RURAL ROUTES: FIRST YEAR COLLEGE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS FROM RURAL BACKGROUNDS

by

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DEDICATION

To Mary, thank you for your unwavering support through this process.

To the college students from rural backgrounds, may your rurality continue to inform your experiences.

To Betsy, your light continues to shine through others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful for the support and guidance of my committee. I am thankful for the steadfast dedication and encouragement of my chair, Dr. Carrie Myers; you kept me on track! I am thankful for the openness of the college student participants; I have learned so much from you. Finally, I am thankful for my experiences growing up in a rural community that continue to shape the person I am today.

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of college students from rural backgrounds have remained understudied. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to further understand how students from rural backgrounds perceive self, define rurality, describe their first-year social and academic college experiences, and make meaning of these experiences. Eight first-time, full-time freshman from rural communities of less than 2,500 inhabitants were interviewed twice during their freshman year of college. Furthermore, data collection techniques also included photo elicitation, student drawings, a rural representation selected by the students, and subsequent discussions of these items. Participants described rurality and rural culture in the context of small-secluded areas, open space, sense of community, and connections to the land. They described themselves as hardworking - honest, driven - responsible, and family oriented. Emergent themes related to general college experiences and rural effects included opportunities, limited college knowledge, initial shock, size of college, just a number, and balancing act. Social preparedness, friends: knowing everyone to knowing a few to good friends, ease of social integration, and lack of diversity but open emerged as themes related to social college experiences and rural effects. Regarding academic college experiences and rural effects, the following themes surfaced: academic preparedness, shift in faculty - student interactions: teachers to professors, peers and academics, perceptions of academic rigor, shift in study habits to meet academic rigor, and perceptions of academic success. A focal conclusion derived from this research study is that the participants define themselves in terms of their rurality. Regarding college experiences and rural effects, study participants did not know what to expect at college and their rural upbringing helped prepared them for the social aspects of college. Furthermore, they are relying on their drive, strong work ethic, and sense of responsibility to integrate academically and are utilizing their social skills to aid in their academic endeavors. The rural students in this study appear to be on a trajectory towards social and academic integration and in turn persistence. Finally, these college students from rural backgrounds understand their agency. They understand that they play the critical role in their own development.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The focus of this research study was to better understand how college students from rural backgrounds describe rurality, themselves, and their first year college experiences. College students come from diverse backgrounds and bring diverse experiences that shape their perceptions of self and of their new environment on university campuses. While some of these characteristics that define the diversity of today's college students are noticeable, the majority of these varied factors are not. Socio-economic status, sexual orientation, learning disability, political affiliation, organizational membership, and military status are just a few of the demographic and individual characteristics of college students that are not always visible. Rurality is another. The voices, perspectives, and generalized characteristics of college students from rural backgrounds have long remained understudied (McDonough & Fann, 2007; McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Snyder, A., McLaughlin, D., & Jensen, L., 2009). Defining rurality as a construct is critical to the investigation of the phenomenon of experiencing college as a student from a rural background in that researchers indicate that rural culture is different than urban culture (Bracken, 2008; Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research [GQRR], 2002; Ritchey, 2008; McDonaugh, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010) and college students from rural backgrounds

identify strongly with their rural culture (Beasley, 2011; Darling, 1999; Elliott, 1989; Maltzan, 2006; Schultz, 2004).

One consistent message in the dialogue to define rurality is that there is no consistent message. The concept of rurality may seem simple at first thought but upon further investigation becomes a multi-faceted construct. Traditionally, population and size have been utilized to distinguish between rural and urban classifications. However, modern sociologists include culture and environment as a descriptor. In a review of literature related to the construct of rural community, Chavez (2005) indicates that definitions usually include the concepts of a common place (geographically location) and interactions with others in that place. This combination of place and culture provides a more holistic view from which to frame rurality.

The complexity of defining the construct of rurality in terms of a common place is illustrated by the fact that Federal agencies use more than twenty-four different definitions (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Reynnells (2008) indicates that the three most commonly used definitions are those present by the U.S. Census, the Office of Management and Budgets (OMB), and the U. S. Department of Agriculture - Economic Research Service. The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) defines rural as territory, population, and housing units outside of urbanized areas (population blocks consisting of 1,000 or more people per square mile). Rural areas generally have a population of less than 2,500 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The Office of Management and Budgets utilizes the county based terms metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan (non-metro). Metro counties are either “core counties” containing at least one urban area with a population

minimum population of 50,000 or "outlying counties economically tied to the core counties" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008, p.33). Non-metro counties are all others not classified as metro. Finally, USDA-ERS utilizes an urban-rural continuum to classify counties on a scale of nine codes based on population and proximity to metro areas (Reynnells, 2008). These codes mix the terms metro/urban and nonmentro/rural. However, competing definitions of what constitutes rural in terms of size is "about as clear as mud" (Ritchey, 2008, p. 6).

However murky, these definitions do share some common ground. Two factors are reflected in the literature related to defining rural by the concept of space. Rural places are characterized by their low population density (Bracken, 2008; Galbraith, 1992; Ritchey, 2008). Furthermore, limited proximity to services also defines these areas by geographical location (Bracken, 2008; Ritchey, 2008).

The concept of a shared culture provides further insight into an emerging definition of rural. Ritchey (2008) indicates that modern conceptualizations of rurality not only include statistical definitions of size but also consider cultural aspects that are deeply linked with the rural construct. Rural culture is perceived as being different than that of urban (GQRR, 2002; McDonaugh, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010). Cultural homogeneity within a community (Galbraith, 1992; Ritchey, 2008) and a sense of shared values (GQRR, 2002; Ritchey, 2006) are reoccurring themes in literature related to defining rural culture.

Additionally, the concept of connection is vital to a more comprehensive view of what it means to be rural. "Rural people have connections to working the land, and to a

set of concepts about place, kinship, and community" (Howley, 2009, p. 549). A connection to nature is one component of this view (Bracken, 2008; GQRR, 2002; Ritchey, 2006). This is reflected in open space, ties to the land, and sparse population density. Rural people are also perceived to have strong connections to family (Bracken, 2008; GQRR, 2002) and to community (Bracken, 2008; Ritchey, 2006). Finally, rural economies are connected to the local community and are often specialized based on the location of the community (Monk, 2007; Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). These concepts are actualized through a sense of shared responsibility and resources.

Even with disparities in conceptualizing and defining what is rural, it is clear that rural America presents a distinctive backdrop for youth to develop and mature. The aforementioned conceptualizations of rurality in regards to size, culture, and connection validate differences between rural and urban areas. Furthermore, current trends and indicators affect the rural landscape. In 2006 and 2007, some economic and social indicators improved in rural America: employment rose and unemployment fell (USDA-ERS, 2007). Current trends show a more harsh reality. As the effects of the recession hit rural areas, unemployment jumped from 5.2 to 9.2 percent in 2009 (USDA-ERS, 2009). Furthermore, since 2001 poverty rates in rural areas have increased and are consistently higher than the national average; 2007 poverty rates for rural areas were 15.4 percent compared the national average of 12.5 percent (USDA-ERS, 2009).

Education in rural America is also an area of concern. One in five students in the United States attends a rural school (Provasnik et al. ,2007). While rates of high school dropout are decreasing and the percentage of rural adults with a four-year college degree

is rising, urban adults continue to outpace their rural counterparts in college degree attainment by nearly 2 to 1 with higher subsequent earnings of nearly 25 percent more (USDA-ERS, 2007). These statistics impact rural children in that they are more likely than their urban counterparts to have poorer, younger, and less educated parents (USDA-ERS, 2005). While college completion rates and rural demographic characteristics are not the primary focus of this research, these factors may affect how students from rural backgrounds experience college.

State-to-state differences regarding rurality exist. Of the limited number of studies that have been conducted regarding college students from rural backgrounds, many are site or place specific. In Montana, the state in which this research was conducted, approximately 65% of residents live in rural areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture-Economic Research Service [USDA-ERS], 2010). Additionally, three of four Montana schools are rural (Johnson & Strange, 2009). In ranking states on the importance of rural education to the overall well-being of the state's public education system, Johnson and Strange (2009) rank Montana as 4th nationally and indicate that rural education is a crucial part of the state's entire educational system. Furthermore, only 23% of rural Montana residents have completed college compared to 27% of their non-rural counterparts. Aspects of rural life and culture may attribute to decreased college completion rates. Parental education (Yan, 2002), socio-economic status (Snyder et al., 2009), and limited financial support (Antos, 1999; Gibbs, 1998; Yan, 2002) are among the primary factors that impede degree attainment of rural college students. A more detailed discussion of these factors and other issues will be presented in chapter two.

Closing the college completion gap between rural and urban students is important not only to rural residents, but also to states with high percentages of their population residing in rural areas and to our nation as a whole.

Understanding connections between rurality and college-related outcomes is important because participation in college affects change on several fronts. In their synthesis of research, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report that college attendance has positive effects on students' cognitive skills, psychosocial assets, attitudes and values, career and economic potential, and overall quality of life. "People who go to college, compared with those who do not, learn better, know more, earn more. College adds value to their lives, enhances their self-esteem, and increases their understanding of others and their engagement in their communities." (p. 628). Personal and collective gains are not mutually exclusive constructs. A well educated populous is important to economic, social, and intellectual aspects of communities across the nation; this fact may be especially important to the vitality of rural areas.

With recent reports of growth in rural America (U.S. Department of Agriculture-Economic Research Service [USDA-ERS], 2005), higher education may also witness an impending increase in college enrollment of students from rural backgrounds. However, the research in regards to college attendance and college experiences of rural students is sparse at best (McDonough & Fann, 2007). Higher education, unlike K-12 education, has "historically been unresponsive to rural contexts and the needs of rural students" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 9) and is not attuned to the needs of students from rural backgrounds regarding their lifestyle, financial concerns, and preparation (McDonaugh,

Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010). A better understanding of the rural sub-population of college students is warranted.

Statement of the Problem

While individuals from rural backgrounds are attending colleges and universities, the rural aspect of their identity may go unnoticed by faculty, student affairs professionals, and administration. These oversights may affect how college students from rural backgrounds experience college and may affect their persistence. Few research studies document and elucidate the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds (McDonough & Fann, 2007; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Snyder, A., McLaughlin, D., & Jensen, L., 2009). This lack of investigation may lead to the exclusion of this sub-culture in diversity and planning discussions on college campuses. McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) state that higher education systems ignore the concept that rural culture is different than urban culture and that higher education as a whole is not attuned to the specific concerns of students from rural backgrounds. This lack of understanding of the college experience of students from rural backgrounds coupled with a lack of recognition of this group as a diverse sub-population was the central issue underpinning this research.

The position advanced in this research is that university faculty, administrators, and student development professionals need to better understand college students from rural backgrounds. To this end, the problem addressed in this study was how these students perceive self, identify with their rural roots, describe their first-year social and

academic college experiences, and make meaning of these experiences. As discussions of student engagement and persistence are increasing at institutions of higher education, involvement and retention of all students is an essential focus. By better understanding differences based on place of residence, universities will be better equipped to meet the needs of all students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to further understand how students from rural backgrounds perceive self, define rurality, describe their first-year social and academic college experiences, and make meaning of these experiences.

Research Questions

Limited documentation of the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds lays the foundation for this study. In consideration of the stated problem and purpose, the research questions were designed to garner a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This study addressed the following questions:

1. How do college students from rural backgrounds define, describe, and view rurality and rural culture and its influence on self?
2. How do college students from rural backgrounds describe and perceive their first-year academic and social college experiences
3. How do rural college students perceive that their rurality has influenced their first-year academic and social college experiences?

4. How do college students from rural backgrounds perceive they have changed as a result of their first-year college experiences?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this research study, the following operational definitions will be utilized:

1. Rural College Students are defined as individuals who attended high school in a town or community with 2,500 or less residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).
2. Rurality is defined as the state and associated characteristics of being rural.
3. Social Experiences are defined as perceptions, feelings, events, and occurrence associated with social involvement and integration into the college community as expressed by study participants.
4. Academic Experiences are defined as perceptions, feelings, events, and occurrence associated with academic involvement and integration into the college community as expressed by study participants.
5. First Year College Experiences are defined as perceptions, feelings, events, and occurrence that take place during the student's first two semesters at college.

Limitations

The following limitations are expected:

1. This study will be limited to perceptions and experiences of the participants. With the diversity of background characteristics and experiences of students from rural backgrounds, results may be limited to this study sample.
2. This study will be limited to the investigation of first-year college experiences of these students. Furthermore, results are bound by the willingness of participants to share information and the truthfulness of this information.
3. Participants will self-select to be involved in the investigation. The willingness of students to participate or not to participate may limit the results.
4. This study will be limited by my ability to develop protocols and questions to address the purpose of the research.

Delimitations

As the researcher, I will impose the following limits on this investigation:

1. Participants will be limited to college students who graduated from high school in a rural community.
2. Participants will be limited to first-time, full-time freshman students.
3. Participants will be limited to traditionally-aged college students.
4. Participants will be from a single-site institution, Montana State University.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are fundamental to this research study:

1. It is assumed that students from rural backgrounds are a distinct sub-culture of college students.
2. It is assumed that these students can articulate how growing up in a rural setting has influenced their development.
3. It is assumed that these students' rural background will affect how they experience their first year of college.
4. It is assumed that study participants will respond honestly and truthfully.

Significance of the Study

Currently, the body of research regarding college students from rural backgrounds is limited. Several research studies document K-12 differences between rural and urban students; few delve into the areas of post-secondary education environments and experiences. Data and interpretations that will be drawn out in this study may afford a snapshot of the essence of the experience of attending college as a student from a rural background. As the phenomenon under investigation is under investigated, this research may potentially inform practice and add to a small, but growing body of literature. It is my hope that results from this research study will help inform faculty, administrators, and student development professionals as they work with and make decisions that affect college students from rural backgrounds.

Introduction to Literature Review

Chapter two provides a synthesis of the related research regarding the focus of this study, first year college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, the breadth of the research regarding rural students focuses on primary and secondary education. Furthermore, the majority of the research that does relate to postsecondary education for rural students focuses on preparation and aspirations. While these aforementioned areas are not the primary focus of this study, these factors are important to the understanding of rural culture and education as a whole within that culture. Additionally, these factors may affect the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. After an introduction to the chapter, a discussion of the work of Tinto (1975,1993) and Bronfenbrenner (1993) is presented as a theoretical framework for this investigation. The chapter then moves into sections focused on reviewed literature. Major groupings are:

1. Pre-College Factors and Students from Rural Backgrounds
    a. High School Achievement and College Readiness
    b. Aspirations - College and Work
2. Higher Education and Students from Rural Backgrounds
    a. Enrollment and Persistence
    b. College Experiences
3. Related Literature
    a. Socio-Economic and First Generation Status
    b. The First-Year of College and Integration

c. Sense of Belonging

A brief synopsis of the literature indicates that while rural students are typically perceived to be as academically prepared as their urban counterparts for college, aspirations for the pursuit of post-secondary education and actual enrollment rates are lower. Factors influencing these trends are discussed in the literature review. Furthermore, these lower rates of enrollment may further marginalize rural students as a minority group on college campuses and thus affect their experience. In regards to college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, the themes of connections to family and community, influence of rural culture, and size emerge from a synthesis of the research. Related literature in the areas of socio-economic status, first generation college student categorization, importance of the first year of college, integration, and sense of belonging is presented in relation to college students from rural backgrounds.

Research Design

With the purpose of this research study addressing how college students from rural backgrounds describe, perceive, and make meaning of their experiences, a phenomenological qualitative research design was utilized. Multiple data collection techniques were utilized. Two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant were central to the investigation of the phenomenon. In order to elicit rich descriptions and broader views of the students' experiences, multiple sources of data were collected through new and emerging techniques. Participants were asked to render drawings focused on their development during their first year of college. Furthermore, they were

asked to present and discuss photographs of their social college experiences. Additional photos of themselves before college and currently were requested and discussed. Finally, participant presented representations of their conceptualization of rurality were requested and discussed. Data was analyzed through review of transcripts, memo-making, thematic grouping, and member checking. While a clearly articulated design is central to the success of any research study, a qualitative approach should evolve throughout the process. Balancing a well thought-out design with the emergent nature of this type of research was of particular import to the success of the investigation. A more detailed discussion of the research methodology of this study is presented in Chapter Three.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to further understand how students from rural backgrounds perceive self, describe their first-year social and academic college experiences, and make meaning of these experiences. Although increased enrollment of these students is both anticipated and documented in the literature, both recognition of these individuals as a diverse sub-population and knowledge related to their college experiences is meager. The intended outcome of this research study is to partially address both inadequacies. The subsequent chapter will explore the literature related to this topic and make connections of related research to college students from rural backgrounds.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Research regarding place of residence and educational opportunity has yet to be fully developed (Snyder, A., McLaughlin, D., & Jensen, L., 2009; McDonough & Fann, 2007). However, the body of research regarding rural students is slowly growing. Growing too are the aspirations for higher education of students from rural backgrounds (Legutko, 2008). In light of these two trends, knowledge about how college students from rural backgrounds describe and conceptualize their experiences in college remains limited. Further understanding of this phenomenon is the focus of this research investigation.

The purpose of this chapter is to present a theoretical framework from which to structure the investigation and synthesize existing literature related to the phenomenon of experiencing the first year of college as a student from a rural background. In review of literature related to rural students, the majority of investigations involve the areas of preparedness and aspirations. Less research documents and investigates the college experiences of these students beyond initial enrollment.

This chapter begins with a presentation of two theoretical frameworks that inform the nature and design of this study. Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Ecological Model is presented as a lens from which to view the environmental factors from the students' background and current experiences in college. Tinto's (1975, 1993) model of student

retention is presented as a frame from which to conceptualize the college experience in terms of social and academic interactions and engagement.

The next sections of the literature review are organized chronologically in terms of experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Part one presents related literature focused on pre-college factors affecting students from rural backgrounds. This section focuses on academic preparedness, achievement, and aspirations of rural students; these pre-college factors may affect how these students experience college. Part two of the literature review presents research focused on higher education and students from rural backgrounds. As this section documents research that explicitly investigates the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, results from the studies included have direct implications for this dissertation. Finally, part three presents related literature focused on college experiences. This section provides a brief overview of research focusing on first-generation and socioeconomic status, factors of which may be associated with many college students from rural backgrounds. Furthermore, general research focused on the first year college experience and sense of belonging is presented to highlight these constructs as they relate to this investigation. The chapter concludes with a summary of the salient points of this review of literature.

Conceptual Framework

Theory and research informs practice and vice versa. As a research plan is developed to garner a deeper understanding of students from rural backgrounds and their college experiences, considerations of college student theories and research is

fundamental to the success of this study. Advocating for linkages between theory and practice, Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, (1998) assert that working with college students without considering a theoretical base is both ineffective and inefficient. I believe that theories presented by Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bronfenbrenner (1993) will provide excellent frames from which to view the phenomenon and will inform the design of this research study.

Bronfenbrenner

Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Ecological Model is a theoretical framework from which to frame college student background, influences, developments, and outcomes. Viewing college student preparedness and development through an ecological lens affords insight into macro and micro level influences. Participants interact with each other and with the environment. These webs of interaction are described in Bronfenbrenner's model which has been utilized by Renn (2003) and Renn and Arnold (2003) to describe identity development and frame college student peer interaction.

The individual is central to Bronfenbrenner's model and to its application as a lens with which to view college effects. The centrality of the student emphasizes the importance of focusing on the individual and their experience. Students bring "personal experiences and characteristics" to college that include "socially constructed identities, prior academic performance and academic self-concept, political and social ideologies, and family background" (Renn, 2003, p. 387). Bronfenbrenner's (1993) model accounts for prior experiences college students bring with them and continued family/peer

interactions. Both of these concepts are important considerations when working with rural college students and are reflected in the literature to follow.

From the individual level, the model frames developmental ecology in terms of systems extending from the core and interactions between systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The microsystem represents settings in which the individual lives and intermingles while the mesosystem represents interactions between the microsystems. As the ecological model relates to college, microsystems include but are not limited to peers, classes, organizations, living arrangements, and academic professionals (Renn, 2003). Exosystems represent situations, events, settings, and guidelines that affect the individual but are outside of their control and the macrosystem represents the accumulation of the systems forming the overall culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Finally, the chronosystem represents changes in the individual and the environment over time. This theory of environmental relationships is an excellent lens from which to view how college affects students.

Viewing college student development in the context of ecology takes into consideration the complex systems of interaction along with the individuals that inhabit them. This broad view places the burden of development, educational attainment, and retention on the shoulders of the individual learner as well as the institution. Kuh (1996) stresses the importance of cooperation between the students, student affairs practitioners, faculty, and the university system in attaining educational and developmental goals. Bronfenbrenner (1993) emphasizes the connectedness between development and

environment, accounts for interactions between systems, and includes the concept of overarching culture.

In their review of research on the broad array of college effects on students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report that the net changes attributed to college attendance are cumulative in nature. While research studies attempt to isolate specific characteristics, the synopsis of the research implies that these factors interrelate and impact one another. The web of influence created as individuals change as a result of the college experience points to the complex interactions of individuals and environments. This "holistic" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 629) viewpoint highlights the importance of connectedness and validates the ecological view of college student development.

Students from rural backgrounds bring with them distinct characteristics and experiences. Furthermore, the ways in which these students interact with the college environment is contingent upon this fact. Bronfenbrenner's model helps frame prior, present, and future experiences of rural students. As I have discovered in pilot research projects involving this population and as will be presented in the subsequent section focused on college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, for many of these students rurality is central to their identity. This model not only acknowledges that precept but embraces it.

Tinto

Tinto's (1975, 1993) seminal work related to retention is an excellent theoretical frame from which to frame college student experiences and view the effects of student engagement. This theoretical model for college student retention focuses on both academic and social integration as protective factors to attrition. While this theory is presented as a means for universities to address retention, its implications are far reaching. Universities are concerned with producing graduates that are both well educated and prepared for societal engagement. Through a constructivist lens, these goals are not mutually exclusive but are inevitably intertwined. A student's interactions within systems of a university should focus on both areas of development. Universities themselves are challenged to strike a balance between the dimensions of academic attainment and social maturation.

Departure from college may be affected by an individual's inability to engage in an academic or social community (Tinto, 1993), while providing multiple opportunities for students to be involved in different peer groups aids in retention (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Ensuring that opportunities are available and that strategies are developed for reaching underserved or high attrition rate audiences is paramount for the successful education of all students. This viewpoint is applicable to working with college students from rural backgrounds.

Hurtado (2007) points out that critics of Tinto's model question the concept of full integration by underrepresented groups into dominant social and academic college environments. This concern is echoed by some research findings reviewed by Pascarella

and Terenzini (2005) but other evidence is also presented that indicates that the mechanisms of social and academic integration operate across a wide spectrum of the student population. Tinto (1993) counters that "some degree of social and intellectual integration must exist as a condition for continued persistence" (p. 119). This statement does not imply conformity. Furthermore, integration may take many forms; Tinto (1993) uses the term communities (academic and social), emphasis on the plural, throughout the text. Tinto's model is useful in framing how rural college students form academic and social connections as they find their place on campus. As was presented in the section focused on rural culture in Chapter 1 and as will be presented in subsequent sections of this chapter, the construct of community and connections to community are predominate within the literature related to rurality and experiences of college students from rural backgrounds.

Concepts presented in Tinto's model help conceptualize effects of academic and social integration and consequences of the inability to connect to these systems. These ideas will help inform the research design and data collection mechanisms focused on these factors. A better understanding of how college students from rural backgrounds integrate both socially and academically is needed. Further research is needed to help identify barriers these students face and mechanisms they employ to overcome these challenges and form connections.

Part One: Pre-College Factors and Students from Rural Backgrounds

While high school achievement, college readiness, and higher education aspirations of students from rural backgrounds are not the focus of this research investigation, two primary justifications warrant presentation of this literature. First, literature presented in this section provides both context and background to the pre-college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Secondly, these factors may influence the college experiences of these students. Therefore, a brief discussion of these factors is presented.

High School Achievement and College Readiness

Regarding academic achievement, studies of urban and rural differences found mixed results. Recent research indicates that a larger percentage of youth from rural schools scored at or above the proficient level in assessments of reading, math, and sciences than did their counterparts in urban areas but were lower compared to suburban youth (Provasnik et al. ,2007; USDA-ERS, 2003). Fan and Chen (1999) found that rural students performed as well as urban youth in assessments of reading, math, science, and social studies knowledge. A contradicting view is presented by Poole and More (n.d) who indicated that rural youth tend to be less academically prepared for college due to limited access to advanced placement courses and lower scores on standardized tests. Caison and Baker (2007) echo these results indicating that rural youth in freshman cohorts at North Carolina State University have statistically significant lower scores on the SAT than their urban counterparts. Furthermore, Poole and More (n.d.) suggest that

universities could increase rural participation in higher education by assisting rural students with preparation for college aptitude tests.

Additionally, components and resources of rural school my affect the college readiness of students from rural backgrounds. Rural school systems often have fewer resources to prepare students for college, have fewer college preparatory courses, and provide less information about career options and opportunities in higher education (Adelman, 2002; Antos, 1999; Poole & More, n.d). These factors may also affect the college aspirations of rural students.

Aspirations - College and Work

The majority of literature regarding college students from rural backgrounds is in the area of post-secondary education aspirations. However, these studies are usually limited to samples from specific states or geographic areas and may not be representative of the entire population of students from rural backgrounds. While some studies indicate the magnitude of differences in college aspiration for rural and urban students is small (Bajema, Miller & Williams, 2002; Haller & Virkler, 1993), results from several studies indicate that rural youths' college aspirations are consistently lower than those of their urban counterparts (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Hu, 2003; Snyder et al., 2009; USDA-ERS, 2003). Rural youth are more likely than urban youth to be work-bound following high school graduation (McDonough & Fann, 2007; Rojewski, 1999; Snyder et al., 2009) or idle (Snyder et al., 2009). Even though gaps exist between rural and urban students, aspirations for rural students are increasing. In a comparative study of 1995 and 2005 rural high school seniors, Legutko (2008) found statistically significant increase

occurred between the cohorts' aspirations to attend college for all students as well as for students that would be first-generation. While several aforementioned studies found that fewer rural youth have higher education aspirations as compared to urban youth, the reasons behind the aspirations or lack thereof vary.

Some of the strongest predictors of rural students' college aspiration are family characteristics. Research studies indicate that factors such as parental education and support have strong influences on rural youths' college aspirations (Ali & Saunders, 2006; Legutko, 1998; Snyder, McLaughlin, Jensen & Demi, 2006) while low income status was negatively correlated to aspirations to pursue post-secondary education (Antos, 1999; Rojewski, 1999; Snyder et al., 2006). Youths aspirations to attend college significantly increased as parental education levels increased from high school only to one or both parents with a postsecondary education. Rural students report the high cost of postsecondary education (Antos, 1999; Richard et al., 1999; Snyder et al., 2009) and lack of family support (Antos, 1999; Hu, 2003) as major barriers. Clearly, rural youth with college educated, supportive parents are advantaged in regards to their aspirations for the pursuit of a college degree.

College aspirations of rural students are also influenced by factors outside the family. These characteristics included specific career aspirations (Bajema et al., 2002), fear of losing friends (Richard et al., 1999), caring teachers (Snyder et al., 2006), and self-efficacy (Ali & Saunders, 2006). Furthermore, rural youth are less likely to have contact with college-educated role models than urban students and fewer jobs in rural communities require a college education (Antos, 1999).

Both high school academic achievement and college aspirations may have influence over the college experiences of rural youth that actually enroll. Reason (2009), in a synthesis of retention research, indicates that high school academic achievement and standardized test scores are strong predictors of retention in college. The academic and college preparation a student receives in a rural high school may affect the academic and social experiences of these students in that they may be underprepared for both of these aspects of college. An inability to integrate into the social and academic structure of college could influence decisions to persist (Tinto, 1975,1993). Aspirations to attend may also affect college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Lower levels of college aspirations may be reflect as cultural norms within some rural communities. These factors may influence the support students receive from their rural communities once they enroll in a postsecondary institution. Ecological aspects of a students' background and sustained connections to these environments may have continuing influence and affect on current and future decisions and interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Part Two: Higher Education and Students from Rural Backgrounds

The research in regards to college attendance and college experiences of rural students compared to urban students is sparse at best. Few studies investigate the pursuit, effect, and attainment of a college education in terms of rural students. This section includes reviewed literature that focuses on the enrollment, persistence, and college

experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Research reviewed in this section is directly related to the phenomenon under investigation.

