed me and expected greatness.

Michael believes that the instruction at his high school is superior to that of other high schools.

Roger, who moved from a rural area of Indiana, compares his experience at his emerging suburban high school with his experience in his first year at the University of Georgia.:

> I got used to it pretty quickly, class wise and I didn't have to really structure myself to do homework like I did when I moved from [Indiana] to [Georgia]. It was kind of the same because I had been taking AP classes. The only thing was like rolling out of bed and going to class. It was a little different than it was in high school because you don't go for 8 hours a day. I didn't have to make my own meals my freshman year. I think I did pretty well.

Roger's experience with STEM courses in his rural Indiana schools did not prepare him for his high school courses in Georgia but experiencing an increase in difficulty was easier for him, because he experienced the increase in high school rather than college.

Roger and Michael provide a comparison for this case study. Though their school is coded as a "Rural: Fringe" school, they both refer to it as "suburban." Though the town may have compared more closely to a rural area in 2007 when the codes of urbanicity

were created, it more closely resembles the sprawling suburban cities in North Atlanta (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Participant Ben attended a rural private school. With the additional resources at a private school, Ben was able to take dual enrollment credits within his high school:

> They partnered up with the local small college and they said, "We understand that all you guys want to do dual enrollment and earn credit," kind of like AP. "We decided instead of offering AP, we'll just offer the dual enrollment credit, bring in professors from the local college and they'll teach classes here on campus just to make it easier for you guys." At my school, they integrated dual enrollment into the curriculum.

Ben's rural private school had the resources necessary to increase the curricular offerings within the school. Ben did not have to travel to the local community college to take dual enrollment classes.

Dual enrollment is available to all high schoolers in Georgia who wish to take courses at local colleges for credit at both the high school and college level. There are several barriers that make dual enrollment difficult, however. The first is information. At schools like Magnolia's, Audrey's, Abagail's, and Lauren's, accurate information about college options was not available to students, according to the participants.

For students like Ernest who are homeschooled, an additional information barrier is present:

> I went to school in 5th grade at a public school. One of my better friends there, we were at this [academic] competition, and it's normally two of the kids in the top of the class. Looking at when he finished high school he had already had 45 hours of

credit through dual enrollment. He already had a scholarship for those feats that

he achieved. [I think I would have received] e-mails where you see when they

offer scholarships and things.

Ernest believes that his homeschooling limited his opportunities in making his college-

going decision and the financial aid available to him. This study shows that there is no

guarantee at a rural school that the counselor will have the same information about

postsecondary opportunities as counselors at urban or suburban schools.

Theme 2 – Socioeconomic Status Mediates Experience

Although rural students are at a disadvantage when it comes to the curricular

offerings at their high schools in Georgia, socioeconomic status has an overriding effect.

This theme analyzes socioeconomic status and its impact on how the years leading up to

college affect college experience and how high socioeconomic status improves the

college experience through the lens of participant Ben's experience. A discussion of

study abroad and its link with student success follows.

Participant Ben is an example of how socioeconomic status can improve the

college experience of rural students. Ben's family successfully navigated the Great

Recession of 2008, which hit his community particularly hard. His rural community is a

tourist attraction in North Georgia. Both of his parents lost their jobs but were both

employed almost immediately afterwards. Ben's mother accepted a job in the public

sector, which provided the family with additional security; Ben's father was working for

a country club that had gone through an international sale and, eventually, its closure.

Ben's experience in higher education is improved by his parents' station in life.

As a result of their willingness and ability to pay for private school tuition, Ben was able

to start taking dual enrollment classes in his high school by the 10th grade. Living in a rural yet economically prosperous area also allowed Ben to gain job experience at a local camp where he worked for several summers. Ben's experience attending private school and working at a local camp increased his social network.

When Ben arrived at the University of Georgia as a freshman, he was already connected to multiple friend groups:

> I will hang out on Thursday night every week or so with all the people back from [my hometown. We] go to one of their apartments and hang out. So, it's still kind of like I don't feel like I've lost that close-knit community feeling, because I'm still keeping that friend group. I was able to avoid getting lost in the crowd.

As discussed in Chapter 3, rural communities are, by definition, smaller in population than urban and suburban communities, which means that rural students come to college with a smaller social network. Unlike other participants in this study, Ben felt that UGA was a small world, rather than a large and lonely campus.

As a result of the superior academic offerings of his private school, Ben completed more college-level coursework than most other participants in this study. Unlike other participants in this study, Ben was able to take calculus in high school with a small class size and was able to earn dual enrollment credit. Ben reported that the smaller class size of his STEM classes led to more academic success, "They blocked classes to a maximum 17 people per class [at my high school]. The calculus classes here [at UGA] I also really like, because they are kept small."

Ben exemplifies how socioeconomic status can improve the college experience. For one, he is economic advantaged above other students in this study. Being more

economically advantaged led to Ben attending a private school with a superior college-level curriculum compared to the public school in which he was zoned.

Indeed, Ben was one of only two participants in this study who completed dual enrollment credits. Both he and Margaery completed dual enrollment credits in their high school and not in a local college. Ben's private school and Margaery's public school either contracted an instructor from a local community college or certified a public-school teacher through a local community college to teach college-level courses.

Other students benefitted from their socioeconomic status, and study abroad emerged as an indicator of high socioeconomic status. The benefits of studying abroad are well documented in the higher education literature (Di Pietro, 2015; Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009; Pope, Sánchez, Lehnert, & Schmid, 2014; Potts, 2015). Anecdotally, the benefits of study abroad include immersing oneself in another culture. Immersion can be particularly powerful if the student is studying the culture, language, or an international aspect of their field of study.

Moreover, there are benefits to study abroad that are not as obvious or anecdotal. Studying abroad increases students' creative thinking and supports complex cognitive processes (Lee et al., 2012). Students who participated in study aboard experiences perceived benefits in communication skills, analytical skills, teamwork, and problem solving (Potts, 2015). One study of Italian students showed a significant link between study abroad experience and post-graduate employment (Di Pietro, 2015).

The benefits of studying abroad are not limited to personal development, however. A large mixed method study found that those who study abroad are more likely

to vote and more likely strive to live a more modest life than those who do not (Paige et al., 2009). Studying abroad is therefore an education in citizenship.

The decision to participate in study abroad will improve a student's life, but the decision to do so is linked with socioeconomic status. A recent study found a link between parent education level and desire to study abroad (Pope et al., 2014). The current study found the same link. Using the code document table function of ATLAS.ti, the researcher found that of the five participants studied abroad, and all of them were second generation college students from a background of at least middle income.

Though Margaery did not study abroad in college, she was able to travel in high school. Margaery noted that seeing people from different cultures made her appreciate diversity:

> I've been out of the country a couple of times. In 10th grade my family we went on vacation to Europe. We went to France – Paris specifically, and that was really fun just sort of seeing other people. My world history teacher does [a] trip every so often where she takes a group of her students somewhere and she decided that she was going to London and Paris again. And I decided, you know, that'd be fun to do. I really enjoyed myself. I really want to go back to London someday.

Margaery said that many people in her community were opposed to any foreign culture, but that her experiences traveling as an adolescent prevented her from having those opinions. For Margaery, traveled prevented her from experiencing the xenophobia that she said was a significant issue in her community.

Unlike Margaery, Mary did not travel until she began college. Attending the University of Georgia gave her the unique experience of being able to travel to Cota Rica; she was able to attend classes at the University of Georgia campus in Costa Rica:

> That was incredible. It was really fun. It was only a Maymester, so we were only there for a month, but it was a chance to practice my Spanish, which I learned needed a lot of practice. I met some really incredible people. UGA actually has a campus there, and it's an eco-campus, and it's fully sustainable. They grow all of the vegetables and fruits that you eat in the dining hall. They raise cattle and chickens and different livestock. They even use the milk from the cows. That was a really cool thing to see because conservation is not a priority in the town where I'm from. There's not really a problem with pollution [in my hometown] or things like that, but at the same time, no one recycles. My parents had never really thought about it, I guess. I'm happy to say that they recycle now.

Mary's experience in Costa Rica enabled her to practice her Spanish, which was an invaluable aspect of her education.

Someone who teaches Spanish ought to have experience speaking it with native speakers. It also gave her the opportunity to learn more about conservation and sustainability. Mary gained professional experience, and she became a better citizen as a result of her trip to Costa Rica.

Faith sought out a study abroad experience because she wanted to have a more competitive resume. She majors in international affairs, and so she knew she needed an international experience:

I chose South Africa. We also went to Botswana and Zimbabwe. I felt like it was

the most different place I could find. It was like the perfect place to learn about

human rights, Nelson Mandela. I didn't want to go to Europe, because I have been

surrounded by white people all my life and I am almost hyper fixated on learning

about people who are different than me, and so that was appealing.

After struggling to find a way to set herself apart from her peers, Faith chose a study

abroad experience in South Africa.

What surprised Faith the most about South Africa was how not different she was

than the people there:

It was not as other-worldly as I thought it was going to be, because I think I had

this idea of a very, like, I knew that South Africa was developed, but like it has

the word Africa in its name and I think it's going to be undeveloped. And it was

like in a lot of ways similar to California. Almost everyone speaks English. It was

not an easy trip to take, but it wasn't like I was somewhere where I didn't know

the language.

Faith's confidence in her ability to travel increased dramatically as a result of her trip to

Africa. As an international affairs major, having first-hand experience is essential.

Faith contrasted her experience in South Africa with her experience growing up in

the Deep South in a rural town:

It was just beautiful. The history… the way they've overcome everything is just

really impressive, especially compared to like… I mean we in South still talk

about the Civil War all the time. And there are people here who are Civil War

obsessed. But like, their like healing process post-Apharti, like not that it's

perfect, but their whole country [made a] collective decision to move past [it].

And I just think that's really interesting.

Faith stated that she had a better understanding of racial issues in the American South as a result of her trip to South America. She was more acutely aware of inequalities that had existed in her hometown that she never realized.

Rachel also went on a study abroad experience. Rachel's study abroad experience was more typical than Faith's, as she traveled to Ireland, Scotland, and England. Rachel comes from a middle-income background, which she admits is very high compared to her peers in high school:

I don't think that my friends [in college] know that I am actually a little bit economically challenged. My family is very well situated for where we are. I was one of the probably wealthier students in high school. But in coming here, all of my friends have done so much travel. My friends, [say] "Oh, every two years we go to Europe." Oh, gosh how? I just don't understand. I would travel all the time if I could. I absolutely love it. But I know that that's not feasible for my family. Yeah, I would say that I have always felt a little lessor for that and wish that I had those opportunities.

Rachel's scholarship gave her the opportunity to study abroad while in college. She says that without that scholarship she would not have been able to travel. Rachel did not feel that her college experience was complete until she studied abroad. When comparing herself to her peers in honors classes, she felt that she was inferior to them because she did not have travel experience until college.

Theme 3 – Rural Students Alter Their Religious Views in College

The 18 interviews in the current study were semi-structured. The interviews followed the interview protocol listed in Appendix A, which served starting point for conversations with participants. This study was not focused on the religious aspects of the college experience for rural students but emerged as a theme in 10 of the 18 interviews.

For over half of the participants in this study, religion was an important aspect of their life in their hometown or while studying at the University of Georgia. After reviewing the transcripts and generating a code set for mentions of religion, the researcher determined that some rural students experience a shift in their religious beliefs towards tolerance of other religions and cultures or reject the religion in which they were raised. All of the participants who mentioned religion in their interview were raised in a protestant Christian church other than one Catholic-identifying student.

Rural students who come to college with Christian values shift toward the tolerance of other cultures and religions. One of the changes rural students in this study noted when they arrived on campus for the first time as a freshman was the representation of a variety of cultures at the University of Georgia. Participant Faith was not accustomed to seeing people who were not like her, "There weren't different cultures where I was from. Where I'm from it's so homogeneous that I remember the first time that I met a person of color and just being like, wow this is a new experience."

Participant Audrey remembered meeting students in her residence hall that came from other parts of the world, and realized that her preconceived notions were false, "Cultural differences had to be reconciled, experienced, and understood. It was definitely a different social and ethnic makeup here." Participant Magnolia, who is from the black-majority southern region of Georgia does not recall seeing a person of Asian descent until

she came to UGA, "I mean, I knew they existed, but just seeing all these people mingling together in one place was kind of new."

The swift departure from their hometown's cultural homogeny caused distress and led ultimately to what Audrey described as "reconciliation." Certain aspects of reconciliation also influenced participants' religious views. Of the 10 participants that mentioned religion in their interview, 5 told a story of how their religious views changed while enrolled at the University of Georgia. Mary, Faith, Ernest, Margaery, and Abagail all experienced a change in their religious views.

Mary realized in high school that some of the things she had learned in her church she no longer agreed with:

> In my hometown, being gay or lesbian was very taboo, and very unacceptable. In fact, we had a guy who was a senior in my junior year of high school who came out and wanted to bring his boyfriend to the prom. It was awful. It was just like chaos, and people were so mean and hateful towards him.

The culture of Mary's church was one of distaste for anything other than strict heterosexuality, "I remember some kind of comment coming from my parents' preacher whenever same-sex marriage was upheld." Mary called it her parents' church, because she quit attending after moving to Athens.

Mary still considers herself a Christian, but the issue with prom and meeting more people in college who do not fit a strict definition of heterosexuality pushed her away from being a member of any church:

> I had my perspectives broadened a lot, now I'm kind of in this, I guess, sense, internally kind of rejecting organized religion, because it just has so many flaws,

especially Southern Baptist Christianity. It uses the Bible to condemn a lot of

people. I approach everyone with love and don't condemning anyone, because

honestly, that's what the Bible preaches.

Mary believes that her experience at the University of Georgia was pivotal in broadening

her view of the world and the people in it. She believes attending any other institution in

Georgia would have had a negative impact on her personal development, "I think I would

definitely still be more ignorant about the world and about people. I would definitely be

more judgmental."

Participant Margaery had a similar experience in her hometown with what she

describes as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy drove her away from her church:

I come from a Christian household, and while I do think that the core of a lot of

the ideas are really good, like being a good person and treating everyone with

respect, I see so many people who call themselves [Christians] and go directly

against that. So, I almost don't like calling myself "Christian" or religious,

because I feel like it carries a negative connotation.

As Margaery studied more at UGA, she realized that the foundation of her understanding

of the world did not line up with what she was learning:

I would say very loosely that I do believe in a higher power, but I'm just not really

sure that the one that I was born into is the right one. I don't know, it's really

weird to assume that, you know? So, I've started to sort of question that. But I do

still have that feeling that while I don't think the earth was created 6,000 years

ago, I do believe maybe something started it all.

Though Margaery does not like the "Christian" label she still identifies herself as one.

