INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
Journal Homepage: https://ojs.literacyinstitute.org/index.php/ijqr
ISSN: 2798-6047 (Online)
Research Article

Volume 4	Issue 1	July (2024)	DOI: 10.47540/ijqr.v4i1.1331	Page: 57 – 69

Understanding College Pathways for Rural Appalachians in Tennessee

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: College Aspirations, College Pathways, Postsecondary, Rural Schooling.

Received : 14 February 2024
Revised : 15 April 2024
Accepted : 29 July 2024

ABSTRACT

Rural students encounter unique obstacles as they pursue higher education. Knowledge of such obstacles can be valuable to stakeholders seeking to prepare, recruit, and retain rural students. This interpretive case study sought to understand postsecondary college pathways from the perspectives of nine participants who attended rural high schools in Appalachia, specifically the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee, and earned a postsecondary degree. Through analysis of face-to-face interviews, researchers found that family and teachers were significant in rural students' guidance and academic success, yet most participants noted a lack of support from high school administrators and counselors. Some participants said their schools failed to prepare them for college, and most said they lacked study skills, yet most participants had access to dual credit, and all participants succeeded in college. Participants' pride in their rural roots led most to return to their hometowns after college. The study demonstrates the need for better college and career counseling from rural students' school leadership and for more diverse experiences while still in high school to help prepare rural students for college.

INTRODUCTION

Rural communities across the United States have many commonalities, but they are also distinct in place and character, requiring a more nuanced understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and barriers that shape rural residents' pursuit of postsecondary education. More knowledge about rural residents' college pathways can be valuable to stakeholders seeking to prepare, recruit, and retain rural students. This interpretive case study sought to understand decisions, influences, and experiences that shaped the successful college pathway of nine participants from rural high schools in the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee, which is situated on the western edge of southern Appalachia.

Recent reporting indicates more students are opting to skip college (Binkley, 2023). College enrollment in the United States "remains well below pre-pandemic levels, down about 1.23 million undergraduates … compared to fall 2019" (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023, para 1). Still, many rural high school students continue to leave their communities after high school graduation to seek a postsecondary education. We sought to know more about the how and why of their journeys. We wanted to know how rural experiences shaped the college pathways of high school graduates from rural communities who pursued a postsecondary degree immediately after high school and succeeded. Our guiding questions were: 1. How do rural Tennessee high school graduates who earned a college degree describe their rural experience? 2. How do the participants describe the forces that shaped their college pathway? 3. How do the participants describe the experience of transition to college? and, 4. What changes do they recommend to improve the postsecondary pathway?

Research has shown that, compared to urban or suburban students, rural students encountered unique obstacles as they pursued higher education (Byun et al., 2015; Guiffrida, 2008; McNamee & Ganss, 2023). Knowing these unique characteristics contributes to understanding the rural student's postsecondary pathway. Rural communities are geographically unique—usually more distant from postsecondary opportunities than more urban areas (Kirby & Sharpe, 2010, McCauley, 2022; Prins &

Kassab, 2017; Tran & DeFeo, 2021). Rural communities also sustain special social and cultural characteristics (Kirby & Sharpe, 2010), including strong family and community connections (Agger et al., 2018; Hektner, 1995; Shepard, 2004), which were perceived as both comforting and invasive (Shepard, 2004; Wright, 2012). Family encouragement was key in the decisions of rural Kentucky students to seek postsecondary education, yet family obligations made the college transition difficult (Hlinka et al., 2015). Participants' desires to stay close to family and home were complicated by the lack of job opportunities and other conveniences in rural areas (Hlinka et al., 2015). A longitudinal study indicated rural students in the US were less likely than urban students to choose a "selective institution," more likely to defer enrolling after high school, and less likely to continue their education without interruptions (Byun et al., 2015).