Enrollment and Persistence

Both enrollment and persistence are necessary steps to college completion. The majority of research indicates that college enrollment rates of rural young adults are lower than those of urban young adults (Adelman, 2002; Gibbs, 1998; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hu, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007; Snyder et al., 2009) but have increased (Snyder et al., 2009). Reasons for this lower enrollment rates will be discussed in a subsequent section. While enrollment rates lag, research studies investigating college completion rates of enrolled students from rural backgrounds have found mixed results.

In a comprehensive investigation utilizing data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Gibbs (1998) found that once rural youth began college that they were as likely as their urban counterparts to finish. Similarly, Williams and Luo's (2010) study of first-time, full-time freshmans' first-year persistence revealed that the urbanicity of the participants' hometown did not have a significant influence on their persistence at the single site university investigated. Finally, Blackwell and McLaughlin (1999) found that although rural youth had slightly lower aspirations, rural youth reach similar levels of educational attainment as do urban youth when controlling for family (parental education, support of college enrollment, access to learning resources), school (achievement factors, extracurricular offerings), and community factors (educational level, geographic location, poverty, unemployment).

Other research studies have documented significant differences between the persistence of college students from rural and urban backgrounds. In a longitudinal study comparing college students from rural and urban backgrounds at the University of Colorado, Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) found statistically significant higher retention rates for urban students. Rural participants also reported statistically significant higher levels of problems in their freshman year in the areas of meeting people and academic engagement. Due to the fact that this study is dated and represents a different time in history, caution in interpretation of the results from this investigation is warranted. However, more recent studies have found similar findings. In a study conducted at the University of Northern Colorado, Peters (1990) also found that students from rural backgrounds left the university at statistically significant higher rates than their urban counterparts. Additionally, rural students were more likely than their urban counterparts to cite interpersonal/social (i.e. demands of other responsibilities, personal problems), poor relationships with faculty members, and feelings of being "lost in the crowd" (p. 93) as a reason for their departure.

In an investigation utilizing two definitions of rurality, varied results were found. Caison and Baker (2007) found no significant differences between the persistence of rural and urban college students when rural was constricted to communities with populations of 2,500 or less. However when rurality was framed as 20,000 or less, differences with small effect sizes existed in persistence favoring urban college students. The researchers did find the college students from rural backgrounds utilizing both definitions did have significantly lower college GPAs and SAT scores than did their urban counterparts.

Another study found mixed results regarding rural/urban differences in college enrollment and attainment by utilizing different methods of statistical analysis. Byun, Meece, & Irvin (2010) utilized logistical regression and a propensity score matching (PSM) technique to investigate rural/urban differences in post-secondary educational enrollment and attainment using National Educational Longitudinal Study data. Utilizing logistical regression, rural youth had statistically significant lower levels of Higher Education enrollment and attainment compared to their urban counterparts even after controlling for the background characteristics of parental education and family income. However, these differences did not exist in the PSM analysis when rural youth were matched with urban youth with similar background characteristics. The authors indicate that differences in rural/urban college enrollment and attainment are due to socioeconomic and other background characteristic differences between rural and urban students. Components of rural culture and environment may lead rural youth to be more likely to have background characteristics like lower levels of parental education and family income that hinder their enrollment and attainment. The authors fail to discuss these aspects.

As reported earlier, some studies indicate that rural youth have similar high school academic achievement records as urban youth. The presence of a postsecondary enrollment gap between rural and urban students in light of similar academic preparedness indicates that other factors are at play in regards to enrollment decisions for rural youth. Some research studies have investigated factors related to the enrollment and persistence of college students from rural backgrounds.

Rural youth may face unique challenges that affect their enrollment in institutions of higher education. Chief among these are economic limitations. "The large and longstanding gap between rural and urban incomes may be the most powerful constraint on college attendance" (Gibbs, 1998, p. 67). Furthermore, rural students indicate that economic factors strongly influenced their choice of institution (Hodges & Barbuto, 2002). Additionally, the proximity of rural students to colleges and universities may affect attendance. Gibbs (1998) indicates long distances from colleges and lack of college information contribute to lower college enrollment rates for students from rural backgrounds.

Several factors also influence the persistence of college students from rural backgrounds. Yan (2002) found that enrollment and persistence of rural college students is significantly correlated to numerous factors including socioeconomic status, cost of higher education, parent and student aspirations, parent involvement, and peer influences. Rural students who attend college often leave for financial reasons before attaining their degrees (Antos, 1999). Reflective of the group's general socio-economic status, rural students are more likely to combine work with school (Snyder et al., 2009). Additional factors have also been documented in research studies. Strong connections to home and friends (Hemmings, Hill, & Ray, 1997; Wright, Scherman, & Beesley, 2003) serve as challenges for rural college students as they cope with their new environment. These results shed some light on rural students' decision to enroll and persist.

College Experiences

While few studies have investigated the enrollment and persistence of college students from rural backgrounds, even fewer have actually documented the college experiences of these students and how they make meaning of these experiences. Five qualitative studies are discussed in greater detail in the following section. Results from these investigations into the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds provide both a foundation for investigation of the phenomenon and a call for further research.

In a phenomenological investigation, Schultz (2004) documented the first semester college experiences of first generation students from rural agricultural backgrounds. The study focused on how six students experienced the phenomenon and data was collected through structured interviews. Emergent themes were clustered into the concepts of decision factors and influences, decision-time factors, expectations and incongruencies, and introspective constructions. Results indicated that parents had a high level of influence over students' decision to pursue Higher Education despite their parent's lack of information regarding Higher Education. The participants also reported a lack of knowledge related to the need to make new relationships and cope with a new environment. The concept of size in relation to the community, campus, dorms, classrooms, curriculum, and high levels of change "produced feelings of awe, and sometimes trepidation" (p. 49). Furthermore, participants articulated pride in being rural and hardworking. "Participants saw themselves as being 'different from others' in the

new college milieu. They were different because they were from rural areas, and because they were the first-generation in their families to attend college" (p. 50).

In an ethnographic hybrid study, Maltzan (2006) investigated the rural culture of a small town in Ohio and how it influenced the post-secondary pathways of students. The study employed interviews, observation, and document analysis as data collection strategies. In describing the rural culture of the town, the themes of family, community, and spirit/faith emerged. Family was framed in terms of immediate family, history of the family within the community, and the extended family of the community. The concept of community was framed in terms of customs and habits, particularly those associated with the school as a center and extracurricular activities. Finally, spirit and faith were documented through the communities strong ties to Christian tradition and practices.

Regarding the residents of the town Maltzan concluded that "rural culture was not only the system of meaning with which they made sense of the world, but importantly, it was the system of meaning with which they made sense of themselves" (p. 114). Students from this community enrolled in Higher Education at similar rates to the national average, but the college persistence of students in study was linked to their rural culture. Maltzan concluded that persistence in college was a function of students' ability to reconcile their rural culture with that of the college. This choice was manifest not as an either or choice, college or rural community, but as an acceptance of their rural culture and a desire to engage in college. Challenges presented included adjustment to size, breadth of curricular offerings, financial resources, and preparation.

Beasley (2011) conducted a research investigation to better understand how rural culture affects the enrollment and success of low socio-economic college students from rural West Virginia. The qualitative ethnographic case study focused on a single site county. The investigation focused on the rural culture of the county, college students from the county, and the interaction between the two. The sample included college students attending either a local community college or a state four-year university and was comprised of sixteen freshman and six seniors. Data collection techniques included document analysis, observations, and interviews. The predominant theme that emerged from the investigation was attachment to family. All students expressed encouragement and support from their parents, a finding that is contradictory to some literature (Antos, 1999; Hu, 2003). While attachment to family had a strong influence on students' pursuit of Higher Education, this construct also provided pressure to stay and influenced some students' choice to attend the community college that was close to home. Rural cultural norms of foregoing college to enter the labor force, traditional gender roles, and connection to community influenced student's enrollment, persistence and college major selection. Furthermore, the support of local school systems promoted the pursuit of post-secondary education for study participants. Peers influenced college choice, particularly of those attending the local community college; additionally, peers attending the same four-year institution served as protective factors for some students in making the transition to college.

In a narrative study to better understand the rural culture and college experiences of students from southern Appalachia, Darling (1999) collected data from multiple

phenomenological interviews with eight students at a research university. Data was utilized to create a narrative portrait of each student; the investigation then moved to meta-narrative analysis to uncover common themes and shared experiences. Common themes emerged as strong connections to home-family, desire to establish connections and form relationships in college, learning through active learning, selecting a major (which was influenced by the previous three themes), and connecting the aforementioned elements to develop a sense of identity. The theme of connections to home and family reflected an aspect of how the students framed rurality. This theme influenced the students' experiences and decision making processes in college relative to forming relationships, learning, and selecting a major. These results articulate the importance and continued influence of students' rural culture and family.

In a qualitative study investigating college students from of rural backgrounds, Elliott (1989) examined the students' perspectives of their college experiences and persistence decisions. The research study gathered data from interviews of University of Iowa students from small/rural school districts. The sample consisted of twelve students classified as persisters and ten students classified as non-persisters. Emergent themes were framed as "back-home" and "new world" (p. 123). Both themes captured students' meanings in relation to individuals and environmental components of their rural homes and the new college setting. "The meanings associated with the concept 'the new world' centered primarily around the notions of emotional proximity, familiarity, and size" (177). In relation to the first theme, the students described positive views of self and growing up in a rural environment. Furthermore, family, peers, rural schools, and

community were viewed as supportive and important to their development. However, students expressed that they felt underprepared for college. Regarding the "new world" theme, respondents expressed contrast to the rural culture in which they maturated. The students struggled to redefine their concept of self in and integrate into this new environment. They acknowledged the size and complexity of college life which led to viewing the environment as impersonal and uncaring. Students often did not seek help when needed. Elliott also described the students' attempts to balance various aspects of their college experiences. This manifested itself in the data as strategies and adjustments students utilized to make sense of their experiences. These balancing tasks included "making the grade", "fitting in", and "creating a home away from home" (p. 144). A successful strategy utilized by the students in balancing the various aspects of college was confronting large, complex tasks and breaking them down to smaller components. Finally, interpretation of data related to persistence framed this concept not as dichotomous but as a continuum. The students' experiences from home and with the new college environment affected their position on the persistence continuum.

While these studies document the specific experiences of students from rural background in the investigations, common themes related to the college experiences of these students do emerge from the collective. Connections to family and community are well documented in these research studies. Study participants indicated that these connections provide both support and restraint to their pursuit of Higher Education. Furthermore, the influence of and connection to rural culture as described by the

participants played a role both in their development and their experiences at college. Finally, the concept of size emerged as a collective theme within the studies.

Part Three: Related Literature

Socio-Economic and First Generation Status

Many of the background characteristic and research results reported in the literature indicated that rural students are more likely than urban students to be low-income and first-generation college students. Researchers should be cautious in classifying all rural students as low-income and first-generation. However, linkages between these sub-groups and rural students are warranted by much of the literature. Therefore, related research is presented below.

Aspirations and preparedness are affected by low socioeconomic and first-generation status. Research conducted by Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) indicates that parental education has a strong correlation to a student's predisposition (aspirations) to attend college and is moderately correlated to a student's search for and choice of a college. Furthermore, socio-economic status is strongly correlated with institutional choice. Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) report results from a national study indicating that low-SES youth were 51% less qualified for college and 55% less likely to apply for college when compared to upper-SES youth. Gaps drastically narrowed when controls for eight-grade college plans, parental involvement, and college choice factors were included. Furthermore, results indicated that once disadvantaged students apply to higher education institutions, they enroll at similar rates as do their non-disadvantaged

peers. Clearly gaining parental and academic support helps facilitate aspirations and enrollment.

When compared to their 1st generation college student counterparts, High School graduates whose parents have some college experience or exposure are more likely to persist beyond the critical 1st year of college and are 2 times as likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Pascarella &Terenzini, 2005). College students that are classified as both low income and first generation make up 24% of the undergraduate population on college campuses (Engle & Tinto, 2008). They are much more likely (up to 4 times) to leave college during their first year and are much less likely (up to 5 times) to complete a bachelor's degree in 6 years when compared to their more advantaged counterparts.

Both socioeconomic and first-generation status are environmental factors that affect students. Bronfenbrenner (1993) acknowledges that conditions and experiences a student brings with them may influence current and future experiences. The rural environment in which these students maturated leads to higher probabilities of these students fitting into one or both of the above mentioned categories. Furthermore, these factors can clearly affect persistence and graduation rates.

The First Year of College and Integration

The first semester and year of college is extremely important to the persistence of college students. Research studies continue to validate that the majority of students that leave a college do so during the first year. Levitz, Noel, and Richter (1999) assert that the best strategy for increasing persistence is to increase retention of students from the first to the second year of college. These findings are affirmed by other research studies

that indicate that the majority of students that leave a college do so during the first year and that persistence interventions should focus on this time period (Barefoot, 2005; Crissman Ishler, & Upcraft, 2005; Schuetz & Barr; 2008; Tinto, 1996). This body of research is important to this investigation as the first year of college is the focused timeframe for the investigation of the experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Experiences during this timeframe that are uncovered in this investigation may have implications for affecting the academic and social integration of college students from rural backgrounds.

While colleges and universities can be complex systems, the formation of academic and social connections with the university community and the various players therein can be successful strategies for supporting students. Jaswal and Jaswal (2008) highlight research that correlated early academic and social connections to student academic success while Benjamin, Ernest, Gruenewald, and Arthur (2007) and Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) point out the positive effects of early involvement and engagement on students' decisions to persist. Departure from college may be affected by an individual's inability to engage in an academic or social community (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1975, 1993), while providing multiple opportunities for students to be involved in different peer groups aids in retention (Renn & Arnold, 2003). In their seminal review of research related to how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarize that "individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant of the impact of college" (p. 602). Focusing on and increasing opportunities for academic and social engagement appears to be a solid strategy to

positively affect student success and retention. This construct is supported by the theoretical frameworks presented in this chapter. Environmental factors affect development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) and these experiences may affect the academic and social integration of college students (Tinto, 1993).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has been defined as "psychological sense of identification and affiliation with a campus community" (Hausmann et al., 2009, p. 650). Few studies have included sense of belonging as a variable separate form social and academic integration (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The investigation of this construct is still in its early stages (Tovar & Simon, 2010). Hurtado and Carter (1997) highlighted academic and social college experiences that positively influenced Latino students' sense of belonging while Hausmann et al. linked sense of belonging to intentions to persist (2007, 2009) and institutional commitment (2009) for both white and African American students. While these studies utilized a three question instrument (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) to assess sense of belonging, new research advocates for the use of multidimensional instruments (Tovar & Simon, 2010). The concept of sense of belonging is important to this investigation on several fronts. Previously presented research indicates that connections are important to rural students. Furthermore, sense of belonging is not a mutually exclusive construct separate from academic and social integration as described by Tinto (1975, 1993) in that integration into college communities can affect sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and persistence.

Chapter Summary

As represented in Bronfenbrenner's model (1993), the experiences students bring with them from their rural communities affect how these students experience college. As presented in the literature, rural and urban students have similar high school achievement levels as represented by subject matter assessments (Fan & Chen, 1999; Provasnik et al., 2007; USDA-ERS, 2003). However, research also indicates that rural students have lower scores on standardized exams (Caison & Baker, 2007; Poole & More, n.d), fewer college preparatory resources within their school systems (Adelman, 2002; Antos, 1999; Poole & More, n.d), and typically have lower higher education aspirations (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Hu, 2003; Snyder et al., 2009; USDA-ERS, 2003).

Continued contact with environmental factors and individuals from their rural communities can also affect the college experiences of students in their new environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). While college enrollment rates for rural youth are generally reported as lower than their urban counterparts (Adelman, 2002; Gibbs, 1998; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hu, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007; Snyder et al., 2009), studies investigating the college persistence differences between rural and urban students found mixed results. Factors affecting the enrollment and persistence of college students from rural backgrounds include socioeconomic status (Yan, 2002), financial (Antos, 1999; Gibbs, 1998), and connections to family and friends back home (Hemmings, Hill, & Ray, 1997; Wright, Scherman, & Beesley, 2003). These factors coupled with academic and social college experiences (Tinto, 1993) lead to retention decisions by these students.

The purpose of this investigation is to better understand how college students from rural backgrounds describe rurality, themselves, and their first year college experiences. However, fewer research studies have focused on the academic and social college experiences of students from rural backgrounds (McDonough & Fann, 2007; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Snyder, A., McLaughlin, D., & Jensen, L., 2009). Five qualitative studies presented in this chapter document the college and rural cultural experiences of students within each investigation. Common themes that emerged included strong connections to family and community, continued influence of these aspects, and conceptualization and adjustment to differences related to size. The chapter concludes with a presentation of research related to socioeconomic and first generation status, first-year of college and integration, and sense of belonging. This literature is connected to the theoretical frameworks and related to the phenomenon under investigation.

The theoretical framework and literature presented in this chapter provides an overview of the current understanding and relevant knowledge related to the design of the study and the investigation of the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Discussions of the works of Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bronfennbrenner (1993), pre-college factors of rural students, college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, and related college experience literature are the basis of this synthesis. Utilizing an ecological lens, all of these factors may influence how college students from rural backgrounds experience college.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Further understanding of college students from rural backgrounds and their experiences at college was the fundamental intent of this research. Investigating how these students describe self, how they conceptualize rurality, and how they make meaning of their college experiences can lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomena. To this end, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to further understand how students from rural backgrounds perceive self, define rurality, describe their first-year social and academic college experiences, and make meaning of these experiences. Four research questions were developed:

1. How do college students from rural backgrounds define, describe, and view rurality and rural culture and its influence on self?
2. How do college students from rural backgrounds describe and perceive their first-year academic and social college experiences
3. How do rural college students perceive that their rurality has influenced their first-year academic and social college experiences?
4. How do college students from rural backgrounds perceive they have changed as a result of their first-year college experiences?

This chapter outlines the research design, methodology, and procedures utilized to address these research questions.

Design

In alignment with the problem and purpose of this investigation, I utilized a phenomenological approach in designing and conducting the research study. Creswell (2007) affirms that a phenomenological study "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 57). A phenomenological approach was well suited for this research project in that it is designed to better understand several individuals and how they describe and perceive a shared experience. This approach was employed to elicit responses and common themes that focus on the heart of the matter, the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological approach structures the participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009); this research study was an attempt to capture and describe the first-year college experiences of students from rural backgrounds.

Harper and Kuh (2007) argue that most of the significant differences expressed in the body of research regarding college student involvement and outcomes are attributed to specific conditions, ecological features, and experiences. Furthermore, they advocate for more qualitative research to investigate the specifics of these situations. "Sophisticated statistical analyses ... cannot tell us why certain students experience college the way they do or provide multiple, deeper, and accurate interpretations of what seem to be similar events in students' lives that individual students experience very differently" (p. 6). Rurality is an ecological feature that provides a specific condition affecting how these students experience college.

Site and Sample

Montana State University (MSU) was the setting for this investigation. Fall 2011 data indicated that this public land grant institution had an enrollment of 12,188 undergraduate students with 62% of the student body coming from in-state. The campus student profile reflected 46% female and 54% male enrolled students. Estimated yearly costs (tuition and fees) for freshman ranged from $ 6,428 - $19,153 based on in-state and out-of-state status. Approximately 50% of undergraduates received aid. The Carnegie Foundation (n.d.) classified the institution as a research university - very high research activity. Data sets provided by the University's Office of Planning and Analysis for the 2005, 2006, and 2007 cohorts of In-state First-Time, Full-Time Freshman at the MSU reveal that 30 percent of these students are from rural Montana communities (Stone, 2010).

In alignment with the purpose and design of this qualitative study, participants comprising the sample where purposefully selected through criterion sampling. This sampling design was appropriate as it identified individuals that have experienced the phenomenon of being a college student from a rural background. Furthermore, it allowed for the identification of individuals that could provide detailed or rich accounts of experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation.

Careful selection and clear articulation of the criterion utilized to identify the sample was a critical step in the design of this research investigation. Criterion for the sample was as follows:

- First-time, full-time, traditionally aged freshman

- Montana residents from communities with 2,500 or fewer residents
- Attended a public High School in their rural community

These limits were selected to provide a more homogeneous sample. The first criterion was selected to help mitigate the influences of other factors such as work and life experiences after high school and before college on how these students experienced college in their first year. As discussed in Chapter 1, there are numerous and competing descriptions of the construct of rurality. The second criterion provided a highly conservative view of the construct and provided a more easily articulated definition of rural. Finally, the last criterion provided more consistency in the type of education and preparation these students experienced prior to college.

Identification of individuals to be included in the sample was an important aspect of the research design and was more arduous than anticipated. Beginning in the Fall 2011 semester, I met with key informants that worked with freshman students. Contacts with student affairs professionals, teaching faculty, associate deans, and freshman seminar instructors provided some access to the target population. Furthermore, through my work with the 4-H program, I contacted former 4-H members from rural backgrounds who enrolled at MSU. I found more success in recruiting participants when I had the opportunity to make a direct ask of students to participate rather than recruitment through mass communication via a third party. Through these multiple recruiting efforts, eight college students from rural backgrounds took part in the research study. Three students were recruited through presentations in classes, one participant was recruited through contacts with associate college deans, two participants were recruited through contacts

with freshman seminar instructors, and two participants were recruited through direct contacts with former 4-H members attending college at MSU.

All eight of the study participants meet the criterion for participation in the study as outlined above. Of the participants, four were female and four were male. Seven participants were Caucasian and one participant was Caucasian/Asian. The communities in which the study participants grew-up and attended High School ranged in population from approximately 200 to 1700 people. Individual vignettes describing the eight participants are presented in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Data Collection and Timeframe

To acquire the necessary data to address the research purpose, I utilized multiple sources of information. Triangulation through the representation of multiple voices and multiple data sources allowed for the emergence of a more detailed sketch of the phenomenon. Furthermore, data was collected at two different times over the course of the participants' freshman year thus aiding in the richness of description of the phenomenon.

As with most phenomenological studies, I relied heavily on interviews as a primary source of data collection (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Semi-structured interview protocols were utilized to draw out descriptions from and perceptions of participants (Appendix A and B). "In phenomenology, perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52).

Interview questions related to the four research question (Appendix C). These questions were designed to capture the voices of study participants as they described themselves, framed rurality, and perceived their college experiences. The protocols were used as a guide. As the qualitative research process is inherently emergent, the questions developed and changed over the course of the study.

The eight study participants each took part in two interviews. The first interviews took place at the beginning of the students' second semester. This interview focused on how participants defined, described, and viewed rurality and rural culture and its influence on self (question 1). Furthermore, this interview elicited responses describing academic and social experiences in the first few weeks and first semester of college (questions 2). The second interviews were conducted towards the end of the participants' second semester, the end of their freshman year in college. This interview again addressed self-perception, perception of rurality, and college experiences (questions 1 and 2) but, also focused on their perception of how their rurality affected their college experience (question 3) and their perception of how they changed as a result of their first-year college experiences (question 4). This timeline helped mitigate the threat of participant attrition as both interviews took place in the same semester.

New forms of data collection in qualitative inquiry are emerging as alternative and complementary methods to traditional techniques (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010; Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). Gourlay (2010) documents a trend towards multimodality, the utilization of numerous resources to make meaning, and advocates for its use in higher education research. Beyond traditional textual representations of data,

photographs and drawings can be utilized in conjunction with interviews and explained by participants to provide a more comprehensive and complete view of their experiences. Furthermore, Weber (2008) provides a convincing case for the utilization of images in research focused on understanding human phenomenon. She indicates that the use of images in research could capture a more multi-faceted representation, aid in the expression of concepts that are difficult to articulate, and facilitate new ways of viewing a phenomenon.

The discussion of photographs, either generated or provided by participants, has been recognized as a legitimate form of data and insight into a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Harper, 2002; Mannay, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010). The use of photographs obtained from participants can provide opportunities for clarity of the experience, communication of viewpoints, discussion of topics, and pathways to new information (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010).

Participant drawings have also emerged as an effective qualitative data methodology (Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010). In their study of the impact of institutional change on participants' emotions, Kearney and Hyle (2004) utilized drawings as a means to connect to the participant's emotions and as a mechanism for participants to communicate their experiences. Furthermore, the researchers found that the utilization of participant created drawings provided a means for tapping into emotions and helped facilitate participants' expression of fundamental aspects of the experience.

For this research study, data collection strategies also included participant drawings, subsequent discussions of the drawings, shared photographs from the participants, and subsequent discussion of the photographs. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to draw a detailed sketch (Appendix D). For the first interview, participants were asked to render drawings representing how they perceived themselves as they first came to college. For the second interview, participants were asked to render drawings representing how they perceived themselves at the end of their first year of college. The drawing assignment was utilized to elicit detailed images and descriptions of the participants' experiences and perceived change to further enrich the data collected through interviews. This technique has been found to provide new and additional information when utilized in conjunction with interviews and may be less tedious than written assignments for participants (Gourlay, 2010). Kearney and Hyle, (2004) documented studies in which participants enjoyed drawing assignments as part of a research investigation. To help facilitate participant resistance to drawing, Gourlay (2010) articulates the importance of communicating that "displaying artistic merit is not the object of the exercise (p. 86).

Additionally, participants were asked to bring photos representing social college experiences to the second interview (Appendix D). Participants were informed that the photos could be in an electronic, print, or online content format. This data collection strategy was utilized to capture visual images of social college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Discussion of these images added breadth to the description of the phenomenon under investigation.

To help facilitate the discussion of how college students from rural backgrounds perceive they have changed as a result of their freshmen year, students taking part in the study were asked to bring a photograph of themselves in their senior year of high school to the first interview and a photo of themselves near the end of their freshman year in college to the second interview. During the second interview, participants were shown both photos and asked to describe themselves at the time of the photo. Furthermore, students were asked how the person in the photos (him or herself) is different. This exercise is helped guide the discussion of how study participants have changed. (Appendix D).

Finally, study participants were asked to bring a representation of how they perceive or frame rurality. Students were instructed that this representation could be an object, image, song, video clip, or any other form. Presentation and discussion of these representative items provided insight into how these students make meaning of and conceptualize being from a rural background. (Appendix D).

Participant Vignettes

As described earlier in this chapter, the eight participants in this study were purposefully selected through criterion sampling. All were First-Time, Full-Time Freshman from rural Montana communities attending Montana State University. The eight participants were each given a pseudonym to provide confidentiality. Furthermore, uniquely identifiable information was removed from quotes.

The aliases for the college students from rural backgrounds that took part in this study were derived from the data that was provided during the interviews. This was an intentional attempt to capture the essence of each individual in a pseudonym and to aid in providing in-depth descriptions of the participants. Participants are described in their own words; however, I do provide personal descriptors for each individual derived from observations during the interviews, memos noted on the protocols, and personal interpretations as the researcher. Vignettes introducing each student follow.

High Achiever

The pseudonym of High Achiever was selected to describe this student for two reasons. First, throughout his interviews he shared experiences in which he was driven to be successful and articulated results that met his high standards. Secondly, as a play on words, he grew up on Montana's Hi-Line. This geographic area spans the state's northern territory along Highway 2.

Based on his attire and demeanor, you might consider him to be a typical "country" kid. However, his drive to be successful was consistently communicated during both interviews. "I graduated from [hometown] High School as valedictorian." Furthermore, he indicated that he wanted to finish college in three years in anticipation of attending veterinarian school. As he was asked about academic challenges in college, he said "I usually do pretty good just getting it done".

He described his upbringing by indicating "I grew up on a farm and ranch.... I come from a family of six. I have two brothers and one sister. My parents are still

together." He also indicated that he enjoys going home and working with his dad at his veterinarian clinic; this relationship has inspired him to follow in his dad's footsteps.