Margaery's parents do not know the depth of her distaste organized Christian, especially because they warned her of the influence of academic professionals. Margaery recalls her parents warning her, "Oh no, the professors, they will try and challenge your faith." Unlike Mary, Margaery still attends her family's church, because she says her minister stays away from politically controversial topics, like same-sex marriage and abortion.

Ernest had a similar experience after starting college. Unlike Mary and Margaery, Ernest's parents viewed education and religion as dichotomous entities:

> My parents were very conservative, very Christian. I was all of those things. I guess, until I got away and was able to actually meet the people, which we spoke so often of, and actually talked to those people, I realized that they don't exist as a label or even as we assume they do. And I realized the similarities that we have, I mean that all people do. My parents even kind of vilify the educated. I don't quite have the same perception to religion as I once had, I try to avoid discussing that with my parents, but at the same time it does come up at times, and it only kind of furthers their perception of me as a person in an educated field.

Ernest chose to bring up religion along with education, because he believes that his parents' view of education and religion are linked. His parents are deeply religious, while they also reject formal education.

Ernest hints at racism or xenophobia in his upbringing when he shares, "I got away and was able to actually meet the people, which we spoke so often of." Much like Mary and Margaery, Ernest now rejects those aspects of the culture of his hometown.

Rural students who completely reject Christianity in college did so while they were still in high school. Four participants in the study now completely reject Christianity, which was the religion in which they were raised. Interestingly, all four students rejected Christianity before they came to college, but their rejection intensified after they arrived at the University of Georgia. Roger, who grew up in a small town in Indiana before moving to Georgia, noted a cultural shift when he moved to the South:

> The South is much more religious than any place in the United States. I grew up evangelical, turned away from that. I decided that I was agnostic my Junior year of high school and then, I guess, I call myself an atheist now. But I would say that I feel like I stand out in that a lot, because the South is it seems like I go around, and I talk to people around here. The majority of them are very Christian. They're not just like nonchalant, they're very Christian. Also, I feel like, even though it's not too bad, I still feel like it's a very conservative campus.

Though Mary, Margaery, and Ernest were all warned of the dangers of the influence of "liberal professors," participant Roger views the campus of the University of Georgia as a "very conservative campus." Indeed, UGA is a place where Mary, Abagail, and Magnolia interacted with cultures and races that they never had before, yet for a relative outsider like Roger who spent the majority of his life in rural Indiana, the Deep South is a culturally different place.

Both Julia and Lauren had similar experiences in high school with religion. Julia identifies herself as Catholic, even though she does not believe in the major tenants of the church. Julia still attends mass when she is home, "As I got older, I kind of wanted to

think more for myself instead of just, you know following. So, that's something I'm still figuring out right now."

Lauren is more open with her parents about the fact that she is no longer a Christian. She still attends church with her family when she goes home, but does not seek out spiritual opportunities when she is in Athens:

When I got here my parents were dropping me off and they said, "We're not going to give up on trying to get you to find a church down here like we did with your brother Christopher," because he's not religious either. He had never gone to church when he was in college. But they never followed up on that. They're never like, "You need to find a church." They just stop caring I guess or stopped asking. So, I'll just go to church when I'm home, which is probably like once a month. I'm just used to sitting there and not paying attention, so it's not really hard for me.

Participant Abagail also rejects her religious upbringing. In her interview she described her experience growing up with religion as a personal support system and to fit into the cultural norm of her small community:

I went to a very small church, every single Sunday, so I had a support system there… I was really stressed in high school because I was very reputation obsessed, because I was popular in high school. I had a very goody two-shoes reputation, even though that's not who I am at all, anymore. I was really obsessed with maintaining that. I'm not religious, but I desperately wanted to be, so that I could just kind of blend in. So, I really faked that growing up all 18 years.

Abagail was obsessed with her reputation in high school, and even though she did not feel religious, she still tweeted bible verses in order to maintain the rouse.

Abagail explains that being involved in church and being academically successful fell under the same category in her mind. Her home and her community valued her success in the classroom and in church:

> I didn't participate in anything that I thought could be perceived or construed as immoral. I did go to church every Sunday, mostly because my parents made me, but I did. I tweeted bible verses… It was just important to me to seem respected. There were things that I wanted to accomplish. I wanted to be class president, and I wanted to be our valedictorian. I wanted to be respected and that was the best way.

Abagail speaks about success in high school immediately after her place in her local church, because these are both venues to show that she is a respectable and successful young adult.

One student did not change in his beliefs; his father is a minister. Religion is the family business in Thomas' house. His mother works as the Director of Missions for a non-profit church coordinating organization in his county and his father is a minister. Thomas watched his father's career develop over the course of his childhood, from seminary to his current position at the top of a local non-profit, and in many ways, Thomas has followed in his father's footsteps:

> He's a minister first and with that includes being a good steward of his household. So, he's always been like a spiritual leader since I was young, since I've been old enough to actually understand what's going on in a church. And now I do a Bible study on Thursdays. I'll get in touch with him a couple of times a week, just ask

him different things. Our faith is really important. You know he's made that

extremely important in the family.

Thomas' decision to lead a bible study rather than to join one shows the disposition he

gained from his father to be a spiritual leader.

Thomas believes that his faith has remained strong because he respects his father

and his father's profession and that he did not grow up in a household that was strict:

He hasn't been legalistic about it, you know, he's been very easygoing and his

whole philosophy is that it's their job to raise their children up as best they can.

You know, with like values to adhere to. And they think that once we have

graduated, we're moved out of the house, and if they've done their job then they

don't have anything to worry about. I really like that; there was a lot of freedom in

my household where I don't have to worry about you know them really saying no

a whole lot.

Of all of the students in this study, Thomas' views on religion have changed the least. It

is likely that the reason for this is that religion is the frame for his family's life. Church is

the family's business and Thomas models that behavior by hosting his own Bible study.

The Bible study began as a meeting between he, his girlfriend, and a couple his girlfriend

met in class.

Both Thomas and his girlfriend work at a chain restaurant in Athens, and they

regularly invite people over who are not necessarily Christian. Thomas models his

father's behavior even though he does not intend to enter the ministry:

He never ever pushed it on me. I think it was always kind of there that it might

come up. And it still might because my dad majored in business administration

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and now he is a minister. It's possible that I may graduate and realize that I want

to go into the ministry. But, right now I'm not feeling the calling. When I'm older

I will be a Deacon or something and be involved in the church, but I don't think I

plan on being in the ministry.

Thomas' desire to evangelize co-workers in a bible study that he leads is very similar to

his father's profession as a minister.

Research Question 2: How do Rural Students Decide to Attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

The second research question of this study was "how do rural students decide to

attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" The researcher used

Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice to analyze how rural students chose the

University of Georgia. The researcher created deductive codes based on the five layers of

Perna's model. A discussion of each level of the model is discussed, followed by two

themes that emerged in the analysis:

1. Poor college advising in rural public schools.

2. Geography as a dynamic barrier.

Human Capital

Students go to college because they believe that their time spent in higher

education will provide them with more opportunities and a higher salary; this is known as

human capital theory (Perna, 2006). Unsurprisingly, the researcher coded zero instances

of students displaying low human capital expectations from attending college. If a student

did not believe that they could benefit from college they would not attend, as it is a costly

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process in terms of time and money. However, specific discussions of human capital were exclusive to students who came from a background of low education.

The researcher viewed a human capital discussion as an instance in which the participant explained how or why they weighed they decided to pursue higher education based on a cost-benefit analysis. Eight rural students in this study came from families where neither parent received a bachelor's degree, and five of these eight included a discussion of human capital as a justification to attend college. The five first-generation college students who discussed human capital included Ernest, Jaime, Audrey, Magnolia, and Roland.

It is likely that first-generation college students in this study decided to discuss human capital in their interviews because they rehearsed these conversations in the past with their parents. Ernest's case is an example of the student's parents not seeing the human capital value of college:

> I was the first person in my immediate family to pursue a 4-year degree. I knew that if I didn't I would never be able to live with myself. And they tried to talk me out of it, and I guess the final bit of the discussion was when I said, "This is as much your fault as it is mine." They raised me [with] a type of work ethic that extended into my personal life to where I saw a responsibility in myself to do the best I could…And I decided that it was my responsibility to finish that even if they didn't support it.

Here, Ernest uses his blue-collar upbringing to support his decision to further pursue his education beyond an associate degree, "I saw a responsibility in myself to do the best I could [like in our] furniture business… Dad said, 'if it's not good enough to put your

name on, then there's no sense in doing it.'" Ernest's family name was stamped on the bottom of every piece of furniture their shop produced.

Ernest worked in his parents' woodshop from a young age crafting artisan wood furniture. In fact, Ernest was the foreman of woodshop when he was 17 years-old. His parents wanted him to, at most, attend a community college and complete an associate degree in business to grow the business and eventually take over for his father. Ernest's parents attempted to bribe him to drop out of school multiple times instead of completing his bachelor's degree. Ernest finished his bachelor's degree in December 2016, because he felt that the benefits of finishing outweighed the detriments of short-term poverty.

Indeed, all the first-generation college students in this study mentioned parents who had a practical view of the time and money spent on postsecondary education. Their view can be summed up in a simple question Audrey's parents asked her when she told them she was majoring in ecology and minoring in German and geography: "How will that make you money?" The subtext to the question is, "How will that make you money in four years?"

Many careers require training beyond a bachelor's degree, but the parents of first-generation college students in this study wanted their children to pick a major that would lead directly to a job after graduation. What is missing, then, for many first-generation college students is a clear understanding of graduate and professional school and their requirements. Ernest's parents were particularly against his decision to major in English because he did not have an interest in being a high school English teacher and his parents did not understand the utility of a liberal arts degree.

In contrast, participant Roland decided to major in English education to allot for the uncertain career opportunities of an English major. He explained that he wanted to have a career creating and performing art:

And the reason I said I don't think there is a degree for authors is just, honestly, this is out of my own ignorance. There could be one out there, but from just judging from the authors that I've heard, my influences, they didn't go to college for the purpose of maybe creative writing for instance. They did something completely different, and they did that on their own time, and they made a living out of it one day. And that's sort of the process I took when it comes to what I want to do with my life. English education is obviously one of those paths I want to take. As far as the other careers go, I want to be able to act on stage, in film, and in voice acting. And once I figured out, yes, they do offer a degree similar to that, that's why I chose theater as a separate degree, because I do want to learn as much as I can about acting.

Roland has less interest in being a high school English teacher compared to his interest in acting and performing music; he continues to major in it because he wants to translate his time in college to a job title when he finishes school.

Both Audrey and Jaime used human capital to explain their decision to go to college. Much like Ernest and Roland's parents, Audrey explained that her parents were chiefly concerned about her future earnings as a result of attending college:

[My major] was ultimately left up to me. My parents put that trust in me, but it was also like, "You need to get something that pays well." Because my parents couldn't afford to put me through college themselves. They wanted a better

income for me, and they wanted me to really think carefully about the career path

I chose so that I could get a job that would guarantee me secure income for the

rest of my life.

Audrey comes from a family with a low income and is a first-generation college student. Her parents wanted her to feel financial security for their rest of her life.

It is easy to understand why Audrey's parents were concerned about her long-term security; Audrey reported that her family makes less than $26,000 per year, and both of her parents work. Jaime was more straightforward about his decision to go to college in relation to human capital, "I just like the idea of being successful I think… Not like monetarily, but like just in a good position in life, because I don't want to work two different jobs."

Jaime lives with his father who works multiple jobs for well over forty hours a week, "There's about two or three months of the year where he works about seven days a week because it's peanut season. He usually works pretty long hours. I think one week he said he worked 120 hours." Jaime sees college as an opportunity to live an easier life than his father.

At the center of Perna's nested model of college choice (2006), human capital theory states that a student will attend college if they believe the time and cost of attendance will be more beneficial than detrimental. All students in this study indicated that they had a positive view of human capital in respect to college, even if their parents did not. Notably, only first-generation college students in this study included a discussion of human capital in their narratives of deciding to attend the University of Georgia. Other students described the decision to attend college as "automatic" or "the expectation."

Habitus

The next layer of Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice is habitus. Habitus is "an individual's internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions" (Perna, 2006, p.113). Rather than looking at college-choice from the perspective of a rational actor, Perna cited McDonough's 1997 analysis of college choice, which proposed that students seek "sensible or reasonable" choices (p. 9).

How students make sense of their decision to go to college will be bound by the expectations of their family and their environment. In order to code the transcripts for habitus, the researcher assigned a "habitus high" code and defined it as "student exists at an intersection of advantage, including socioeconomic status, race, measures of social and cultural capital, and gender." The definition of "habitus low" was similar but exchanged the word "advantage" for "disadvantage."

Assessing a student's habitus in relation to their college-going decision is a method of understanding how a person's family and their social class impact the decision to attend. This section discusses how habitus related to the college-going decision for rural students in this study and shows how students from a background of low habitus managed to attend the University of Georgia.

Family connection was an important aspect of habitus, as seven participants indicated a prior connection. Participants who were the first in their family to attend college did not know where to begin their search for schools, while those with a prior connection began their search with the University of Georgia at the top of their list. For participant Mary, UGA was the most obvious first choice. Her immediate response when

the researcher asked how she decided to apply to UGA her response was, "Well, so, a lot of people in my family have gone here. My family has always kind of been UGA fans."

Even if UGA was not the student's first choice, family connection had a positive effect on the decision to attend, as participant Ben explains, "…being that my family went there and kind of all that and then I had friends who went and told me about it and so that played in, but I'd say it was academic mostly." UGA was not Ben's first choice, but the connections he had there contributed to his decision.

Four of these seven students received help from an older sibling who had already gone through the college process. Participant Margaery actually wanted to extend her college search beyond the University of Georgia, but her family connection with her father and sister attending made a significant impact, "It does help that it's a bit of a family thing to come here. My dad did, and my sisters is. It helps that I do know the campus from visiting them or going to games and stuff."

Some students received direct help from their parents in their application to college. Participant Mary's parents both attended graduate school and were able to help her apply for college:

> Yeah, so, I definitely got a lot of help from my parents. Since both of them are teachers, they already knew a lot about the process, and both of them have been to college. So, they were a huge help, and proofread my entrance essays. [They] told me tips about what to include, and maybe what not to… Because they are teachers, I didn't really need to seek out a lot more help, other than maybe advice from one or two of my high school teachers.

Mary's example is in sharp contrast to students like Magnolia, Ernest, or Jaime, who received no help from their parents or any family connection in their application.

Margaery, whose parents are highly educated, was also aided by her parents in her application process:

> My parents were like, "Oh you think you're writing normally? No this is the stuff they want." They kind of knew what the people who were sorting the applications were looking for. It was all my thoughts and ideas, but they were like, "No, you need to word it like this. Instead of 'I helped out with a band competition once,' you need to say you were the Assistant Supervisor." It did help.

Both Mary and Margaery received instruction and editing help, along with the security of believing that their parents knew how to "game" the admissions process.