Rural communities may have limited occupational and educational opportunities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Ganss, 2016; Hektner, 1995; Petrin et al., 2014; Reichert et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Stone & Évora, 2021; Wright, 2012). Rural outmigration, or rural brain drain, was especially prevalent for perceived high achievers (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Petrin et al., 2014; Reichert et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Wright, 2012). Educated youth often migrate to towns and cities that offer more job prospects, while those without college degrees stay behind and must compete for limited economic opportunities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

Rural schools provided fewer educational opportunities within their communities, such as access to advanced coursework, college counseling, or college advisement (Carrico et al., 2019; Morton et al., 2018; Saw & Agger, 2021), and rural students reported they lacked the study skills needed for college (Brame, 2022; Hlinka, 2017). Rural students took fewer rigorous courses in high school, and their achievement test scores were lower than those of suburban students (Byun et al., 2012a). Lack of rigor in coursework (Morton et al., 2018), low self-esteem (Menaka, 2022), and deficit mindsets (Hlalele, 2022) were found to contribute to self-doubt and inability to persist in college. Lack of direction from teachers, counselors, and parents was a prominent theme in the literature concerning rural students' postsecondary attainment (Burnell, 2003; Byun et al., 2012a; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Hektner, 1995; Morton et al., 2018; Shepard, 2004). In a study that examined rural student success in China, Xie and Postiglione (2016) found that teachers tended to give more personalized attention to students whose parents were more involved in schooling and explained that rural parents from more disadvantaged households were less likely to be directly involved with their student's school and less likely to develop important parental-teacher relationships than rural parents from more affluent households. Also demonstrating the complexity of the rural challenge, a study of African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and White rural students found that educational aspirations were similar for the four groups, but their educational experiences varied (Irvin et al., 2016). Researchers said the study indicated school experiences for the three underrepresented groups, including grade retention, higher poverty rates, and segregation, were counter-indicative of educational aspirations.

The many obstacles to higher education access for rural students are not exclusive to the United States; similar obstacles have been identified by researchers around the world, including in Australia (Douglas et al., 2018), South Africa (Maila & Ross, 2018), Vietnam (Pang, 2022), and China (Chen, 2022; Clothey et al., 2018). Both Pang (2022) and Clothey et al. (2018) noted the complexity of challenges for rural students. Rural, low-income students in Vietnam struggled to build student-teacher relationships because they found teachers "unapproachable," (Pang, 2022), and participants also struggled with social relations, had low self-efficacy and self-esteem, and were stressed over money. In China, challenges to rural students included language issues, distance, culture shock, and decision-making barriers for ethnic minority students seeking access to higher education (Clothey et al., 2018).

Evidence has identified potential ways to mitigate these barriers, including high teacher expectations (Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2017), natural mentors in the community (Aschenbrener & Edwards, 2023), teacher support (Watson et al., 2016), enrollment in college preparation courses or programs (Byun et al., 2017), and small class size and unique scholarship opportunities (Morton et al., 2018). Evidence also suggests rural students need more support, resources, and programs to

successfully transition to college. One successful program in Australia trained library staff to assist with access and motivation within rural communities (Douglas et al., 2018). The authors of a study of 3,456 rural youth in the US noted the importance of both families and schools collaborating in support of rural youth's educational and career decisions after their research demonstrated that rural youth "adjust their educational aspirations, and subsequent college enrollment, based on their attitudes about and connections to family and place" (Agger et al., 2018).

In the discussion that follows, we describe what we learned about rural college pathways in a small region of Tennessee. We describe our methods and analysis, followed by findings related to the participants' decisions, influences, and experiences. We conclude with a discussion of the findings for each research question and the implications for stakeholders.

METHODS

This interpretive case study was informed by traditions of ethnography and symbolic interactionism, which seek to understand human ideas, actions, and interactions in specific contexts or in terms of the wider culture (Glesne, 2016). Our work assumes that the perspective of others is meaningful and knowable and can be made explicit (Patton, 2015). In the qualitative tradition, we worked as co-constructors of knowledge, with our participants, as we sought to interpret and describe participants' perspectives and experiences. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval and securing informed consent, researchers recruited graduates of a 4-year public university in Tennessee and conducted semi-structured, individual interviews, which were transcribed and returned to participants for review. Interview transcripts were then analyzed inductively, first individually by the researchers, then collectively to compare codes, assign categories, resolve discrepancies, and develop themes from the data.