He described the community in which he attending High School by saying "it's about a town of 1200 people. It's on the Hi-Line. A pretty close knit community. Everybody knows everybody else." In High School, he played sports and was involved in the 4-H program. As he described his transition from High School to college, he indicated "I didn't really know what to expect coming here." When asked if thought his first semester of college would be harder or easier than it actually was, he replied "I didn't know really. I had no idea what the classes were going to be about or how hard they were going to be."

He described himself as determined, hardworking, and honest. I would describe him as driven and quietly confident, evident through the many passages in which he articulated his passion for success but in a soft-spoken, unassuming manner. He articulated a focus on achieving his goals but also indicated that he enjoys the social aspects of college.

Blossom

Blossom was selected as the alias for the second study participant. This name reflects both her rural nature and the growth she articulated through her college experiences. While "Bud" is synonymous with good ol' boy, Blossom represents the rural girl that can be both feminine and outdoorsy.

> I hunt a lot. It is a very open area to where I'm able to do that whenever. My dad's a taxidermist so it kind of plays in a lot with my hunting. I like

> to fish, I'm out on the river a lot.... I can be girly when I want. I guess I prefer to just be comfortable.

Blossom is also a metaphor used to describe this college student. When asked how she had changed in college, Blossom replied

> I think I've grown up a lot and realized that things in life aren't as easy as they were in High School, because I did have it really easy in High School. I mean if the teachers like you then you're pretty much set.... I'm really happy. I feel like I'm past all the awkward stages that High School had. I mean people were really judgmental in High School but I don't know, I've just learned that I'm an awkward person and I've accepted it completely and stuff and it's easy for me to make friends and they like me for who I am and I don't need to try really hard.

The name Blossom was chosen to capture the growth and self-awareness that she gained in her first year of college.

She shared that she was a "very outgoing person." Additionally, Blossom stated "I don't get shy easily, I like to make friends." She described a strong connection to her family; "I've been really, really close to my mom and dad forever. I have an older sister and an older brother." She is the first in her family to attend college.

Blossom grew-up and attended High School in a town with a population just over 800 people. "We have one grocery store and 3 gas stations. A lot of bars, a lot of bars. A lot of places to go out in the mountains. A lot of places to drive." She describe the people of her hometown as friendly, family-oriented, and hardworking. "Back home everybody waves to everybody regardless if they know you or not." Blossom also described how growing up in a rural community helped shape her; "I feel like I learned a lot more about myself and what I was, it's going to sound cheesy but, meant to do in life."

She describes herself as honest. "I'm going to tell you exactly what I think." Blossom added,

> I've always been just myself, I don't care what people think about me ... I feel like if somebody is going to get to know me they might as well know me for who I am then something that I'm not.

Based on presented quotes from her interviews, I would describe her as outgoing, pleasantly quirky, and relaxed. Through excerpts in her interview, Blossom indicated that she is both searching and finding herself in college.

Farm Boy

The moniker Farm Boy is used to describe the third study participant. The name clearly articulates his ties to the land. "My family, we've lived in the same spot since 1911. I'm the 4th generation that's lived there. We've always been on that farm." The concepts of hard-work and connections to agriculture were evident in many segments of Farm Boy's interviews. When asked what it was like growing up in a rural area he stated "you have some interesting experiences, I mean you get to see a lot more of the 'real world' than certain other individuals.... I feel you develop a work ethic a lot earlier in your age. "

He was raised in the country, outside of the community in which he attended High School. "We have cropland and we also have about 100 head of cows." The community in which he went to High School has approximately 1,500 residents. He described the community as small, a place where everyone knows everyone. "They usually find out news fairly rapidly because what little news there is gets spread around fast!"

As we talked about his family, Farm Boy shared that he had one younger sibling. He elaborated on his parents.

> My dad, him and his side of the family have been the ones who have lived in [name] County since 1911. My mom on the other hand was born and raised around [town name] in the [place name] area. So both parents are from Montana, kind of a rural setting for both.... My dad attends to the farm and my mom she works at [name] Health Care.

He indicated that his father received a bachelor's degree before taking over the family farm.

Farm Boy further described himself as honest and concerned with the work he does. "If you don't care about what you are doing, you're probably not going to do a good job of what you are doing." During the interviews, he would pause and contemplated the questions. When he spoke, his answers were direct. Based on these observations, I would describe him thoughtful, literal, and straightforward. He too indicated that he is finding his way and discovering new things in college.

Small Town Kid

The pseudonym Small Town Kid arose out of the second interview with the fourth participant in this research study. When asked if there was anything else he would like to tell me about himself, he replied "I was just a small town kid. I guess that's how I got into this interview." He grew up in the country. "I've lived on a ranch all my life up there.... It was usually about a half an hour or forty-five minutes drive to school, all gravel roads.... I think our closest neighbor was like six miles away."

His rural upbringing brought opportunities for both work, play, and lessons learned. "You're up early in the morning, maybe do a couple of chores, nothing too big

maybe. We always had 4-H steers that we had to always feed in the morning and stuff.... You were always out working." When asked if his experiences coming from a rural background shaped the person that he is, he replied "you always had to work for what you wanted." This pastoral life also provided a setting for a young kid to "go explore".

> We had a creek down at our house and I remember when we were young we would always go to that creek. It had a lot of trees and we would always play games in there it was just a lot of stuff to do. That's what I like about there...you weren't limited to those couple of yards you live around. You had endless space and opportunities and stuff like that to go look at.

This lifestyle also influenced his character. When asked what values or personal characteristics he appreciated in himself, Small Town Kid replied "hardworking, honest. You know those are things, you're not really born with them, you're just raised up, your parents have always taught you that and it's just how you were raised."

When asked about his family, he stated "I'm really close to both my parents and they both went to college here." He continued, "my dad is a rancher, a self-employed rancher. Then my mom she just does all the book work for us and stays at home and does a lot of good stuff." Small Town Kid also shared that he had two younger siblings.

As he was talking about his personal background, Small Town Kid shared is motivation for coming to college.

> I wanted to come to college to better myself and get a good job in life.... I want to do the best I can and go on to be a vet somewhere in the world and help better other people and better myself through my life.

He showed his determination as he indicated "my goal is to always challenge myself each semester more." In addition to this grit and his articulated strong work-ethic, I would also describe him as reserved and reflective. Regarding his background, he indicated "I

wouldn't have grown up any other way." Through the interviews, it became apparent that he was becoming more social as he found small pockets of people in the larger college community. Perhaps this was an attempt to hold on to or recreate that small town feel.

Sporty Girl

"I was voted most likely to be in the Olympics so that's kind of just like how sporty, like kind of shows how much into sports I was." This quote from a section in the first interview focusing on a High School photo of herself gave rise to the alias Sporty Girl. "I was in every single sport you can imagine. Soccer, softball. In High school I did volleyball, track and basketball." While she was very active in sports, like many other youth in rural communities, Sporty Girl was also involved in other activities. "I was just into everything pretty much. I tried out everything at least."

Sporty Girl also felt that this 'try anything' attitude was a shared experience among fellow youth from rural backgrounds. As she responded to a question regarding the advantages of growing up in a rural area, she shared "I think like getting the chance to do everything. Like, being well rounded as a person. I think a lot of people, I think mostly like the students and like everyone seems very well rounded."

She indicated that both of her parents attended college. When asked about her family, she replied

> My dad owns his own company, he's an electrician. And my mom is kind of like the phone lady, she's like the secretary and does all that. So that's basically what he does. My sister is a junior in high school right now.

She added "my mom grew up in [same hometown], my grandparents have a ranch there."

As she described her hometown, Sporty Girl enthusiastically stated "I absolutely love it. I loved coming from a small town.... Well I grew up in [hometown] my whole life. I was born and raised there." When asked what she loved about her hometown of 1,700 residents, she replied "I think probably knowing everyone."

During the first interview, Sporty Girl was asked what personal values or characteristics she appreciated in herself. She replied

> I think I'm like very, I'm very outgoing, like helpful, friendly. I always try to, if I see someone struggling with something I'm always like trying to figure out a way like, what can I do to like bring their day up or how can I help them in a way that like will make them feel better about themselves. I really like that about myself. I'm just really friendly, outgoing.

Based on this quote and observations during the interview, I would describe her as extroverted and nice. During both interviews, she was eager to answer the questions and share her experiences.

While she described herself as "well-rounded" in High School, Sporty Girl indicated that she has become even more so in college. When asked how college has affected her, she replied "just like realizing that there's more to life than just what you thought there was." Like the other participants in the study, Sporty Girl is discovering new opportunities and taking advantage of the college experience.

Mindful Optimist

Throughout both interviews, the fifth student in this research project described personal experiences in terms of accomplishments and barriers overcome. For her age and stage in life, I found that she was exceedingly self-aware. She attributed her success

in college to her understanding of self; “I know how hard I work and I know what I am capable of doing.” Furthermore, she described her college experience in the following manner, “overall the whole living experience just was positive and I think that’s just because I like to think it was positive.” These quotes coupled with her overall confidence and understanding of self exhibited through both interviews led to the pseudonym Mindful Optimist.

Mindful Optimist grew up in a small rural community comprised of approximately 300 residents. “It was quiet and it was so calm and the world just seems slower in Montana. Just a lot more laidback, but that’s what I loved about it.” As she talked about here rural upbringing, she indicted “I really appreciated the sense of community.” Furthermore, Mindful Optimist indicated that her rural community supported youth endeavors and provided opportunities for self-determination.

> If you want something you go and do it because there was nothing stopping you. ... If you want to do something you can find a resource and people will be willing to help you especially because there’s already that camaraderie within the community. So I think that was really helpful for me.

Conversely, she shared one disadvantage of growing up in a rural area. “I think a lot of people are more closed minded. And that’s just because they are less cultured, not in a bad connotation but just because they haven’t had to experience a lot of things.”

One aspect that sets Mindful Optimist apart from the other study participants is her family situation. “My parents are divorced. I have a little sister but I’ve 8 older siblings and they’re half siblings.” She indicated that her mom was from Southeast Asia.

> When she lived in [Country] she received a bachelor’s in accounting and she worked as that for a while. And then she came her and she received

> her associates to be an LPN and then her associates to be an RN. And know she has her bachelor's to be an RN and she's thinking about doing her masters. So she's very, she's highly intelligent. And she's a really hard worker. So that's my mom.

Regarding her father, she stated "he's not as big in my life." She indicated that he only attended college for a semester and has held several odd jobs. "He's done about everything you can think of in his life time. And never been like incredibly successful but just has, you know, kept us going."

While many of the study participants' families had direct ties to agriculture, as Mindful Optimist describing her upbringing she shared:

> I actually wasn't raised on a ranch or a farm. I just grew up in a rural area. And when I was 15 I started working on a ranch and decided that I wanted to ride horse and get involved in 4-H. So really I've only been and Aggie for like four years.

Mindful Optimist described herself as faithful, hardworking, honest, and humble. "I am kind of a serious person. I like to laugh and you know have fun but I've always taken school very seriously and if I'm going to do something I want to do it well." Through excerpts of both interviews she articulated struggles within her family, within her community, and with some experiences at college. Through these passages, Mindful Optimist displayed her independence, resiliency, and self-awareness. While she may not know what the future holds, she articulated a confidence in her ability to take advantage of opportunities and overcome obstacles.

Ag Ambassador

The pseudonym for the seventh student in this research study emerged naturally from reviews of the audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews. She clearly

articulated a personal connection to agriculture as well as a connection of agriculture to the ethos of rural communities. "My family is involved in Agriculture and so very interested in that and the background or in the influence it's had on the community." As she described her rural community, Ag Ambassador stated "I think everybody felt the connection to agriculture. In a rural area, there's really no way you can avoid that sort of thing." When asked about what the term rural means to her, she replied "I definitely associate it with agriculture because that's really the reason these, in Montana, that rural communities exist."

In response to being asked what it was like growing up in a rural community, Ag Ambassador replied "It made it so that kids, all kids had the opportunity to take part in activities I think. Just because generally rural communities are smaller communities and I feel like the community as a whole was very close-knit." The rural community in which she attended High School has about 1,600 residents. When asked about the culture of the community, Ag Ambassador replied "it just had that small town feel."

When asked about her family, Ag Ambassador enthusiastically talked about her parents and her younger brother. She shared that her mom was a physician's assistant and that her dad owned his own meat processing business. "They went back to school when I was really young and so they started their careers relatively later in life which I think is kind of cool." She continued, "my dad grew up in [hometown] on the family ranch and so we still have strong ties with that. ... We're a really tight family; we do a lot of stuff together. "

Her family and community played an important role in her maturation. In response to a question focused on the effects of growing up in a rural community, Ag Ambassador replied:

> I think having a connection to or an understanding of what was really important ... I think that came from growing up where I did and the impact that not only my family had but the community as a whole had.

These connections to family and community are presented in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

One aspect of Ag Ambassador's college experience was extremely unique when compared to the other study participants. She was involved in a leadership position on organizational team that had a very small number of members. This position required travel and commitment to responsibilities outside of college. For anonymity, the organizational name has been removed and her drawing has been modified.

She described herself as happy, dependable, "a go-getter", and family oriented. "I feel like I'm really, I feel like I am very accountable, definitely take responsibility for my mistakes and my actions and responsibilities." Throughout the interviews, she answered the questions in a polite and cheerful manner. As indicated in above description of herself and in her descriptions of her college experiences, Ag Ambassador faced her first year head on.

Quiet Man

The pseudonym for the final participant in this research study was derived from his quiet, calm nature throughout the interview process. Quiet Man set politely and calmly during both interviews. He answered the questions concisely and directly. When

asked how he would describe himself in High School, he replied “I was pretty quiet throughout High School, one of the few that didn’t go out and party and that stuff. I didn’t really have any great friends throughout High School.”

When asked about his hometown, he replied “it’s [name] Montana, it’s a real small rural community.” In the second interview he stated that “everybody knows everybody and helps out, will help out others a lot” and that his community was “pretty patriotic.” He grew up on a cattle ranch outside of this community of less than 300 residents. “I’ve been helping out on our ranch for, ever since I was little.” He indicated that there was a lot of “trust” in rural communities as compared to urban communities.

> Back at home a lot of people don’t lock their cars or lock their door, their houses. ... Around here it’s kind of lock the door every single time you leave even if it’s for couple of minutes. Don’t leave the car running with the keys in it

His dad manages the ranch and his mom is “kind of entrepreneurial.” In response to a question inquiring about the education of his parents, Quiet Man replied “my mom came here for a couple of years and then dropped out and went to a technical school for drafting.” Discussing his family, he continued “my sisters are graduating this year and then my grandma lives right next door to us.”

Quiet Man described himself as “hardworking, try to help out people when I can”. He indicated that he kept to himself in High School. Through observation and dialogue during the interviews, he appeared to be reserved and provide brief responses to questions. Therefore, I would describe him as a man of few words. . In response to how college has affected him, Quiet Man indicated “I’m more on my own now. My parents will still help me out if they can but it’s for the most part I’m on my own.” He also

indicated that he was more social in college than in High School; “I’ve got a lot of friends that I hang out with a lot.” Although he appears to remain reserved, he too has carved out a niche for himself in college.

Pseudonym	**Hometown Population**	**Descriptors**	**Quote**
High Achiever	1,200	Determined Hardworking Quietly Confident	“I just want to go to vet school ... so I just let that drive me to get good grades because if I don’t it won’t happen.”
Blossom	800	Outgoing Honest Outdoorsy	“I’m going to tell you exactly what I think.”
Farm Boy	1,500	Honest Straightforward Literal	“If you don’t care about what you are doing, you’re probably not going to do a good job”
Small Town Kid	400	Hardworking Honest Determined	“I wouldn’t have grown up any other way.”
Sporty Girl	1,700	Outgoing Friendly Well-Rounded	“I actually give things a chance instead of just turning them down right away.”
Mindful Optimist	300	Honest Humble Serious	“I feel like there are just so many opportunities.”
Ag Ambassador	1,600	Happy Dependable A Go-Getter	“It’s a very small world in rural Montana.”
Quiet Man	200	Quiet Hardworking Reserved	“Comparing it to past experiences, Bozeman is a huge city to me.”

Table 3.1. Study Participants

Data Analysis Strategies

Analysis of qualitative data is a continual process, one that is ongoing over the course of the research study (Maxwell, 2005). As data was collected, interpretations began to be formed either consciously or unconsciously. Drawing these interpretations out to a conscious level allowed the process to grow and change thus revealing the inductive process of qualitative research. Data collection and analysis were simultaneous undertakings in this research study. As more data was collected more detailed or different interpretations emerged. The pre-design of this investigation was fully developed and planned for implementation. However, interview questions were adjusted to provide a better opportunity for participants to describe their experiences. Furthermore, unanticipated and follow-up questions surfaced during the interviews and discussions of the drawings, photos, and rural representations. Creswell (2007) indicates that the initial plan may need to change due to the emergent design inherent to qualitative research.

Interviews and discussions of drawings and photos were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Several techniques of data analysis were utilized. Data analysis first began by reviewing notes taken during the interview, listening to the recorded interviews, and transcribing the interviews. Memo-making (Maxwell, 2005) was a fundamental aspect of interpretation. This process included notes/memos recorded on the protocol during the interview, developed from listening to the recordings, documented during review of the transcripts, and obtained through clarification with the participants. This primary review and organization of thoughts led directly into the next analysis

strategy. Responses were coded, categorized, and clustered for thematic analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Initial categories were formed with the examination of early data and transformed as further analysis and data collection took place. This process of qualitative data analysis was inherently elastic and reciprocal; both data and interpretations informed each other in an attempt to capture the nature of the experience as expressed by participants.

Data obtained from the drawings, photos, and representative items was treated in a similar way. Creswell (2007) indicates that the three steps in data analysis consist of organizing, grouping, and representing data. The images and representations collected in this study were analyzed alongside textual data for common themes. These objects provided another lens from which to view the phenomenon. Furthermore, they added to the rich descriptions of the students' perceptions and experiences.

After initial themes were constructed, I returned to the data for validation. Supporting interview question text and student descriptions and discussions of objects, drawings, and photos were utilized to fortify, reconstruct, and support themes. Additional voice to support themes emerged through this process as well discrepant data. Review and presentation of negative case data provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Validation

In this phenomenological study, focus was placed on truthfully capturing, describing, and interpreting the experiences shared by participants. Steps to ensure

accurate representation of the participants' descriptions and understandings of the phenomenon are vital components of a quality qualitative research study. Validation strategies were considered as key aspects of the research design.

Creswell (2007) presented standards and strategies for validation of qualitative research utilizing the terms credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability. Validation of qualitative results in this investigation was a process not an outcome. The evidence revealed through this qualitative study was a fundamental component for validating the study. Themes and interpretations were anchored in the voices and provided descriptions of the study participants. Furthermore, positioning myself as the researcher was an essential step in validation. This process provided evidence of the trustworthiness of the study.

Creswell (2007) outlines strategies for validating qualitative research. These strategies include member checking, rich descriptions, and triangulation. A more detailed description of these three strategies follows. Furthermore, other strategies for validating the results of this qualitative study included conducting the study in a natural setting, comparing data to related literature, and utilizing a standardized protocol.

Member checking strengthened the credibility of this study and was an excellent strategy to validate the collected data and interpretations. This strategy involved study participants reviewing data and interpretations. Clarification of statements provided by participants and initial thematic analysis review by participants helped validate descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon.

"Scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience" (Moustakas, 1994). Rich descriptions provided detailed accounts of the participants, environment, phenomenon, and experiences. Clearly articulated details helped provide a more accurate account of the study. These detailed descriptions provide opportunity for individuals to evaluate the appropriateness of relating the shared information to other situations. This process leads to transferability.

In this study, triangulation involved obtaining data from multiple sources and from multiple participants. The techniques described earlier provided opportunity for the collection of different types of data to inform the study. Involving multiple participants in the study provided a broader view of the phenomenon and aided in validating themes that emerge from data collected from multiple participants.

Positioning My Role as the Researcher

As with any qualitative study, I (as the researcher) played a critical role in the design, implementation, and interpretation of the research. My role as the researcher cannot be separated from the study itself. My experiences, biases, assumptions, actions, and interpretations were central aspects of the study. I came to this research with experience as a college student from a rural background. My experiences at college were undoubtedly influenced by the culture and environment in which I maturated. While these personal experiences bias my perceptions of the phenomenon, they also were the driving force of interest in this area of inquiry. I am currently positioned as a faculty

member that works directly with rural youth aspiring to attend college and college students from rural backgrounds. Bracketing these experiences to help guide the research but not the responses of individuals was a critical step in the process.

Chapter Summary

Intentional and reflective consideration of the design and methodology was critical to the success of this investigation. The clear articulation of the purpose and research questions for this study in the introduction was a first step towards this end. Subsequent discussion connected the purpose to an appropriate research design and method. Furthermore, the site and sample for the research project were clearly presented and multiple data collection strategies and analysis were outlined. Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion of validation and bracketing of the researcher's experience with the phenomenon. In its entirety, this discussion frames the methods utilized for investigating the descriptions and perceptions of college students from rural backgrounds.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

Developing a more detailed understanding of how students from rural backgrounds perceive self, define rural culture, describe their first-year social and academic college experiences, and make meaning of these experiences was the primary focus of this research. This chapter outlines results and research findings addressing the purpose of the study and the following four research questions:

1. How do college students from rural backgrounds define, describe, and view rurality and rural culture and its influence on self?
2. How do college students from rural backgrounds describe and perceive their first-year academic and social college experiences
3. How do rural college students perceive that their rurality has influenced their first-year academic and social college experiences?
4. How do college students from rural backgrounds perceive they have changed as a result of their first-year college experiences?

As outlined in chapter three, analysis of the data included memo-making, multiple reviews of audio recordings and transcriptions, examination of participant drawings and explanations, and evaluation of participants' descriptions of photos.

This chapter begins with description of the organization of themes and the surfacing of a frame from which to view the results that emerged through the examination

of data presented in the form of the students' rural representations. Results and research findings are then presented as emergent themes that are grounded in participant responses to interview questions, personal descriptions of participant drawings, participants' presentations and explanations of rural representations, and discussions of participant provided photos.

Framing the Themes

As themes that describe the phenomenon under investigation emerged, they were originally organized into discrete silos that addressed the four research questions. While this format was straightforward and systematically organized, this structured presentation of the themes lacked authenticity and did not provide a more in-depth, holistic picture of the experiences of these college students from rural backgrounds. Through meetings with one of my committee chairs, I was challenged to look deeper into the data to discover connections between themes. These conversations also reminded me of a previous meeting with my other committee chair, who recently passed away. As we discussed constructing themes, she encouraged me to free myself from the research questions by first uncovering themes, then looking for negative cases, and finally painting the big picture.

Through their support and guidance, I reexamined the themes and searched for connections. I contemplated metaphors and analogies for presenting the broader picture of the phenomenon; examples included comparing the experiences of these college students to a tree (roots, trunk, branches, and leaves) or conceptualizing their experiences

as an anchor (both providing stability and limitation through weight). While these constructs could represent the broader picture, they did not feel authentic in relation to the rural backgrounds of the college students.

As I struggled to bring to light a broader view of these college students' experiences, I returned to the data and my interpretations. Fischer (2009) describes this process as a form of bracketing and engagement; "the researcher repeatedly discovers what his or her assumptions and interpretive understandings were and reexamines them against emerging insights" (p. 584). I reexamined the rural representations that were presented by the study participants; I looked for connections between the representations, the data, interpretations, and emergent themes. It was through this process that a frame for the themes emerged.

Rural Representations

As discussed in chapter three, study participants were asked to bring a representation of how they perceive or frame rurality. As defined in chapter one, rurality is the state and associated characteristics of being rural. The prompt provided to the participants prior to the interview indicated that this representation could be an object, image, song, video clip, or any other form.

The Mindful Optimist brought a belt buckle as her representation and indicated that it embodied the rural ethos "if you want to do something you can". Sporty Girl, High Achiever, and Quite Man each presented songs as their rural representations. They explained that these songs were characteristic of the agricultural and community focused components of rural culture. The remaining four students shared photographs as their

rural representations. Small Town Kid's photo represented the open nature characteristic of rural areas; "this road just goes on for miles and miles and just little rolling hills and you see the horizon and the blue skies and there's nothing around you." The photos shared by Blossom and Farm Boy were of their home and farm respectively. Lastly, the photo presented by Ag Ambassador depicted a branding on a ranch near her rural community. Through reexamination of the representations, it became apparent that this photo captured a metaphoric depiction of the phenomenon under investigation, the data gathered, and emergent themes. Ag Ambassador's representative photo is presented as Figure 4.1.



Figure 4.1. Ag Ambassador: Rural Representation. Photo by Lauren Chase, Montana Stockgrowers Association. Reprinted with permission.

She described the photo in the following manner:

> The reason I picked this picture ... it shows a community. I really see rurality as being the coming together of families and community. And then also in this picture they are roping and dragging, that style of branding which is very traditional and I really associate that with rurality.

This photo was selected as a means to frame the themes that emerged from the data. Many of the components of the photo provide an authentic representation of the emergent themes. The people and the landscape depicted in the photo capture the themes and descriptions of rural culture. Furthermore, study participants' descriptions of self are connected to the ways in which they describe people and the construct of place as they relate to rural culture. In the same way the calves bear the brand of the ranch, rural culture and rurality affect how the study participants view self. The themes related to self are also rooted in the hard-work and community aspects portrayed in the photo. Roping and dragging is a labor intensive form of branding, one that requires both hard-work and help from several individuals within a community. Finally, the college experiences, influences of their rural backgrounds, and changes articulated by the students are intertwined and reinforced in the same manner the individual cords come together to form the rope depicted in the traditional roping and dragging method of branding captured in the photo.

Results of data analysis will be presented as themes and research findings in four subsequent sections:

1. Rural Culture, Rurality, and Descriptions of Self
2. Participant Drawings
3. First Year College Experiences and Rural Effects
4. Perceived Change in Self

Rural Culture, Rurality and Descriptions of Self

The college students that took part in this research study clearly articulated their perception of rurality and rural culture as they described the characteristics, traits, and concepts of being from a rural community. Furthermore, participants were asked to describe themselves, discuss their backgrounds, and share personal characteristics that they value in themselves. Additionally, excerpts from interview transcripts of sections focused on rurality and college experiences provided further insight into how these students describe themselves, describe their rural communities, and articulate the connection between the two. In the branding photo, the people integrate with the landscape and lifestyle portrayed to depict the whole picture. Likewise, study participants communicated the integration of rural culture and descriptions of self.

The environment in which these students grew up influenced the people that they believe themselves to be. At multiple times in both interviews, the study participants ascribed many of their personal values and characteristics to their rural upbringing. When asked about advantages of growing up in a rural area, Small Town Kid stated "you know I guess learning some of those values that are important in life to get you somewhere." He also stated "I think it's just a lifestyle of where you live is what's going to help you the best when you start doing that kind of stuff, when you leave home" (Small Town Kid). In reply to being asked how he developed his personal values and to what he would ascribe them to, High Achiever stated "probably, my background in, you know, rural life and agriculture. Those are kind of principles I was taught all through my life. You learn that at a very young age when you are working on a farm." He went on

to indicate that both his family and the community members in his rural community influenced his development of these values.

The college students from rural backgrounds interviewed during this research study clearly identified with their rural up-bringing, valued the experience, and wouldn't have had it any other way. All eight study participants communicated their fondness of the rural lifestyle and what it meant to them.

> I loved growing up in [hometown] ... and I love it there; I really wouldn't have changed anything about it. And I feel like the opportunities I was given in [hometown], I wouldn't have found anywhere else. And so I don't think I would, I don't think I would be the person I am today if I hadn't grown up in [hometown] (Ag Ambassador).