Students who did not have a high habitus in their home must find college advice in unconventional ways. Participant Jaime is a first-generation college student and a first-generation American. Jaime was born in the United States, and thus is an American citizen, but his father is undocumented. His father was not involved in the college decision process at all and speaks very little English.

Jaime explained that he was only able to attend the University of Georgia because of a shift in his friend group. In the early years of high school, Jaime played football and hung around mostly African American students, "I was hanging out with like Hispanic kids and black kids. I was playing football and soccer basically. But then eventually when I stopped playing football, I kind of stopped hanging out with black kids." Jaime stopped playing football, because he could no longer attend the practices. He had a responsibility

to care for his younger siblings after school. He continued to play soccer, though, and happened to live near the local country club around a majority of white peers.

Through soccer and his geographic closeness with people of a higher socioeconomic status, Jaime was provided with additional opportunities:

> And I remember a lot of my friends were telling me, "Yeah, you'll get into Georgia no problem." I also remember them telling me that, "since you're Hispanic you'll get into Georgia no problem… I remember one of my really good friends, Alan, his mom invited me to come with them for a trip to UGA since we both got accepted. She said, "If you come live with Alan at UGA in the dorms, if you guys become roommates, I'll buy everything in the room. I'll provide the stuff in the room for you guys." I said, "All right." I said, "Yeah, I'll go UGA," before I even toured.

Throughout his education, Jaime was placed in gifted programs and took the toughest classes offered in his high school: AP classes.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the gifted classes often consisted of a majority of white students in a primarily minority high school. Through his gifted program, AP classes, and by playing soccer, Jaime's social capital was much higher than it would have been otherwise. Moreover, by interacting with children of a higher socioeconomic status in his neighborhood, Jaime gained a taste for dominant white culture. Jaime's habitus was improved tremendously by his high social and cultural capital.

Participant Ernest was also the first in his family to attend college. Because his parents did not want him to attend, he was forced to figure out the process of applying to college himself, as well as how to relocate to Athens:

> I was going to have to be responsible for moving here on my own. I was going to have to be responsible for all my bills moving forward, from cell phone, to rent, to power. I managed to get a job before I moved here and so from day one, I actually had an income which helped me out. That was that was the kind of thing that if I was moving away from home, if I was going away, I was on my own. That was what I accepted as the terms and conditions I guess.

What Ernest lacked in emotional and financial support from his parents, he possessed in work ethic and skill.

Ernest's years working in his father's woodshop helped him find a job before he ever arrived in Athens. Ernest lamented that he does feel frustration with his parents for not supporting him, but that there were benefits to accomplishing his goals on his own:

> It almost goes back to the whole practicing manual labor, carpentry, finishing a job and knowing that I created this with my own hands. I credit my parents with me being here, [because of] work ethic. But there is a certain power, a certain fulfillment I feel with having achieved all this without those factors, without that assistance I guess.

Though Ernest's parents did not attend college, and actually did not want him to pursue a four-year degree, his habitus was improved by skill in carpentry and woodwork. The skills and economic capital he gained in his formative years prepared him to survive

without the help of his parents, which is impressive noting the rising cost of college (Seltzer, 2017).

Some students, like Lauren, come from a background of low education, but were boosted by their siblings. Neither of Lauren's parents completed a bachelor's degree, but both of their children will graduate from the two best public postsecondary institutions in Georgia: the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech, "Well, my closest friend in high school also applied to UGA. She got in, and so we kind of went through that together. My parents helped me a lot because I guess they remember doing it with my brother."

Audrey's parents were able to help her, and her brother apply for college, but not every parent is as capable or willing to help in such a way, as was exemplified by Jaime and Ernest. Audrey's explanation of her family and their ability to help her apply to college is a good example of how social class is difficult to overcome in a rural area:

> [When I started applying for college] it was completely left up to me. My parents
> were very ... Loose isn't the right word, because they did expect a lot out of me.
> [Just] to perform at the best of my ability. Early on, it manifested that my ability
> in regard to book learning was very high. I've always been very good at reading
> and retaining information, so it was always a natural thing that I would go to
> college, but it wasn't something that I would say I was actively groomed for
> because I didn't come from a background where there was a strong history of that.

Though Audrey did not have parents who attended college, Audrey was able to find the information she needed as a result of very high human capital. Similar to Magnolia, Audrey believed that college was her way out of the working class.

When a student comes from a background of low habitus, as was shown with Ernest, Jaime, Lauren, and Audrey, rural students must depend on special skills or the help of others to help them push through. For Ernest, it was his skill and work ethic. For Jaime, it was his placement in gifted courses and proximity to white middle-class students. Lauren had parents who were willing to help her, even though they knew little about the process. Audrey was extraordinarily motivated by her perception of having a high intellect.

School and Community Context

The next level in Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice is the school and community context. The school context includes teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators who serve as motivators for students. The community context includes anyone in the community who influences the student. An example in the current study is in church membership. Participants in this study indicated that they had conversations with members of their church about college.

Inherent in the school and community context of Perna's (2006) model is organizational habitus. Like individuals, organizations have a habitus as well. Some organizations may encourage or discourage the college-going decision for youths that are members or are influenced by the organization. An example of this comes from Abagail's story of being discouraged to attend the University of Georgia by members of her church because of its distance:

Also, I feel like there was a lot of conversation about how I could leave my parents, because Georgia is perceived to be… I mean it's two and a half hours

away. But I just remember people asking me all the time, how I could leave my parents, which I think is a weird thing, and I don't feel like guys are asked that. Members of Abagail's church were pointedly asking her how she could consider leaving her parents behind, because she is an only child.

As with other levels of Perna's model, the researcher created two codes, one named "School and Community High" and the other named "School and Community Low." High was defined as "the student reported receiving help from teachers and administrators in accessing higher education. Student reported hearing stories about higher education from members of their community."

Transcripts coded with "School and Community High" typically fell into two categories, influence from school officials and extracurricular trips. Advising at the high school level for rural students was poor for many students in this study. Poor advising emerged as a theme and is further discussed below this overview of Perna's (2006) model.

In addition to having parents who were teachers, Mary also had the opportunity to learn Spanish in elementary school. She was the only student in the gifted program in her age group and received one-on-one instruction. This led to her decision to major in romance languages as an undergraduate, and to eventually to finish a master's degree:

> When I got to high school, it all just kind of came back, and I was like, I really
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> enjoy this, and not a lot of people at our school enjoyed foreign language. I just
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> felt like I sort of had an affinity for it, and I really liked it. I looked into Spanish
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> first, and then I realized I could do romance languages and also learn French,

which my dad speaks, but I don't really, I didn't really know a lot before then.

That kind of guided me on my choice.

Mary's experience being in the gifted program in her elementary school led directly to her career as a Spanish teacher.

Julia also had a good experience with her teachers in her small rural school, "Yeah, I mean it was a good school. There were some teachers that really, they really wanted the kids to learn, grow. It was a smaller school, so everyone kind of knew each other. It was like a community." Smaller communities, therefore, do not necessarily mean a poorer education.

Abagail spoke of her high school English teacher who encouraged her to focus on improving her standardized test scores in order to apply for prestigious private schools:

For the most people UGA, was their reach school. I thought about Vanderbilt, I have a lot of stuff from them, that's why I want to go there for law school, or somewhere like Vanderbilt or Duke, hopefully. But I never really thought about it. I just… I don't know, I had this high school English teacher that told me that I should work on my SAT score, or take the ACT, and try to apply to an Ivy League school, and I thought he was being ridiculous. I was like, "Okay, Coach Carter. Whatever." I would never move so far away, I would never do that.

Abagail's shared that UGA was the highest academic institution students in her home community; a school like Vanderbilt of Duke was well beyond anything that could be expected of someone from her small town. That motivation from her teacher helped push her through towards what she viewed as her optimal school, which was the University of Georgia.

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Similarly, Magnolia remembers a middle school science teacher who pushed her and her classmates to begin thinking about college early. Magnolia reported that very few students from her school attended any postsecondary institution after graduation, and that she was the first University of Georgia student from her high school in years:

He had a habit, he would, instead of teaching, he would lecture us the entire class period. Okay, the mentality of where I'm from is that you're not going to amount to anything because you're black, you're poor, so you're not going to do anything. He would always lecture us, "You have options. There's more to life than just this." I decided then to shoot for the best.

The HOPE scholarship gave Magnolia's teacher a motivator for student success. If each student in Magnolia's class finished with a 3.0 GPA, they could attend college with a 75% discount on their tuition.

Participant Michael was a third generation University of Georgia student. He received encouragement from his family and from teachers in his high school to go to UGA if given the chance:

It was hard to find a person who could say something bad about the university, especially when you say, "Oh I go to the University of Georgia." And they go "Oh, I went there in 1982. It was fantastic and great." I have been to homecoming games and there are a few things I think can impress on you the amount of love people have for this school more than coming to a homecoming game, especially when you are a little kid. So, yeah between personal stories and name recognition and all of that, those were big factors toward me leaning Georgia.

From his interactions with adults in his community, Michael realized that going to the University of Georgia would connect him with a vast social network of individuals. Thus, habitus played a role in Michael's understanding of how he could benefit from college based on others' experiences in his community. Audrey, a first-generation college student, did not take the opinions of adults who attended the University of Georgia seriously, because she did not believe their experiences were relevant.

Both Ben and Adeline benefitted from positive experiences with school personnel in unconventional ways. Ben attended a private school and was offered the opportunity to take college-level courses in his school during normal school hours with professors from a local college. Adeline benefitted from interactions with the advisor for Upward Bound, a TRiO program, in her high school. Adeline's advisor invited her to her home after school to fill out her application for the University of Georgia.

School resources produced positive results in the form of educational trips. Audrey was a member of the Future Farmers of America (FFA). Along with her peers, Audrey traveled to locations all over the state of Georgia to agriculture competitions, county fairs, and vocational tours of working farms. Often these trips were to college campuses:

> I was also in the FFA, primarily the natural resources division. I did tree ID and
> wildlife ID, and little contests like that. We came up here for state almost every
> year. A lot of my teachers had been to Georgia. I just did the research. I just
> looked online and read. It had breadth and depth, and I felt like I could find a
> richness of an education here.

As a land grant institution, the University of Georgia had a presence at many agriculture events. One of these events led to Audrey attending a program for high schoolers, which had her working in a research lab during the summer in high school.

Thomas was able to experience a variety of college campuses as a result of trips for high school marching and his church:

> We went to a thing called Band Day at FSU. So, it was like a whole 2-day trip where we left we left on one day we went over to Florida State and we got to meet the marching band. You know we didn't really get to practice with them, but we got to talk, we got to tour just a little bit of the campus not a whole lot. But then we got to stay there for an FSU game and after seeing FSU and how big it was, and I had seen other smaller colleges at the same time, I realized like I wanted to go to a big college.

Thomas' high school afforded him an opportunity to interact with a college campus and college students, which helped him recognize what kind of institution he wanted.

Additionally, Thomas traveled to college campuses around the Southeast each summer from middle school to high school for a missions-based church camp on college campuses. At the camp, teens from all over the country would engage in project-based missionary work, such as working in homeless shelters, working in a food bank, interacting with underprivileged children, and painting houses.

When speaking negatively about their schools and communities, participants in this study tended to talk about the guidance they received in their search for colleges. This topic is explored further in "Theme 1 – Poor college advising in rural public schools" below this discussion of Perna's (2006) model.

There were some special situations that put participants at a disadvantage. Ernest's situation is one of them. He was homeschooled in an unaccredited program and needed to complete a GED after he finished his high school curriculum. He lamented later that homeschool helped prepare him for college by putting him in charge of his learning. There were negative short-term consequences, however:

> I did learn a lot, and I was able to learn a lot with my dad's business, which has helped me as well. [Homeschooling] did limit my opportunities for things that were more viable in public schools, like scholarships, extracurricular activities, things that really do help you as you take those steps up in other academic realms. And while I probably wouldn't do anything differently looking back, just because of where I am now, sometimes it does make you wonder, if you were offered the same opportunities in those areas, where you could possibly be.

Ernest believes that he would have made better postsecondary decisions if he had been in a traditional high school environment.

Higher Education Context

The higher education context of the college going decision based on Perna's (2006) model deals specifically with recruitment from the college, the characteristics of the school, and its geographic location. The researcher coded "Higher Education High" in instances where students were aware of a variety of schools, where participants were recruited by the University of Georgia, where participants indicated a preference for a larger school experience, or when participants felt that they would be admitted to UGA.

In Perna's model, experiences interacting with institutions of higher education increase the chances of making an optimal decision for students. The current case study

found this aspect of the model to be true. The most common reason participants determined that they would attend the University of Georgia was their belief that it was the best institution to suit their needs; nine of participants in this study indicated that they selected the University of Georgia, because they viewed it as the best institution for their needs. For participant Faith, the University of Georgia appeared to be the best college she could attend:

> UGA would be the absolute most affordable, best school I could go to, and so that's what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to go to college. I knew I wanted to go to the best college I could afford.

> Participants Ben, Margaery, Lauren, Mary, and Audrey all considered Georgia Tech as an option when applying for admission. Only Mary applied and was accepted to Georgia Tech:

> I actually applied to Georgia Tech, but that was honestly just to see if I could get in. When I got the acceptance, I was like, "No! This isn't for me." I mean, I was always pretty set on UGA.

Mary had no true interest in Georgia Tech, she just wanted to see if she could get in if she tried.

> Ben applied to Georgia Tech because he was interested in a career in computer science. Unfortunately, he was not admitted and chose UGA over Kennesaw State. Margaery, Lauren, and Audrey's interest in Georgia Tech was temporary, and ultimately, none of them formally applied. Margaery did not want to be stuck in a science or math major:

I came here just because it's the best option for me, not knowing what I wanted to

do. And if I decide to go to Georgia Tech or something, and they're very good at

certain things, but if I decided that I wanted to be a teacher, there's really nowhere

for me to go. I just feel like we have a lot of options here.

As an institute of technology, the course of study offered is limited to students,

particularly in the humanities.

Lauren is a first-generation college student, and her brother attended Georgia

Tech. She felt like she needed something different than her brother, however. She was

not interested in a major that would require a great deal of math:

I kind of thought Georgia Tech because I really like the campus and every time

I've been there I just liked it a lot. And my brother did well there, but I decided

that I really shouldn't go the math route because that's not what I like. So, I looked

at other colleges but not very in-depth. I just figured I'll just go to UGA, so I'll get

in-state tuition and they offer a lot of different things, so I could figure out what I

wanted to do.

Students in this study were most likely to decline an interest in Georgia Tech, because of

the perception of a difficult curriculum, though some colleges do not require more than

finite math for undergraduates (Georgia Tech, n.d.).

In addition to not seeking out a major that involved math, Audrey also wanted to

be able to explore a wide variety of topics:

I picked Georgia because [it was] in state, it was the most prestigious school

outside of Tech, and I wasn't interested in a mathematically-oriented career. I also

really admired the fact that you could pursue a wide variety of subjects and

disciplines here at the university. I'm an ecology major, but I have two minors.