In our study, rural students were defined as having graduated from a rural high school in one of three rural counties, all with populations under 20,000, predominantly White, and with population densities of less than 40 residents per square mile (U.S. Census, 2020). No high school in the three-county area had more than 500 students (Tennessee Department of Education, 2021). Participants in the study were all White and included six women and three men. Their names are pseudonyms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Seven themes developed in our analysis of participant interviews, representing rural hometown and school experiences, forces that shaped their postsecondary pathway, the transition to postsecondary education, and what could have been different.

Because I Was a Rural

We wanted to know how rural life shaped participants and their decisions, so we asked them to reflect on their rural communities. Apart from participants' experiences with rural schooling and their own families, discussed in separate categories, the theme Because I Was Rural presents participants' discussions of local pastimes, people, and other characteristics of their respective communities.

A common characteristic of their communities was stated emphatically and positively by Tracy: "Everyone is family". Danny said he knew everybody, and everybody knew his family, which was beneficial. Among the benefits of knowing everyone, Ella said, was that everyone was "really willing to help out." Lynn described the benefit this way: "Everyone's kind of united ... something that I think of a lot when I think of how I grew up." Lewis said that in his "very tight-knit" community, people watched out for him, which he enjoyed.

Participants also shared some of the negative aspects of growing up in a close-knit community. "People are typically all in your business" and "nosy," Tracy said. Lynn shared that "drama spreads quickly," and Blair said stories and rumors about others were common. Danny explained that "if you did something embarrassing, everybody knew about it," and if someone in your family had a bad reputation, "you get judged for that." Cassie said the small-town closeness was a "give and take" between the positives and negatives. Adam expressed a similar sentiment, stating that having a community family "can hurt you," then quickly added, "but it also helps, you know."

Participants described cultural and social sameness in their hometowns. Tracy said she was never comfortable expressing alternative views in

her hometown because "people would have thought [I] was weird." Blair mentioned a lack of "open-mindedness" in her small town, and Lynn stated: "It's really difficult to have a different opinion … and [you] really stand out if you maybe don't agree or don't follow the kind of status quo of things." Racial and cultural diversity also were lacking. Adam explained that he "graduated with maybe two students of other cultures or races." Danny said, "Umm … everybody is White, pretty much." By contrast, Tracy noted, in college, she was around "all different types of people" and was exposed to more diverse viewpoints than in her hometown.

Many participants discussed limited opportunities for extracurricular engagement in their communities. When asked what friends in high school would have done for fun, Lynn commented, "We would maybe drive the four-wheeler around," watch movies, cruise in a car, and "eventually end up in some parking lot, sitting there." Tracy described a similar activity: "We did a lot of keeping the roads hot, riding around … in the county, just backroads." Some participants recognized the limited pastime opportunities as problematic. For Tracy, "the most inconvenient part [about growing up in a rural community] was just not being around anything." She explained: There isn't a bowling alley. There aren't movies here. There isn't any place to go hang out. So, a lot of times those kids might get together on the square and maybe do things that they shouldn't—maybe underage drinking or different things like that.

Participants indicated community as family, cultural and social sameness and limited extracurricular options were prominent in their experiences because of their rurality.

School as Community

In many rural communities in the United States, schools are the center of the community. All participants in our study shared stories of School as a Community, including significant relationships with at least one and sometimes multiple people in their rural schools. Participants spoke of the close associations and familiarity that characterized the school community. "In high school, like, I knew everybody," said Cassie. "I never felt lost at high school. … I knew where every class was, I knew every teacher kind of on a personal level." That sense of community extended in some cases beyond students and teachers, to other staff. Ella remembered the food services staff: "The lunch ladies were the kindest people ever." Lynn said that bonding with teachers, coaches, or staff gave students "a landing place" when they walked through the school doors.

