

Influences on Rural Students' College Access and Completion:

A Qualitative Case Study

A Dissertation

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by

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### Authorization to Submit Dissertation

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## Abstract

Historically underrepresented populations are racial/ethnic minorities, low socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. Rural area youth, while intersecting differing underrepresented characteristics, encounter experiences unique to college access and completion that low-income, first-generation, non-rural students do not face. This qualitative case study investigated the lives of ten high school graduates of Lincoln High School (pseudonym) between 2008 and 2011 who came from a rural community and examined their college access and completion experiences. The methods of data collecting include the use of a questionnaire and interview and was reviewed as was the data analysis techniques and efforts to synthesis data.

Concerning college, the emergent themes of finances, voice and community were examined through social and human capital (Coleman, 1988) and planned behavior theory (Ajzen, 1991) lenses. Participants cited finances as a major challenge. All participants talked of different influences on their decisions. While the voices that the participants first heard were from family, community members, or school personnel, over time and with experience, a stronger voice emerged from within, and this voice was the participants' own, telling them that college was *their* choice, not someone else's. Rural youth spoke of a strong sense of community.

What the research found supported others' research on underrepresented populations as well as provided participant voices and added personal perspectives to mostly quantitative data. Rural youth can be situated with other defined underrepresented populations such as low-income and first-generation. However, rural youth are uniquely situated concerning the prospect of leaving their deep-rooted community connection to go away to college and

possibly never return. For example, staying in Lincoln to live and work while at college was not an option as the nearest college was 75 miles away. This is in sharp contrast to urban students who can continue to live and work in their community while attending college.

The dissertation concludes with recommendations to rural students, families, communities, and policy makers. Recommendations offer practical suggestions both honoring and keeping rural identity while encouraging discussions of their challenges.

*Keywords:* rural students, college completion, qualitative research, social capital, college access, planned behavior theory

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**Dedication**

To Cavendish Elementary School,

where it all started...

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background for Study**

Most youth entering college face numerous challenges ranging from academics to life-style. However, the challenges faced by youth from small, rural communities are significantly more complex. If one has never known rural life, it can be difficult to imagine.

The entire town's population was less than 1,000, which is smaller than many graduating classes in urban schools. The graduating class there had 30 students. Neither parent completed college, which is not unusual considering 80% of the town's adults similarly lack a college degree. As a realistic prospect, college is rarely discussed around home since the parents both work and rarely have extra money left over at the end of the month. When thinking about college, questions arise concerning how to possibly pay for it. Despite these barriers, all goes well. The student figures out how to apply to college and complete the financial aid paperwork. Now, imagine leaving the deep-rooted support system to move at least 90 minutes away to attend college. Not many classmates make the same journey, so everyone is a stranger. The student feels like they do not belong and everyone knows it. Finally, should the student obtain their bachelor's degree, there are few jobs that require it back home, and even fewer jobs that will make the time and money spent on a degree worthwhile. Such is the life of many rural students in Idaho.

The objective of this research is to discover the affordances and challenges for the college access and completion experiences of high school graduates from a small, rural community. The National Rural Education Association (NREA) is a national organization that has provided a voice for rural schools since 1907. Two major priorities of the NREA are to address the increased need of preparation for postsecondary experiences and to positively

influence rural youth toward attaining postsecondary education (National Rural Education Association, 2016). The research that follows addresses these priorities.

Though college-going rates nationwide increased over the past several years, rates for rural settings are lower than non-rural rates. According to a 2016 National Student Clearinghouse report, only 59% of rural students enrolled in college the fall after graduation compared to 65% of students in non-rural areas (Tizon, 2016). The National Student Clearinghouse collects data on college enrollment and completion and provides research based on these findings.

College completion rates in rural areas also lag behind urban areas. Rural adults possessing a bachelor's degree increased from 15% to 19% from 2000-2015 (Marré, 2017), whereas urban adults possessing a bachelor's degree during that same period increased from 26% to 33%. This disparity translates to a wider gap in those who possess a bachelor's degree among rural-urban adults from 11% to 14%.

While the rural education literature (Calzaferrri, 2011; Mullin, 2012) contains numerous discussions of underrepresented populations, such as low socioeconomic status and first-generation or racial/ethnic minorities, many other works in the field contain few to no references about rural students specifically. And while the literature is clear about the need for increasing the number of rural youth who attend and complete college, specific methods about how to do this are less clear. Gibbs (1998) found that 89.4% of urban counties across the United States had at least one or more community or four-year college within the community compared to only 50.9% of rural counties. To further demonstrate rural students' lack of access to brick-and-mortar higher education buildings, 49.1% of rural counties have no colleges within the county, while only 10.6% of urban counties realize the same fate. A

comprehensive review of the literature yielded little related to the anecdotal experiences of rural youth as they enter and complete college well beyond their community's borders. This study is an attempt to explore those experiences.