We've got classes here in Russian film and intersections of art and science, and

just some really interesting, dynamic things that wouldn't have been available at a

smaller college.

In addition to the lack of interest in math courses, participants like Audrey were

interested in studying a wide variety of academic areas. A university offers many more

course offerings than an institute of technology. Michael agreed with this sentiment, "I

really settled on Georgia because of the options."

Mary was offered a scholarship to play basketball at smaller institutions in

Georgia, but ultimately decided to retire from basketball, because she was drawn to the

substantial number of course offerings and her view that the quality of the education was

superior:

I would much rather get a really great education and a degree with a lot behind it

at UGA than go to a school where they don't have as good of a program, or as big.

It wouldn't have been as detailed. I don't even know that I could have done both

Spanish and French at [another] school.

Mary exemplifies the participant attitude towards the University of Georgia. UGA is the

best value school in Georgia, as it provides majors and courses in many topics and is not

limited to STEM areas.

Five participants in this study noted that they desired a large school in their

college search. Participant Julia believed that the University of Georgia was the best

school she could go to. Moreover, she believed that a larger research institution would

provide her with what she needed:

Well I really just wanted to go to a good school, and I thought that UGA was the best school in Georgia. I needed to go somewhere I got the HOPE scholarship, so I definitely wanted to stay in state. I had looked at Georgia State [University] in Atlanta, but in the end, I wanted to go to the bigger research university.

Both of Julia's parents went to graduate school, and she indicated that they played a role her understanding of why research in universities matters.

The size of the institution mattered to the participants in this study, because they were ready for a novel experience. After growing up in a small town, they wanted to experience what a larger community would be like. Participant Abagail shared:

[UGA] made me the most sense for me. I wanted a big school. I wanted the social life. I wanted a school that was regarded well, which UGA was good enough for me in that respect. Because I mean, it's a great school. It was big.

Abagail bookends her comment about UGA being regarded well by noting the size of the institution. For Abagail, there is a direct correlation between size and quality.

Participants in this study noted receiving recruitment mail from colleges and universities around the United States. None mentioned receiving any recruitment material from the University of Georgia. Participant Mary noted that, because of her lack of AP credits, she was fearful that she would not be admitted:

I was really nervous when I applied, because I knew that I had only taken a couple of AP classes and other dual enrollment classes, and a lot of other people probably had a lot more on their application. When I found out that I got in, I was ecstatic. I was really happy, because this was my number one choice.

The University of Georgia is upfront about certain aspects of their selection process. For example, what they define as "academic rigor," or taking the most rigorous coursework available, is most important. UGA does not publish its precise method of selecting students.

Adeline, too, believed that the University of Georgia was beyond her reach. Despite having a 4.0 GPA in high school and scoring in the 98th percentile of the ACT, Adeline felt that UGA was looking for students with even more achievements:

UGA was not on my radar when I was searching. It was kind of like a, I feel like it was kind of a spur of the moment kind of thing when I finally applied because I wasn't going to apply. I thought that I wouldn't get it in or I thought that, yeah, that they were looking for something better, with more prestige. With more accolades than I had.

Adeline came to this conclusion when she began searching for scholarships. She read the profiles of students in the honors program at UGA and who had received scholarships. They had traveled abroad and knew multiple languages. She did not feel that she could compete, and she was never contacted by UGA to apply.

Adeline felt safer applying to smaller schools rather than the University of Georgia. The largeness of the institution intimidated her:

[At Valdosta State and Kennesaw State] I felt like I would get in. I felt like I had the grades and the accolades to get in there. The atmosphere, it was what I was used to, so small. It was small, and it felt like it could be home, in a way. Home away from home, so I was like, "Okay, I can get here. I can jive with this. With this group of people." [UGA was] beyond my reach. The people who've gone

above and beyond and went to another country, built wells and saved the

amphibians and yeah. I thought UGA was a place for those individuals.

Adeline had one parent who went to college and one that did not. She was not a

disadvantaged student in the sense that she was a second-generation college student, but

she is an African American female from rural Georgia of middle income. Of the students

who indicated that they wanted a large school experience, none of them came from a

background of low income or low education.

One reason for participants from backgrounds of socioeconomic status not

mentioning going to a "large" university might be that the students did not have a context

for the difference between large and small institutions. Mary's parents both attended

graduate school and went with her to campus visits to compare. Thomas was able to be

on a college campus several times in high school because of church and band. Both of

Julia's parents attended graduate school and she had visited her sister at the University of

Georgia before applying. Experiences interacting with institutions of higher education

increase the chances of making an optimal decision for students, as the participants in this

study showed.

Social, Economic, and Policy Context

The social, economic, and policy context of Perna's (2006) model is the

outermost layer. It represents how changes in the periphery of the college student can

influence behavior. Perna uses demographic changes to note the changing social context

and the unemployment rate to show changes in the economic context.

At the University of Georgia, the demographics of the undergraduates mirror

demographic changes in Georgia. As seen in Table 6.1, the total number of Asian

students rose by 7.7% between 2011 and 2016. The total Asian population of Georgia nearly doubled from the 2000 Census to the 2010 Census, as the children of immigrants are now college-aged (*Georgia Asian Times*, 2011).

The Hispanic, or Latinx, population of Georgia also experienced growth in the last 20 years, and the University's demographics reflect that growth. Surprisingly the Hispanic population continues to grow at UGA in spite of University System of Georgia Policy 4.6.1, which limits undocumented students from attending the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, or Georgia State University, regardless of their merit. Though it is not known precisely how many, a significant number of undocumented students under 18 live in Georgia, and most of them are Latinx (Pérez, 2014).

The Great Recession that began in 2008 is now official over (Worstall, 2015). During the height of the Great Recession, economic realities affected student decision making. Using Pell Grant data, Katsinas (2013) found that the number of financially-needy students was dropping as a result of new economic realities and new Pell Grant restrictions. The end of the recession in 2015 signals that college-going decisions are likely no longer impacted by overarching negative trends in the economy. Indeed, in 2018, at the time of writing, the economy is strong (Horsley, 2018).

The policy context, unlike the economic context, is significant in Georgia. The HOPE and Zell Miller scholarships are awarded to students in Georgia based on academic merit. HOPE scholarship recipients receive 75% of their tuition for maintaining a 3.0 GPA in high school and college, while the Zell Miller Scholarship provides 100% of tuition, excluding fees, for students with a 3.7 GPA in high school and maintaining a 3.3 GPA in college (Georgia Student Finance Commission, n.d.).

The researcher generated two codes for the social, economic, and policy context. The researcher coded text in which the student mentioned positive outcomes of demographic changes, overarching economic changes, or specific public policies that influenced their decision to go to college as "Social, Economic, and Policy Context High." The researcher coded negative outcomes of demographic changes, overarching economic changes, and public policies as "Social, Economic, and Policy Context Low."

Table 6.1

Undergraduate Demographic Changes, 2011-2016

Race	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	% Change
White	22,067	21,891	21,584	20,907	21,042	21,341	-7.3
Asian	2,090	2,234	2,415	2,573	2,666	2,290	7.7
Black	1,960	2,138	2,132	2,184	2,250	2,290	3.3
Hispanic	1,013	1,239	1,365	1,502	1,542	1,663	6.5
Unknown	1,077	581	461	340	253	257	-8.2
Non-resident Alien	257	309	386	437	549	630	3.7
Two or More	360	560	704	859	978	1,101	7.4
Indian or Alaskan	53	53	37	28	25	27	-0.3
Native Hawaiian	14	19	31	33	35	33	0.2

Note: University of Georgia demographic data based on 2011-2012 through 2015-2016 undergraduate unduplicated headcount from the Integrated Postsecondary Education (IPEDS) database.

The HOPE and Zell Miller scholarships were prominent throughout the study. In fact, every participant in this study mentioned or alluded to the desire to stay in state to

take advantage of the HOPE scholarship. The "Social, Economic, and Policy High" code was the only code used in this study that was assigned to a string of text in every transcript.

There were no instances of the "Social, Economic, and Policy Low" code. It is possible that if this study were completed between 2009 and 2015, the "low" code would have been used more, as the economic recession had a negative effect on college-going decisions (Katsinas, 2013).

The purpose of the HOPE scholarship was to encourage the best and brightest students from Georgia to stay in state to complete their postsecondary education and to remain for their professional career (Baralament, 2007). For every participant in this study, the HOPE scholarship was a major reason, if not clearly stated as the main reason, for their attendance at the University of Georgia.

The most common reason that participants in this study gave for using HOPE to say in state was to avoid student loans. Participant Rachel received the Zell Miller Scholarship and the Bernard Ramsey scholarship, and she was still forced to take out loans. Moreover, her parents were worried about her taking loans as an undergraduate, because she had ambitions to go to medical school, "They were very worried about how they were going to spin [the finances]. I have a great scholarship here. I have Zell. We still had to take out loans for me to be in college here."

Lauren scored in the 98th percentile on the ACT, and she received material from colleges across the United States. Still, the HOPE scholarship was enough to keep her in state:

I got stuff from tons of colleges and I didn't really consider out-of-state ones very much at all because just the cost of going out of state. I knew I'd get Zell Miller here and it would be way cheaper. I didn't want to take out a ton of loans to go somewhere. The only other place I thought about was Emory, but that would be expensive too, and I didn't even apply there.

Lauren did not apply to Emory University, which could be seen as a negative consequence of the Zell Miller scholarship, as Emory is a superior institution. Still, the scholarship paid for 100% of Lauren's tuition.

For participant Audrey, the University of Georgia was her only choice. She viewed the University of Georgia as the best possible choice given the financial opportunities, "Georgia just was the only school in the state that fit all of the criteria, but finances were a really big issue because I was determined to take out the absolute minimal amount of loans."

Both Michel and Roger come from backgrounds of high income and high education. They are both third-generation college students. It is likely that they could have been admitted to a higher quality institution than the University of Georgia and that their parents could have afforded to help pay for tuition. They both felt that the University of Georgia was the most practical option. Michael stated:

And then as far as the choice to go to Georgia, I have a lot of siblings, so in state [was preferable]. I'm on Zell now, that was like the deciding factor for me, even though my parents, were like, you know "You don't have to worry about it." But there's five of us, let's be reasonable here.

Michael applied using the "early action" application. He found out in December that he would be attending the University of Georgia, and his college search ended. The early action application in conjunction with the HOPE scholarship encourages Georgia's best students to stay in state.

Roger was more upfront about his parent's financial situation. As an older sibling, Roger felt compelled to leave more money behind for his siblings:

> So, I'm on Zell Miller right now, and my Dad makes 6 figures, and my Mom also makes 6 figures, and so they make quite a bit of money, but they also support my two older step-brothers and myself and my younger sister.

The HOPE scholarship serves as a convenience for wealthy students and as a bridge for students of low socioeconomic status.

As the name implies, the HOPE and Zell Miller scholarships do provide a great deal of hope for students who are first-generation or in financial need. Participant Magnolia's seventh grade teacher began telling his students that HOPE money would be there for them if they tried hard in school. From then on, she was focused on making it to college:

> I knew it was going to have to be a public college, so I could use my HOPE and Zell, so I looked at the grades, I looked at the GPA, the requirements, so it came down between Georgia and Tech. I figure Tech is mainly focused more on engineering, sciences, so I decided to pick Georgia because I'm a psychology major.

For Michael and Roger, HOPE provided a convenient means to attend college affordably. For Magnolia, HOPE was the only chance she had at a four-year education.

This section continues with a discussion of two themes that emerged from the research question, "How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" Two themes emerged: poor college advising in rural public schools and geography as a dynamic barrier.

Theme 1 – Poor College Advising in Rural Public Schools

Participants in this study reported that the pre-college advising that they received in their high school was poor. Four of the participants reported that they did receive good advising for college, but the advice came in unconventional ways. For example, participant Ben attended Bright Mountain School, a private boarding school in the North Georgia mountains. The standard at Bright Mountain School was for every student to attend college after graduation, "every senior had to do a project that was part of their final grade. You had to apply to at least three schools. So, they really wanted you to try and actually look at different options and see everything."

Magnolia's school implemented a similar program, but she did not feel that it had much success:

> The new administration came in and they made it mandatory that all seniors apply to at least three colleges. [Other students] didn't really care about college. Most people, they got this mentality in their head that they're not going to amount to anything, so they didn't really care about it.

When Magnolia was asked if she thought the new program requiring seniors to apply to three schools improved the rate at which students in her school went to college, she simply replied, "No."

The culture at Ben's school was different; all of the students Ben attended high school with attended college after graduation, whereas Magnolia is one of only a dozen from her high school who did. Here, we see that the policy of mandating that students must apply to colleges is hindered by human capital development and the habitus of the school. Moreover, socioeconomic status could also depress college-going rates, as 89% of Magnolia's classmates received free or reduced lunch as seen in Table 5.4.

Magnolia mentioned nothing about her guidance counselor in her interview. She reported receiving no help from any adult in her college-going decision. She claims that her intense desire to go to college drove her to do hours of research in her own time to figure out the best public school in Georgia to study psychology.

Adeline received college counseling from Upward Bound, a federally funded TRiO program that provides college counseling for students at an intersection of disadvantage, such as in socioeconomic status and race. Adeline and her fellow Upward Bound members traveled several times per year to colleges in the Southeast:

> It was really good because we had a good coordinator. We went on a lot of trips to universities around the Southeast. We went to Tennessee, Louisiana, and Florida. It exposed me to a lot of different things I had not seen before, because [my hometown] doesn't have a college or a state university. We even got to live as college students would during the summer. We would go to Gordon State College and stay there for the entire summer, living with, having roommates, living in the dorms there and getting to experience how college might be.

Adeline received practical experience from Upward Bound. By traveling to so many colleges, she was better able to understand what she might desire out of a college experience.

By emulating college students for a summer, Upward Bound students get a low-stakes opportunity to test the waters of independence and higher education. The experience was extremely important for Adeline, because even though she was an excellent student in high school, a second-generation college student, and from a middle-class family, she did not feel confident that she could gain admission to the University of Georgia:

> UGA was not on my radar when I was searching. It was a spur of the moment kind of thing when I finally applied because I wasn't going to apply. I thought that I wouldn't get it in or I thought that they were looking for something better with more prestige with more accolades than I had. [My Upward Bound advisor] was like, "We're going to do this, okay? You come over my house and we're going to do this. We're going to apply."

Thankfully, Adeline did apply at her advisor's home, and Adeline gained admission to the University of Georgia. Adeline admits that she would not have applied to UGA if it had not been for her Upward Bound advisor's willingness to invite her over and answer any questions that she had as she completed the application.