Participants also discussed meaningful teacher-student relationships. "I had a teacher that helped me my junior year, and it probably changed my life," said Lewis. Tracy mentioned one teacher with whom she could talk if she was having a bad day, and Adam discussed how a teacher understood his strengths and always tried to help him. Some teachers encouraged the pursuit of postsecondary education. Stephanie said her teacher "was really good about talking to people about what they wanted to do." She said teachers were "very instrumental" in advocating for postsecondary education. Participant stories of student-teacher relationships described mostly positive experiences, but two participants said they had avoided courses that might have helped to prepare them for college because they did not have a good relationship with the course teacher.

Small School Limitations

Participants described less impactful interactions with administrators and counselors. Only one participant discussed positive experiences with a counselor. Ella said her counselor "answered our questions in the summer" and scheduled many parent meetings to discuss college. Lewis and Blair said counselors sometimes helped with paperwork, such as completing college admissions paperwork, but did little else to help students understand career or postsecondary options. Adam said he "wanted to be an engineer," but the guidance counselor pushed a different option "and I don't know why." Danny could not recall one-on-one conversations with a counselor about "realistic" postsecondary career options. Cassie said her guidance counselor "didn't have a lot of answers" and even discouraged her postsecondary aspirations: "I told her I wanted to apply to [the university], and she told me that wasn't going to be an option. I needed to have a plan B." Lynn said she felt her counselor ignored her because she was a good student, noting, "It was kind of like, 'you're making all As, you're fine, you're good. You're going to figure it out on your own'." Two participants, Stephanie and Tracy, said they could not recall any conversations with guidance counselors about postsecondary education

options. "I could not tell you who the guidance counselor was the whole time I was in high school," Stephanie said. Even less impactful, participants said, were principals and vice-principals. Seven of nine participants said they could not recall any conversations with school administrators about career options or postsecondary education. Cassie's response summed up most responses: I can't think of a time where I sat one-on-one with either the vice principal or the principal and talked about postsecondary, the steps I needed to take to get that, what I wanted to do kind of career-wise if I even needed to go to college.

Participants' responses were mixed when asked whether their rural schools prepared them for college. Although three participants mentioned that their schools offered honors classes, Blair, Stephanie, Danny, and Cassie said their schools lacked academic rigor. "In no sense did [school] prepare me for college. At all. None," said Blair. Stephanie said she was forced to take remedial courses when she entered college. "I don't think I was provided the opportunity in high school to make it through college," she said. Danny noted that his school "didn't have AP classes, or they didn't have calculus, physics, or programming, which are the things I'm interested in, and the things I wanted to really study." Both Cassie and Stephanie noted that their college peers who had attended larger high schools were ahead of them academically. Stephanie also described a deficit in her rural education: "I didn't feel as if I was [as] prepared as other kids from other schools." However, she indicated that her school was not to blame. "I just don't think we had the resources for tutoring and things like that," she said, adding that the percentage of students in her high school who planned to attend college was low, and teachers were more focused on "the other 80% [who] are just trying to be the first one in their family to graduate high school."

Many of the participants said they did not study or did not learn how to study in high school. "I didn't feel like high school challenged me enough," Cassie said. She added that in high school she never studied "for anything … and I was in the top 10 in my class." Danny and Tracy also said they had not studied in high school. For both, as well as for Lewis, high school was about something else. "In high school, all I did was socialize," Tracy said. Danny further explained: "In high school, social experience is number one, right? I mean, you want to get along with people, you want to talk to girls and all that. … That's the main point." Lewis commented: "High school, to me, was more social than anything." Yet like Stephanie, Lewis did not feel his rural school should be blamed. "I think I had good teachers," he said. "Did I take advantage of them? Probably not. … I think I could have applied myself in the classroom more." Tracy had a similar sentiment: "I could have worked harder." Lynn was an exception in the study who, unlike other participants, felt her rural school provided a good education. She "felt prepared" academically to begin college, and said, "I never thought, 'Oh, I can't do this'."

Team sports, such as softball, basketball, and football, were the primary extracurriculars in the participants' rural schools, and for some participants, sports were significant to their experiences. "Without a doubt," Danny said, the community gave more attention to sports than to academics. Sports were both opportunities for participants and pastimes. Lewis said summer football camp "really helped me come out of my shell a little bit and make connections." Stephanie said participating in sports meant "I always had something to do after school." Tracy played sports and "went to all the basketball games." Blair said she was "invested in sports, so that was my fun, and that's all I ever did was play volleyball or softball." Interest in sports helped her maintain her grades and think ahead to college. However, Cassie bemoaned the lack of variety in after-school activities. "We don't have a marching band," she said, "but really, could we even fund that if we did have enough people to fully have enough participation?"