Blossom, Sporty Girl, and Mindful Optimist expressed similar sentiments of "loving" their rural hometown. Small Town Kid summed it up by sharing, "I wouldn't have grown up any other way." Many of the participants shared analogous opinions as those expressed by High Achiever; "I don't really have anything to regret from being in the rural community." Lastly, when asked about how his rural background shaped him, Farm Boy replied "I guess it's given me an appreciation for like the smaller towns ... It kind of teaches you to appreciate the basics and you can get along with the basics pretty well." As expressed in this quote, the participants provide a straightforward, simplistic account of their upbringing. This simplicity is expressed in their descriptions of rural culture and in their understanding of self.

People and place are central to the participants' descriptions of rural culture, rurality, and self. Emergent from the participants descriptions of place are the themes of small-secluded and open. These concepts are capture in one participant's description of

rural areas; "that's another way to define rural is living in a town of under a thousand people and you're nowhere near anything else. You drove out of that town and it was about like that" (Small Town Kid).

The themes of sense of community and connections to the land surfaced from participants' descriptions of the people from rural communities. Ag Ambassador described rural inhabitants in the following way:

> I think that people in rural communities are just more connected to their background and to that rural heritage and it seems like when you take that into account in any situation there's a better appreciation for family, for values, for hard work, so it seems.

Finally, the themes of hardworking-honest-integrity, driven-responsible, and family oriented emerged from the students' descriptions of self. Table 4.1 outlines the themes related to rural culture, rurality and descriptions of self.

Theme Area	**Theme Name**
Rural Culture and Rurality	Small - Secluded
	Open Space
	Sense of Community
	Connection to the Land
Descriptions of Self	Hardworking - Honest - Integrity
	Driven - Responsible
	Family Oriented

Table 4.1. Themes: Rural Culture, Rurality, and Descriptions of Self

Small - Secluded

"The town consists of a few local businesses; we have a grocery store, a few restaurants, a few bars, we have a clothing store there and then the courthouse and the library. That's the basics of the town" (Farm Boy).

All of the participants in the research study describe their rural communities as small and in some cases as tiny. When asked how she would define the term rural, Blossom stated “small town, small in general”. In her first interview, Sporty Girl articulated “I’m from a tiny, tiny town in Montana” and in her second interview she stated “I’m not used to like stop lights or like two lane roads. It’s just like in [hometown] we have one stop light, it’s like a four-way or one stop light, yea four-way stop”. When asked about his hometown, Quiet Man described the community as “about 100 people in town, including the people around town in the area it’s probably about 300 people. Two churches and a small store and a post office”. While Ag Ambassador simply stated “it’s a small rural community”.

In their descriptions of their hometowns and rural communities in general, the participants also presented seclusion as a descriptor of rurality. “We were kind of secluded up there from a lot of other towns” (High Achiever). Distance was expressed by Small Town Kid as a characteristic of rural communities as he avowed “you’re far away from something ... it’s just about as far away as you can get”. Another example of being secluded emerged as Quiet Man described rural as “small, middle of nowhere area”.

The size and secluded nature of rural communities was also presented as both a blessing and a curse. When asked about advantages of growing up in rural community, Ag Ambassador answered “I think it is size. I really liked how small (hometown) was and I didn’t feel like it was too small. Just because of the opportunities that become available to you”. When asked about his High School, Small Town Kid state in a positive tone “it was just so small and you knew everyone”.

The participants also articulated disadvantages to the size and seclusion of rural communities. Proximity to services was shared by several participants as a down side to living in a rural area. "Not really a whole lot of places to go and hang out with friends. A lot of people are shocked that we don't have a movie theatre. You have to drive an hour to do any shopping" (Quiet Man). High Achiever framed this drawback as follows: "I guess the only disadvantages I can think of was you're far from I guess society, Wal-Mart and stuff."

One student expressed a different disadvantage to the size of rural areas in general. "I feel like the area was so small um that a lot of people were very closed minded. And I think that is pretty common in small towns and also maybe just in Montana, the Montana culture" (Mindful Optimist). As will be presented and discussed in a following section of this chapter, all but one participant articulated that their rural areas were not as diverse as their college environment. However, Mindful Optimist was the only participant to share the perception that rural inhabitants were, in general terms, "closed minded".

Open Space

The second theme describing rurality in terms of place was expressed as open space. When asked what the term rural meant to her, Mindful Optimist replied "it means open spaces and not crowded." This concept was further expressed by three participants as they described their rural representation.

For his rural representation, High Achiever brought the Tim McGraw song "Where the Green Grass Grows." When asked what it was about the song that represents rurality, he stated:

> The open space when you get to a rural community. The inviting nature, you know green grass, you know it sounds inviting. You always want to go to greener pastures. It's about being, getting out by yourself where there's not as much, not as many people I guess. You can see the beauty of the land instead of some big structure in concrete.

Small Town Kid shared a photo of open, rolling fields as his rural representation. He too described rurality in terms of openness.

> I think in a way it kind of means somewhat isolated from just where you, like isolated from like another town or something. Kind of out on your own. And no one near you. Country life, there's open plains, you see the sunshine every morning, you see the stars at night because there's nothing blocking it.

Finally, Ag Ambassador added to the definition of rurality in terms of openness as she shared her rural representation.

> This picture shows the landscape and I really associate it, rural communities with the landscape around them and really open spaces not necessarily a lack of housing and development but just very open, whether that's the sky, the mountains whatever, just very openness, a lot of openness.

<u>Sense of Community</u>

"I really see rurality as being the coming together of families and community." (Ag Ambassador)

As communicated by study participants, people in small, rural towns create a strong sense of community that is descriptive of rural culture. "I think the big thing that I consider rural is like the sense of community and you can feel that when you go to any

small town from my experience" (Mindful Optimist). Additionally, High Achiever indicated that "having a lot of connections, having a lot of people to turn to" were advantages of living in small town. As she described the culture of the rural community in which she grew up, Ag Ambassador indicated that it was "very community oriented, very willing to work together." She continued "I think that there is a great sense of community in terms of people coming together to help one another, to support one another."

Study participants expressed that the strong sense of community found in rural communities translated into a friendly environment. "Back home everybody waves to everybody regardless if they know you or not" (Blossom). Sporty Girl described rural communities as "very friendly, it's like the biggest thing, everyone is really, really, really nice. Walking down the sidewalk everyone waves at you." Mindful Optimist described similar experiences; "I really appreciated the sense of community ... everywhere you go, you can walk down the street and walk into a store and you smile at someone and they smile back."

Close-knit was a common expression utilized by participants to describe the culture of people from rural communities. "I would say rural areas are a little bit more closer knit. They, I feel that rural areas might look out more for the others in the community" (Farm Boy). When asked about the place he grew up, High Achiever stated that his town was "a pretty close knit community" and "everybody knows everybody else." This connectedness of the community and familiarity of people was also described as a protective factor. "My family wasn't a prominent family in ... but people knew who

I was, people knew who my family was and they really genuinely cared and that was what was really great about living there" (Mindful Optimist). Ag Ambassador stated "I feel like the community as a whole was very close-knit. I mean I couldn't get away with anything if I wanted too without my parents finding out from somebody else."

Many of the study participants described both themselves and their communities as helpful. Small Town Kid simply stated "everyone was there to help each other." Furthermore, they connected this personal sense of benevolence to their rural background. When he described his rural community, High Achiever captured this sense of helpfulness; "It's one of the places where you have, you know you can turn to people and they are always there for you because they know you and they have an interest in you." An excerpt from another interview provided a specific example rural residents helping each other out; "If there were snow storms or something like that we could always stay at someone's house it didn't matter who it was, they knew you. You didn't even have to ask they just knew" (Small Town Kid). Mindful Optimist shared similar feelings; "people will be willing to help you especially because there's already that camaraderie within the community." Finally, Quiet Man conveyed a similar viewpoint; "If you need help with something then you can just call up, there's somebody around that will come over and help you out."

This collective sense of community translated into an individual desire to help and serve others. Several of the participants described themselves as willing to help out or shared experiences of volunteer service; "I'm really big into community service"

(Blossom). Furthermore, the students provided examples of helping people out when they could and associated this with their rural background.

> If I see somebody that needs help then I'll stop and help and see if there's anything that I can do. Like jump starting a car for somebody that I don't know. Around there you never know when you might need help and so you might as well help out as many other people as you can and then if you need something then it's, you're more likely to get the help you need (Quiet Man).

Lastly, Small Town Kid indicated that in a rural area "you have like that group of people you can count on and stuff, whether it's your family or your neighbors."

The concept of sense of community is extremely important to a rural community. Ag Ambassador indicates that it is an imperative in a small, rural town. "You need to come together as a community and as a school for that matter in order to be successful and so I think that it just opens up opportunities for kids and adults alike." However, with this closeness comes extreme familiarity. "Everybody knows who you are; they might know more about your life than you ever thought you knew" (Blossom). Farm Boy expressed similar views as he shared that "everybody knows everything about everyone."

Connection to the Land - Agriculture and Natural Resources

When describing rurality and rural culture, all of the students indicated some form of connection to the land either through agriculture or natural resources. The pastoral scene depicted in the branding picture captures the strong ties these communities have to agriculture. "When I think of rural I think of dirt roads, mountains, horses, cows, no big tall buildings, just like grass and trees everywhere. Cowboy boots, cowboy hats" (Sporty

Girl). Five of the eight students grew up on a farm or ranch. "I'm the 4th generation on 1,000 acre cattle ranch ... my dad's been running the ranch for his whole life or most of his life" (Quiet Man). High Achiever, Farm Boy, Small Town Kid, and Ag Ambassador shared similar stories of their family while Sporty Girl indicated that her grandparents had a ranch outside her hometown. Mindful Optimist described a different experience that still lead her to articulate a connection to agriculture. "I actually wasn't raised on a ranch or a farm. I just grew up in a rural area. And when I was 15 I started working on a ranch and decided that I wanted to ride horse and get involved in 4-H."

Six of the eight participants shared a rural representation that was directly connected to agriculture and natural resources. Quiet Man's rural representation was a song parody of life on a farm were everything breaks down, Mindful Optimist's was a belt buckle, and Ag Ambassador's was a photo of a branding. When talking about the song he shared, High Achiever stated, "I always think about raising cows and stuff because I really enjoy ranching and raising animals, being able to do something with the land." Farm Boy brought a photo and declared "well I guess rurality to me is working on a farm. I mean this is basically a picture of I think me and my dad at harvest." Lastly, Blossom discussed a photo of her home she brought as her rural representation and shared "it's always been that way, mom fed us out of the garden and the chicken coop. Dad goes hunting and mounts stuff and makes money."

Hardworking - Honest - Integrity

"The upmost value is integrity. I value compassion and hard work, work ethic." (Mindful Optimist)

Hardworking, honesty, and integrity were consistently repeated as personal traits and qualities that the students valued. All study participants provide examples that support this theme. When asked what values or personal characteristics he appreciated in himself, Quiet Man plainly stated "hardworking". He continued to add, "growing up on the ranch you had to, um you had to work hard or nothing would get done." Mindful Optimist affirmed "if I'm going to do something I want to do it well." This theme is reinforced as she shared her rural representation.

> I'm wearing my belt buckle ... I guess the reason I chose it was because I feel like growing up in a rural area you're taught to work for what you want to win. And so when you see 4-H kids win buckles or junior livestock at the fair they've spent an ample amount of time with that animal and have gotten to know that animal in a way that they can show it and win. And it teaches them to take care of something else and to really put pride into something and to do it well. And winning isn't always the most important thing but that you are able to work for what you want.

As indicated in the above passages and reinforced through other examples, growing up in a rural area affected the work ethic of these students. "I definitely like, rural background it I mean it taught me how to work hard and achieve those things and not to be a lazy person or something like that" (Small Town Kid).

Honesty and integrity were repeated concepts in the data and were connected to the construct of work ethic. Farm Boy expressed "I appreciate integrity, doing the right thing when nobody is looking." Moreover, in support of this theme Ag Ambassador stated "I really like that I am dependable; like if somebody asks me to do something I will do it to the best of my abilities regardless of other things that might be going on." Passages from the interviews with Blossom, High Achiever and Mindful Optimist also support this theme.

The descriptions of themselves as hardworking were clearly tied to their background. High Achiever indicated that "everybody kind of values hard work and determination and drive and everybody tries to get stuff done. Everybody kind of comes from a common background that's why I think everyone kind of has shared values in rural communities." Ag Ambassador captured this concept and its application to her current situation;

> I definitely think I have a stronger appreciation for hard work as compared to some others and putting in long hours. I was never a studious person in High School it came really easily to me. But I found that I was able to easily transition to studying in college and I feel like that come from having spent long hours fencing or working with my animals or something along those lines.

All study participants articulated this connection.

Driven - Responsible

"I haven't stopped yet and I don't plan on stopping. I plan on keep pushing through." (Farm Boy)

For the roping and dragging style of branding to be effective, each person involved must be personally responsible for their individual job. The next theme that surfaced related to descriptors of self focuses on the students' drive and personal-responsibility. Examples materialized from information provided from all eight participants save one; analysis of data from Quiet Man did not provide direct indicators of this theme. While this theme is connected to the one discussed in the previous section, discrete shared experiences warrant individual designation.

Examples of this theme were discussed by participants as they described personal characteristics and discussed their pre-college selves. High Achiever shared that "I appreciate my determination, drive" when asked about values or personal characteristics that he appreciated in himself. Ag Ambassador described herself in High School by stating "I was definitely a go getter; always pushing myself, always busy, always missing school to go do some activity." Blossom, Sporty Girl, and Mindful Optimist also shared similar experiences; "if you want something you go and do it" (Mindful Optimist).

Instances of this theme also surfaced during discussions of college experiences. When discussing her approach to academics in college, Blossom stated "you have to really rely on yourself to get it done and learn." Mindful Optimist described a challenge that lead to an affirmation; "It was an adjustment but after I failed that first exam I was like "okay, you need to buck up and study and focus" (Mindful Optimist). Sporty Girl had similar sentiments; "I did fine first semester, like my parents were like 'oh we are so proud of you' and I was like 'okay but [name] you can be better." Finally, Small Town Kid's college experiences helped solidify his own drive and self responsibility; "I realized you know I've got to go out and learn how to get stuff done on my own."

Family Oriented

> And then, I really feel like one of my big values, it kind of summarizes a couple of them, is family. It is definitely where I came from and like what holds me steady, that sort of thing. And I feel like lot of other things spur off of that. So that's a really concrete one for me (Ag Ambassador).

In her description of the branding photo, Ag Ambassador shared that it represented the coming together of community and family. As she described the scene

she indicated “there’s representation from a couple different generations.” The concept of family is the final theme related to how these students describe themselves. Repeatedly, the majority of study participants articulated strong connections to family as an aspect that they value. “My family is the most important thing to me” (Blossom). When asked about their personal background, Small Town Kid shared “I’m really close to both my parents” and Ag Ambassador indicated “we’re a really tight family; we do a lot of stuff together.”

High Achiever attributed his parents and siblings with influencing the development of his character. Farm Boy communicated similar feelings as he acknowledged “I’ve developed a lot of the same philosophies as my dad.” Sporty Girl indicated that she had a very close relationship with her sister, despite not always getting along. Furthermore, she indicated that her parents provide continued support and encouragement in her college endeavors. Mindful Optimist provided a different perspective. Her parents are divorced and she indicated that her dad is “not as big in my life”. However, she did indicate in both interviews that she had a strong relationship with her mother. Quiet Man did not provide details related to his relationship with his family as he answered the questions with brief, direct responses.

Lastly, the concept of family extended beyond kinship. Family is strongly tied to the descriptions of rural culture as close-knit and as have a strong sense of community as shared in a previous section of this chapter. When asked what things people in rural areas value, Blossom responded simply, “family”.

Participant Drawings

As described in chapter three, study participants were asked to render drawings representing how they perceived themselves as they first came to college and how they perceived themselves at the end of their first year of college. During the interviews, the drawings were presented and discussed. Figures 4.2 - 4.9 are the drawings created by the students. Each drawing is accompanied by a quote from the each student's explanation of the drawings.

These drawings provide insight into how the participants perceive self and frame their first year college experiences in relation to their rural backgrounds. Excerpts from the students' descriptions of the drawings will be integrated into the discussion of the emergent themes. As appropriate, portions of the drawings will be used individually and collectively to provide a visual context to the themes.

"I drew boots because I wear boots a lot. I grew up on a farm and ranch" (High Achiever).

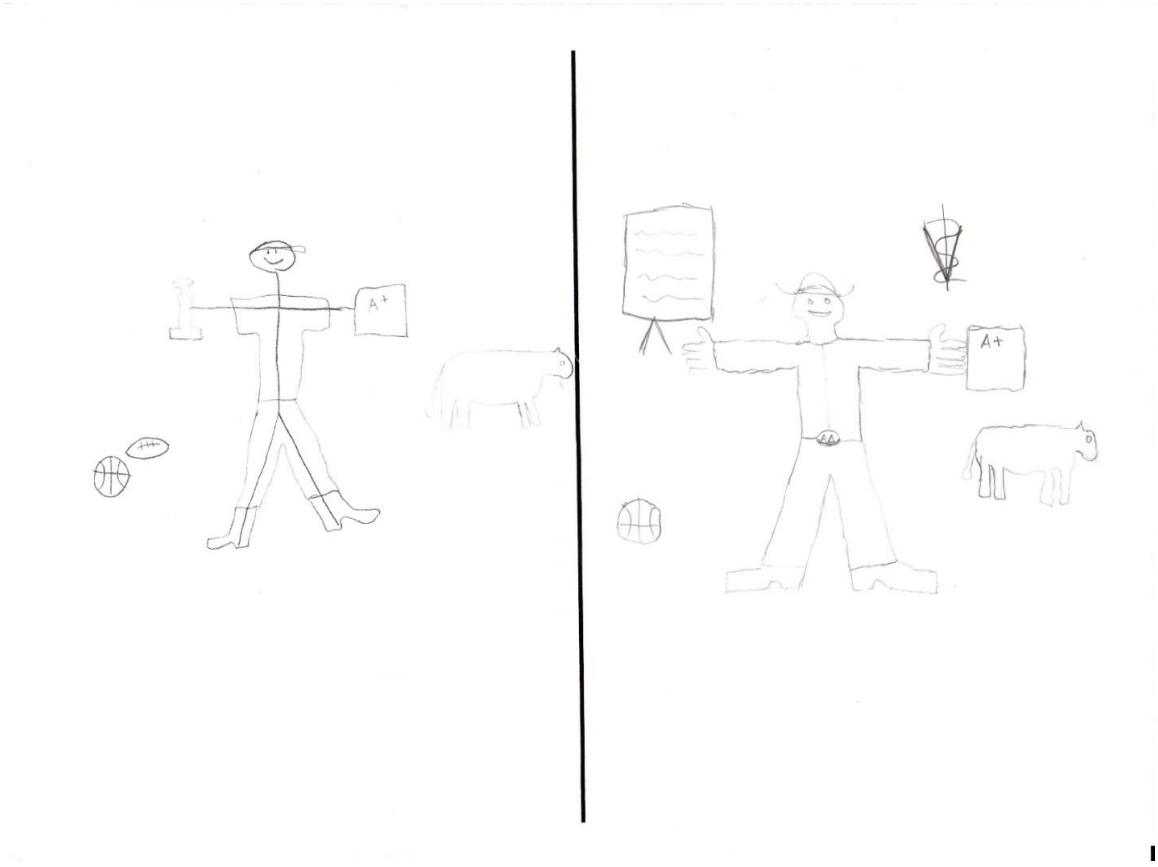


Figure 4.2. High Achiever: Before and After Drawing

"In the center I put myself because I was trying to see what I was going to be doing" (Blossom).

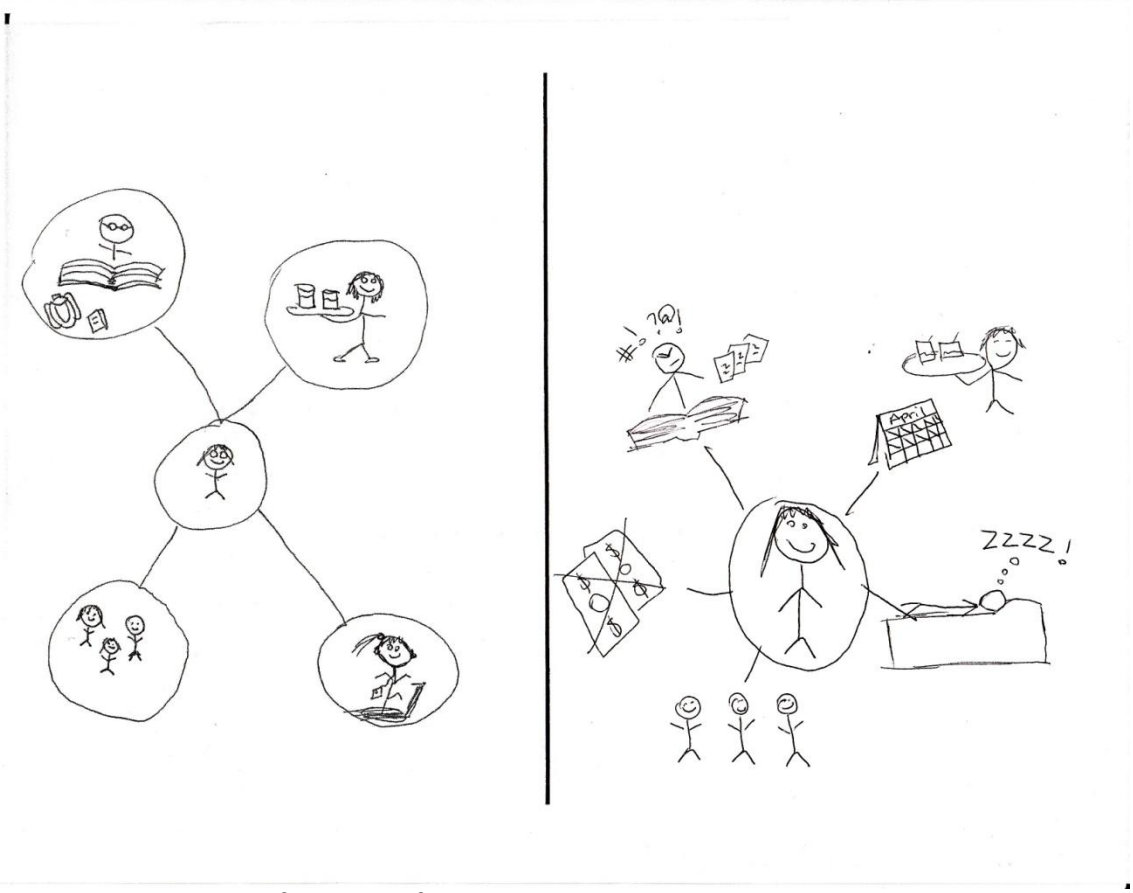


Figure 4.3. Blossom: Before and After Drawing

"I guess the middle one is I came to college thinking I was going to take on the world with a farm boy style" (Farm Boy).

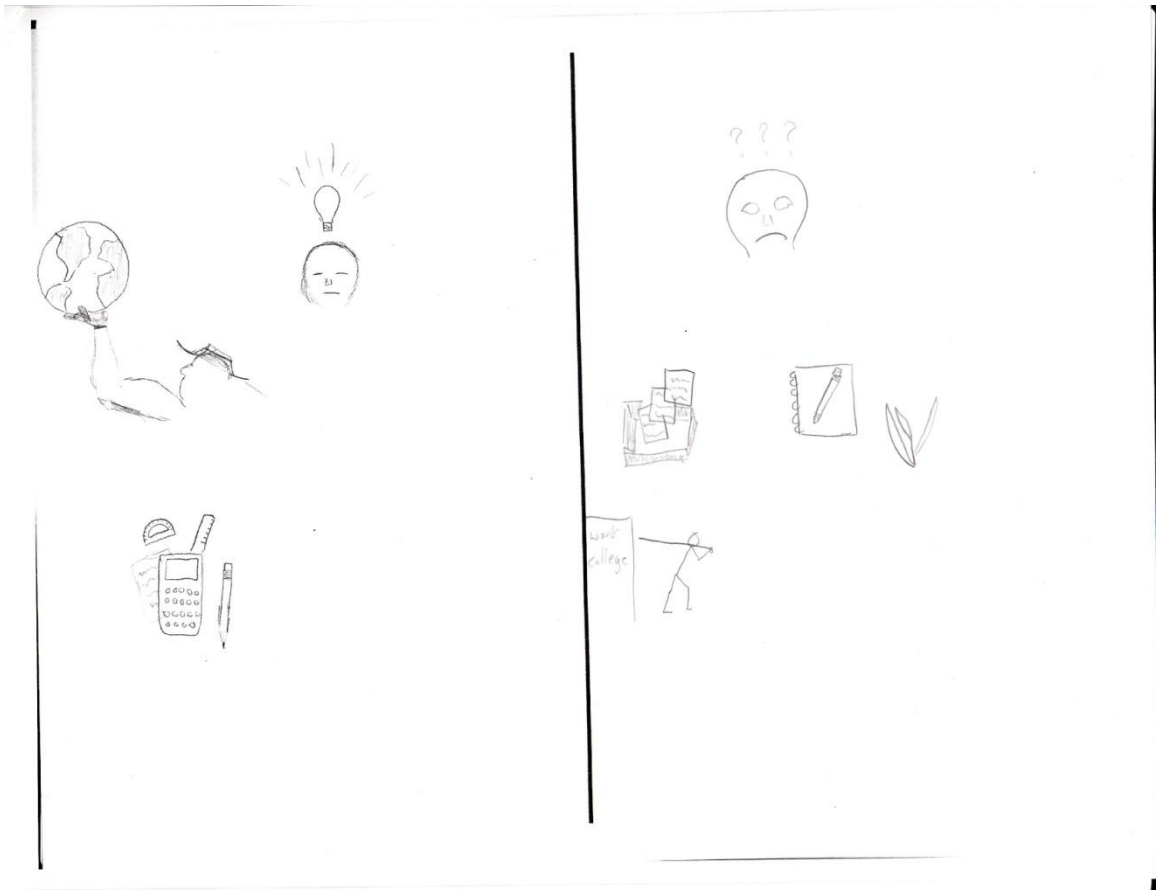


Figure 4.4. Farm Boy: Before and After Drawing

"When I very first got here and I ... put me in the middle because I knew no one and ... there were a whole bunch of people" (Small Town Kid).

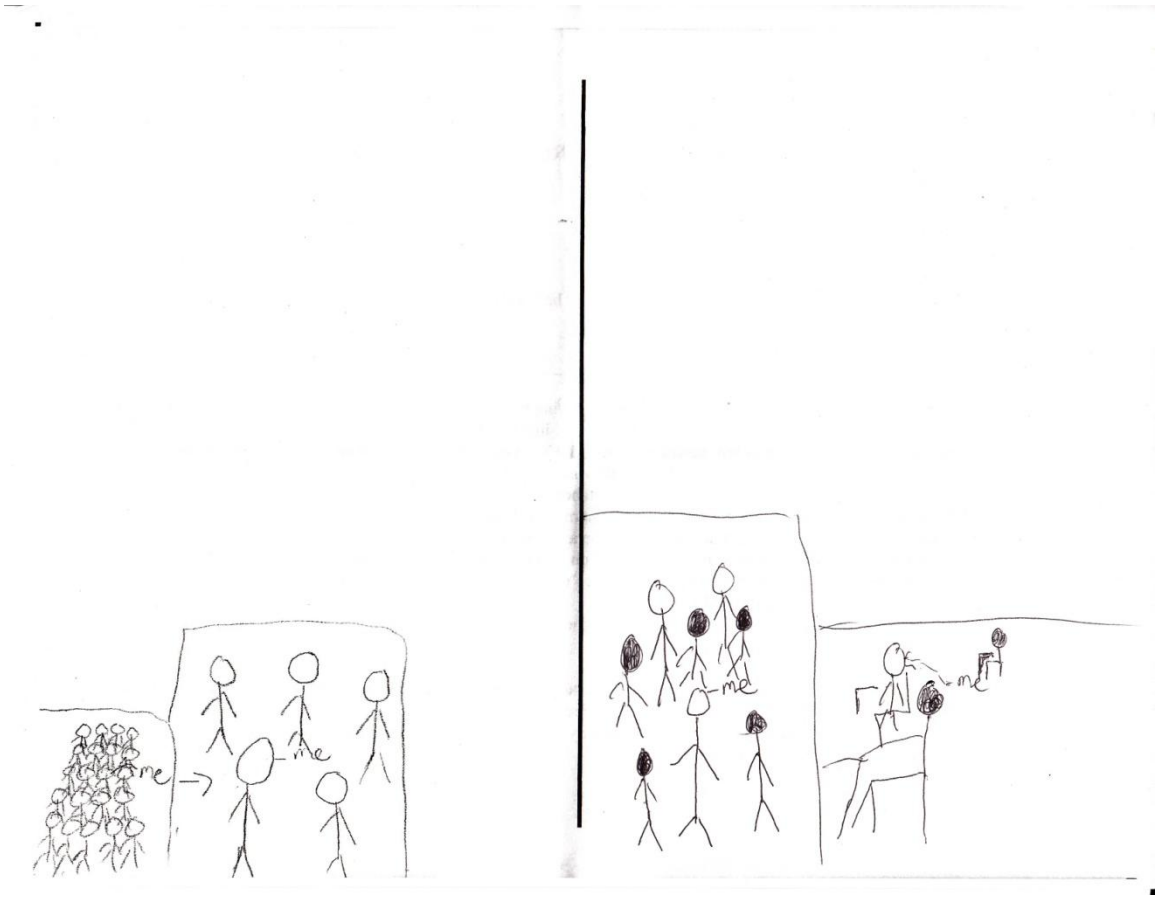


Figure 4.5. Small Town Kid: Before and After Drawing

"This would be like the first initial shock of college" (Sporty Girl).