Adeline's story fits into the school and community context of Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice in the school context. It should be emphasized that Adeline's counselor went above and beyond to aid her in making the optimal college choice. Both Valdosta State and Kennesaw State are adequate institutions, and Adeline

would have excelled at both institutions. The quality of her education at the University of Georgia is superior, as she has had the opportunity to learn from world-class scholars at the 16th ranked public university in the United States at the University of Georgia (U.S. News Staff, 2018).

The only homeschooled participant, Ernest, received no advising whatsoever from his family. Though they were displeased, Ernest's parents allowed him to attend a small two-year college near his hometown to study business. Ernest never considered attending a four-year school, until he met professors who mentored him:

> There were two professors that I would credit with my passion for study in general. I found that they were deeply interested in seeing me succeed. I had worked hard in their classes, but they also sensed that I really actively wanted to learn. I specifically had one who, I sat down with one day when I was still a business major… he pushed me to pursue further in my academic studies. I had a responsibility simply because he said you had done well and you want to learn and if you give it up it's a waste. If it wouldn't have been for him, I definitely wouldn't have gone to college after community college.

Though Ernest grew up in a home that did not value a formal education, Ernest still felt that he had more to learn after finishing his high school diploma.

In his English classes, Ernest learned that education is about more than rote memorization, but that in our academic studies, we learn more about ourselves. He realized that he wanted to further pursue his education, and his professors were likely the first in his life to tell him that he was capable of being a college graduate. Ernest's community college professors provided him with what his parents could not.

In Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice, Ernest is a special case. As a homeschooled student, his habitus acted in the school and community context as well because he was his own teacher. His professors in his community college acted as a high school teacher might, just as in the story that Abagail told of her teacher who encouraged her to apply to Duke and Vanderbilt. For Ernest and his family, the University of Georgia was like Duke or Vanderbilt, as Ernest was the first in his family to go to college.

Finally, participant Faith had a positive experience with her guidance counselor in helping her to make the decision of where to go to college. Unlike other participants in this study, however, Faith's guidance counselor was also her mother:

Having a mom who is a guidance counselor gave me so many resources that, you know, I probably wouldn't have had as a typical high school student. I was thinking about my teacher letter of recommendation the day I started high school. My mom was like, "Ok, at the end of high school, you're going to have to have this many teacher recommendations, start now. Start forming those relationships." I'm sure that's advice that she gave to every other high schooler that she had as a guidance counselor, but having it come from your mom is a lot different I think.

Faith was strategizing about her college application process in the first year of high school. She began studying for the SAT and ACT early and sought out future recommendations. Having a mother as a guidance counselor gave her a distinct advantage in the college-going process.

Five participants recalled specific instances of poor guidance from their high school in their decision of where to go to college. Two of the participants, Audrey and

Abagail, stated that they did not trust the guidance that they were receiving from their counselors. Abagail said:

Yeah, 110%. Our school counselors weren't super helpful. I'm not even sure that one of my counselors went to college. If she did, she had have gone later, because I know that she… She's wonderful, she's great, but I know that she got pregnant at 16, and I feel like she got her GED.

Because Abagail guidance counselor did not attend college in a traditional way, Abagail discounted her advice. While the advice given by her counselor might not have been poor, Abagail perceived her counseling as sub-par.

Audrey did not trust the advice that she received from her school counselor, because she felt her school's administration was too old to understand the college application process:

I took other people's opinions into account, like teachers and mentors and things like that, but for the most part, it was my own research. I put more faith in that, because I felt it was more comprehensive than one person's viewpoint. Especially when they attended the university 10, 20 years prior, it wasn't as much value to me.

Additionally, Audrey was displeased when she realized that her career would probably require graduate school. She was not prepared to continue improving her resume. Audrey had no concept of how to build a career other than the process she went through applying to college.

Lauren was lucky to have a school that took top performing students to colleges around the Southeast. The trips were inadequate, however. Instead of visiting the

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University of Georgia and Georgia Tech, the two best public institutions of higher education in Georgia, Lauren's counselor took the class to Kennesaw State University, Tennessee Wesleyan University, and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC).

Kennesaw State University is a good choice for students in her school, as it has low admissions standards and accepts the HOPE scholarship. The other two choices are puzzling. Tennessee Wesleyan University (2018) is a private university with tuition cost of $23,300 per year for full time students. UTC (2018) charges $8,059 per year for tuition and does not accept the HOPE scholarship.

Perhaps choosing one of these institutions and UGA would have been more appropriate. Tennessee Wesleyan and UTC both charge high tuition and do not accept the HOPE scholarship. There are 26 University System of Georgia (n.d.-c) institutions and they all accept the HOPE scholarship.

Theme 2 – Geography as a Dynamic Barrier

The University of Georgia is located in Athens. Athens is in Northeast Georgia, just over 45 miles from Interstate 85, which connects the university to the Atlanta Metropolitan Area. According to the locale codes of the two public high schools in Athens, Clarke Central High School and Cedar Shoals High School, Athens is "City: Midsize" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-b). Nearby high schools, like North Oconee High School, carry the "Rural: Fringe" code. Distance, therefore, is a barrier for some students but not others.

Julia was the closest to Athens of all of the participants. She describes that both her decision to attend UGA and the difficulty of her transition to life in Athens was eased by her close proximity:

I was right next door. We would always go into Athens, like the town, there

wasn't anything in [my hometown] really. So, if you wanted to do anything, you'd

go there. So, I was kind of already familiar with Athens.

Though Julia's transition was eased, she was surprised about the makeup of campus.

Julia never considered what going to school with thousands of people would look

like:

The biggest thing was seeing everyone around you that's the same age. Everyone

was 18. There's so many people here and everyone is from different places.

Because where I grew up, they were always from the same town, you know. You

never see people where you're from, and now you do.

For the two decades following World War II, the suburbs were the choice destination for

middle class families to raise children (Hanson, 2017). Rural areas have a different

history and are populated by an older generation of Americans (Brown & Schafft, 2010).

Seeing a great deal of peers in one location was surprising for Julia

Seven of the participants in the study mentioned distance as a significant barrier.

Participant Rachel was much closer to other excellent institutions of higher education,

and her father wanted her to pursue those schools, because Athens is over a five-hour

drive from her home:

Like I knew I wanted to stay in state. I had to be semi-close to home. My dad

really wanted me to go to FSU, because it's closer, maybe just like an hour from

our house. We're way down south. Or even Auburn, Auburn would have been

closer.

Ultimately, Rachel chose to attend the University of Georgia because of the scholarship she received that helped offset the fees the Zell Miller Scholarship did not cover.

Lawrence was deterred by the distance, which is why he attended a small college near his hometown before transferring to the University of Georgia:

> I guess I had not really considered what it would be like to go so far away, because it's a good, you know, three to four hours away from home. Whenever I came up here for orientation, I was like, "Oh wow this is really what this is going to be like." And so, I was a little bit hesitant after that as well. And so, it was kind of a combination of those factors I guess.

Lawrence attended orientation before his freshman year, but the entire experience drove him away from Athens. For the first time, Lawrence did not feel comfortable around his peers. He was not used to seeing so many people in an academic environment that he did not know, "It was kind of an eye-opener. It was just a different sort of atmosphere I guess."

Thomas was also four hours away from Athens, but the distance did not deter him:

> I only applied to three colleges: I applied to Gordon State which is a not a community college, but it's a really small college, mostly 2-year degrees, in Barnesville, Georgia, which is just like 20 minutes away from my house. And that was my safety-net. Mom didn't really want me to go there. She thought that I could do better.

With the encouragement of his mother, Thomas went on to the University of Georgia, even though it was farther than nearby private institution, Mercer University.

For a student like Roland, who grew up over three hours away from Athens, traveling far for school was not an option. He did not do well in high school academically, and did not feel that he could qualify for admission at UGA:

> One of the big factors of why I didn't consider Georgia at first was because there's this stigma that it is impossible to get into Georgia, especially around my hometown. Everybody stresses, you have to be the cream of the crop, and in a sense, you do, but it really kind of pushed me away almost, because I didn't think I was the cream of the crop, but then when I finally decided that I'm going to give it a shot, that really, really motivated me in the last few years at my small college. I really pushed as hard as I could. First semester I got all As and one B, and then next semester all As.

Roland's process to making a college-going decision was different than others in this story. Because he did not have the grades to attend the University of Georgia, he never considered it to be a possibility. For Roland, going to college was a risk, and moving a great distance would only increase the risk.

Margaery's roommates come from suburban Atlanta, and she notes that they go home frequently. For Margaery, home is a five-hour drive, "My roommate goes home every weekend. I have about a 5-hour drive. But, I'm fine with it, because it's enough for my parents to not come check on me every weekend." For students who drive a car, the distance is no problem. Lauren lives three hours away, and has no problem traveling home because her parents bought her a car in high school. The distance is much harder for students like Magnolia who live five hours away from Athens and do not own a car. Here, socioeconomic status serves as a barrier to geographically desolate students.

Though geography is a unique barrier for rural students, it affects them differently depending on their proximity to the university and their socioeconomic status. Students who have reliable transportation are more likely to feel comfortable going to college farther away than those who do not, and reliable transportation often means being part of the middle class.

Students who were among the most academically successful and have experience in sharing a living space are more comfortable with the distance. Ben is three hours away from the University of Georgia, but was undeterred, because he had a superior private school education and he had experience sharing a living space in the camp that he worked at during summers. Participants Audrey and Adeline also had experience living in college residence halls in high school in programs aimed at students with low income.

Distance is a dynamic barrier in which students react to differently based on their academic success and socioeconomic status. A good strategy for increasing the college-going rates of rural students from a low socioeconomic status is to increase the offerings of high school sophomores and juniors during the summer at colleges and universities.

Research Question 3: How Does Being Rural Affect a Student's Sense of Belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

As was discussed in the fourth chapter of this study, rural students are a minority at the University of Georgia. Through a freedom of information request, the researcher obtained a demographic profile of the fall 2014 freshman class. The data set included the high school attended by the student if that student went to a Georgia high school. Table 6.2 shows the changes that would be needed for the Fall 2014 class to adequately represent the high school class of 2014 at the University.

Table 6.2

Changes Needed to Balance Freshman Class at University of Georgia

High School Code	Fall 2014 Changes Needed
City Large	34
City Midsize	85
City Small	-215
Suburb Large	-1,093
Suburb Midsize	35
Suburb Small	24
Town Fringe	36
Town Distant	306
Town Remote	90
Rural Fringe	429
Rural Distant	223
Rural Remote	45

Note: Fall 2014 changes needed to adequately represent Georgia's Class of 2014 were calculated by subtracting the difference between the percentage of each urban locale code's representation in the University of Georgia's Freshman Enrollment in Fall 2014 by the State of Georgia's Class of 2014 geographic representation. The change in percent needed was divided by 100 and multiplied by the total number of freshmen enrolled in Fall 2014

Of significance is the overrepresentation of students from large suburban schools. The University of Georgia would need to admit 1,093 less students from large suburban schools to geographically represent Georgia. The data show that the students

underrepresented are the town and rural students. Together, UGA needs to add 1,129 students from town and rural school to geographically represent Georgia.

Students in this study noted that the culture they came from differed from those who come from suburban Atlanta. This research question asks, "How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" After reading and coding the transcripts, two themes emerged:

1. Rural students experience a shift in cultural and academic expectations.

2. Residence halls create cultural bridging opportunities for rural students.

Theme 1 – Rural Students Experience a Shift in Cultural and Academic Expectations

For rural students at the University of Georgia, suburban culture is the dominant culture. Participant Abagail shared, "Everyone here is from Atlanta," which is not quite true, but students from metropolitan Atlanta outnumber rural students significantly. Often, rural students are one of only a few to come to the University of Georgia from their graduating class, such as participants Adeline and Magnolia. When asked what drove her to get involved on campus, Adeline shared:

> [I didn't want] to be lonely. There weren't many people that came to UGA from [home] with me. I think there was like five of us, and not to say that we weren't friends, but we weren't close friends. Not wanting to close myself off from the world, a world that I'd never experienced, or opportunities that I've experienced.

The fear of being lonely drove Adeline to get out of her dorm room and into information meetings for clubs.

Students who are involved on campus are more likely to do well and to feel that they belong (Strayhorn, 2016). Students who are not involved get homesick and are likely to move home to finish at a local college. Mary shared her feelings in the first few weeks of being on campus:

> Yeah, I would definitely say that I felt [out of place] a couple of times my freshman year, because, even though I did know people who went here, I still hadn't made a ton of friends, like close friends, and so there would be times when I would just be like, "It'd be so easy for me just to go back home and be somewhere familiar where I know everyone and am comfortable." But closer to the end of my freshman year, I just got involved in more things, and I was like, "Okay, this is where I want to be." It's a hard adjustment.

Students like Adeline and Rachel come to UGA with some students from their hometown.

As was discussed in Chapter 3, rural students come to the university with a smaller social network than their suburban and urban peers. Rural students experience what many out-of-state students experience at a large university, which is feeling a need to start completely over. The freshman class of 2017 consisted of 87% in-state and 13% out-of-state. Rural students describe their experience similarly to how an out-of-state student would (University of Georgia Undergraduate Admissions, n.d.-b).

Students from rural areas in this study noted cultural differences in the way people speak, the food people consume, and the clothes people wear. After spending a year at a local college, Lawrence transferred to the University of Georgia:

I know one thing that kind of strikes me still is, and I know it sounds really cliché,

but accents. It's a different sort of, you don't hear, I really can't even tell you

exactly what words it is or what sounds it is, but it's a different sounding way of

talking up here. And so that's one thing I remember initially, I don't know if I was

yearning for a drawl, but it was different.

Accent is one way in which rural students do not have the cultural capital that suburban

students do. Both Rachel and Lawrence note that their peers who have lived in Georgia

all their life have a neutral accent while they have a deeper southern drawl.

Rachel noticed the difference in her accent immediately when she arrived. This

quote is cited in Chapter 5 as well:

[My accent] was very apparent, and I honestly think being in that honors

environment made it more apparent, since I was on this like science-y track. And

a lot of those kids are from like Atlanta suburbs, and stuff like that.

Bourdieu (1991) claims that accent is a means for individuals to draw boundaries

between individuals. In small communities, the thick southern accent is dominant and

respected, while the more neutral American accent is devalued. In an urban environment,

the neutral American accent is valued more, as cultural capital.

When Ernest was not completing his homeschool curriculum, he was working in

his father's woodshop. When he moved to Athens, he continued to work part-time doing

skilled blue-collar labor. Ernest wore his work clothes to class and felt like he stuck out.

He changed his look after his first semester to better assimilate:

I did not feel that I belonged. I normally wear shorts when I can, because before I

moved here I never owned a pair of shorts or sandals; it was boots and jeans every

day of my life. It was a necessity doing carpentry, but also was a cultural thing.

And so, walking around in September in boots and jeans here in Athens, it makes

you stick out a little bit I guess. I basically I felt out of place. And not only is it

about, I just felt from a different place from where everyone else was. But I mean

I guess that was mostly the first year when you kind of find your place.