Motivation—A Family Affair

Family members were a strong force in participants' motivations to pursue a postsecondary education. Participants indicated that family members, particularly their mothers and in most cases also their fathers, both encouraged and supported their postsecondary attainment. Eight of the nine participants indicated they were raised in traditional family settings with both mother and father present. The only exception was Tracy, whose father died when she was young. Without exception, participants described specific encouragement or support from one or both parents,

including high expectations, words of encouragement, attendance at college information meetings and visits, and/or financial support. Some participants also mentioned support from siblings or grandparents. The parental and familial support of college, a form of motivation, was coded as A Family Affair.

Several participants said family members expected them to earn a postsecondary degree, which led to external motivation. "My parents always wanted me to go to college," said Cassie. "They wanted me to be educated," Lynn said her parents shared high expectations. "Because of their framing of it ... I don't think I ever considered college not being an option," she said. Parents' high expectations for many participants included success in high school so college would be an option. "It was super important to [my parents] for us to at least make good grades and try," said Blair. The school also was a "top priority" in Adam's house. For Ella, parental support also meant parental participation in school meetings and college recruitment events. "My mother always attended every parent-teacher conference or parent meeting," Ella explained and accompanied her to her first on-campus orientation.

Prominent in participants' explanations of their parents' support for postsecondary attainment were the desire to be their family's first college graduate and the need for financial independence. Some participants were first-generation college graduates. "Neither of my parents attended college," Cassie said. "None of my grandparents attended college. They wanted that for me." A second explanation for parental support was financial independence. "It was really important to my parents … that we could support ourselves one day," Stephanie explained. Ella's mom wanted her daughter to be independent. "It wasn't necessarily about the education; it was that the degree let you get a job," Ella said.

Little Fish in a Big Sea

We asked participants about their college transition experiences, including both academic and social aspects of the experience.

Most participants mentioned being fearful of academic rigor. Stephanie said she asked herself in her first class: "Have I bit off more than I can chew? Am I really ready for this?" She added that she "learned quickly that I was going to have to study and probably ask for more help." Study skills were mentioned by other participants. Danny explained that in his upper-level courses, he had to "actually … study this material … which had never happened before." Adam lamented the lack of both study skills and knowledge about the academic demands. Ella also mentioned a lack of knowledge that contributed to discomfort in the transition. "I don't know if I'd ever even written a formal paper before," she said, and much of the technology was new to her: "I'd never had my own computer." Cassie said she "really had to work my tail off." Blair had similar sentiments: "College was really freaking hard" and "it took me a long time to learn… how to study."

Some participants discussed how they coped during the transition. Lewis said he thought of college as his job because his dad was financing it. He said, "I mean, [Dad] said, 'This is your job, so I'm paying you to do this, and you do the best you can'." For Lynn, the college transition involved learning about academic expectations and "just learning the juggling. ... What were the things worth spending time on and what was not?" Connections with high school teachers helped some with the transition. Cassie said she "called back to one of my math teachers and was like, 'Hey, I'm struggling with this calculus'." She said the teacher connected via Zoom and talked her through the problem. She wrote letters each semester to another teacher "and she always wrote me back."

Seven participants discussed early access to college credit, including dual credit—a program for earning both high school and college credit while still in high school—in easing the transition to a 4-year university. "I would say that was a big help in preparing me" for college, Cassie said. Participants mentioned taking both English and algebra for dual credit. Ella said she earned more than two dozen college credit hours through dual credit; however, her push to earn college credit in high school, while also maintaining a job, was stressful. "So, it's kind of like Catch-22," she said.