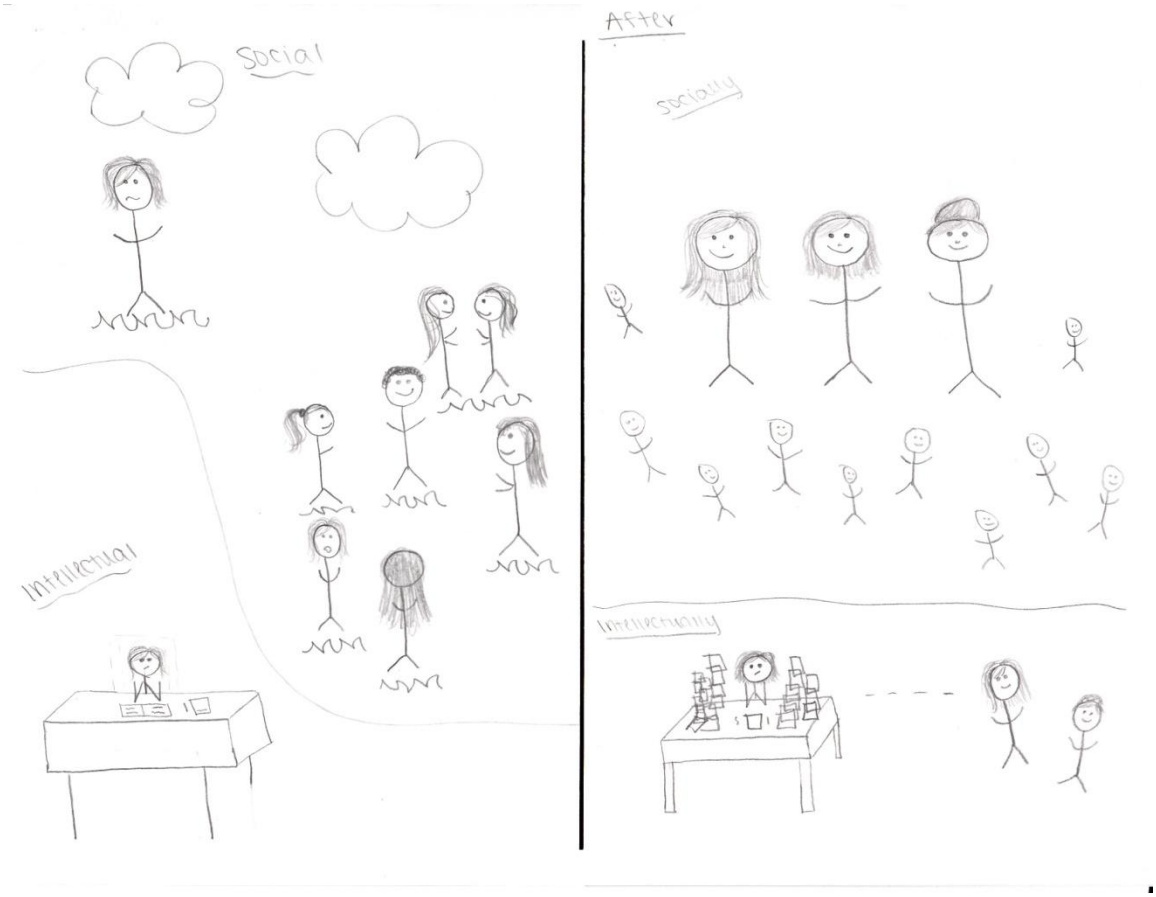


Figure 4.6. Sporty Girl: Before and After Drawing

"I spent a lot of time volunteering ... like my days were just full" (Mindful Optomist).

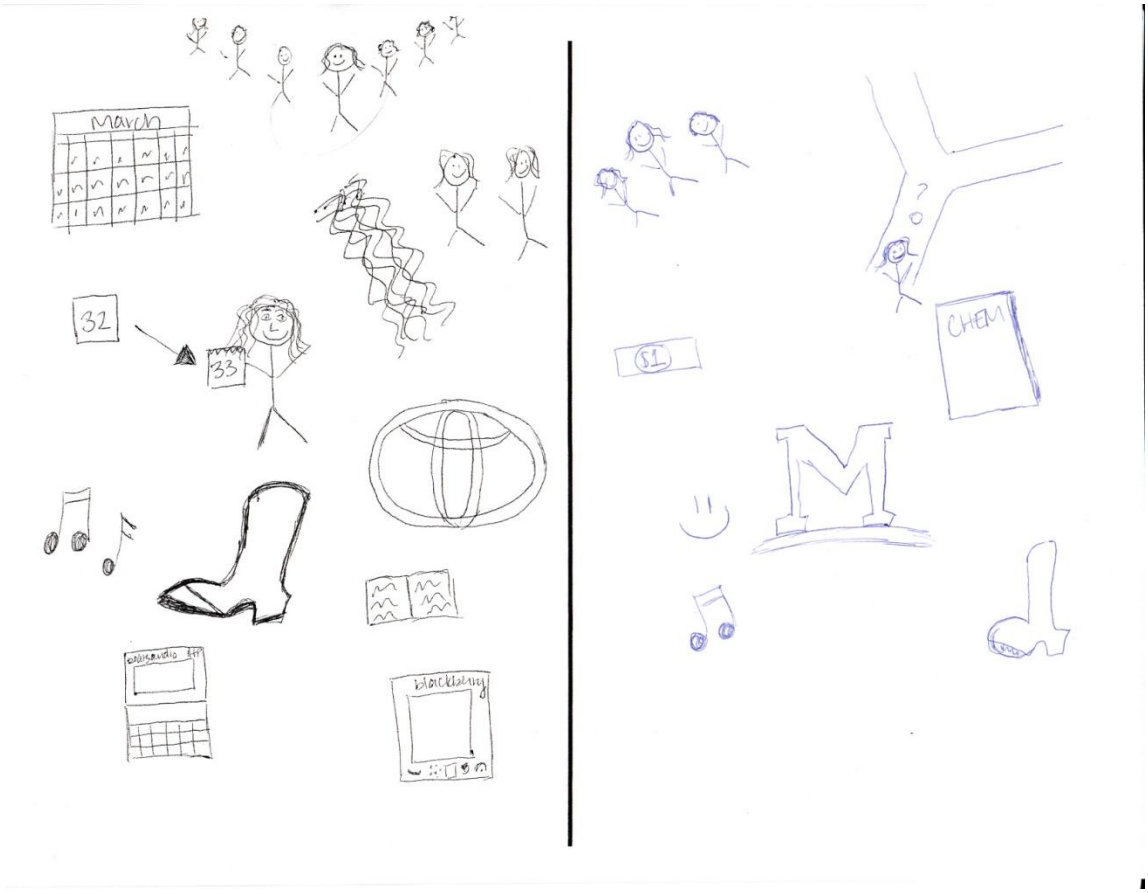


Figure 4.7. Mindful Optimist: Before and After Drawing

"I was very excited, very excited to be here; excited for the opportunities, everything that was involved" (Ag Ambassador).

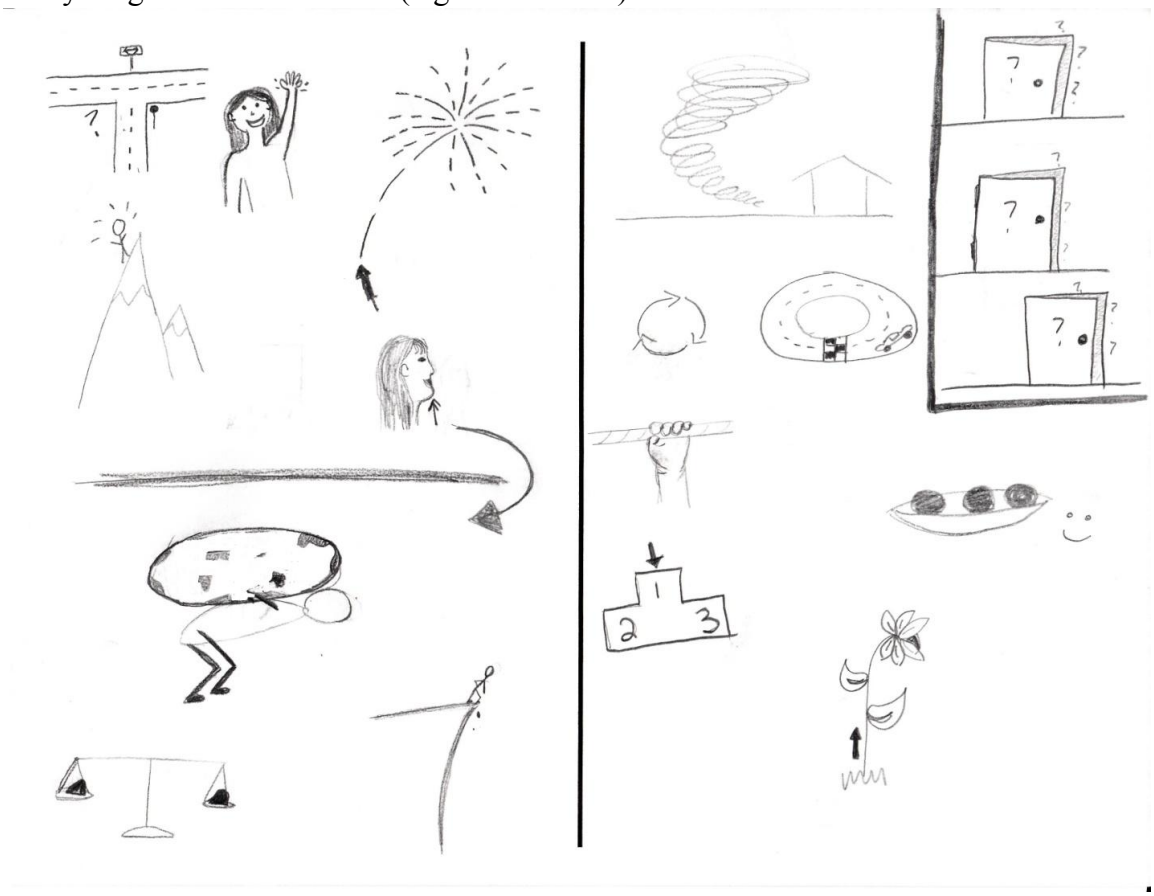


Figure 4.8. Ag Ambassador: Before and After Drawing

"When I got to school I was kind of confused, not quite sure what to do" (Quiet Man).

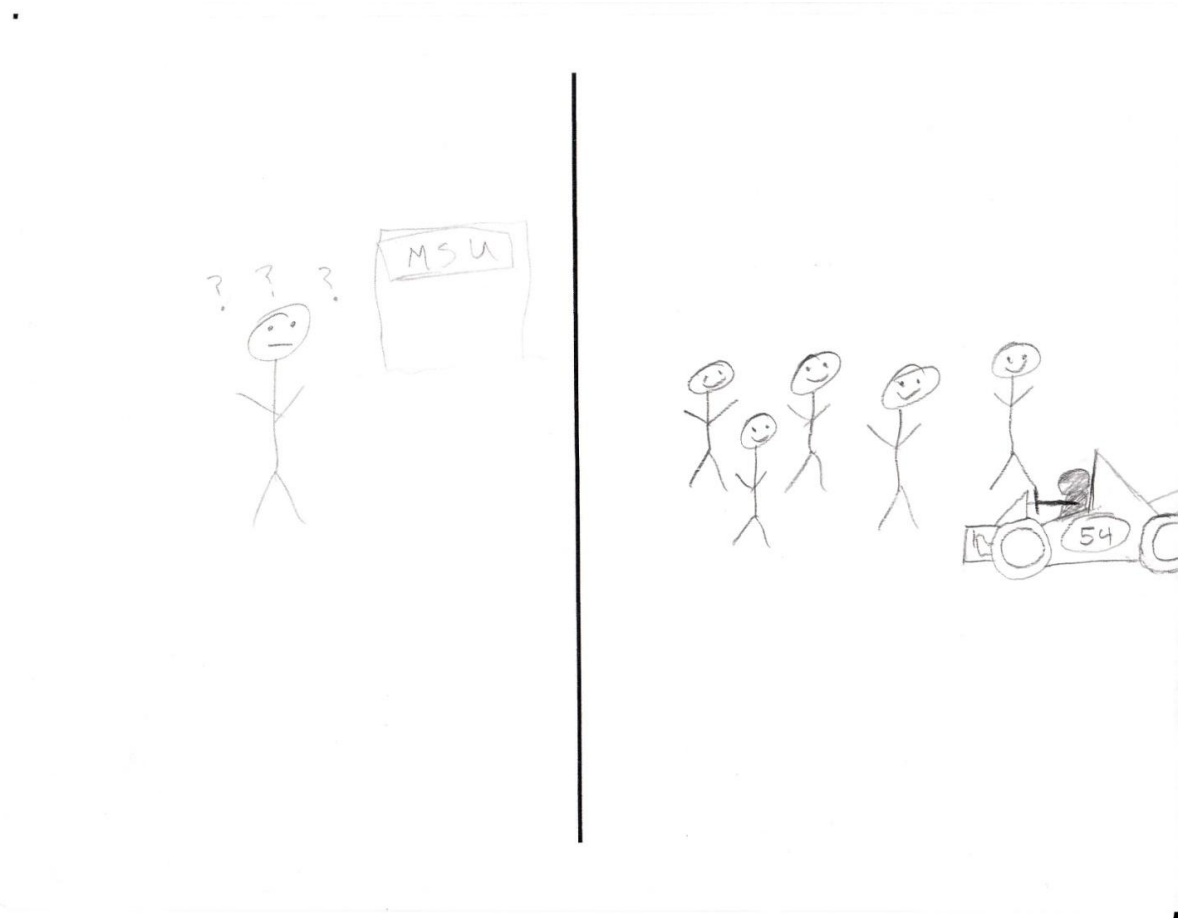


Figure 4.9. Quiet Man: Before and After Drawing

First Year College Experiences and Rural Effects

"My first year college experiences are merely reference guide for the future I guess" (Farm Boy).

Once again, the rural representation presented by Ag Ambassador (Figure 4.1) will be used as a metaphor for presenting the themes in this section. The rope is instrumental to the traditional style of branding depicted in the photo. Ropes are comprised of individual strands woven together. As the cords of a rope are intertwined to shape the whole, so too are the general, academic, and social college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Furthermore, the rope of college experiences is also shaped by the continued influence of these students' rural backgrounds.

Much of the data collected during this research focused on the college experiences of these students and how their rural backgrounds affected their college experiences. As the study participants answered interview questions, discussed their drawings, and shared photographs, themes began to emerge from descriptions of their first year college experiences. Furthermore, several research questions concentrated on factors the students believed were unique to the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, characteristics of their rural communities that helped or hindered their college experience, and personal beliefs related to the students' perceived readiness for the social and academic aspects of college.

Through analysis of data, general categories for themes surfaced. This section focuses on themes organized into three broad categories: general college experiences and rural effects, social college experiences and rural effects, and academic college

experiences and rural effects. Table 4.2 outlines of this classification of themes in this section.

Theme Area	**Theme Name**
General College Experiences and Rural Effects	Opportunities
	Limited College Knowledge
	Initial Shock
	Size of College
	Just a Number
	Balancing Act
Social College Experiences and Rural Effects	Social Preparedness
	Friends: Knowing Everyone to Knowing a Few to Good Friends
	Ease of Social Integration
	Lack of Diversity but Open
Academic College Experiences and Rural Effects	Academic Preparedness
	Shift in Faculty - Student Interactions: Teachers to Professors
	Peers and Academics
	Perceptions of Academic Rigor
	Shift in Study Habits to meet Academic Rigor
	Perceptions of Academic Success

Table 4.2. Themes: General, Social, Academic College Experiences and Rural Effects

General College Experiences and Rural Effects

Students in this research study indicated that growing up in a rural area affected their college experiences. While effects on social and academic experiences will be discussed in subsequent sections, study participants also described broad influences of their rural backgrounds on their first year college experiences. As reported earlier, study participants described themselves as driven and responsible. In the following excerpt

from his interviews, High Achiever connected this characteristic to his rural upbringing and described its affects on his college experiences.

> I think it instilled a lot of drive in me for what, you know I want to stay on track and get what I want done ... I think just the drive and stuff that they instilled in me there and the determination to do things has made it easy to adapt here and do well.

Small Town Kid reiterates this belief; "that rural experience is going to help you so much more by coming here and learning you're going to need to be more dependent on yourself."

Study participants also shared ways in which they felt their college experiences were positively affected by their rural backgrounds. Sporty Girl describes such an advantage and foreshadows a following section that focuses on diversity and openness.

> I think it's definitely been easier coming from a rural background because I am more open minded about things, I'm willing to try more things ... I think it's kind of just made me more apt to doing different things.

When asked if she believed her rural background affected her college experiences, Ag Ambassador's response points out an advantage she believes rural students have as they come to college.

> I think because you have to grow up relatively quicker in a rural community ... you're just expected to do more from a younger age and so I think that from a maturity stand point I see that many students, myself included, from a rural background ... we just seem to be more mature than some other students who've maybe necessarily never been forced to grow up a little until now.

This statement is further intertwined with the earlier descriptors of self as hard-working.

Finally, the rural student participants see themselves as different from their urban counterparts. Subsequent themes discuss the initial shock of coming to college,

differences in opportunities, diversity and rural effects. Mindful Optimist generalizes this feeling of shock and attributes it to being from a rural background. Furthermore, this passage provides a lead into the following discussion of opportunities and a subsequent discussion of social effects.

> I think it's kind of an eye-opener to the world more so than for kids from a metropolitan area just because there are so many more people, so many more opportunities and, and um the people that you meet are more often than not way different than you are.

Opportunities. All of the students articulated that their rural communities had fewer opportunities or that there were more opportunities at college and in Bozeman. Sporty Girl simply stated "we didn't have all the opportunities that bigger schools had." When asked about drawbacks to growing up in a rural community, Ag Ambassador said "I think the only disadvantage is that there wasn't a whole lot of things for the community as a whole especially the youth of the community to do outside of school." Quiet Man also indicated that "out of school activities" were a disadvantage of growing up in a small town.

The lack of opportunities in their rural communities is juxtaposed by the vast opportunities at college. "Here I feel like there are just so many opportunities "(Mindful Optimist). Sporty Girl articulated a parallel opinion:

> I mean bigger places are exposed to more things that they like know of or something like coming from a smaller town we don't have like many opportunities. So, like coming here you had no idea what different things were out there like different activities or clubs or stuff like that... The biggest thing is just like the different opportunities that a big city brings.

Quiet Man captured the difference between free-time activities in rural and urban areas.

> There's a lot more stuff around to do. Like, growing up if I got bored it's okay well go fix fence. Around here if you get bored you can run down to the movie theater, go out with friends or something.

Figure 4.10 is a segment from Ag Ambassador's drawing that captures the theme of opportunities.

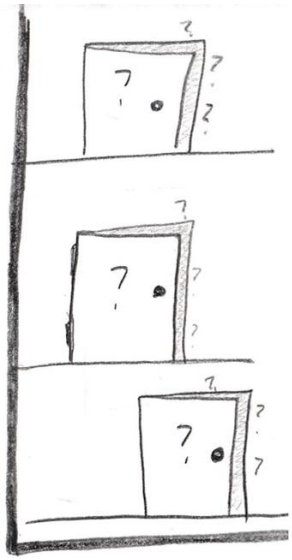


Figure 4.10. Opportunities.

Referring to this drawing, she stated,

> I feel like there's many options, many doors and I don't know where all of them are going to lead and I felt like that throughout the whole semester. Lots of different options, lots of different things I could do... lots of different opportunities.

Finally, Farm Boy hinted to the fact that opportunities may be cumulative. "There's a lot of opportunities out there and if you just, if you miss them you're going to miss more opportunities because I've found that each opportunity that I've taken here in college has opened up doors to another."

Limited College Knowledge. Participants in this research study had a limited understanding of what to expect from college or how it worked. All of these students from rural backgrounds described situations that highlighted their lack of college knowledge, a basic understanding of the college experience and procedures of the university.

As she reflected on her experiences when she first came to campus, Sporty Girl frankly stated "I didn't know what to expect." Mindful Optimist shared an analogous experience, "just being really uncertain of what to expect for the year ... I was really uncertain about what it would be like." Ag Ambassador also commented on being unsure of what to expect from college as she described one of her drawings (Figure 4.11); "like looking over the edge. There was definitely some nerves but that was just more the unknown."



Figure 4.11. The Unknown: Looking over the Edge.

The students also described experiences in which they were unaware of some operational aspects of college. This pattern was plainly expressed by one student's experience in registering for classes. In a section of the interview focused on academics, High Achiever talked about not taking as many credits the first semester as he did the second. When probed for a reason for taking fewer credits, he answered:

> My advisor told me I couldn't. She said well you won't do any good if you take more than 15, 16 or whatever I took. Well I didn't really have a choice I guess, I didn't realize that your advisor says one thing, you still can register without her knowing what you registered for. I didn't figure that out until last semester. So, I was just like okay I'll do what you say.

Other students in the study shared similar experience; "I guess I just didn't know what to expect from the classes. So I didn't know if 14 was going to be like lot for me or if it was going to be too little or if it was going to be just right" (Sporty Girl).

Excerpts from other students indicated that this lack of understanding went beyond the academic realm. "Basically when I got to school I was kind of confused, not quite sure what to do" (Quiet Man). Small Town Kid echoed these feelings; "When I look back on it, I had no idea what I was doing."

Initial Shock.



Figure 4.12. Initial Shock of College.

The calves at a branding have no idea what's about to happen; before they know it they've been roped, dragged, and branded. The shock of the experience is expressed through the calves bawl. While not as traumatic, these students from rural backgrounds described the initial shock of coming to college. All students in this research study described their initial college experiences as a shock, a big change, or overwhelming. When talking about rural students' experiences, High Achiever shared "they're from a place of like 500 people in their town, they get to come to a campus that's got more people than are in their home town by a lot ... so that's kind of a culture shock." Blossom provided a supporting statement as she described her first semester; "It was a reality check". Mindful Optimist described a concurrent experience; "My first semester was an eye opener."

Additional support for this theme was provided by Small Town Kid and Sporty Girl as they described their drawings of how they felt when they first came to campus.

Small Town Kid stated "it was kind of a big, it was really confusing and stressful ... Confusing, I guess just getting to know what college life was about and stuff like that" (Figure 4.5). Referencing her drawing (Figure 4.6), Sporty Girl shared "this would be like the first like initial shock of college, like being from such a small town like there would be like the cliques and groups of people and I just kind of had to squeeze my way."

Many of the study participants describe the transition to college as different or a big change. "Yea, I wasn't used to living in a building with 600 people. There was only 5, and now it's 600. And then, you know it's a lot different" (Small Town Kid). Blossom echoed the concept of college life being "a lot different" while High Achiever said "it was definitely a change in my life." One student indicated that the effects of this change lasted beyond the first week of college.

> And I mean it just wasn't the first week it was probably the first two or three weeks. And, it was a big change for me. I wasn't used to that kind of stuff from just all of a sudden bam I'm on my own and I had to figure out all this kind of stuff. Getting to where I need to be and finding, finding all that stuff I had to do (Small Town Kid).

The feeling of being initially overwhelmed provides further credence to this theme. Sporty Girl captured this feeling in the following excerpt from one of her interviews:

> I was really overwhelmed. I was just like "I don't know what to do", I mean I had my friends who I went to High School with so I was kind of with them but I was like, it was just so different.

Mindful Optimist described her initial reaction to the transition to college; "I remember feeling almost numb just because it was just such a scary environment ... and I just remember being really overwhelmed."

One divergent view was expressed by Ag Ambassador as she stated "well I would say the first week was pretty easy for me." She continued:

> I became really close with my [organization] team before class even started. And then as it turned out I ended up living on the same floor as two other [members of the team] and a girl, another girl from [hometown]. And so that made it really easy to connect with people right away. And so that really took away the nerves I think.

This social connection seemed to ease the initial transition to college for Ag Ambassador, however she indicated that she still had to deal with the change; "I think my first week I was just trying to figure out the ropes."

Size of College. The construct of size was a recurring pattern in the collected data. Participants repeatedly discussed size as it related to their rural experiences and those at college. The size of classes, number of people, and size of the community are sub-themes of this pattern.

The size of classes at college compared to their touchstone of small classes in their rural communities was commonly discussed by study participants. "It's so different to go from a graduating class of 30 to 200 people in one class and that's just one section of the class, you know" (Mindful Optimist). High Achiever reiterated this concern for rural students as they first experience college; "I just think you come from class sizes of 5 and 10 and then you come to here and you have class sizes of 400, 500 hundred. So

that's kind of, it's not what you are use to." When asked what was shocking at first about college, Sporty Girl replied:

> Just the amount of people, like class size especially. A few of my classes are like 20 kids. I graduated with a class of 32. So all my classes were all, even there would be like 5 people in a class or there would be like 15. One of my classes had like 200 kids in it, like this is bizarre.

This sentiment describes the construct of size as it relates to both classes and college in general.

The concept of the sheer number people encountered by these rural college students was a repeated pattern in interviews. "There's just a lot more people when you come to a campus that is, I don't know 10 times the size of your community or more, generally more" (Ag Ambassador). The number of people was viewed as a challenge to which rural students had to adjust. "The biggest one is just the amount of people. Like coming from [hometown] I knew everyone, here I don't even know like a quarter of the people at all. So this just like, the size I guess" (Sporty Girl). Mindful Optimist reaffirmed; "it was just so different because at my school you have a hundred and fifty kids and you know everyone."

Size was also discussed by these rural students as it related to the larger campus community. "Just living in an area that was so heavily populated was weird at first; There's always cars, there's always noise at night. I'm not used to that. I don't necessarily prefer that" (Mindful Optimist). Quiet Man indicated that he was "not used to so many people out and about all the time." He continued; "Yea, kind of comparing it to past experiences Bozeman is a huge city to me." Finally, Mindful Optimist put things

in perspective as she indicated "I guess even this town is considered rural for a lot of people but it's huge for me."

Just a Number.

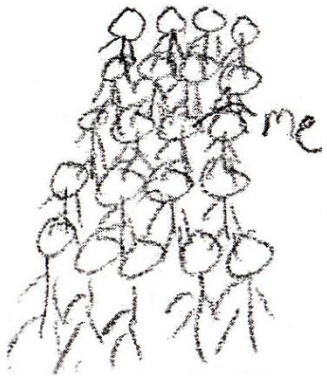


Figure 4.13. Just a Number.