In Ernest's world, people dress to work in their free time. If the sun is up, then there is
work to be done.

For Ernest, wearing shorts and sandals means leisure, and free time should be
spent working rather than engaging in leisure activities. Here, clothing act as an indicator
of cultural capital. How one spends their leisure time is an indicator of class, and dress is
one means to engage in distinction from the lower class (Crane, 2000; Lee, Dunlap, &
Edwards, 2014). Wearing clothing that functions differently than one's peers indicates a
group boundary (McMillian & Chavis, 1986).

When Abagail was in her hometown, she was doing everything she could to feel
that she belonged; this was most apparent in her church. Abagail began feeling distant
from religion at an early age but dedicated herself to church activities. In fact, in middle
school, she began tweeting bible verses to fit in. As cited in Chapter 6, she wore clothing
to reflect her belonging in the community, "Also, the things that I wore. I wouldn't wear
them again, it was definitely very 'church-y,' because fashion back home is like very
southern."

After she moved to Athens and joined a sorority, she changed her clothing and her
leisure activities. Specifically, Abagail mentions wearing a choker on a daily basis, which
would have appeared to be provocative in her home community. She described herself as

a "good girl" and shamed others for having sex and drinking alcohol on the weekends. She no longer shames girls for their sexual activities and has been drinking regularly since beginning college.

Audrey grew up in a community where individuals did not use curse worse or talk about crude subjects like sex. When she started meeting others, she felt that she did not belong:

> [I felt] affronted a bit. It wasn't a feeling of personal insult, but I didn't really like it. I definitely didn't feel like I fit in with most people here the first year or two. Gradually, that just started to become something I thought less and less about. I wasn't judgmental. I never said anything, but I mean, I don't know. I just felt like there was a lot of ... For all the talk of people trying not to offend other ones in some manners of their speech and things that they say or do or don't do, there was a lot of stuff they were doing that offended someone like me coming from a conservative background that they either didn't care about or didn't take into regard.

Though Audrey was not acting upon it, it can be surmised that she was, in fact, being judgmental about the actions of her peers. Abagail understood the world through the lens of the social expectations she learned in her hometown, just like the other participants mentioned in this section.

Rural areas of the United States tend to be more conservative in terms of politics and dress when compared to urban and suburban areas (Brown & Schafft, 2010; Sng, Neuberg, Varnum, & Kenrick, 2017). Like accent, use of language and dress are indicators of cultural capital.

As was discussed in theme of the first research question earlier this this chapter, there is a curricular gap that exists between rural and non-rural students. Participants noted being at least a year behind their peers in credit hour production and struggled in science and math related courses. When discussing situations in which they felt out of place on campus, the classroom was often mentioned. Participant Ernest shared his experience taking courses at the University of Georgia after spending two years at a small college and earning an associate degree:

> This is a school [filled] with very intelligent people. You are immediately placed into a room with a bunch of people who have a lot of opinions, but also want to vocalize those opinions. And it's at times overwhelming, but at times just eye-opening and surprising in a good way. Even if you feel so different, even if your views and attitudes are different you're still just all there together.

Taking classes at the University of Georgia pushed Ernest beyond his comfort zone. He was confronted with ideas he never considered or even heard before

Ernest notes that his courses at the University of Georgia were much more rigorous than at his previous institution. He anticipated a gap, but underestimated how different life would be in Athens, and what his English courses would be like:

> I knew that it would be different, but I had no idea what I was in store for until I got here. It was even ironic to hear so many people talk about what kind of Southern school this was. I just kind of felt like country come to town I guess.

Ernest was surprised that his classmates considered UGA to be a southern school. Ernest's peers did not talk like him, dress like him, or hold the same opinions as he did. For Ernest, the University of Georgia was a completely different world from which he

came. He viewed a "northern" school as one with individuals holding liberal opinions; he did not expect the institution bearing the name of his state to contain so many individuals who espoused progressive ideas.

Participants in this study were surprised to be average in their college courses. Participant Faith, as cited in chapter 5, shared her experience in an International Affairs class:

[My high school was a] small school. International affairs was not a topic, like not a class. I took world history which was like the closest to international affairs… I remember we were having a discussion about Israel and Palestine one day in one of my classes [at UGA]. I had never studied that in a classroom setting. I had never learned about Israel and Palestine. Like, I had read about articles about it. I just remember everyone else was having a very informed discussion. [They] just knew about it…They had been well read well studied, and that's when I realized that I've got some reading to do.

In Faith's school, reading the textbook occasionally and looking over teacher-produced study guides were the requirements necessary to be an excellent student. The rigor at the University of Georgia was much higher than she was expecting.

Roland was also surprised at how advanced his classmates were in his courses at the University of Georgia:

There are people with just an abundance of knowledge, much more so than me. It's like wow, what have I been doing, and why haven't I been spending my research focused on this? Because things that I do consider myself passionate about, there are other people who are so much more passionate about it. Well,

maybe not more passionate about it, but they know a wealth much more than I do about it.

Roland came from a family of artists and musicians. In his hometown, Roland felt like an expert on art and music, but was an absolute novice compared to his peers. Moreover, Athens is a culturally rich city with a thriving music scene (Mastrovita, 2017). Roland was not used to not being the expert in the room.

Rachel, an honors student, ended up changing her post-graduate plans, because comparing herself to her peers affected her confidence, as cited in the previous chapter:

I kind of decided that I wanted to do a gap-year my second year here. And I think that's a lot from feeling like I wasn't measuring up to my classmates. That's before I kind of had the revelation that we're not doing the same thing. And so, I was just like, oh I don't have as much stuff on my resume. I haven't done as much research. And just felt like I wouldn't have gotten into medical school if I applied right now. Now I 100% feel that I would have gotten into med school if I had applied this cycle. But I just didn't feel like I was measuring up to my counterparts.

In her hometown, when Rachel was comparing herself to her to her peers, she was the best. For the first time in her life, in college, she was no longer the best. Belonging, therefore, has a special meaning for students from rural areas.

Though rural students notice cultural and academic differences between them and their peers when they arrive on campus, their discomfort is alleviated after the first couple of years. Ernest, Rachel, Roland, Faith, and Mary all were much more comfortable after the passage of an academic year.

Rural students in this study did more than notice their differences with their non-rural peers, they ruminated over them. Though their level of comfort on campus increased after the first year, some rural students spent their time at the University of Georgia focused on their differences with their non-rural peers. Rachel recalled one situation where she realized her non-rural peers did not understand what it is to be rural:

> A friend of mine is from Albertville, Georgia, which is pretty rural. [He] was going to Georgia-Florida with some of their friends, and [they] stopped to take farm pictures out in the cotton field. And I'm like, "Wait, you've never seen cotton before?" And they didn't know that hay bales were an actual thing when they saw bales of hay.

Not only did Rachel have feelings of not belonging because of her academic struggles, she also felt that her peers looked down upon rural areas like the one she was from.

Rural students in this study felt discomfort from a variety of areas. Rural students are the most academically excellent in their hometowns, and when they come to the University of Georgia, they are placed in classrooms with individuals who have completed a more advanced curriculum. Moreover, rural students in this study came to the University of Georgia with a different set of social and cultural capital than their peers. Participants Ernest and Abagail exemplified how changing ones' dress can improve their cultural capital.

Theme 2 – Residence Halls Create Cultural Bridging Opportunities for Rural Students

The residence halls at the University of Georgia provide a unique opportunity for students of a variety of cultures and geographic areas to interact. As was noted in Chapter

5, Faith felt that the social networks established by suburban students erected barriers to selective student groups at UGA. Participant Lauren shared:

> And I made a lot of friends on my hall here. And just people from different places which was nice. [It's] not the same people that I've been with since middle school that was probably the best part of it.

After not being selected for several student organizations in her first year, Faith made most of her social connections in the residence hall. Without the residence hall, Faith may have had less opportunities to interact with peers.

Julia shared a similar sentiment and noted that the meal plan simplified her life in her first year on campus, "I really liked the social aspect of being in the dorms. And everyone wanted to make friends, so it was really easy. Yeah Freshman year was a great time. I was on the meal plan, eating well." Students in residence halls in their first year who are on meal plan have more social opportunities than those who do not. More social opportunities translate into a higher sense of belonging.

Participants Lauren, Rachel, Margaery noted that their social networks expanded because they were roommates with students from suburban Atlanta. Suddenly, each of these participants noted an extended group of friends with social connections all over campus. Rachel benefitted from being around students who had completed advanced science curriculum, as many of her friends were also planning to attend medical school:

> The honors dorm is in Caldwell. So, two of my closest friends, they were right next to me in that chemistry class. And it was just that we were spending so much time together, we go to [class] recognizing each other and kind of just fell in. I don't remember how specifically I met a lot of them.

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Before living near each other and attending the same classes, Rachel and her peers from suburban Atlanta had little reason to interact. Because of their proximity to each other, they had additional opportunities to interact. Rachel reflected that being around the same people translated to higher grades as her friends were able to make up for her curricular deficiencies.

Participant Margaery was able to meet international students for the first time in her residence hall. Here, she discusses how interacting with someone from a different culture opened her mind:

There's two girls on my hall that are from China. And it's cool seeing their sense of fashion, or just what they do is just ever so slightly different. And then in a discussion group in my anthropology class there is someone from the UK.

Any preconceived notions that Margaery had about people were shattered when she began to interact with international students in her hall.

Lauren experienced the greatest shift in her social network, however. In her first year, she met five girls from suburban Atlanta and she describes them as her best friends:

And my like main girlfriends in that group have a ton of friends from high school that go here too. And like I have a big extended friend group from them too. So, we hang out with all of them and like at their place like we'll watch the Falcons games together on Sunday. We'll just hang out on the weekends.

As a direct result of being friends with her roommates from suburban Atlanta, Lauren has become part of the larger social network. She describes herself as part of "a big extended friend group," which she gained admittance with as a result of her relationship with her roommates.

This extension of Lauren's social network is an example of bridging capital, as described by Putnam (2000). Putnam (2000) uses the terms "bridging and bonding" to describe the differing utility of social capital. Bonding social capital exists between groups and individuals that are very similar. Ethnically homogeneous neighborhood associations in suburban areas are excellent examples of this. Bridging social capital connects individuals that are diverse but share a common interest. The residence hall serves as a means to bridge social capital between rural and non-rural students.

Living in the residence hall also opens students up to engaging in more activities. Both participants Ben and Adeline shared that they attended more events and interacted with more strangers on campus because they lived in the residence hall. Adeline stated:

> From my hall I met a lot of cool people. It was all girls, so I met a lot of cool girls. Going to a lot of different functions that year, too, that gave me the opportunity to meet other people as well, because I was always going to something. First semester I was tied down, in my room studying, but second semester [I wasn't].

Not only did meeting people in the residence hall expand Adeline's social network with the residence hall, it also encouraged her to network with students at activities beyond the residence hall.

Through coincidence, Ben's suitemates had friends at Kennesaw State University that were suitemates with two of Ben's friends from high school. There were also fellow students in his residence hall that worked with him at a summer camp for several years. Ben lived at the intersection of several communities in his residence hall and felt very comfortable on campus as a result. This comes despite Ben's discomfort with increased foot traffic on campus, and his need to rely on public transportation, "There weren't any

buses or public transportation in [Kelly County] (pseudonym), so I never got, you know, looking at the bus routes and everything was like oh I'll just walk."

In Michael's first semester on campus, he cut himself off because of having a girlfriend at a different institution. He did not do much work to embrace his new college community:

I was just kind of sitting you know just kind of sitting there watching tv, reading a textbook. So, it didn't hinder so much life goals, but short-term, I didn't have that true college experience I was talking about. I was more reserved and more cut-off.

After they broke up, Michael became more involved on campus. He started spending more time with neighbors in his residence hall and joined the club cross country team. Because he was involved on campus, Michael felt he belonged. When the researcher asked him if he ever felt out of place, he replied, "Not particularly."

Participant Lawrence chose not to attend the University of Georgia in part because he did not like the idea of communal living. For participant Ben, working at a summer camp in high school eased the transition. Though living in Athens was different, living in a shared environment came more naturally:

I've met a bunch of people in my dorm… It's been a lot different than back home. I don't really mind living in the dorm; I live in Libby, one of the hill community dorms so it's two people per room and it's a communal bathroom at the end of the hall. And I didn't really mind or anything like that. I've been working at a summer camp since I was 14 and it was cabins with a communal bath in the middle. So, I was kind of used to having roommates and everything.

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Lawrence, because of his fear, missed out on the network of fellow students from urban and suburban areas. He lamented after his interview that he mostly spent time with a friend from his hometown, because he was not sure how to make friends outside of class.

Mary also did not have experience with communal environments. Mary was an only child, and Lawrence grew up with his own bedroom and bathroom. It was a struggle at first, but Mary pulled through after her first semester:

> At home, I had my own room and bathroom, and then, when I moved to college, I shared a room with someone, and shared a bathroom with multiple people, so that was a big change, but that was one that I was expecting, because I'd known about that.

Because Mary started thinking about what life in a residence hall would be like long before she enrolled in the University of Georgia, she was expecting the change. Lawrence was not as prepared.

Lawrence had been admitted to the University of Georgia, and during his trip to orientation, he changed his mind about attending. He drove home and decided that he would transfer to UGA in a year to avoid living in the residence hall:

> I guess the idea of living in a dorm environment, as opposed to being at your own house, having your own room, you have your own space, and I guess that was really something that I wasn't ready to give up.

Instead, Lawrence attended a local college and transferred to the University of Georgia after his first year.

The University of Georgia's requirement that students live on campus their first-year aids rural students in their transition to college and expands their social network.

Students from suburban Georgia come to UGA with many peers, while rural students do not. Participants Lauren, Rachel, and Margaery were able to access these social networks as a result of their placement in the residence hall. Though there are positive effects, the shared living space convinced Lawrence not to attend his first year.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. This chapter presents the research findings of the three research questions:

1. What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States

2. How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

3. How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

Three themes to the first research question emerged. There is a curricular disadvantage that sets rural students back, especially in STEM courses. The number of AP course offerings at suburban schools far outpaces that at rural schools. As a result, rural schools can be up to two years behind their peers. The second theme was that socioeconomic status mediates experience. Students who come from a background of high socioeconomic status have a better experience regardless of their status as a rural student. Third, rural students in this study altered their religious views in college.

The researcher gave an outline of participant college going behavior according to Perna's (2006) model of college choice. Two themes emerged. In the first, it was revealed that there is poor college advising in rural public schools. In the second, geography revealed itself as a dynamic barrier.