Participants also discussed the social aspect of their college transition. Stephanie said she had to "learn how to have fun and get to hang out with your friends but also keep up with school." Tracy said she socialized less and noted, "It's like I went from one extreme … in high school, all I did was socialize, and then in college all I did was study." Blair feared "moving away and just being kind of

by myself." Cassie feared loneliness and said, "I guess I was scared I wouldn't make any friends and then I would spend all my alone time, like, in my dorm in the dark and quiet … by myself. I'm going to be a little fish in a big ol' sea".

Cassie further expressed a sentiment shared by other participants: "College wasn't exactly what I thought it was going to be. ... I thought the way it was portrayed in high school [was that it would] be easy and fun. ... College wasn't that."

Regrets and Advice

We asked participants to discuss what might have made their college pathway smoother. Specifically, they shared advice for other rural students considering college, as well as regrets that they had about their own experiences.

Stephanie, Cassie, and Tracy all said they wished they had been made aware of the difficulty of college. Stephanie noted, "I didn't realize how hard it is to graduate in 4 years … I wish that … I'd had a little guidance on that." Stephanie also thought that delaying college after high school would have been beneficial and added, "I don't know that I would have [gone] straight to college … I think that if I had been a little more clearheaded when I went to college and older and appreciated education … that I probably would have got a different degree".

Cassie felt unprepared for college and said she wished she had visited more campuses. Cassie also advised: "You've got to find those little study habits that are going to make you successful." Other participants noted the importance of seeking scholarships.

Many participants wanted rural students to know that they can do anything they desire and that they can impact their world. "Just because you're from a small area doesn't mean that you can't make a difference," Stephanie said. Similarly, Cassie stated, "Guess what? You can be from [a small town] and go to Harvard. You can do it. You can graduate. Set your mind to it." Lynn echoed those sentiments, advising rural students to "have a view of what opportunities are out in the world" and not feel limited. Participants emphasized the importance of staying grounded in their rural experience. "There's a whole big world out there," Cassie said. "You can go anywhere and do anything. But you're always going to feel, like, rooted at home, too." Lewis said he hoped rural students would "have the same pride" as he does in his rural roots.

Most participants expressed regret that they had not been more committed in high school to coursework, extracurriculars, and socializing. "I would have applied myself a bit more in football," Lewis said, and "I'd have applied myself a little bit more in school." Tracy said, "I didn't try as hard as I should, and I didn't do as good … I would just apply myself more, and I would have a little more fun." Cassie wished she had spent more time making friends in high school. Blair also wished she had "branched out more with my friend groups." Danny had a different response: "I wish I wouldn't have done my homework as much because, looking back on it, you know, the homework was pointless."

Participants also wished they had found more mentors. Tracy suggested: "Find somebody … There's somebody in your community that helps you and [knows] what's best for you. Find that person." Ella echoed the advice: "Have that one adult that really encourages you and just is that connection for you … You have to have at least one other person be like, 'I believe in you.'"

Maintaining Rural Roots

Another theme of the study was a desire to return to their hometowns. Most participants said their motivation stemmed from family. Lewis wanted "to raise a family in a place where [I] felt like they would be taken care of." Stephanie, a healthcare provider, had moved to her hometown: "I wanted to be back closer to my family." She added that she liked the idea of seeing her patients in town and said she would "care at a different level here" than she would have elsewhere. Tracy said with certainty, "I always want[ed] to have my home here." Adam had returned home after college and said the only reason he would ever leave would be "something drastic … like a huge opportunity somewhere." Lewis had moved to his home county to raise his family, and Stephanie also returned home. "I felt ... [like] I was going to be a better person if I worked here instead of going to a big city," she said. Danny had plans to return home: "I'm going to buy a house near my parents' property."

Three of the nine participants chose not to return to their rural counties. Blair chose to move with her child to a nearby county, expressing dissatisfaction with her hometown school system.

Ella reflected that before starting graduate studies, she would have been happy teaching in her hometown, but now her future was at a university.

CONCLUSION

Our study's data collection was guided by four research questions. The discussion that follows examines how findings addressed each question, with links to existing research. We conclude with implications for education.