The previous theme related to size and the number of people is tightly connected to the common sentiment expressed by the participants in which they felt like a number not a person at college. This attitude was clearly articulated by High Achiever:

> It was like they, you know the college they didn't think of you as a person anymore you are just kind of more a number to them because they have so many kids so they have some way to figure out where they all are so they assigned numbers. For everything it's not your name it's your number.

Many of the students describe comparable experiences of feeling like a number in classes and around campus. "As soon as I got here knowing that the teachers weren't there for you and you were just kind of a number, it was definitely an eye-opener" (Blossom). Connections to the university were described as a way to combat these feelings. Small Town Kid expressed a feeling of happiness in his transition away from feeling like just a number through social connections. "I got involved in more and more stuff and once

you know more people it's just really nice because you're not like lost or fell just like one number around here, it's really nice."

Balancing Act.

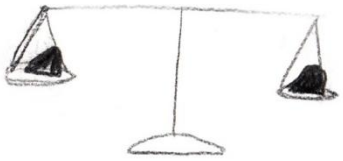


Figure 4.14. Balancing Act.

The final theme that emerged related to the students' general college experiences takes the form of a simile; college is like a balancing act. "It's hard to take care of like studying and work and having a social life and school and classes, just everything. It's kind of like juggling. Then you have to find time to go home and visit which is hard" (Blossom). When asked about his first semester, Quiet Man said it was "kind of hectic trying to get the hang of figuring out a system for like studying and what has priority and getting projects done; trying to balance school work with [college club name] and work." While Farm Boy was describing one aspect of his second drawing (Figure 4.4) he articulated "the picture with a bunch of papers going into a box is just things just seem to be stacking up more and more just work, family, college." Furthermore he described another drawing of a stick figure pulling a load as "basically just pulling the burden of work and college. Just keep moving on." This last statement displays another connection to the theme that emerged as these students described themselves as driven and responsible.

Several of the students articulated that the concept of finding balance was difficult. "I feel like the balancing act and living on your own and stuff like that ... was more difficult than I thought it would be" (Ag Ambassador). When asked about aspects of college that have been challenging, Farm Boy responded "time management. Still having time to do homework and having time to meet new friends and do all of the social stuff. It's still a work in progress. It's better than last semester. But, still needs improvement." The students also talked about trying to find ways to make it all balance out. "Just finding time to do your work and do what you need to do. Finding ways to tell people that I don't really want to go drink tonight" (High Achiever). Sporty Girl shared her approach to achieving balance in the multiple dimensions of college life; "I'll tell myself the week is for your studies, your homework, like getting stuff done so then the weekend you can like go out with your friends and have fun. So that's the way I've managed it." Once again, the closing statement further supports the earlier descriptions of self-responsibility.

Social College Experiences and Rural Effects

Social Preparedness. The majority of study participants perceived themselves to be socially prepared for college as a result of their rural backgrounds. When asked about coming from a rural background and personal readiness for the social aspects of college, High Achiever simply indicated "yea" and Farm Boy said "I think I was pretty ready for it." In response to a question focused on her social preparedness for college based on her rural backround, Blossom affirmed "I've never doubted my social abilities." These

statements are interconnected to the aforementioned themes of driven, sense of community, and close-knit. These descriptors of self and rural communities helped shape the students' perception of social preparedness.

These feelings were also shared by Ag Ambassador, Mindful Optimist, and Sporty Girl. When asked if she was ready for the social aspects of college, Ag Ambassador answered "I think I was." Commenting on her rural background as it relates to her social endeavors, Ag Ambassador stated, "It makes me more friendly towards people ... as you compare say kids from rural Montana to kids from the inner city who are just a little bit more hesitant to open up."

Mindful Optimist commented on her overall perception of the social preparedness of students from rural backgrounds.

> Socially, I really don't think rural kids have problems socially. I think a lot of the time rural kids are so down to earth because you are used to having to talk to little kids, people your age, adults, older you know elderly people because everyone knows who you are in a rural area.... Conversing with anyone isn't as difficult as it might be for, um city kids in my opinion. And so socially I really don't think that we struggle, I think that we're just really good at adapting that way.

Sporty Girl indicated that she was socially prepared but had to work through leaving other friends behind in her hometown as well as dealing with a close friend attending college in another state.

Small Town Kid expressed a divergent view regarding his perception of his preparedness for the social aspect of college. When asked if he believed his rural background prepared him for the social aspects of college, he simply replied "no, definitely not." He continued, "there was like maybe 4 or 5 people you consistently

would go do stuff I mean go do things with. And around here there's lots more people.... It's definitely different."

Friends: Knowing Everyone to Knowing a Few to Good Friends. Large segments of the transcripts from the interviews with study participants focused on friendships. As data was grouped, decoupled, and reorganized, a pattern emerged. These college students articulated that they moved from a place in which they knew everyone to a place where they knew a few people. "I didn't really know that many people, well I knew some a little bit. I didn't know 'know' hardly anybody. So I had to make a lot of new friends" (High Achiever). Figure 4.15 is diagram utilizing portions of the students' drawings to depict their friendship process.

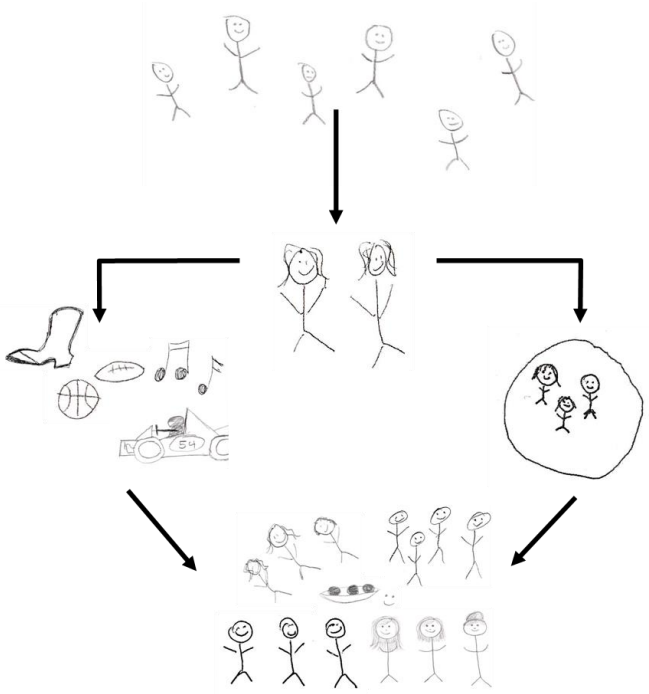


Figure 4.15. Pattern of Friendship.

The top of the diagram represents “knowing everyone” in their rural community. Following down, the two figures in the middle represents knowing just a few individuals when they first came to college. Participants described two mechanisms for making friends: relying on the few at college that they knew before and finding individuals that shared a similar rural background or interests. These mechanisms are represented by the collage of various interests on the left side and the circle with three figures on the right. Finally, study participants indicated that during their first year of college they had a good group of friends. This is represented at the bottom of the diagram by the small groups of good friends and the “peas in a pod” drawing.

Participants repeatedly articulated that, as a result of their rural background, they moved from a place in which “everybody really knows everybody else” (High Achiever) to college where they “didn’t really know any, very many people” (Quiet Man). As study participants described their experiences in a rural community, it became apparent that “knowing everyone” was universal as all eight participants articulated this construct. “You knew everyone in the school, you were friends with just about everyone if not really close friends and you know, we all got along” (Small Town Kid). Quiet Man simply stated “everybody knows everybody”. Sporty Girl provided further support to this concept; “you know everyone, so it’s like you have so many friends and your close with all of them.”

The students’ rural background affected their transition to college in that they went from knowing everyone to knowing a few. “I could name most of the people in my

town where as here in college I only know a handful of people" (Farm Boy). Sporty Girl echoed this sentiment; "you're like 'so many people' coming from where you know every single person that you go to school with to knowing only like three or four I guess." As she described the transition to and first weeks at college, Mindful Optimist stated "it was just so different because at my school you have a hundred and fifty kids and you know everyone." As he described his drawing depicting himself as he first came to college (Figure 4.9), Quiet Man indicated "I think when I came in I knew like 3 or 4 people." Small Town Kid shared a similar experience and as he described his first drawing (Figure 4.5) He stated "when I very first got here and I was just, I kind of just put me in the middle because I knew no one." While many college students, regardless of background, may not know many people when they first come to college, rural students seem to share a common experience of transitioning from a place in which they know everyone.

It took some time to remedy this situation for some of these students. "The first semester I was kind of like ugh, I haven't really met people I've like clicked with" (Sporty Girl). As he discussed his social college experiences, Small Town Kid provided further legitimacy to this concept. "When I first came here it was pretty hard for me to know people.... You know you were just on your own and you didn't know anyone really. I mean you knew a couple of people."

Many of those individuals that these students knew before were the basis of their friend group at college. When sharing photos of her social experiences, Sporty Girl talked about a picture with two of her friends; 'just recently this semester these two girls

I've gotten along with really well. And I knew them both before college actually." Farm Boy provided this insight during his first interview; "My one friend I've been friends with him since I've been in school in [hometown].... We're still good friends. We live in the same dorm on the same floor. We get together basically every day." When talking about friends at college, Small Town Kid shared that "some people you've known kind of before." Ag Ambassador connected the concept of knowing some friends before college to rural culture; "It's a very small world in rural Montana and so I knew a lot of people already."

Ag Ambassador also provided insight into her individual case that, while mirroring the concept of being friends with individuals that she knew before, was unique in nature. Ag Ambassador was a member of an organizational leadership team during her first year of college. This connection provided a strong friendship base that she discussed during an interview.

> Most of my friends this semester are the members of my [organization] team. Like I said we live pretty close together so we eat together, usually at least twice a day and so I really became close with them ... I mean there was a few other people. Mainly people from each other's hometowns or each other's roommates that we met that kind of became part of the group. But it was more about who we knew before we came into college than who we met once we got here.

While not entirely discrepant in nature, this situation was individual to her experience among the research participants.

The college students from rural backgrounds in this study described a second mechanism for making friends. They gravitated to individuals that came from a similar background and shared similar values and interests. When talking about friends that he

had made in college, High Achiever shared that "they're all similar to me. They all come from the same, pretty much the same background." He went on to add that "most of them are kids from rural communities ... they all have the same values as me". When asked about his friends, Small Town Kid indicated that they were "people I can ... hanging out with though because they're kind of the same, the same background as you, rural.... They just know where you are coming from." Sporty Girl indicated that she was friends with other students from rural backgrounds "just because we have the same like background I guess. We come from the same stuff."

The concept of shared values as expressed above by High Achiever was also communicated by other study participants. When asked about her friends at college, Mindful Optimist shared that "a lot of them are in the college of Agriculture but a lot of them just like share some of my values." Ag Ambassador stated "I knew that I would find people that I could associate myself with I guess and really connect to. I think it's having the college of ag here." In another section of her interview, she added "I wasn't necessarily worried about finding friends; I just knew that it would be easier in the west with people that had a similar background as me, similar values, similar interests."

Finally, these students articulated that they had established strong bonds with good friends. "I have great friends, great roommates. I'm a very social person. I like to meet everybody that I run into" (Blossom). Blossom continued these thoughts as she described her second drawing (Figure 4.3); "I've a really good social life, I have great friends" (Blossom).

It was often communicated by the students that while they may have a larger group of casual friends, they have a small group of really tight friends. When referencing her drawing (Figure 4.6), Sporty Girl stated "this is me socially. These are like my two really good friends that I've made and then like we all have our own little, like we'll have a bunch of other friends but we're kind of like our own little group us three." When she described one of her drawings (Figure 4.8), Ag Ambassador stated "this semester I became really close with my friends, there might not me very many of us but we are really tight, like peas in a pod so not very many can fit in there but good friends."

While they described divergent paths from the others, Mindful Optimist and Quiet Man also emerged with strong friendships in college. Both shared that they didn't have great friends in High School but have found a group in college. Mindful Optimist was ostracized as an over-achiever and Quiet Man was not into the High School party scene which was pervasive in his community. Quiet Man described himself in High School; "I've never been very social, just a real small school that you know everybody whether you try or not." In college, Mindful Optimist has found strong friendship. When she described one of her drawings (Figure 4.7) she shared "now I feel like, before I felt like I was separated from my peers, but know I have a good group of friends that just really, really care and really, really matter in my life." Quiet Man also found friends through dorm and club activities. When describing his drawing (Figure 4.9), he affirmed "now I've lots of friends here."

Ease of Social Integration. While the source of social connection to the university varied, all study participants shared that they had in a sense found their place at MSU and

articulated the ease of social integration. Much of these connections were formed through the strong friendships discussed in the previous sections. Other connections surfaced through participation in extracurricular activities. Figure 4.16 is a representation of this connection; “There’s the MSU logo ... that’s a big part of my life” (Mindful Optimist).

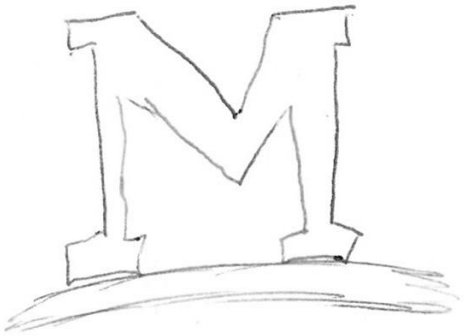


Figure 4.16. Connection: MSU Logo Drawing

All participants except Sporty Girl shared that the dorms provide opportunities to engage in the social aspects of college. “I have about 4 or 5 good buddies in the dorms. You know, in the week we always go over to someone’s room or something like that and just hang out” (Small Town Kid). Quiet Man indicated that he liked “getting to know people in my dorm.” As he was describing a photo of numerous people packed into a dorm room, Farm Boy shared “that picture is just signifying that we all like to hang out in the dorms and basically have a good time.”

Social connections to the university were also evident in the students’ participation in extracurricular activities. High Achiever and Small Town Kid discussed joining a fraternity. “The [name of fraternity] house, I don’t know, I just kind of wanted

a place to live with other guys with some common interests and stuff" (High Achiever). Small Town Kid, High Achiever, Farm Boy and Ag Ambassador joined agricultural related university clubs. Academic related clubs provide further opportunities for engagement for Small Town Kid, Blossom, High Achiever, and Ag Ambassador while Quiet Man and Mindful Optimist joined other university clubs.

While other students mentioned involvement in intramural athletics, this was the only formalized social campus involvement mentioned by Sporty Girl. Other students in the study had unique experiences regarding involvement. Small Town Kid participated in college athletics for the first semester but did not his second. He described his general routine as a positive aspect of his first semester.

> You would have meetings and then you would have practice and you would always have stuff after practice and then there would be study tables and stuff like that. I mean it was from 2 o'clock in the afternoon until 9 at night. It was just chaos. But, it was like that for an entire semester. But I think that really helped me because when I look back on that I learned a lot of, got a lot of skills and stuff from there, I got a lot of time management.

As a member of an organization team, Ag Ambassador described her freshman experience as atypical. Her involvement required travel and, as she discussed her drawing, she described her unique situation.

> There was huge expectations and it was really hard to adjust to being both a college student and like the world's most responsible college student with [name of organization]. I really felt like it was a balancing act between school and my [name of organization] travels and then trying to have a life and be sane and enjoy college and stuff like that.

Finally, Mindful Optimist expressed a divergent view. She indicated that she was burned out from being highly involved in High School and therefore "avoided extracurriculars."

She added "I just wasn't interested in it for the time being." However, after the first semester, she too looked for opportunities for engagement; "I wanted to be more involved with campus life."

All of the study participants believed that they had successfully navigated the social aspects of college; in fact, they collectively felt it was simple. When asked what was easy about the social aspects of college, Blossom responded "meeting people, definitely. I'm really outgoing so it's easy for me to just go up to somebody and start talking to them." When asked the same question Farm Boy responded "probably the easiest thing to do is finding friends" while Small Town Kid replied "I would say probably getting out there and knowing people has been pretty easy for me."

Sporty Girl pointed out that she was "a really social person" and Mindful Optimist stated "I don't really have a hard time introducing myself". Both indicated that these attributes made making friends and the social aspect of college relatively easy. Even with his quite demeanor, Quiet Man said "just like getting to know people" was easy at college. Regarding rurality and self, the aforementioned constructs of sense of community and personally responsible seem to be protective factors in these students transition to the social aspects of college. They take responsibility for their own social integration and creating a new sense of community at college.

Lack of Diversity but Open. Lastly, in relation to rural affects on social college experiences, participants communicated that their rural communities lacked a large sense of diversity that they were confronted with at college. "Like from my hometown a lot of people kind of act the same. There is not really a lot of diversity in people. Here, there is

a ton" (Blossom). Sporty Girl described her experience with diversity at college in a similar manner. "Bozeman does have like a more diverse group of people but you will get that anywhere in a bigger town." When asked if there were aspects of her community and rural culture that affected her college experience, Sporty Girl stated "I wasn't used to like a big diverse group of kids. They were, we were all kind of the same in a way." These opinions were echoed by High Achiever. "I don't think there is as much diversity probably in rural areas because everybody is kind of the same as far as growing up on a ranch and small community and stuff."

In response to the question asking her what she felt was unique about the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, Ag Ambassador answered:

> I think that it's more eye-opening to students from rural backgrounds. As a generalization in Montana rural areas are typical white America without much diversity.... Bozeman does a good job of including diversity onto this campus and promoting diversity and so that is something that is very different.

Quiet Man also described a similar scene in moving from a rural community to the MSU campus. "There's a lot more diversity. In my area it's probably like 80%, 80, 90% Caucasian then about 15% Native American. And around here you have people from a lot of different communities, or different countries and backgrounds." As he described what he considered to be unique about the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, Small Town Kid illustrate the opportunity rural youth have as they are exposed to more diverse settings at college.

> I knew it would be different than living in a rural area but I didn't know how different it is.... Rural kids probably think this is a fairly diverse area and then there are some people that will come from big urban areas and think this is just nothing.... You're learning how to deal with different

> types of people ... you just can't be that one track minded person.... Learning how to deal with other types of people, different situations, different areas, learning how to be a more rounded person is definitely what college experiences has helped me to be.

The students described themselves as outgoing and open-mind. They, on several occasions, ascribed the development of these attributes to their rural upbringing. When asked how she thought her experiences living in a rural community shaped her, Blossom replied "I wouldn't be nearly as outgoing if I lived in a big city. ... I don't think I would be as open to meeting as many new people as I am. When you live in a small town you know everybody, it's kind of exciting when somebody new comes along." Continuing, she described how this characteristic affected her college experiences. "I've learned a lot of different cultures coming from a small town to a bigger town. I've met a lot of more different people. Like a lot of hippies. I met a vegan; I never knew one of them." Sporty Girl also described college students from rural backgrounds in a similar manner. "I think kids from rural backgrounds who go to like a bigger place they're all really friendly and like willing to try or get to know anyone. Like personally, I've always, I've given everyone a chance." When asked what is unique about rural college students, Sporty Girl replied "we are really open-minded and we'll try anything I think. That's me personally but from the other kids that I've met they're all the same."

When asked about navigating the social aspects of college, Mindful Optimist indicated that she as managed by "just being open-minded but not having to sacrifice my morals has been my way of navigating. Open-minded and accepting." She also articulated that she was open to engaging with diverse individuals and situations. "I think just being a small town girl seeing, you know hearing stories about where other people

grew up and what they had experienced makes me want to go and experience other things." Ag Ambassador described analogous feelings. "I've always appreciated culture and been open to that sort of thing. And so I've been curious and felt like it's more, it's a more appropriate time to ask people about their cultures here in college." Additionally, when describing a photo of his social college experiences, Farm Boy articulated his openness to new things. "That one's basically signifying that I've just started experimenting with new things. I'm starting to try and dabble a little bit into DJing a little bit. Just trying new things, getting into new stuff" (Farm Boy). When asked how she has reacted to the diversity on campus, Blossom replied "I'm so interested by it. I love it just because it's kind of new and stuff." Furthermore, when asked what she considered to be unique about the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds, Blossom stated "they learn diversity."

Academic College Experiences and Rural Effects

Academic Preparedness

The college students from rural backgrounds that participated in this study provided varying views related to their perception of their college academic preparedness as it relates to their rural education experiences. High Achiever, Sporty Girl, and Ag Ambassador believed that they were well prepared for college while Blossom, Farm Boy, Mindful Optimist, and Quiet Man perceived that they were not academically prepared for college. When asked if he felt academically prepared, Small Town Kid provided a more neutral response:

> In some ways yes and in some ways no. With the rural background you had a lot more 1 on 1 help ... which helps you and hurts you at the same

> time, or at least for me it did.... It hurt me by coming here in college ... you're not going to get much 1 on 1 help which is good in a way because it teaches you how to be more dependent on yourself.

This statement is another example that supports the earlier expressed theme of driven - responsible as it relates to college students from rural backgrounds. While Small Town Kid indicated that his rural experience both helped and hindered his academic preparedness, the other participants articulated more definitive perceptions related to this concept.

Three of the eight participants believed that they were academically prepared as they came to college. "I don't think like academics is really limited in a rural place so I think I was ready as any other freshman coming in" (Sporty Girl). High Achiever stated "it hasn't been that big of a jump from High School. I thought I had a pretty good solid foundation from High School so it's been pretty easy thus far. It's basically review." Later in the interview he indicated that his High School had "good academic programs" and that he felt he was academically prepared coming from a rural area. Ag Ambassador shared a similar experience;

> I think I mentioned that [hometown] was very strong in its academics and I had a lot of really good teachers that pushed me to be a good writer, a good reader, a very strong math department. And so I think I was okay.

She also shared, "I took a lot of challenging classes or honors classes so I felt, I felt like when I came into college I was well prepared." However she did go on to add, "that was something that I think as a generalization most rural communities struggle with, to get all of their students up to par in terms of a college level." This generalization was affirmed by four participants.

The remaining four participants articulated that they felt under-prepared for college as a result of their rural background. "I didn't necessarily know everything that I felt I should have known" (Mindful Optimist). Furthermore, she indicated that at her High School "the focus on academics isn't as strong as it should be." Blossom also believed that she was not academically prepared for college coming from her rural High School; "school was really lackadaisical, it focused on sports a lot more than academics." This perception of rural schools lacking academically was also articulated by two other participants. When asked if they felt academically prepared for college coming from a rural background, Farm Boy definitively answered with a simple "oh no" and Quiet Man replied "not really". Farm Boy elaborated on this concept:

> Well in small schools you don't get near the experience in math classes, you only get the basics. I mean I was lucky to have like pre-Calc and some of the advanced classes but I didn't have as many options for classes and stuff.

Quiet Man echoed this view. "There wasn't very many, there wasn't much offered. It was just kind of the basics."

As alluded to above, one limiting factor to their academic preparedness may be the lack of curricular diversity and advanced placement classes. "Basically up until I think it was about senior year, every, there really wasn't very many options everybody took the same thing" (Quiet Man). Farm Boy provided further support:

> You have all your basic classes but you have a few advanced classes or AP classes, and a few elective classes ... I didn't have the opportunity to do some of the ... economics stuff. I mean we only covered one semester of economics and that was combined with a world history class so it was pretty short.

Small Town Kid also shared a similar opinion but also provided a possible reason behind the limited curriculum; "they provide you with the classes you need to graduate but there's not more advanced classes or classes that fit peoples' needs better and stuff like that just because of the lack of teachers." Mindful Optimist reiterated that her school lacked teachers but also shared some other limiting factors; "I came from a Class C school that lacks funding, lacks teachers, lacks opportunities as far as AP classes, honors classes, clubs, occupational clubs I guess would be what they would be called."

The perception of under-preparedness further emerged in their first year of college. When asked if she thought her first year of college would be harder or easier that it actually was, Blossom replied:

> I thought it was going to be easier. I think just because my teachers in High School never really prepared me that well. I thought it was just going to be the same as High School, just go to class and then I realized you kind of have to motivate yourself to go to class.

Mindful Optimist also reflected on her preparedness in relation to her college experience. When asked about her High School she stated "when I got to college I kind of realized that academically they are lacking." In many cases, they didn't know what they didn't know; this concept provides further support to the aforementioned theme of limited college knowledge.

Shift in Faculty - Student Interactions: Teachers to Professors. As the participants described their High School and college experiences, a theme emerged focused on relationships with teachers and professors. The transition to college brought with it a shift in faculty and student interaction. The move from familiarity and one-on-one

interaction with High School teachers to limited contact and personal relationships with college professors emerged from data presented by study participants.

The students consistently communicated that they really knew their High School teachers, a likely product related to the strong sense of community in their rural hometowns. "The teachers, it was really great because all the teachers knew who you were. You weren't just a number to them ... I liked knowing all my teachers and all my classmates" (Blossom). Quiet Man articulated this phenomenon in the following passage:

> You got to know them all really well. They're, most of them are really good teachers and [long pause] many of them had been in the area for a long time so I knew some of them before school. I knew a lot of them really well outside of school.

Farm Boy provided further evidence as he indicated "all of the teachers I had a really good relationship with." Moreover, Ag Ambassador also provided a support statement as she articulated "I was able to get to know most of my teachers."

Furthermore, the study participants indicated that they had more one-on-one interaction with their High School teachers than they do with their college professors. "The class sizes were small so there's a lot of teacher and student interaction" (High Achiever). When asked about teachers in High School, Sporty Girl replied "They were awesome ... they were just so helpful like with kids who had club stuff to go to or they would always help with homework."

As she reflected on her High School and college experiences, Blossom communicated a shift in the teacher-student relationship. "I mean I had the teachers there to help me every step of the way and now you have to really rely on yourself to get it

done and learn, which is hard." This sentiment is further supported by an excerpt from one of the interviews with Small Town Kid as he talked about the differences in his High School and college classes.

> Probably the biggest class I ever had [in High School] was maybe 20 kids and even then you still got one-on-one attention and stuff like that. I think if I look at it you probably maybe learn a little bit better in those smaller classes just because the teachers can reach out to you better and you're not lost in sitting there in a class of like, I've had classes of 300 here now and your just trying to figure out as best as you can.

In regards to talking to and getting to know their professors, class size was a limiting factor. "The professors in the classes I had I didn't really talk to at all because the class size was so large" (High Achiever). He continued, "the larger classes are kind of challenging. There's just not really any interaction with professors if you need, um, if you need assistance." Small Town Kid shared similar sentiments; "my big lecture classes I really don't know, don't know the professors very well. I think I've talked to one once and it wasn't very much." When asked if she had gotten to know her professors, Mindful Optimist answered "no, well a lot of classes I'm taking are, there's like 200 people in the class."

Additionally, not knowing the individuals that were teaching classes was a new experience that further supports the shift in faculty-student interactions articulated by study participants. Sporty Girl captured this feeling:

> And like not knowing the teachers was really hard. Because usually you could walk up to the teacher in High School and be like 'I don't understand this can you help me with this problem?' And they would walk you through it. But like walking up to a professor they were a lot more like, 'baa, you can do it' and blah blah blah. Like I never tried because I was a little nervous. They just seemed so more intimidating.

Blossom also shared a similar experience; “I guess I was expecting my teachers to help me like they did in High School.”

As a further testament to their drive and self-responsibility, many of the students made concerted efforts to talk to their professors and communicated positive results from these interactions. Ag Ambassador stated “I have really liked getting to know the professors” while Blossom said “I’ve actually gone and meet with a lot of professors unlike last semester.” When probed about why she is meeting with her professors more this semester, Blossom answered “just so I can do better myself and stuff so I understand things better. And then I have a one-on-one with that professor and they get to know me and know that I do have difficulties in those areas.” Quiet Man communicated an analogous experience:

> I’ve tried to talk to my professors more. Pretty much the only time I’ve been around my professors are in class. And then email or call or go to office hours if I have questions about something ... The better your professors know you the more likely or the harder they will work to help you out if there’s a conflict or problem.

The students appeared to adapt during the first year and make more attempts to get to know their professors resulting in a shift back to a more familiar relationship with faculty. This may be an attempt to recreate previous rural experiences of sense of community and close-knit.

Two students talked about difficulties that they had with a faculty member, but also expressed that they were pleased with the majority of professors.