Finally, in the third research question, two themes emerged. The first theme explored the cultural and academic shift when they first arrived on campus. In the second, residence halls served as a bridge for cultural opportunities for rural students.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students from rural areas at the University of Georgia, a public R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States. The study was guided by the following research questions:

4. What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States

5. How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

6. How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

Summary of Research Design

A qualitative case study design was used to examine the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States: the University of Georgia. Participants included 17 undergraduate and 1 graduate student who attended high schools with a "Rural: Remote," "Rural: Distant," "Rural: Fringe," Town: Remote," or "Town: Distant" locale code. Data were gathered from multiple sources to provide a deeper single-case study analysis. Sources included:

1. One 90-minute individual semi-structured interview with each of the 18 participants

2. Demographic information sheets detailing parental education, income, high school GPA, standardized test scores

3. High school descriptive statistics through the Common Core of Data.

This study takes the epistemological stance of social constructivism. Social constructivism notes that the creation of culture and human history is not a result of an objective reality, but rather the "intersection of politics, values, ideologies, religious beliefs, and so on" (Constanto, 2008, p. 119). In this study, social constructivism is used to show that participants have unique experiences in their small rural communities and in the larger collegiate environment.

The researcher used concepts from the fields of higher education and psychology to create the conceptual framework that guides this study, including social and cultural capital, sense of belonging theory, and Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice. Bourdieu's (1977) cultural and social capital were included to assess the non-monetary forms of capital that rural students employ in their college-going decision and in their everyday life. Social capital is the value of the total social connections of an individual. Cultural capital consists of cultural goods and preference towards cultural goods.

Sense of belonging theory contends with how student success is impacted by their feeling of belonging. Specifically, Strayhorn (2016) states that sense of belong is a basic human need, drives human behavior, and takes on heightened importance at certain times, including during the transition to college. Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice states that human capital is the most important value in determining college-going. Other factors are also important, including habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context.

Research questions were developed based on the results of a completed pilot study, which sought to understand the rural student experience applying for college. Based on the feedback from the advisory committee of this study, the inquiry was expanded to include an overarching "what" question for exploratory study, "What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?"

Using the conceptual framework guided by three research questions, the researcher sought to understand the experiences of rural students at the University of Georgia. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher interpreted the meaning of questions posed to the participants. Participants were encouraged to tell stories about specific experiences they had to understand their phenomenological perspective. Questions were designed to "generate detailed information concerning [human] experiences as well as the participants' responses to the phenomenon of investigation" (Roulston, 2010, p. 16).

The interviews focused on the rural students' process deciding where to attend college, their transition to college, and their sense of belonging on campus. After transcribing the interviews, they were loaded into ATLAS.ti for Mac. The researcher conducted an initial read of the transcripts and assigned deductive codes from Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice. The researcher then created inductive codes using holistic and emotion coding.

After reading the transcripts several times and reviewing the data segments attached to codes, the researcher answered the three research questions by presenting a series of themes associated with each question. A discussion of the research findings on the literature follows.

Discussion

This chapter continues with a discussion of the research findings in relation to the current literature. Each theme is presented below.

Research Question 1: What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

The central research question of this study was "what is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?" The word "what" implies that this study is exploratory, and the researcher was not sure what would be found before entering the field (Yin, 2014). Three themes emerged from data analysis:

1. Curricular disadvantage sets rural students back, especially in STEM.

2. Socioeconomic status mediates experience.

3. Rural students alter their religious views in college.

Theme 1 – Curricular disadvantage sets rural students back, especially in STEM. Curriculum intensity is a significant and understudied issue in rural education. As the popularity of AP courses in the United States has grown over the past twenty years, course offerings at rural schools remained stagnant. Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) found that the one of the most significant differences between rural and non-rural students was curriculum intensity.

The University of Georgia is aware of the curriculum intensity, because it altered their admissions guidelines to account for the lesser curricular offerings at rural schools. On the University of Georgia's Undergraduate Admissions (n.d.-a) page, it states "To be most competitive, you should challenge yourself by pursuing the most rigorous courses available in your high school… 98% of first-year students admitted to UGA pursue an

honors or advanced level curriculum track" (para. 4). With an admissions rate of 52.88% and 98% of first-year students on the advanced track of their school, a student would need to invest in many dual enrollment courses if they were available in the area (See Table 3.1).

The University of Georgia's freshman class of 2014 was made up of 18% rural students, while the state of Georgia's senior high school class of 2014 was 27% rural (See Tables 4.2 and 4.3). If the University of Georgia did not take curricular intensity into consideration with what curricular options are available at the student's school, it is likely that the 18% figure would be much lower.

Dual enrollment is an option to introduce college curriculum into the classroom of rural students. In 2002, Adelman wore:

> Dual enrollment is the least threatening (to school systems) path to providing opportunity-to-learn, particularly in rural areas where school districts have considerable difficulty in hiring teachers. Dual enrollment is an alternative use of school time. The challenge to colleges and community colleges in such areas is one of creative capacity: how much space can be assembled in different ways (and in different courses) to provide secondary school students with the academic momentum they need to enter, participate, and succeed in postsecondary education? (p. 57)

The problem Adelman poses is a significant one. In this study only two participants, Ben and Margaery, completed dual enrollment credits.

Neither Ben nor Margaery completed dual enrollment courses on a college campus; both Ben and Margaery's high schools created agreements with a community

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college to have instructors come to the high school campus to teach. Taking dual enrollment is an option for students even if their school does not make a formal agreement, but there are barriers.

For example, Lauren lived over half an hour from the closest community college, and her father would not allow her to take classes at night. Moreover, participants like Jaime and Magnolia would not have had transportation available to even consider dual enrollment an option. Finally, dual enrollment credit is of higher stakes than AP credits, as AP credits do not have to be reported on the college transcript, and dual enrollment credit does, because the student is dually enrolled at another institution.

The curriculum disadvantage that rural students face is the most significant and disturbing finding of this study. It is disturbing because it affects students' sense of self-worth and creates boundaries to student success. It is also disturbing, because rural areas need local doctors, lawyers, and teachers to sustain their local communities.

Being a doctor, lawyer, or STEM teacher requires the student to take advanced curriculum. Rachel, the valedictorian of her class, almost did not make it past organic chemistry. This quote is cited in Chapter 5:

> I failed every [organic chemistry II test]. I did make an 82 on the final… I went in and talked to my professor. And he had me bring in all the work I had been doing for the class. I brought in like 4 notebooks. And he was like, "Ok your grades are definitely not reflecting what you're doing." It was like PTSD. It haunts me. But that's the first time that I wasn't able to do something. It's honestly still really hard for me to think about.

If not for her professor's decision to pass Rachel despite failing multiple tests, it is possible she would not have gone on to medical school. Rachel is planning on being a general practice doctor in her hometown. Rachel had a perfect 4.0 GPA in high school and scored the highest of anyone in this study on the ACT with a 34. A 34 is in the 99th percentile of all students who take the ACT.

Theme 2 – Socioeconomic status mediates experience. The rural student in American higher education is different than the urban or the suburban student. Rural students tend to be of a lower socioeconomic status than non-rural students. Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) found that rural students were less likely to be from a family that makes $50,000 or more compared to non-rural students.

Income inequality is important, because the same study also found that students whose family made $50,000 or more a year were more likely to finish a bachelor's degree than those who came from families with incomes of $25,000 or less. The current study analyzed the experiences of two students who came from families of $25,000 or less: Audrey and Magnolia. At the time of her interview, Magnolia was very close from having to leave the University of Georgia, because she was having trouble making ends meet.

Participant Faith is an example of how socioeconomic status can improve one's college experience. She came from a background of medium income, which helped her participate in a summer internship at the Carter Center. The Carter Center is a nongovernmental organization focused on international rights issues. Unlike students from suburban Atlanta who are able to commute from home, Faith had to relocate to Atlanta to take on this unpaid internship; Faith had to pay rent for an apartment in Athens

and in Atlanta for two months. Because of parents' financial means and their willingness to pay, Faith was able to complete this internship.

Table 7.1

Education and Income Breakdown of Participants

Demographic	Number of Participants
High Education	7
Medium Education	3
Low Education	8
High Income	4
Medium Income	10
Low Income	4

Note: Education is defined as follows: (a) high – student with one parent with a graduate degree (b) medium – student with one parent with a bachelor's degree (c) low – student with no parent with a bachelor's degree. Income is defined as follows: (a) high – family income at or above $95,001 per year (b) medium – family income between $40,001 and $95,000 per year (c) low – family income up to $40,000 per year.

Overall, national research found that students from high schools that are classified as "high-poverty rural" across the United States are the least likely to enroll or persist at any institution of higher (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013). There is also a link between rural status and the choice attend a selective institution confirmed by multiple studies (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013).

Despite geographic limitations, which will be explored more in the next section concerning the second research question, socioeconomic status can mediate the

relationship between rural and non-rural students. This study explored several examples of how socioeconomic status can improve a rural student's chances of success.

One example exists in the college decision process. Rural students who are well educated, and likely of a higher socioeconomic status, rely most heavily on parental support for help making the college going decision (Griffin et al., 2011; McGrath et al., 2001). For students who do not have access to a parent with a college degree, they must rely on the school or members of the community for support.

Rural students of a higher socioeconomic status tend to aspire to a higher level of education (Howley & Hambrick, 2014). In this study, income was a much better predictor of college attendance at the University of Georgia than education. As seen in Table 7.1, 10 students come from a background of middle income, while only 4 come from a background of low income.

Meanwhile, eight participants came from a background of low education and only four came from a background of medium education. Here we see the "hollowing-out" effect in rural America. When parents and community members encourage their students to complete a bachelor's degree, they are opened to a world of white-collar employment that is, in many cases, bound to urban and suburban areas (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Areas that require an advanced education, like in law, medicine, and secondary education, require training beyond a four-year degree.

Future quantitative research should explore what proportion of college educated rural residents have advanced degrees. If there is a correlation between advanced degree attainment amongst those who have a bachelor's degree, then policymakers must be

encouraged to continue to invest in TRiO programs that provide resources professional

degree attainment for rural students in the areas of medicine, law, and education.

This study contributes to the literature concerning socioeconomic status and the

rural student experience by analyzing situations in which a student's experience was

fundamentally changed by using socioeconomic resources. Chapter 6 explains how

participant Ben was able to avoid the curricular gap in rural schools by attending a

private school that contracted dual enrollment courses through a local college. It also

showed that studying abroad is both beneficial to students and limited to those of medium

to high socioeconomic status.

Students who are from rural areas tend to attend and persist at colleges and

universities at a lower rather than urban and suburban students (National Student

Clearinghouse, 2013). Despite lower admission and persistence rates, rural students who

come from middle income backgrounds or better have more advantages than those who

do not. Socioeconomic status is still a tremendous indicator of academic success,

regardless of geographic origin.

Theme 3 – Rural students alter their religious views in college. The researcher

could find no modern study that sought to understand the religious views of college

students. One study did find that participation in religion is correlated with student

success, particularly in urban areas (Jeynes, 2003). Jeynes (2003) hypothesized that the

reason for the urban success as a result of religious participation was the added

temptations of urban areas and the culture of rural areas towards conservativism that does

not necessarily promote intellectual discourse.

The current study found that rural students who rejected Christianity in high school continued to reject religion in college, while students who accepted Christianity throughout high school retained their faith. Moreover, rural students who retained their faith experienced a shift towards tolerance of other religions and cultures. Rural students noted cultural aspects of their religious upbringing that they rejected, such as the repudiation of LGBT youth.

Research Question 2: How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

To study the rural student decision to attend an R1 Doctoral University, the researcher used Perna's (2006) nested model of college choice as a conceptual frame. During the data analysis, two themes emerged:

1. Poor college advising in rural public schools.

2. Geography as a dynamic barrier.

Theme 1 – Poor college advising in rural public schools. The guidance counselor position in rural high school is of utmost importance as rural students wish to go to college now more than ever (Doyle, Kleinfeld, & Reyes, 2009; Howley, 2006; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, & Farmer, 2016). According to Brown and Schafft (2011), only 19 % of adults in rural areas 25 or older have a bachelor's degree, compared to 30 % in urban areas and 31.5 % in suburban areas. Finding an adult with firsthand knowledge of the college-going process is therefore difficult in rural communities around the United States.

Students who wish to obtain information about college go to their parents first for help. In their study of rural high school students' information gathering strategies for

college, Griffin and her colleagues (2011) found that 54% of rural found information from their parents to be the most helpful, while only 28.9% of rural students found their school counselors to be the most helpful. This finding is problematic, because 100% of college counselors have attended college compared to only 19% of residents of rural America.

Rural students in this study had trouble accessing reliable college admissions information from both their parents and their high school counselors. Five participants reported what they called "bad" or unreliable college-going information. Four students reported receiving college-going advice from unlikely sources, like the Upward Bound advisor in Adeline's case or a community college professor for Ernest. The only participant who noted receiving adequate help from their high school counselor specifically was Faith, and her mother was her high school counselor.

High school counselor must go beyond college-choice. Participant Rachel reported that she desired more information about how to prepare for a career in the medical field throughout high school, but that her counselor could not provide information and did not know how to suggest a major. Participant Audrey shared, "Graduate school was not something that was communicated at all basically in high school… because no one explained to me that you need to keep building your resume for grad school even as you're in college."

Rural students are looking for practical advice when it comes to college-going. Tieken (2016) explains:

> [Rural students] understand the connection between a degree or credential and employment and, participants suggested, have heard it elsewhere. This focus is

apparent among the rural, first-generation students with whom college admissions staff interact. As an administrator at the public associate's/bachelor's institution shared, "they tend to come in very much with a jobs mind-set: the purpose of higher education is to get a better job," and the admissions staff at both the public and private liberal arts colleges noted similar trends. An official at the private college said that, compared to more urban students, many rural students "have a more specific focus coming in, and it is very tied to career." (p. 210)

It is not known whether student's need to equate degrees with careers more than non-rural students, but some possibilities are the economic possibilities of rural America, advice from the high school counselor, advice from parents, or a lack of knowledge of tangible career fields. It is likely that all of these factors could play a role.

Rural high school students need college and career counseling because many do not know how to turn their degrees into careers. Howley (2006) wrote:

Rurality plays a significant and negative role in children's aspirations for advanced studies. In other words, other things being equal, rural youth aspire to attain postgraduate educations in smaller percentages than their nonrural peers. This means that, the influences of income, parent education, and race aside, rural children do indeed aspire to somewhat shorter educational careers… Nonrural youth are nearly twice as likely to expect to obtain more than 4 years of college. (pp. 71-72)

Poor counseling in high school is at least partially to blame for the shortfall in post-graduate degree attainment for rural students.

Access to individuals in the community for support in the college-going decision may also be to blame. The work of Doyle and colleagues (2009) and Means and colleagues (2016) revealed a serious shortfall in informational resources in the community. In the former study, Alaskan native students could not access college graduates in their community to answer questions about college. In the latter, the same problem presented itself amongst African Americans in the rural Black Belt region of Georgia. Moreover, Nelson's (2016) analysis of social capital amongst rural students revealed a correlation between social capital and college attendance, signifying community connections to be an important means of college choice.