Question 1: The Rural Experience

The first research question examined how rural Tennessee high school graduates who persisted in postsecondary education described their rural experience. Participants spoke about a common theme, everyone is family, which represented a cultural norm and supported findings of rural community connectedness (Azano, 2011; Tran & DeFeo, 2021), as well as perceived strong family and community ties (Hektner, 1995; Shepard, 2004). Participants in our study also discussed the negative aspects of their tight-knit communities, in accord characteristics of living under a microscope (Wright, 2012; Shepard, 2004). Participants noted "doing nothing" time filled the void in extracurricular activities a similar finding to Wright (2012).

Participants noted limits to their rural education. Many believed their high school lacked the academic rigor needed for college preparation, and some said they were ignored by school personnel who felt lower-performing students needed more attention. This finding was inconsistent with studies that indicated rural students' perceived teacher favoritism towards higher achieving students (Burnell, 2003; Petrin et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Participants perceived a community focus on sports rather than education, unlike Alleman and Holly (2013), whose participants thought that their community emphasized both education and academic performance.

Deficit ideologies in their abilities, perceptions, views, and experiences were all relevant in participants' discussions in the current study when reflecting on their rural experience. Considering that rural youth were found to depend on their families and communities for moral guidance (Shepard, 2004), it is understandable that our participants' views would reflect those of the near homogenous rural community. Participants also spoke of lacking social skills because of their rurality, leading to deficit perceptions of their abilities and supporting Morton et al. (2018), Menaka (2022), and Hlalele (2022), who found that many rural students experienced self-doubt in their abilities. Low-income rural students in Vietnam struggled with social relations, had low self-efficacy and self-esteem, and were stressed over money (Pang, 2022).

Question 2: Forces of Influence

The second research question explored how participants described the forces that shaped their postsecondary pathway. Personal relationships with family and school personnel, particularly teachers, were prominent in participants' discussions of their postsecondary journey. Participants indicated that missing elements, such as study skills, college visits, and college or career information, would have enhanced their college pathways. This aligns with Rivera et al. (2019), who found that campus visits served to both generate interest in pursuing a postsecondary degree as well as help rural students to envision themselves as a postsecondary student. Participants indicated that postsecondary education was important to them because it was important to their family members. While family support primarily came from one or both parents, some participants also mentioned support from their siblings and grandparents. This finding aligned with earlier studies that demonstrated the significance of family for motivation, guidance, and financial support (Byun et al., 2012a; Byun et al., 2012b; Heinisch, 2017; Hlinka et al., 2015; Lasselle, 2017; Morton et al., 2018; Ngozwana et el., 2024; Seward & Gaesser, 2018; Shepard, 2004; Stone & Évora, 2021).

Bonding with others, particularly teachers, within their rural schools was also a prominent force shaping participants' decisions, access, and persistence. Teacher support ranged from frequently discussing college while students were still in high school to helping participants with challenging college coursework after high school. Contrasting their positive sentiments about teacher support and motivation were participants' reports of limited or lacking support from school counselors and administrators. Most participants indicated they wanted and needed more information to make decisions about their future. This lack of support

from counselors aligned with Morton et al. (2018), who found that counselors were generally uninterested in providing support for students' college preparation. The lack of support or interest from administrators was in sharp contrast to Kryst et al.'s (2018) finding that demonstrated the value of administrators in providing pathways to postsecondary education.

Question 3: The Transition

Our third research question explored rural high school graduates' transitions to postsecondary education by asking them to describe their experiences. The transition from a rural community upbringing and education to the academic rigor of postsecondary education proved challenging for most of our participants, which aligned with previous studies (Burnell, 2003; Byun et al., 2012a; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Ganss, 2016; Hektner, 1995; Morton et al., 2018; Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021; Pang, 2022; Shepard, 2004).

Notable in participants' discussions was the absence of guidance from school counselors and administrators. Overcoming this lack of information, while also experiencing fear of failure and a new social scene, made the transition more difficult than it might have been with more support in high school. Most participants in our study did have access to dual credit programs, which helped to prepare them for what was to come. However, all participants were clear in their discussions of their post-high school decisions and subsequent transition to college: They wanted and needed more information and advice about career options and how to prepare for and succeed in college. Research has shown that multiple supports, such as career planning or other programs, lead to more success for rural students (Alleman & Holly, 2013; Douglas et al., 2018; Kryst et al., 2018; Lapan et al., 2007).