> I was having a hard time registering for a class and I was advised to go and talk to the actual professor and then we had a bit of an encounter where she kicked me out of her office and I reported her to the [college] Dean. It was kind of a mess and it’s been worked out and it’s fine now....

> but other than that experience I am more willing this semester to speak up in class and I feel like all of my professors are approachable. And I feel like they would do whatever they could to help me (Mindful Optimist).

Ag Ambassador also had a negative experience with one of her professors whom she felt was not well prepared for class. However, she shared:

> So far overall I feel like the majority of the professors are, except for that one, are very knowledgeable and know what they are talking about and aren't just here for like research or for the title of being a professor. I feel like they really like to be here and to teach and to be a college professor.

Peers and Academics. All but one of the students in the study indicated that they rely on friends or classmates for academic help. "It's nice to know people in your class because then you have people to study with and get to know" (Blossom). When asked what resources or services have you utilized to assist you in your academic pursuits, Sporty Girl replied "just get together with the kids in some of my classes and they usually like know something that I don't and I'll know something that they don't so we kind of just help each other." Quiet Man found academic assistance form peers in his dorm; when asked what aspects of the college experience have been easy, he indicated that when he needs help "my roommate or someone else in my dorm is really knowledgeable on the subject so I'm able to get help from them." Farm Boy indicated he had experienced a shift in his approach to academics at college; "I've went from more of an individual study to more group studies. I just, I find it easier to work with other people now." Mindful Optimist described establishing academic connections with peers in each of her classes and Small Town Kid indicated positive peer interactions aided in engagement in learning. High Achiever hinted to the fact that he relies more on other

students for help than professors. When asked about his academic interactions with other students, he stated:

> We do homework together, study and stuff. Ask them questions, it's easier to figure out from them something if you don't know it than, because office hours really don't work for professors usually. Basically just have my friends that I set with in class and they're the ones that I really do stuff with in the classes.

These passages again hint at the students' desire to create a close-knit community, in this case with peers. Furthermore, this section highlights the complexity of rural identity as it positions two diametric descriptors: self-responsibility and sense of community.

Perceptions of Academic Rigor. As discussed in an earlier section, the students in this research study were unsure of what to expect at college or didn't fully understand how college worked. Their opinions were based on limited information that was shared with them from family members, High School teachers, and other individuals from their community. In the second interview, the study participants were asked if they thought college was harder or easier than what they thought prior to coming to campus now that they had actually experienced college. Regarding academic rigor, the results were mixed.

Five of the eight study participants indicated that college was more difficult than they had anticipated. "I definitely thought it was going to be easier because I've always considered myself a very smart person. It was a reality check" (Blossom). Mindful Optimist voiced "academically, I thought it would be easier. I thought I was better prepared than I was." Two respondents articulated difficulties associated with mathematics. Farm Boy stated:

> I hadn't hit my brick wall in High School at all and I figured I was probably going to hit it in college at some point in time. I didn't think it was going to be Calc 1. Everybody told me 'oh you're going to be just fine in Calc 1', according to my ACT score. And I said 'oh you're going to do just fine, you're going to pass it with flying colors.' And I go in there expecting to just do pretty good and it really shook my understanding of math.

Quiet Man discussed a similar situation:

> I thought it was going to be a little easier.... My calculus class is what really got me. I had taken a class in High School and did really well in it and then I took the honors upper level Calc and we just jumped straight into stuff I'd never seen before.

Responses that were shared by High Achiever and Mindful Optimist regarding academic experiences are connected to the earlier discussed themes of hardworking and responsibility respectively.

> I really got scared on my first Biology test, the class averaged a 54 or something and I got an 85 but they said they were not going to curve. So that kind of made me think about having to work harder and really it was a first test wakeup call thing. It's for real, I better start working on it pretty hard. So I guess it was a little harder to begin with than I expected (High Achiever).

Mindful Optimist comments related to the level of difficulty of college academics are clearly connected to the aforementioned theme of self-responsibility.

> I didn't know that college was going to be as hard as it was and I think that's something that, just, the type of person that I am I had to learn on my own, no one could have told me it's going to be a lot harder. I wouldn't have believed them.

While college may have been more academically challenging for some of the students, they still understood their agency as it relates to their college experiences.

Some of the students had different experiences. Ag Ambassador communicated these divergent feelings in the following excerpt:

> I thought academically it would be more challenging. You just hear horror stories about how hard college is ... but I really didn't find that to be overly challenging.... I know that school has always been relatively easy for me but I don't think college should be this easy ... I thought classes would be more difficult and that I would struggle more with that and be more frustrated with that.

Small Town Kid's echoed these thoughts "I thought it was going to be a lot harder. I put some pretty high expectations on it when I first came here and then as things went along and I figured stuff out." Sporty Girl indicated social connections helped her academic endeavors; "It was easier than I thought it was going to be.... The workload really didn't seem as bad. And just like the people I meet made it really easy to like get in the groove of the college experience." Somewhat contradicting his earlier comments related to his experiences with math, Farm Boy also shared that he initially expected college to be more difficult.

> I was actually expecting it to be a lot harder in a lot of ways and how my mind was tricking me it may have been harder than it actually should have been. Because I look back at it now I'm like 'I made that a lot harder than it should have been.'

These comments indicate that personal attitude plays a factor in beliefs related to the difficulty of college academics.

Several of the students indicated that their own attitudes affected their perceptions of the level of difficulty they associated with college academics. Once again, these feelings are closely tied their descriptions of being driven and responsible.

> Before I came to college I thought it was going to be harder and then when I came in and looked at my classes I was like you know this isn't that bad I mean I realized that your generals, the weed out classes, as long as you pay attention and do your work you're going to do good (Small Town Kid).

Mindful Optimist reflected on here first semester experience.

> My family says I'm an eternal optimist and so I just hope for the best regardless of what I know or what I think. And, so when I got here that first week I felt really, really worried. But then at the end of the semester I was like 'you know that wasn't that awful.'

Finally, Quiet Man communicated that his academic experiences ended up being balanced and self-manageable:

> It was hard enough that it made me think but it was easy enough that I ... was able to do most of my homework on my own and get good grades without having to rely on too much help from my roommate and other friends.

Shift in Study Habits to meet Academic Rigor. A major shift in academics expressed by these students was an increased focus on studying as they transitioned from High School to college. "I never had good study habits in High School because I felt like I never needed to study" (Blossom). But as she was describing her drawing (Figure 4.3), Blossom said that at college she is studying "my butt off." Other study participants shared similar feelings related to studying in college. As she described a section of her drawing (Figure 4.17), Sporty Girl stated "I felt like I was studying all the time."



Figure 4.17. Studying all the Time.

High Achiever stated "I'd rather stay on top of that and get my homework in. I spend more time on school than anything else I'm sure." He continued "I studied a lot and tried to keep focused on getting good grades and trying to get into vet school in 3 years so I study quite a bit." Small Town Kid expressed a similar desire to keep up in his classes; "after class I'll usually like to put in a good 4, a good 4 hours of you know doing homework, studying, reading, or something like that just to keep caught up on the classes."

Further evidence of the shift in study habits was provided by other study participants. "I was never a studious person in High School; it came really easily to me" (Ag Ambassador). However this tendency changed in college; "I definitely struggled with statistics and so I found myself actually having to study for that in a way that I had never had to study before." Blossom discussed her transition in the following passage:

> In the beginning I guess I didn't really study because I'm so use to High School.... now you have to really rely on yourself to get it done and learn which is hard. But, now me and my roommates we have time set aside that we all set down in the living room and do homework.... I'm just learning step by step knowing that I have to take different precautions when it comes to my classes and actually set down for an hour a night and study.

Sporty Girl reflected on her first year experiences as they related to studying.

> It was different, definitely. You had to shift, but it was very manageable it still wasn't too bad. But the studying aspect, I definitely have not and like did not study near as much as I should of. And that definitely opens your eyes.

When asked about his first semester, Quiet Man indicated it was "kind of hectic trying to get the hang of figuring out a system for like studying and what has priority and getting

projects done." Like many of the other students, he indicated that he needed to study more. "This year I've been pretty bad about it just like not studying as much as I should." This shift in study habits is intertwined with the descriptions of self as hardworking and driven. Participants were willing to adapt to the demands of studying in order to get the job done.

Mindful Optimist communicated a different experience in High School as it related to her study habits. "I worked really hard at school so I, you know, would study". However, like many of the other study participants, she also indicated that she had to adjust to studying in college. "After I failed that first exam I was like 'okay, you need to buck up and study and focus'."

Perceptions of Academic Success. Despite varied views related to the academic preparedness and demands, all eight students communicated that they believed they were doing well academically. Mindful Optimist stated "I feel like I am doing well" and Sporty Girl indicated that she was doing well even though "it's just a big change going from High School to college." These perceptions are influenced by their drive, grades, interest in coursework, and faculty opinions.

Grades were mentioned as a means to measure academic success. Figure 4.18 is a portion of the drawing rendered by High Achiever.

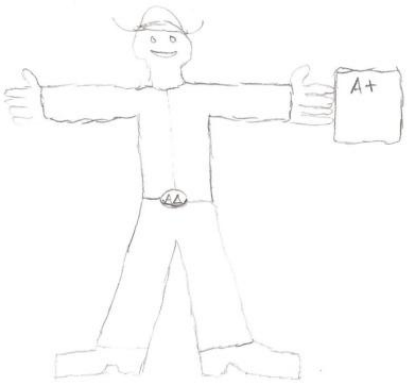


Figure 4.18. Good Grades

While discussing this drawing he stated "A+ on my report card because I'm doing well in school". He elaborated in a different section of the interview:

> I'm doing well I would say. I got a 4 point the first semester. I hope to get a 4 point this semester as well and basically I just want to go to vet school and be a vet so I just let that drive me to get good grades because if I don't it won't happen.

Ag Ambassador's experience is similar. "So far I think it's really a breeze. I should pull off A's in all of my classes unless there's something I'm missing that I haven't seen yet."

Other factors beyond grades affect their perceptions of how they are performing academically.

> I would say I'm doing pretty good and what influenced that is that the classes I'm taking are actually, I find myself more engaged in them. Maybe it's the professors or maybe it's the subject, I don't know but I feel like I'm more engaged in the subject matter than I was last semester (Farm Boy).

Blossom indicated that "this semester is going a lot better than last semester" as she was a lot more interested in her second semester classes. Small Town Kid indicated that his growth and development have influenced his academic endeavors:

> I would say I'm doing pretty good.... With my major I have to do very good I would have to say. But, I'm not quite to where I want to be with that. It comes with more learning, experiences I guess and stuff but I mean my GPA is very high so I'm happy with it.

Quiet Man provided insight into contributing factors related to his self-perception of his academic success; "most of my grades so far have been really good and some of my professors and TAs have told me that I am doing very well in the classes, that I shouldn't have anything to worry about."

Perceived Changes in Self

While the rural representation depicted in Figure 4.1 shows a very traditional form of branding, the students in this research study have left their rural backgrounds and have had new experiences at college. A major section of the second interview focused on how they perceived they had changed as a result of their first year college experiences. Several questions, the drawing analysis, and a prompt referencing how the person in the student's current picture of themselves differed from the person in the student's picture of themselves in high school were utilized to elicit responses referencing how they believe that they had changed. The emergent themes of growth and independent were supported by data from all eight participants. A third theme, labeled more social, surfaced from passages shared by four of the students. Table 4.3 outlines the three themes related to perceived changes in self.

Theme Area	Theme Name
Perceived Changes in Self	Perceptions of Growth and Development
	Independent
	More Social

Table 4.3. Themes: Perceived Changes in Self

Perceptions of Growth and Development

"I've grown a lot this semester" (Ag Ambassador).

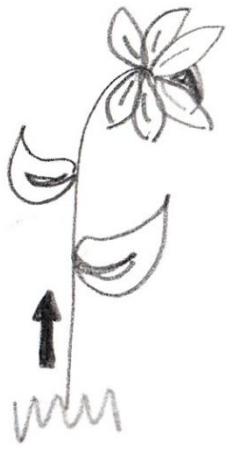


Figure 4.19. Growth.

As they reflected on their first year at college and considered how they had changed as a result of their experiences, their responses centered on the concept of development. As she compared a photo of herself in High School with current one, Ag Ambassador commented "I definitely grew up a lot, became more mature. ... I would say that a big difference is that there's a different level of maturity and growth there" (Ag Ambassador). Reflecting on the past and present photos, Quiet Man shared "I feel like I've matured a lot since then." High Achiever both playfully and reflectively

contemplated on how he perceived he had changed over the course of his first year of college:

> I guess I've matured a little bit. I've bought a suit. I've become more interested in what I'm going to do with my life rather than just what I'm going to do this weekend at the basketball game or the football game. I think I've become more goal oriented.

Thinking about how she had changed, Sporty Girl simply stated "it's just like a big time in my life, it's like okay I'm growing up."

Farm Boy captured the concept of growth and development in terms of lessons learned during the process; "my first year college experiences are learning experiences on what I can do better in the future, what I shouldn't do in the future." Similarly, as Blossom contrasted a picture of herself in High School with a current picture and was asked how the person was different she indicated:

> I feel like I've grown up a lot. I mean I look pretty much exactly the same. But, I don't know, I learned a lot of new things ... I think I've grown up a lot and realized that things in life aren't as easy as they were in High School.

Mindful Optimist also articulated her growth in terms of learning from experiences. As she reflected on the two pictures of herself she shared:

> I feel like I'm a lot more brave. ... I've experienced so many new things. It's kind of crazy to look back and think that almost two years ago that first picture, like everything that I've accomplished since then and everything that I've been through. It's just really weird to imagine being in that place that I was before. This person now I think is a lot more aware of herself and what she wants.

Finally, the study participants also talked about maturing in terms of adulthood and the "real world". "I think most students, myself included, just grew up a little bit, had a better understanding of the world and how to be an adult in this world" (Ag

Ambassador). As a result of his first year college experience, Farm Boy affirmed "I've got a little bit more real world experience on how jobs work and stuff and how higher end academics works." Referring to an encounter with a professor and how this experience in college affected her, Mindful Optimist indicated "making that decision to go and speak up and say something is ... me maturing and becoming the adult that I wanted to be." The concept of changing for the betterment of self was also expressed by Small Town Kid.

> Through a class I've taken like character traits and stuff, I've definitely worked on those more trying to become just a better overall person I guess. Because I mean everyone has character faults and stuff and you know I've definitely noticed those more in college.

Independent

"You know I've probably become more of an independent person" (Small Town Kid).

The concept of independence also emerged as a theme descriptive of how the students perceive they have changed as a result of their first year college experience. While this theme is connected to the aforementioned construct of driven-responsible, its reoccurrence during interview sections focused on change warrant separate discussion.

> I feel a little bit more independent I guess. ... College has affected me by just giving me an opportunity to study more of what I want to study and not what the school wants me to study. ... You're choosing which path you want to go down, it's more along the lines you're choosing where you want to go. It's not so much you're being told where you're supposed to go (Farm Boy).

When asked to sum up his first year of college, Small Town Kid indicated that he had "definitely learned a lot. It's definitely going to help me next year, this summer, everything, it's ... learning just how to work on your own and stuff like that. I like that."

Quiet Man learned a similar lesson during his first year of college; "I'm more on my own now." Summarizing her college experience, Mindful Optimist stated "I just feel so much more independent and free. And the future just looks so much brighter after experiencing a year."

High Achiever captured the concept of independence in terms of choosing for oneself. "It's time to make decisions once you get here and you got, you know it's time to get some goals together and figuring out what you want to do." Sporty Girl provided similar comments.

> So it kind of just marks like the first year of like being on my own and like not having my mom and dad there to like make sure that I'm doing everything right. It's like it means it's time for me to figure things out on my own I guess.

Mindful Optimist described how she has grown to be more empowered through her independence to stand up for herself in a conflict with a professor.

> I'm always going to do what I want to do in my life and before I might have been a little bit more hesitant to say that because I was treated wrongly but .... I learned that I've been more direct, become more direct and that I'm just willing to stand up for myself.

Finally, Blossom provided a bridge between the concept of independence and the earlier theme of self-responsibility;

> I've loved my first year of college. It's made me realize that I love school. I liked school when I was in High School and I just don't know what I would do without school. But, first year has definitely made me realize that I can make friends, I can make it through school, and I can do whatever I put my mind to. I Can.

More Social

While not expressed universally by all eight students, several believed that their first year college experience helped them to become more social. Mindful Optimist spoke to this concept as she reflected on the photos of herself.

> I feel like I've always been confident but I feel even more confident now and I think a lot of that has been the social aspect, is finding people that really like complement me. Which I think is really great about college. I just think that I'm at a better place in my life in this picture.

Blossom indicated that she was "really happy" when asked about how she has changed during college. In her interviews, she indicated that she had a difficult time in High School being friends with other girls but that changed in college. She expressed that some of this change was due to the fact that she has become more comfortable with herself; "I've just learned that I'm an awkward person and I've accepted it completely and stuff and it's easy for me to make friends and they like me for who I am." As he reflected on the two pictures of himself, one prior to coming to college and one a current photo, Small Town Kid indicated that he had changed;

> I'm more outgoing definitely in this picture. ... From experiences and stuff you know, you don't want to be that little shy person that's [pause] or at least I didn't want to be and so I just got out there and got to know people.

When asked how he had changed during his first year of college, Small Town Kid stated "I'd probably say I was more, more sociable know." Quiet Man shared a similar response; "I feel like I'm a little more social." This change is different than most of the other students in this study in that the majority have always felt social.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented results and research finds related to participants' descriptions of rural culture, rurality, and self, their first year college experiences and rural effects, and their perceptions of how they have change as a result of these experiences. The themes were framed using a branding photo that served as the rural representation present by one of the student. Furthermore, student drawings depicting themselves as they first came to college and depicting themselves towards the end of their first year were presented to provide further support to themes focused on how the participants perceive self and frame their first year college experiences in relation to their rural backgrounds.

The themes of close-knit, sense of community, and connections to the land surfaced from participants' descriptions of the people from rural communities while small-secluded and open emerged as descriptors of the landscape of rural areas. Participants articulated a strong connection to their rural up-brining and described how it influenced their perceptions of self. The constructs of hardworking, driven, and family-oriented were used by the students to describe themselves.

The majority of research findings focused on the participants' first year college experiences and effects of their rural backgrounds on these experiences. General, social, and academic experiences and effects were presented. A lack of college knowledge and the initial shock of college emerged as themes. Additionally, the concepts of size and feeling like they were just a number were themes that were closely tied to their rurality. Regarding social aspects of college, a pattern emerged related to the formation of friends.

The participants described the challenges of moving from a place in which they knew everyone to a place in which they knew few people. However, they explained that they had made good friends by relying on the few individuals that they knew and migrating toward individuals with similar backgrounds and shared interests. In all they articulated that they had made strong social connections and believed that the social aspects of college were easy. In contrast, they reported mixed feelings regarding their academic preparedness and the rigor of college. Additionally they reported a shift in faculty - student relationships and study habits.

Lastly, themes related to participants' perception of how they have changed were presented. These themes were framed in the context of the students' first year college experiences. Perceptions of growth, increased independence, and increased social interactions were discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This phenomenological study focused on understanding how students from rural backgrounds perceive self, define rurality, describe their first-year social and academic college experiences, and make meaning of these experiences. Chapter one provided the background of and articulated the need for this investigation. The second chapter discussed two theoretical frameworks that informed the study and presented related literature. Chapter three outlined the methodology utilized and the fourth chapter reported results and research findings.

This chapter begins with a presentation of the major conclusions drawn for the research findings to answer the four research questions. Furthermore, connections are drawn between the conclusions and the extant literature. The intent of answering the research questions and relating this content to the literature is to make meaning of the reported findings and to capture the essence of the phenomenon. The second half of this chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks as they relate to the results. Limitations of the study are then presented to provide context. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study and suggestions for future research.

Rurality, Rural Culture and Influence on Self

The first research question investigated through this study was: *How do college students from rural backgrounds define, describe, and view rurality and rural culture and its influence on self?* Research findings grouped participants' descriptions of rurality and rural culture into sub-groups focused on people and place. In relation to people, the themes of close-knit, sense of community, and connection to the land emerged. Regarding place, participants describe rural areas as small-secluded and open. As they described themselves, the themes of hardworking, driven-responsible, and family oriented emerged from the data. From these findings, two major conclusions are drawn: self and rurality are inseparable and these concepts are mutually influential.

A focal conclusion derived from this research study is that the participants define themselves in terms of their rurality. Self and rural communities are like two sides of the same coin, they do not exist independent of each other. People and place are one. Not only are the constructs of self and rurality inseparable, they both shape the perception of the other. The connection to agriculture and secluded nature of rural communities not only influences the perceptions of self as hardworking and personally responsible but also to some extent necessitates the development of these characteristics. Furthermore, the isolation of rural communities affects the constructs of family-oriented and sense of community. Rural inhabitants are "drawn inward". They rely on self and familiarity with those close to them, both family and fellow community members. These concepts are supported by literature presented in chapter two. Among study participants, Elliott (1989) reported a positive relationship between self concept and rural upbringing.

Furthermore, Maltzan (2006) concluded that "rural culture was not only the system of meaning with which they made sense of the world, but importantly, it was the system of meaning with which they made sense of themselves" (p. 114). For the study participants, being from a rural community is not only a geographical descriptor but and innate facet of who they are as a person and how they interact with the college environment.

Descriptions of rural communities and individuals uncovered in this research investigation are supported by the research presented in chapter two. Regarding place, the concepts of small-secluded and open are congruent with the literature. Rural areas are characterized as being small (Bracken, 2008; Galbraith, 1992; Ritchey, 2008) and secluded based on their geographical location (Bracken, 2008; GQRR, 2002; Ritchey, 2008). Furthermore, descriptions of rural areas or the country (GQRR, 2002) include "open space" and "dirt roads" (p. 4). The findings related to rural culture as having a strong sense of community, as being close-knit, and as having strong connections to agriculture are also supported with the literature. Strong connections to community (Bracken, 2008; GQRR, 2002; Maltzan, 2006; Ritchey, 2006) and the land (Bracken, 2008; GQRR, 2002; Howley, 2009; Ritchey, 2006) are reoccurring themes in the literature related to rurality.

Study participants' descriptors of self are also compatible with the extant literature. In research focused on perceptions of rural America, a strong sense of family and hardworking were the top two responses provided by study participants when asked what words best describe rural areas and inhabitants (GQRR, 2002). The theme of family oriented is further supported by previous studies (Beasley, 2011; Bracken, 2008; Darling,

1999; Maltzan, 2006). Hardworking was also used as a descriptor of self identified by college students in the research conducted by Schultz (2004). Finally, the concept of self-responsibility is also present in the literature (Elliott, 1989; GQRR, 2002).

From the emergent themes, some may interpret the findings as a dichotomy; close-knit communities willing to help others versus strong, independent rural individuals. This same juxtaposition is presented in research conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (2002). Although nuanced, I do not interpret the data presented by the college students in this study through this lens. I frame this concept not as either or but as both. They are not close-knit or independent, they are both. The participants are community minded - helpful and at the same time driven and personally responsible. They understand both their agency and their responsibility to a community that is larger than themselves. As presented earlier in this section, the students attribute these characteristic to their rural upbringing.

First Year College Experiences and Rural Effects

As students' responses to questions, drawings, and shared photographs were examined, categorization of themes emerged. Through this process, it became apparent that decoupling accounts of first year college experiences and the effects of the students' rural backgrounds as originally framed in the second and third research questions was not conducive to capturing rich descriptions of the phenomenon. The second research question examined in this study was: *How do college students from rural backgrounds describe and perceive their first-year academic and social college experiences?* The

third research question stated: *How do rural college students perceive that their rurality has influenced their first-year academic and social college experiences?* As discussed in the preceding chapter, results were presented as a collective account of college experiences and rural influences. Additionally, general experiences and associated rural effects emerged from the data and did not discretely fit under the categories of academic and social experiences. While the study's framework conceptualized college in terms of academic and social experiences, participants described some aspects in terms of broad categories that painted a more holistic view of their college experience. These general descriptors of their experiences were once again strongly connected to their rural upbringing.

Major conclusions regarding the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds are presented. Conclusions related to the general, social, and academic areas of college are presented and connected to the students' rurality. Additionally, these conclusions are discussed in relation to the findings and the literature.

The first conclusion relates to the overall or general college experience of these students from rural backgrounds. Study participants did not know what to expect at college. This lack of understandings included the college environment, people, university community, and opportunities. As reported in the findings, participants described their limited college knowledge and initial shock. Additionally they articulated feelings of being "just a number" and described challenges with the size of college as it relates to classes, number of people, and the community. This lack of knowledge and subsequent associated feelings are directly connected to the students' rural upbringing.

Participants contrasted this new college environment with that of their rural communities. There were more people, more buildings, and more opportunities. There were fewer familiar faces and open spaces. While many students regardless of the population of their hometown may share the sentiment of feeling like just a number at a university and may have to adjust to a new environment, these feelings may be exacerbated for students from rural backgrounds as they have moved from towns in which they articulated that they "knew everyone" and that they described as having a strong sense of community.

As the study participants adjusted to college, they articulated the need to balance the various aspects of college. This concept is supported by Elliott's (1989) research in of rural college students. Again, their rural upbringing played a critical role in this transition. The students in this research study relied on their sense of personal responsibility, hard work, and drive to forge ahead. Study participants did not let these challenges serve as an impediment. Facilitated by their drive and work ethic, they found ways to engage both academically and socially in the unfamiliar and larger college environment.

The concepts that emerged in this investigation related to the general college experience of students from rural backgrounds are supported by literature. Schultz (2004) reported similar findings in regards to the lack of knowledge related to the college environment and also indicated that parents had a great influence on rural students' decision to seek a college degree in spite of the fact that these parents often had limited college knowledge themselves. Other research supports the conclusion that rural schools

provide fewer resources and information about higher education (Adelman, 2002; Antos, 1999; Poole & More, n.d). While not articulated as shock, rural students in Schultz's study articulated that the college culture was "extremely dissimilar to that which they had known all their lives" (p. 49) and that this college environment also caused feelings of awe. The construct of size is a repeated pattern in the literature related to college experiences of students from rural backgrounds (Elliott, 1989; Maltzan, 2006; Schultz, 2004) as is the perception of being "just a number". Peters (1990) found that college students from rural backgrounds reported the feeling of being "lost in the crowd" (p. 93). Additionally, Elliott's (1989) qualitative study of college experiences and persistence decisions of students from rural backgrounds reported that participants felt the college environment was impersonal and uncaring.

The conclusion that study participants had a lack of knowledge related to college is grounded both in the data and the related literature. Additionally, their rural upbringing both affected these perceptions and served as a mechanism for overcoming these challenges. The next conclusions related to the college experience of these students and rural effects center on the social aspects of college.

The study participants' rural upbringing helped prepared them for the social aspects of college. Growing up "knowing everyone" in their rural community helped facilitate this social preparedness. The strong sense of community descriptive of their rural areas thrust them into social interactions. They interacted with the same individuals in school, at the grocery store, at church, and at community events. Unlike large urban

areas, it is difficult to be "lost in the crowd" in a rural community. These frequent and repeated interactions with individuals of all ages affected these students' social aptitude.

Another major conclusion of this research study is that participants are successfully integrating into the social fabric of the university. As a whole, these students felt well prepared for the social aspects of college as a result of their rural upbringing and believed that they are connected to the university from a social standpoint. This perception of social integration into the college environment is supported by findings. Students reported establishing strong interpersonal relationships and friendships. Furthermore, study participants became connected to the university through involvement in extracurricular activities and organizations. These rural students found this aspect of college easy.

As discussed in the presentation of theoretical frameworks outlined in chapter two, Tinto (1993) indicates that some level of social integration is necessary for persistence, a concept that is supported by research reviewed by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005). In their review of research, Pascarella and Terenzini present studies that indicate that involvement in extracurricular activities has positive effects on cognitive, intellectual, and moral development. While this study focused on the first year college experience of these students, the findings related to social integration are promising.