Participant Magnolia, and African American student from the Black Belt, sought out no community resources and depending upon her own research. Participant Abagail was discouraged from attending a school that was two-and-a-half hours away by members of her church, because they felt she was leaving them behind. Roland describes how in his hometown, there was a culture of discouragement from pursuing the University of Georgia as an option, as cited in Chapter 6:

> One of the big factors of why I didn't consider Georgia at first was because there's this stigma that it is impossible to get into Georgia, especially around my hometown. Everybody stresses, you have to be the cream of the crop, and in a sense, you do, but it really kind of pushed me away almost, because I didn't think I was the cream of the crop.

For students like Roland, a year or two at a community college is a good option but relies on the student to either receive extra help from professors, like Ernest did, or to find the answers themselves.

Poor college advising was an issue for many students in this study. Further research is needed to understand the cause of poor advising.

Theme 2 – Geography as a dynamic barrier. Rurality is not a monolith in which researchers can make sweeping analyses. National research in the access to and persistence in higher education provides important overarching patterns but fails to find causal links. In his seminal overview of college access, Adelman (2002) states "urban means poor and minority; suburban means middle class and white; rural is a mystery, and most analysts would prefer to leave it that way" (p. 41).

Region mattered in this study of rural college students. Rural students from the north Georgia mountains were particularly successful if they lived in a community with an expansive recreation industry, like Audrey and Ben. Rural students who were located within a couple of hours drive from Atlanta benefitted from the suburban creep of the metropolitan area, like Michael and Roger.

One participant, Julia, lived in a rural area close to Athens. This quote was cited in Chapter 6:

> I was right next door. We would always go into Athens, like the town, there
> wasn't anything in [my hometown] really. So, if you wanted to do anything, you'd
> go there. So, I was kind of already familiar with Athens.

Julia benefitted from being familiar with the Athens area, which both encouraged her attendance at the University of Georgia and eased her transition.

Participants from the farthest reaches of Southeast and Southwest Georgia faced significant barriers to access. Rachel was closer to Florida's best public institutions of higher education, the University of Florida and Florida State University, than the

University of Georgia. Her decision to attend UGA came as a result of a special scholarship and not because it is an academically superior institution, as other students in this study claimed.

Magnolia depended on herself to find information about the college-going process and, without a car, must depend on others in order to see her family. Participant Jaime ended up attending the University of Georgia because fellow students in his AP courses convinced him to apply, even though he did not truly understand why the University of Georgia was a superior institution. Finally, Lawrence allowed the distance and fear of living with others discourage him from attending the University of Georgia in his first year. All of these students experienced unique struggles as a result of their geographic location in the state.

The act of attending an academic institution that is less selective than the student was academic qualified is known as "undermatching" (Smith et al., 2013). Undermatching is troubling, because students who attend more selective schools are more likely to graduate and more selective institutions are likely to have more resources to aid in student success (Bowen et al., 2009). Moreover, students seeking professions that require an advanced degree benefit from attending an academically rigorous institution.

When trying to explain the link between rural status and undermatching, Smith, Pender, and Howell (2013) explained:

Students whose parents have a college education are much less likely to undermatch. This may be because relatively more educated parents have more information on the college going process. It could also mean that these students have stronger networks of friends and alumni, who may also provide information.

Similarly, students who live in rural areas have fewer colleges nearby than students who live in urban or suburban areas. The lack of a nearby college may influence a student's desire to attend college and qualified non-enrollees increase the extent of undermatch. Rural students may also have a lack of information on college options, whereas an urban student may know several local options. (p. 256)

This explanation by Smith and his colleagues (2013) shows why it is difficult to explain how a combination of demographic factors and geography influence the college-going decision.

Geography is an important factor in the college-going decision. A simple definition of "rural" in not adequate to understand individual college experiences, however. Rural students in North and South Georgia faced different economic realities, while students near the Atlanta area enjoyed a superior education and community resources.

Research Question 3: How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?

The findings of research question three began with an explanation of the geographic origin of students at the University of Georgia. Table 6.2 shows that, to balance geographic representation of students at the University of Georgia according to the population of eligible students, it would have needed to lose 1,093 suburban students from its freshman class of 2014 and added 1,129 students from town and rural schools. Rural students are already a minority among students in the state but are also underrepresented at the University of Georgia.

To understand rural student sense of belonging at the University of Georgia, the researcher created emotion codes to identify scenarios when rural students felt that they did not belong. Two themes emerged:

1. Rural students experience a shift in cultural and academic expectations.

2. Residence halls create cultural bridging opportunities for rural students.

Theme 1 – Rural students experience a shift in cultural and academic expectations. National research on sense of belonging for rural students is limited, but one study found that rural students who participated in social clubs or Greek organizations while attending college were more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those who did not (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Rural student success therefore may be linked to campus involvement. Participants Abagail, Adeline, Mary, Michael, Faith, Lauren, Rachel, and Ben all benefitted from being more involved on campus.

Adeline, the lone student to be involved in Greek Life, credits her sorority with providing her a community on campus, as well as a network of professional contacts. Adeline forced herself out of her dorm room to become more involved on campus. Elaine, Michael, and Ben all attended events at the Tate Student Center to stay involved. Faith failed to join several organizations, until she found a fit at the *Red & Black*. Lauren joined Students for Environmental Action and Young Democrats to get involved. Rachel formed a tight community with fellow honors students who were pre-med.

Other participants in this study were not involved on campus, and it affected their outlook of how much they felt they belonged. Magnolia was involved in virtually not extracurricular activities and feels that no one at the University of Georgia is like her. Lawrence delayed his admission to the University of Georgia and never expanded his

social circle beyond friends from high school. Jaime felt a connection playing pick-up soccer with international students but failed to find a consistent community on campus.

Moving to a college-town from a rural area brings new cultural importance in addition to the academic changes. Tieken (2016) notes:

> College requires a move far from home, a move with both literal and symbolic meaning. Beyond the challenge of physical distance, this move might signify entering a new lifestyle and world. For many first-generation students, "going to college can be an eventual point of departure, one that both prompts and hastens movement into some 'other' culture" (London, 1992, p. 6), and this sense of cultural distance may be heightened for rural students and families because pursuing college signifies a break from whatever rural industry—farming, logging, millwork—has sustained the community and traditionally defined the path to adulthood. (p. 206)

Ernest is a notable example of this break from industry that can sustain rural communities.

Ernest chose to leave his hometown to pursue an education and to leave his father's woodshop. Though he left the woodshop, he did not leave the lessons he learned there, nor the cultural artifacts behind. As was cited in the previous chapter, Ernest said of his clothing, "I did not feel that I belonged. I normally wear shorts when I can, because before I moved here I never owned a pair of shorts or sandals; it was boots and jeans every day of my life."

Audrey too wore clothing that she described as "church-y" when she came to the University of Georgia. The culture of her hometown dictated that she dresses and acts

like a church-going young woman, tweeting bible verses, and not showing too much skin in spite of being agnostic. Abagail now dresses like her sorority sisters and is open to consuming alcohol at parties. She changed her behavior to feel a sense of belonging.

Theme 2 – Residence halls create cultural bridging opportunities for rural students. This theme emerged amongst participants who lived in the residence halls in their first year. Because the University of Georgia requires its first-year students to live in a residence hall in their first year, rural students have a unique opportunity to tap into the social networks of suburban students. Participants Faith, Ben, Rachel, Lauren, and Margaery noted an expansion of their social network as a result living near students from affluent areas of Georgia.

This finding contrasts Li's (2013) study of superior rural students in China. Rural females had difficulty adjusting to the culture of their urban peers in the residence hall. Their difference in cultural capital was so significantly different, that they could not find common ground. One possible reason for the difference in this study is in the case study location; Li's study took place at a national university in China, rather than a regional one. Students at the University of Georgia, whether they are from rural, urban, or suburban Georgia, share a common history by living in the state of Georgia.

Implications for Future Research

Though AP course offerings grew over the past 20 years, the availability of STEM courses in rural areas is not currently known. In May 2017, the top five most commonly administered AP tests were English Language, United States History, English Literature, Government & Politics – United States, and Calculus AB (The College Board,

2017). While the typical participant in this study was able to take one to three AP

courses, they were typically in United States History or English.

Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) found that the one of the most significant

differences between rural and non-rural students was curriculum intensity. To improve

curriculum intensity, rural schools must invest in AP teachers. Unfortunately, teachers are

particularly needed in math and science in the rural communities of Georgia (Percy,

2016). Without experienced math and science teachers who are certified to teach AP

courses, rural schools with remain behind, and will underprepare their students who

attend top public universities

Adelman (2002) offered dual enrollment as an alternative to AP courses.

Unfortunately, this study found that dual enrollment offerings are insufficient to make up

the difference in the curriculum intensity. Dual enrollment was most effective when

instructors are brought into the high school to teach college courses.

One key piece of information that is missing from the literature is the distribution

of AP courses in rural America. To understand the curricular disadvantage that rural

students experience, statistical analysis is needed to understand the availability of AP

STEM courses.

Future research in the study of rural students is hindered by the data collection

methods of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). IPEDS does

not gather the high school of origin of each student, making basic data analysis at the

campus level impossible without a data request from the institution. The researcher of

this study obtained the high school of origin of the freshman class of 2014 data from the

University of Georgia, though it took several requests to do so. Without this data being publicly available, research will continue to be limited.

Religion emerged as a theme in this study. The religious experiences of rural students in college is sparse, and this study found that rural students who remained religious kept their faith in college and shifted their views towards tolerance. Future research should look at rural student religious identity at a variety of institution types. For example, do rural students adopt more tolerant views at a Christian college?

Poor college advising in high school was a pervasive finding in this study. Most participants noted being dissatisfied with their high school counselor. Future research should assess the views of the rural high school guidance counselor to understand their process of advising students towards postsecondary options. Understanding how counselors advise students is particularly important, as the low-skill labor that was once a hallmark of rural America is diminishing (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Cochet, 2016; Hagerty & Shukla, 2015; Schumpeter, 2013).

Implications for Practitioners

The University of Georgia has responded to its underrepresentation of rural students. Recently, President Jere Morehead announced a five year $300,000 "ALL Georgia" program to aid rural students (Shearer, 2018). Moreover, the policy of the Office of Admissions of taking AP course availability into consideration with academic rigor is critical for rural students. Participants in this study noted knowing fellow first-year students with over 30 hours of AP credit, while only being offered one to three in their own school.

More must be done to encourage rural students to attend the University of Georgia, however. As is shown in Table 6.2, the University of Georgia does not resemble the state in which it is set out to represent. The University of Georgia currently represents suburban Atlanta, but not the rural areas or small cities of Georgia. Only one participant noted interacting with an individual at the University of Georgia before applying. Two participants specifically mentioned desiring admissions officials to visit school to talk about the benefits of attending a research university and admissions requirements.

To improve the experience of rural students, the University should also invest in scholarships for study abroad experiences. Scholarships are especially necessary for first-generation college students and students from a background of low socioeconomic status, as study abroad is currently limited to those of a middle-income background.

Concluding Thoughts

Rural students who begin to search for a career path face unique challenges in the 21st century. The reliable low-skill labor that once proliferated in rural American is diminishing. The expansion of white-collar labor over the past few decades was concentrated in suburban and urban areas (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Therefore, leaving the community for college could potentially mean leaving for good. Rural communities still need college education professionals, however. Rural communities need doctors, lawyers, and teachers to sustain their populations.

The most talented students from rural America must be encouraged to seek out professions that require an advanced education to improve their lives and to aid in sustaining rural communities. This study showed how rural schools are providing an

inferior curriculum to aid students in their academic development, which causes both academic and emotional issues.

As postsecondary institutions continue to become more suburban, the academic and cultural gap between rural and non-rural students widens. The rural student experience is, therefore, one in which rural students must learn to perform like their suburban and urban counterparts to succeed.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Guide

Research Questions:
    (1) What is the rural student experience at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?
    (2) How do rural students decide to attend an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?
    (3) How does being rural affect a student's sense of belonging at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States

1. Tell me about your life at home. *(RQ2, RQ3)*
   Possible Probes:
   1. How big is your hometown?
   2. What subject was your best in school?
   3. What does your mother/father do?
   4. Do you have any siblings in college?
2. How do you think being rural affected your decision to go to college? *(RQ2, RQ3)*
   Possible Probes:
   1. When did you decide that you were going to college after high school?
   2. Who did you lean on for help when you weren't sure what to do next?
   3. Did you think you were going somewhere else for college?
   4. What made the biggest impact on your decision?
3. How did coming from a rural area affect your experience at this university? *(RQ2, RQ3)*
   Possible Probes:
   1. What was it like when you first arrived?
   2. How did you compare with your peers in your classes?
   3. What sticks out about your freshman year?
   4. What do you wish you had known your first year that you know now?
   5. What is your career objective?
4. Have you ever felt out-of-place at this university? *(RQ1, RQ3)*
   Possible Probes:
   1. Were there clubs or groups on campus that you avoided?
   2. Did you ever feel out-of-place in class?
   3. What did you do if you felt uncomfortable?
5. What are you going to do after you graduate? *(RQ1)*

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

Demographic Information

1. Gender Identity: Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ☐ _____

2. How do you describe yourself?

   American Indian or Alaska Native ☐

   Asian ☐

   Black or African American ☐

   Latino ☐

   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ☐

   White, non-Latino ☐

   Other (please specify) ☐ _____

3. What is your age in years? _____

4. What is your current major/minor? _____

5. What is your family's yearly income?

   Under $10,000 ☐

   $10,001 - $25,000 ☐

   $25,001 - $40,000 ☐

   $40,001 - $55,000 ☐

   $55,001 - $70,000 ☐

   $70,001 - $95,000 ☐

   $95,001 or above ☐

6. Mother's highest level of education?

   No high school diploma ☐

   High school diploma/GED ☐

   Some college ☐

   Bachelor's Degree ☐

   Graduate Degree ☐

7. Father's highest level of education?

   No high school diploma ☐

   High school diploma/GED ☐

   Some college ☐

   Bachelor's Degree ☐

   Graduate Degree ☐

8. What was your high school GPA? (4.0 Scale) _____

9. What was your SAT score (if applicable)?

   a. Reading: _____

   b. Math: _____

   c. Writing: _____

d. Total: _____
10. What was your ACT score (if applicable)? _____
11. What high school did you attend? _____

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT FLYER

ARE YOU FROM RURAL GEORGIA?

You may be eligible to participate in a research study about your experiences in college

Participate in a 90-minute 1-on-1 interview

Your participation is extremely important as this study seeks to improve the educational experiences of students like you at large research universities

Interested? Have questions?
E-mail pdgrant3@gmail.com

Every effort will be taken to retain your confidentiality, and any concerns should be directed to the Institutional Review Board at UGA Reference Study #1413 - irb@uga.edu