Question 4: Improving the Rural Postsecondary Pathway

In answering Question 4, participants discussed many things they wished they had known or had done differently both while in high school and in college. Participants also identified areas where more support could have been beneficial. Many participants discussed the need for more information and guidance about postsecondary opportunities. Recommendations included better guidance about postsecondary career opportunities, associated educational requirements, and college and scholarship application processes. These recommendations support Chenoweth and Galliher (2004), who found that the lack of this type of information presented significant obstacles for rural students when deciding whether to attend college. Acquiring better study skills in high school was another need identified by the participants, which aligned with other studies of rural students (Blame, 2022; Hlinka, 2017). Many participants said lack of study skills made their transition from high school to college more difficult.

Several participants recommended seeking an adult mentor while in high school to provide advice and encouragement. Beneficial mentors identified by the participants included teachers, relatives, and community members. Participants' recommendations emphasized the importance of natural mentorship within rural settings, which can effectively promote students' well-being and health (Aschenbrener & Edwards, 2023), which aligns with the findings of Marlow-McCowin et al. (2020) who suggested that peer mentoring initiatives would be beneficial in building social capital for rural Latinx students.

Implications for Education

Study findings provide stakeholders with a better understanding of rural high school graduates' college pathways, including rural school and community experiences, the role of others in decisions and access, and the supports they had versus those they lacked. The study points to the need for better counseling; findings indicate some rural school districts may be missing a significant opportunity by not engaging school leaders in their students' decision-making processes. Perceived lack of college and career counseling could be due to counselors' oversized caseloads, especially in rural areas. Policymakers may consider funding a college admissions advocate or additional administrator to give guidance counselors more time with students. High school administrators could work more closely with school counselors to ensure students' academic and personal development needs are being met. This collaboration might include professional development, a comprehensive counseling plan, and allocating necessary resources to ensure all students are heard and supported. More research is needed to understand the disconnect described by participants and to identify effective programs for helping students navigate successfully to college.

The findings of this study also underscored the lack of diversity of both culture and ethnicity in many rural schools, which can amplify the challenges rural students face when transitioning from high school to college. One possible solution could be a collaborative effort by school and community stakeholders to create opportunities for diverse student experiences, including travel outside the community and culturally relevant discussions and activities to broaden students' understanding of diversity. Many rural school districts are within a 2-hour drive to a state or private university which could help to facilitate such experiences on their campuses.

This study highlighted the meaningful role that family plays in the guidance and academic success of rural students. We recommend that teachers and administrators make a focused effort to work collaboratively with families on college access initiatives. A family engagement program could empower families and students through additional resources, homework assistance, and training on topics such as study skills and career planning.

This study also highlighted the abundance of "doing nothing" time or downtime within the rural community, which in some cases could lead to misconduct, such as underage drinking, mentioned by one of our participants. Leadership in rural communities should take note of this time and consider it a window of opportunity for engaging students in meaningful extracurricular activities as well as addressing some of the issues mentioned by participants, such as lack of study skills and the need for adult mentors to bridge their move to college. Clearly, participants in our study who played sports in high school derived benefits from such activity; finding ways to diversify and expand extracurricular activities could provide more pathways for non-athletes to postsecondary education.

Findings also seemed to be inconsistent with the idea of rural outmigration, or rural brain drain, prevalent for perceived high achievers (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Petrin et al., 2014; Reichert et al., 2014; Sano et al., 2020; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Wright, 2012). Most participants in our study had returned or planned to return to their rural communities. More research is needed to understand the circumstances that enable rural college graduates to return home. One possible explanation is increased work-from-home opportunities made possible by expanding internet access and employers' willingness since the 2020 pandemic to permit working from home.

Finally, participants clearly are proud of their rural roots. Universities and other post-secondary institutions should consider ways to recognize and celebrate rural students, such as highlighting rural excellence or providing rural college students opportunities to mentor other rural youth in their communities.

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