A final conclusion related to the social college experiences of these college students is that they are open to new experiences. These college students have been confronted by new and different experiences at college. As discussed earlier, study participants reported many more opportunities at college. Furthermore, these students

understand that there is more to life than their small rural communities; “there is more to life than what you ever thought there was” (Sporty Girl). This openness to new experiences is also connected to the aforementioned conclusion of social integration. Lastly, one of the most salient findings of this investigation relates to participants’ openness to diversity. As reported in chapter four, participants shared that their rural communities lacked diversity. This concept is support by related literature in that rural communities are culturally homogenous (Galbraith, 1992; Ritchey, 2008). One research study focused on perceptions of rural America (GQRR, 2002) framed one description of rurality as a dichotomy; “rural life is friendly, but intolerant of outsiders and differences” (p. 1). This description is incongruent with the findings of this research study. While study participants articulated that their communities were both friendly and lacking in diversity, they clearly articulated a desire to learn about other cultures and an openness to the diversity around them at college. This finding is promising in that Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report positive outcomes of diversity experiences on students’ attitudes, values, cognitive development, critical thinking skills and learning.

Many of the findings and conclusions related to the social experiences of these college students from rural backgrounds are inconsistent with existing literature. The ease of social integration in the first year of college reported by the participants in incongruent with Pascarella and Terenzini’s synthesis that “students’ views of their social skills ... may suffer in the transition from high school to college but then rebound between the sophomore and senior year” (p. 221). Additionally, study participants were consistently confident in their social abilities. These results are inconsistent with findings

that rural college students were more likely than urban college students to cite social problems as a reason for leaving college (Peters, 1990), that rural students cited making friends and connecting socially as their number one challenge in the transition from high school to college (Hemmings, Hill, and Ray, 1997) and that college students from rural backgrounds reported higher levels of problems with meeting people (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976). The strong and lasting influences of rurality articulated by these students serve as a possible explanation for these discrepancies.

This research implies that study participants have utilized their confidence in their social abilities to positively affect their social college experiences and integration. Conclusions related to academic college experiences are not as bright. Furthermore, there is more divergence in the reported perceptions of academic experiences for these students. Two conclusions regarding academics as it relates the participants' experiences are discussed.

The mixed results regarding academic preparedness lead to the conclusion that not all rural schools are created equal. Different faculty, resources, and course offerings provide variance that could explain differences in the students' perceptions of academic preparedness. As reported in chapter two, rural school systems often have fewer resources and advanced courses to help prepare students for college (Adelman, 2002; Antos, 1999; Poole & More, n.d). Findings from this study support this notion. Furthermore, research evidence is mixed regarding high school achievement and college readiness of rural students with some studies indicating similar levels of achievement on assessments as compared to urban youth (Fan & Chen, 1999; Provasnik et al. ,2007;

USDA-ERS, 2003) and other studies reporting lower scores on standardized tests (Caison & Baker, 2007; Poole & More, n.d). In qualitative studies of experiences of rural college students, participants articulated that they felt underprepared (Elliott, 1989) or viewed their academic preparedness as a challenge in college (Maltzan, 2006). Contradictory, rural students in a study by Beasley (2011) reported that their high school both encouraged participation in post-secondary education and helped them prepare for college. The mixed results related to preparedness reported in the literature and in this research study would imply that students' academic college preparedness varies from one rural community to another.

Despite inconsistency regarding preparation, the communicated perception of academic success leads to the conclusion that study participants are relying on their drive, strong work ethic, and sense of responsibility to integrate academically. Study participants had diverse perceptions of academic rigor, whether they believed college was going to be easier or harder than their actual experiences. These results appear to be connected to their aforementioned limited college knowledge. Regardless of the perceptions of rigor, once again the students' understood that they played a vital role in their own academic success. In this vein, the students' reported shifting their study habits to adapt to the new academic environment. As reported in chapter two, some research documents equivalent persistence rates between rural and urban students (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Gibbs, 1998; Williams & Luo, 2010). Despite perceptions of academic rigor and cases of under-preparedness as reported in the literature and among some of the study participants, the students in this research study found ways to adapt and

all articulated that they were successful in their academic endeavors at college. Once again, the rural characteristics of drive, hard-work, and personal responsibility influenced their college experiences.

Lastly, the research findings point to the conclusion that these rural college students utilize their social skills to aid in their academic endeavors. As previously discussed, participants are confident in their social skills. They utilized these skills to establish academic relationships with peers and faculty members. Academic peer interactions were viewed as positive and as supportive factors in their academic experiences. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicate that peer interactions in academic endeavors have a positive influence on knowledge acquisition, academic development, and cognitive/intellectual development. Furthermore, Yan (2002) found that rural college students' persistence was significantly correlated to positive academic interactions with peers. Unlike high school, college class size served as a barrier to getting to know their professors but not one that was insurmountable. The majority of study participants reported positive interactions with faculty and made direct attempts to get to know their professors; this finding is in contrast to Peters (1990) results indicating that rural students were more likely to report poor relationships with professors. However, taking the initiative to interact with their professors adds credence to the notion that these students view themselves as personally responsible. Reported academic interactions with peers and faculty may be another explanatory factor for rural student persistence in college as previously discussed.

Perceived Changes in Self

The fourth research question posed in this study was: *How do college students from rural backgrounds perceive they have changed as a result of their first-year college experiences?* Three themes emerged from research data: perceptions of growth and development, independent, and more social.

All study participants articulated personal growth and development in their first year of college. They connected this process to their experiences and learning from them. Furthermore, they described their development in terms of the transition to adulthood and becoming the person they wanted to be. For these students, this growth was added by their openness to new experiences and their sense of personal responsibility. They took ownership of their own development, an attribute that is connected to their rural backgrounds. Erikson's theory of identity development (1980) describes the transition to adulthood through his fifth stage, identity versus identity diffusion. Furthermore, Erikson articulates that individuals must manage crisis in each stage. They must reconcile these challenges in terms of their environment and their own identity. Growth and development through the stages takes place as individuals are confronted with a "change in perspective" (p.57). The transition to college and associated initial shock served as a point of crisis for these students. However, they frame their own growth and development in terms of their ability to successfully navigate through the opportunities and challenges of their first year college experiences.

Secondly, study participants indicated that they had become more independent as they reflected on their first year college experiences. Chickering's seven vectors

(Chickering & Reisser, 1993) provide another lens from which to view college student development; "we propose the seven vectors as maps to help determine where students are and which way they are heading" (p. 34). One of the original vectors was renamed moving through autonomy towards interdependence as a means of providing "emphasis on the importance of interdependence, while not denying the significance of learning independence and self-sufficiency" (p. 40). The theme of independence is connected to the students' perceptions of being personally responsible; they take responsibility for their own actions and decisions. Furthermore, as presented in chapter four, the study participants described their rural hometowns as have a sense of community and communicated that this aspect affected their own identity in terms of an individual desire to help and serve others. These connections indicate that these students are already developing an appreciation for "interdependence - an awareness of one's place in and commitment to the welfare of the larger community" (p. 117) prior to coming college.

Finally, four of the students indicated that they had become more social as a result of their college experiences. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicate that few studies focus on college students' social self-concepts. However, in their review of studies that examined this concept, "it appears that students' social self-concepts generally become more positive during the college years" (p. 221). Moreover, this study's reported finding of participants becoming even more social in college is in direct contradiction to some previous research focused on college students from rural backgrounds (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Peters, 1990).

Collective Meaning

While discussions of findings are presented as they relate to this study's research question, some collective conclusions emerged. Integration, interactions with peers, and agency are conclusions that reach across the individual aspects of the study. Further exploration of these areas follow.

Rural students in this study appear to be on a trajectory towards social and academic integration and in turn persistence. Tinto (1993) defines social systems in college in terms of extracurricular activities and peer relationships. All participants in this research study articulated examples of social integration through participation in extracurricular activities and establishment of strong friendships. Academic systems are described as academic performance and faculty/staff interactions. All eight students communicated that they believed they were doing well academically; they cited drive, grades, interest in coursework, and faculty opinions as factors influencing this perception. Furthermore, four study participants discussed positive interactions with faculty members. "Interactive experiences which further one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social life of college are seen to enhance the likelihood that the individual will persist within the institution until degree completion" (Tinto, 1993, p. 115).

Through analysis and synthesis of data related to college experiences of these rural students, peer interactions and connections related to both academic and social integration surfaced as having significant import. Friendships and peer interactions were often central to the descriptions of college experiences articulated by study participants.

Regarding involvement in college, Astin (1993) articulated that "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398). Chickering and Reisser (1993) echo this sentiment; "a student's most important teacher is often another student" (p. 392). Renn and Arnold (2003) indicate that providing multiple opportunities for students to be involved in different peer groups aids in retention. Again, the articulated strong connections to peers in college appear to place these students on a track towards persistence.

Participants in this research study understand their agency, that they play the critical role in their own development. They chart their course both academically and socially. Despite coming to college with some perceived deficiencies (self reported and/or garnered from the literature), these students from rural backgrounds continually articulated their ability to affect their situation. As was discussed earlier, these students describe self in terms of their rurality; they believe the two constructs are inseparable. This connection speaks to the continued influence of their rural environment; a point highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Ecological Model. As the common saying goes, "you can take the boy/girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy/girl". While many interpret this axiom in an unfavorable light, for the purpose of this study the student's rurality is a protective factor. True to form, their descriptions of self in relation to drive, hard-work, and personal responsibility facilitate their resolute belief that they have influence over their own lives and experiences. This power of agency is manifest through description of self and rurality, interactions with faculty,

social integration, academic adjustment, and perceptions of change interwoven throughout the data, presentation of findings, and interpretations.

Revisiting Conceptual Frameworks

Tinto

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure frames college experience in terms of social and academic systems. This framework was utilized to conceptualize and frame questions related to the college experience. While the model separates the academic and social systems of college, the findings of this research study suggest that these areas are not so discrete. Furthermore, participants articulated experiences that did not neatly fit into either system but represented a more general or holistic view of college experiences. As described in chapter four, the general, academic, and social college experiences are intertwined as the cords of the rope in the representative branding picture and are continually shaped by the rurality of these students.

Bronfenbrenner

As presented in chapter two, Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Ecological Model was a theoretical framework utilized in this investigation. The model is a lens from which to view the backgrounds, college experiences, and environmental interactions of college students. The centrality of the student within the model clearly positions the focus on the individual and their experiences.

Bronfenbrenner (1993) indicates that development occurs when the individual engages in increasingly frequent, complex interactions with the environment and people

within over a sustained period of time. Furthermore, the model takes into consideration the continued influence of previous experiences and individuals. From this research study, two key points emerge as important considerations in framing the experiences of college students from rural backgrounds through an ecological lens.

As reported earlier, the participants describe themselves as hardworking and driven. They believe that they have influence over their own lives and take responsibility for this aspect. While the individual is central to the Bronfenbrenner's model, the students in this research study understand their own agency as it relates to their environment, interactions, and experiences. While the understanding of individuals' ability to influence their own lives is not an exclusively rural characteristic, the students' blatant and repeated references to hard work and personal responsibility point to the conclusion that self-determination is at the forefront of their self perception and manifests itself in their actions. Furthermore, the students indicated that these characteristics are linked to their rural background.

As previously presented, Bronfenbrenner's model acknowledges previous experiences and their continued influence on development. This point appears to be reinforced by the results presented in this research study. Study participants acknowledge the influence of their rural backgrounds on their perception of self and on their first year college experiences.

Limitations

Results and meanings derived from this investigation are limited by the period, place, and participants. This study is limited to the chronological time period in which it took place and to the period of time encapsulating participants' first year at college. Furthermore, this research is limited by place. All participants graduated from high schools located in rural communities in Montana and were enrolled at Montana State University. Finally, this investigation is limited to the backgrounds and experiences of the participants. Results and interpretations are grounded in the individual and collective experiences of these first-time full-time, traditionally aged college students.

Implications

This research focused on how college students from rural backgrounds perceive self, rurality and their first year college experiences. The findings have implications for understanding these students and for future research. A discussion of the implications related to rurality, college preparation, and integration follows.

Colleges and universities are charged with initiating both challenge and support opportunities to address the needs of their students. Subsequently, one of the most salient implications of this research study is a call for university, faculty, and staff acknowledgment of students from rural backgrounds as a subpopulation worthy of investigation and informed practice. Place of residence should be considered as a diversity characteristic used to describe college students as participants in this study clearly articulated the centrality of their rural upbringing in their perceptions of self.

The concepts of college preparedness and college knowledge emerged from the data and were discussed as findings of this investigation. Initiatives to increase the academic preparedness of rural students could focus on broadening curricular offerings in high schools. More large scale quantitative studies on student assessments and standardized tests could shed light onto the academic preparedness of rural college students and possible areas of deficiency while qualitative studies focused on academic preparedness could provide insight into these students' academic self-concept and areas perceived to affect preparedness.

Strengthened connections between colleges and rural schools could enhance the college knowledge and possibly create new college pathways for these students. The lower levels of postsecondary aspirations (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Hu, 2003; USDA-ERS, 2003) coupled with the academic preparedness, limited college knowledge and the initial shock of college presented in the data pose a substantial challenge as faculty and student affairs professionals work with rural students. Increased university connections with rural schools, sponsored campus visits, and transition programs might be wise investments as universities seek to reach rural students and could aid in feelings of trepidation related to the size of college. More qualitative studies investigating college knowledge of rural students are necessary to further understand this phenomenon.

As stated earlier, all study participants indicated that they had begun to integrate in to the social and academic systems of college. Integration is key to persistence. These college students from rural backgrounds relied on their work ethic and drive to forge new paths as they established friendships, became involved in extracurricular activities,

engaged with peers in academic activities, and connected with faculty members. As reported in chapter two, the body of research regarding the persistence of college students from rural backgrounds is mixed.

As reported in the literature, efforts to retain college students should focus on the first year of college (Barefoot, 2005; Crissman Ishler, & Upcraft, 2005; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Schuetz & Barr; 2008; Tinto, 1996) and some level of social and academic integration is necessary for retention (Tinto, 1993). Engagement with peers in both social and academic settings appears to be an effective mechanism utilized by students from rural backgrounds to successfully integrate into college. Peer mentoring programs could provide safe opportunities for rural college students to seek out and receive support. Increased opportunities for peer academic interaction, both in class and out of class, could be effective practice implemented by faculty and student development professionals to positively affect integration. Academic advisors could support rural students in creating a first semester class schedule that balanced class size, providing opportunities for these students to engage in small classes as well as large lecture courses as they transition into the new, larger college environment.

Further research is needed to investigate the affects of college on rural students. Qualitative studies of persistence and departure of rural students could provide further insight into factors that lead to or hinder academic and social integration. Qualitative studies on social preparedness of college students from rural backgrounds could uncover results that would inform practice of both high schools and post-secondary education institutions. Other areas of future research regarding college students from rural

backgrounds could include degree attainment, institutional type and fit, influence of residency, degree programs entered, and post-graduation aspirations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined conclusions drawn from data related to how college students from rural backgrounds describe self their first year college experiences, frame rurality and its effects, and perceive they have changed as a result of their first year college experiences. Discussion focused on capturing the meaning of their articulated experiences. Implications and areas of future research were presented as a means to better understand college students from rural backgrounds and inform practice to aid in their success at college.

The college students from rural backgrounds in this study brought with them a common culture and shared experiences that affect their perception of self and their first year college endeavors. Furthermore, their rural background has continued influence on the ways in which they view self and their experiences. Rurality is one lens from which they view the world. College affords the opportunity for them to add new perspectives and new viewpoints as they continue to grow and develop. As one participant described in her drawing, these students are at a crossroads (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1. Crossroads.

But, true to their rural form, they are personally responsible and understand their agency. "Right now I'm not really sure what I want to do with my life so I'm kind of at a crossroads. But I'm okay being there, I'm not afraid of the unknown" (Mindful Optimist).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SUBJECT CONSENT FORM

SUBJECT CONSENT FORM
FOR
PARTICIPATION IN HUMAN RESEARCH AT
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

First Year College Experiences of Students from Rural Backgrounds

Cody Stone, Researcher
210 Taylor Hall, 994-3503
cstone@montana.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study designed to further understand how Montana State University (MSU) students from rural backgrounds conceptualize rurality, describe self, and describe and perceive their first year social and academic college experiences. Results from this study may provide a better understanding of the first year college experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Data will be collect through two semi-structured interviews, rendering and discussion of representative drawings, presentation and discussion of representative items, and presentation and discussion of representative photos. This data will be analyzed with that obtained from other study participants to identify common experiences and themes.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in two 60 minute interviews regarding your personal and college experiences. The interview and discussion will be audio-taped. The recorded interviews and discussion will then be transcribed verbatim and any information that might identify you personally (including your name) will be removed from the transcription. Only the interviewer will have access to the tape from your interview.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to stop participating in the research at any time, or to decline to answer any specific questions. **Your participation in this research study is confidential**. The transcription of your interview will be identified by a code number and this number will not be connected with your name in any fashion. If information you disclose is uniquely identifiable, this information will not be disclosed. There are no foreseen risks to participation in this research study.

If you have any questions regarding this research project you can contact me at 406-994-3503. Any additional questions about the rights of human subjects can be answered by the Chair of the MSU Human Subjects Committee, Mark Quinn, (406) 994-4707, mquinn@montana.edu.

AUTHORIZATION: I have read the above and understand the discomforts, inconvenience and risk of this study. I, _____, agree to participate in this research. I understand that I may later refuse to participate, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Signed: _____

Investigator: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCALS

Interview Protocol - 1st Interview

Descriptions and Perceptions: College Experiences of Students from Rural Backgrounds

Have students review the cover letter and provide opportunity for questions. Review: 1) confidentiality 2) that this is voluntary and 3) that the student may ask questions or decide not to participate at any time. Ask students to sign their informed consent form. Tell students not to hesitate to ask for clarification on any questions if they're not sure what the question is asking.

Tell students that you are going to begin taping (start recorder).

Researcher	**Participant**
Thank you for taking time to interview with me today. Participation is voluntary, and you can choose to not answer any question that you do not want to answer, and you can stop at anytime. Can you provide verbal confirmation that you have been informed about the research project, have signed the informed consent form, and understand that this interview is being taped? Thanks.	
Personal Background	
To start off, I'm going to ask a few questions to get to know your personal background. Tell me a little about where you are from?	
Tell me a little bit about yourself.	
Tell me a little bit about your family.	
Self Photo Analysis: Were you able to bring a photo of yourself in high school? Can you tell me about the person in the photo? What were you like in High School?	
Drawing Analysis: Were you able to complete the drawings? Can you describe them for me?	
Tell me about the high school you attended.	
What values or personal characteristics do you appreciate in yourself?	

Rurality and Rural Culture	
What was it like growing up in a rural area?	
Advantages?	
Disadvantages?	
What does the term "rural" mean to you?	
How do you think your experiences living in a rural community have shaped you?	
Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself or your community?	
Representation Analysis: Were you able to bring something that represents rurality to you? Can you describe it for me?	
General Effects	
Tell me about your first week at college.	
Tell me about your first semester at college.	
What were your initial impressions of this university, the place and the people, when you first came on this campus?	
Social Experiences	
What kinds of things are you involved with on campus, outside the classroom?	
What type of social or leisure time activities do you participate in? Describe?	
Can you tell me a little bit about your friends, who they are, when & how you met? Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the social aspects of your college experience?	
Academic Experiences	
We're going to shift gears and talk a little bit about your academic experiences at college.	
Describe your approach to academics at college (classes, studying, learning).	
Describe your academic interactions with faculty? Other Students?	
How would you say you are doing at college academically? What influences this perception?	
Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your academic college experience?	
General Effects	
Did you think your first semester of college would be harder or easier than it actually was? Explain?	

Wrap-up	
Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else about who you are or your experiences on campus that you'd like to tell me about?	
Do you have any questions of me?	

Interview Protocol - 2nd Interview

Descriptions and Perceptions: College Experiences of Students from Rural Backgrounds

Have students review the cover letter and provide opportunity for questions. Review: 1) confidentiality 2) that this is voluntary and 3) that the student may ask questions or decide not to participate at any time. Ask students to review their informed consent form. Tell students not to hesitate to ask for clarification on any questions if they're not sure what the question is asking.

Tell students that you are going to begin taping (start recorder).

Researcher	**Participant**
Thank you for taking time to interview with me today. Participation is voluntary, and you can choose to not answer any question that you do not want to answer, and you can stop at anytime Can you provide verbal confirmation that you have been informed about the research project, have signed the informed consent form, and understand that this interview is being taped? Thanks.	
Personal Background	
In our last interview we started off with questions to get to know you. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself?	
Rurality and Rural Culture	
How would you describe the culture of the place where you grew up? How is the culture in your rural community different than the culture here? Same?	
How do you think rural areas are different than urban areas? The same?	
Social Experiences	
Social Photo Analysis: Were you able to bring some photos representing your social college experience? Can you describe them for me?	

Since our last interview, are you involved in any new things on campus, outside the classroom?	
Since our last interview, is there anything you would like to tell me about your social activities in college? Friends?	
What aspects of the social college experience have been easy for you? Challenging?	
How have you managed or navigated the social aspects of college?	
Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the social aspects of your college experience?	
Academic Experiences	
We're going to shift gears and talk a little bit about your academic experiences at college. Can you tell me about your classes this semester?	
Since our last interview, can you describe your academic interactions with faculty? Other Students?	
How would you say you are doing at college academically and what influences this perception?	
Have there been changes between your first and second semester regarding academics?	
What aspects of the academic college experience have been easy for you? Challenging?	
What resources or services have you utilized to assist you in your academic pursuits?	
Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your academic college experience?	
Rural Effects	
What do you consider to be unique about the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds? Social, Academic, Overall	
Do you think your rural background affected your college experience? Explain.	
Are their aspects of your rural community and culture that have affected your college experiences? Made it easier or more difficult? Explain?	

Coming from a rural background, do you think you were ready for the social aspects of college? Explain?	
Coming from a rural background, do you think you were academically prepared for college? Influences?	
What would you change at this university to help students from rural backgrounds?	
What aspects of the university help students from rural backgrounds?	
Drawing Analysis: Were you able to complete the drawings? Can you describe them for me?	
Changes	
Self Photo Analysis: Were you able to bring a current photo of yourself? (Show H.S. photo) How is the person in the photos different?	
How have you changed since coming to college? How has college affected you?	
To what would you attribute this change?	
How have you dealt with these changes?	
Why do you think this change has occurred?	
What do your first year college experiences mean to you?	
General Effects	
Tell me about your first year at college.	
Did you think your first year of college would be harder or easier that it actually was?	
What advice would you give to students from your hometown just beginning their college education at this university?	
Wrap-up Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else about who you are or your experiences on campus that you'd like to tell me about?	
Do you have any questions of me?	

APPENDIX C

TABLE OF SPECIFICATIONS

Research Question	Interview Question
1. How do college students from rural backgrounds define, describe, and view rurality and rural culture and its influence on self?	1. Tell me a little about where you are from? 2. Tell me a little bit about yourself. 3. Tell me a little bit about your family. 4. Tell me about the high school you attended. 5. What was it like growing up in a rural area? Advantages? Disadvantages? 6. How would you describe the culture of the place where grew up? 7. What values or personal characteristics do you appreciate in yourself? 8. What does the term "rural" mean to you? 9. How do you think your experiences living in a rural community have shaped you? 10. How do you think rural areas are different than urban areas? The same? 11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself or your community?
2. How do college students from rural backgrounds describe and perceive their first-year academic and social college experiences?	1. Tell me about your first week/semester/year at college. 2. What were your initial impressions of this university, the place and the people, when you first came on this campus? 3. What kinds of things are you involved with on campus, outside the classroom? 4. What type of social or leisure time activities do you participate in? Describe? 5. Can you tell me a little bit about your friends, who they are, when & how you met? 6. What aspects of the social college experience have been easy for you? Challenging? 7. Since our last interview, are you involved in any new things on campus, outside the classroom? 8. Since our last interview, is there anything you would like to tell me about your social activities in college? Friends? 9. Describe your approach to academics at college (classes, studying, learning). 10. Describe your academic interactions with faculty. Other Students.

	11. How would you say you are doing at college academically? What influences this perception? 12. Can you tell me about your classes this semester? 13. What aspects of the academic college experience have been easy for you? Challenging? 14. What resources or services have you utilized to assist you in your academic pursuits? 15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your social or academic college experiences?
3. How do rural college students perceive that their rurality has influenced their first-year academic and social college experiences?	1. What do you consider to be unique about the college experiences of students from rural backgrounds? Social, Academic, Overall 2. Do you think your rural background affected your college experience? Explain. 3. Are their aspects of your rural community and culture that have affected your college experiences? Made it easier or more difficult? Explain? 4. Coming from a rural background, do you think you were academically prepared for college? Influences? 5. Coming from a rural background, do you think you were ready for the social aspects of college? Explain?
4. How do students from rural backgrounds perceive they have changed as a result of their college experiences?	1. How have you changed since coming to college? How has college affected you? 2. To what would you attribute this change? 3. Why do you think this change has occurred? 4. How have you dealt with these changes?
Representation Question	Were you able to bring something that represents rurality to you? Can you describe it for me?
Drawing Question	Were you able to complete the drawings? Can you describe them for me?
Self Photo Questions	Were you able to bring a photo of yourself in high school? Can you tell me about the person in the photo? Were you able to bring a current photo of yourself? (Show H.S. photo) How is the person in the photos different? Changed?

Social Photos Questions	Were you able to bring some photos representing your social college experience? Can you describe them for me?

APPENDIX D

PRE-INTERVIEW ASSIGNMENTS AND PROMPTS

First Year College Experiences of Students from Rural Backgrounds - Interview 1

Contact Information:
Cody Stone
210 Taylor Hall
994-3503

Thank you for agreeing to take time out of your schedule to be involved in this research study. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

Your interview is scheduled for _____ and should last about one hour.

In preparation for our discussion, please complete the following three requests:

- Representative Drawing: The attached page is divided into two halves. On the left side of the page, please draw a representation of how you perceived yourself when you first came to college. At this time, please leave the right side of the page blank. For the drawing, think about yourself both socially and intellectually. The drawing may be one sketch or a group of sketches/symbols. Please only use drawings and symbols, please do not use words or phrases. I am not concerned with the "quality" of the representations (stick figures and symbols are great, it doesn't have to be a Picasso), the point is to capture a visual representation.
- Rural Representation: Please bring a representation of how you perceive or frame rurality. This representation may be an object, image, song, video clip, or any other form. We will discuss the item and how you believe it represents rural culture.
- Photo: Please bring a photo of yourself in High School. You should be the primary subject of the photo. This photo can be in print or electronic format.

During the interview, you will be asked open-ended questions and we will be discussing your representative object. Any information that is shared during the interview (conversations, answers to questions, drawings, and photos) will be kept confidential and will not be personally identifiable. Shared responses will only be reported in aggregate. Your participation is voluntary.

First Year College Experiences of Students from Rural Backgrounds - Interview 2

Contact Information:
Cody Stone
210 Taylor Hall
994-3503

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed a second time for this research study. It is greatly appreciated!

Your interview is scheduled for _____ and should last about one hour.

In preparation for our discussion, please complete the following two requests:

- Representative Drawings: The attached page is the drawing representing how you perceived yourself when you first came to college. On the right side of the page, please draw a representation of how you currently perceive yourself now that you have been at college for some time. Again, think about yourself both socially and intellectually. The drawing may be one sketch or a group of sketches/symbols. Please only use drawings and symbols, please do not use words or phrases. Again, I am not concerned with the "quality" of the representations (stick figures and symbols are great, it doesn't have to be a Picasso).
- Photos: Please bring with you 4 – 8 photos representing your social (on or off campus) experiences at college. You may or may not be included as a subject in these photos, however they should be representative of your social college experiences. These photos may be in various formats (prints, electronic files, files on your phone, etc.)
- Photo: Please bring a current photo of yourself in which you are the primary subject. This photo can be in print or electronic format.

During the interview, you will be asked open-ended questions and we will be discussing both the drawings and photos. Any information that is shared during the interview (conversations, answers to questions, drawings, and photos) will be kept confidential and will not be personally identifiable. Shared responses will only be reported in aggregate. Your participation is voluntary.