Several terms used in the research do not agree on one definition of rurality. The term "rural" is used in a variety of ways across the literature. This dissertation adopts the operational definition provided by the United States Census Bureau (2016b), which states that rurality is defined as "towns having less than 2,500 in population" and that everything greater in population is urban. This definition of rural was chosen because it is easily quantifiable and identifiable by both researcher and participant. Another term, "college access," while widely used, proves difficult to formally define. College access, as a term of social justice is "the belief that all students, regardless of income, age, race, or ethnicity, deserve an equal opportunity for a college education" ("NCAN: Why College Access", Retrieved from [www.collegeaccess.org/about](http://www.collegeaccess.org/about)). Furthermore, this dissertation delineates college access to encompass the process that students traverse from the point of deciding to attend college to actually beginning classes to eventual, and hopeful, completion.

### **Researcher Background**

My interest in college experiences of rural youth naturally developed from my own rural upbringing and eighteen-year college access and completion career. When I left high school, I planned to obtain a secondary teaching certificate in social studies and teach in a middle school. Part of my plan was realized by graduating with my bachelor's degree in secondary education. The thought of pursuing an advanced degree never crossed my mind. I did not need it to teach in middle or secondary school. However, except for substituting for a

short while, I never ended up teaching in a middle school. Instead, I was hired to teach reading in an adult basic education department at a college.

When working at a state college in Idaho, several opportunities arose, such as the ability to take classes, undergraduate or graduate, at other public colleges at the extremely low cost of *five* dollars per credit. Not one to turn down a good deal, I received my master's degree in adult education after six years. Acquiring my master's opened doors for advancement to management positions within the adult education and college access areas. Interestingly enough and now qualified, I had the choice between directing two different college access programs – one urban, one rural. Due to my experiences as a rural student, I found myself drawn to other rural school students who, always seemed to me, needed the help much more than the “urban” kids.

When choosing my dissertation topic, rural students naturally came to mind. It had been an integral part of my life experience. I attended a one-room schoolhouse with seventeen other children in grades one through six. I loved the closeness and support I felt in that environment and wished every child could have that same experience. I later attended a “big” combined junior high and high school with 125 total students. At the same time that I experienced positive social interactions, I recognized broader academic challenges that I faced as a rural student. I had few advanced course options beyond state-required basic requirements—i.e., no AP courses, no calculus, no honors English. My high school did not take us on campus tours even though the closest colleges were only thirty miles away.

The rural students and schools I now serve share similar experiences. Advanced coursework is sometimes available but depends on retaining the *one* highly-qualified teacher for that subject. Students, due to funding and remote geographic location, often do not have

the opportunity to set foot on a college campus until their first day of college, and they must move away from home because commuting to school is not an option. Witnessing the continued challenges—to develop a college-going mindset, to apply and get into college, and then to seldom graduate—made me want to investigate the unique factors that rural students face.

As a lifelong learner, I felt the urge to pursue a doctoral degree. Without the affordability, I probably would not have aspired to reach that high. Even though I was the first person in my family to pursue a master's degree, the prospect of a doctoral degree felt and looked fundamentally different. This first-generation fear gave me insight into some of the same fear and uncertainty that many of my students have faced trying a new educational endeavor. I had serious doubts that I could actually complete a doctorate degree. The process felt foreign and unwelcoming.

Yet, given my position as director of a program focusing on college access in selected rural schools, I readily had access to demographic data, as well as a possible population to interview. I first considered using a quantitative research method. The data was easily available and could cover participants' services going back seven years, as well as data about college completion. However, as I took both quantitative and qualitative research classes as part of my coursework, I found myself drawn to learning more about people's stories than the numbers associated with their actions. Merriam (2009) explains that qualitative research's purposes are to “achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process...of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 14). At that point, I abandoned my quantitative research intentions and fully embraced qualitative research coursework.

After completing my dissertation coursework and advancing to candidacy, I took the opportunity to direct an additional program that supported college students in completing their bachelor's degree. I was ready for the challenge that came from leading two staff, as well as seeing the college process from its inception in middle school to its fruition when students graduated with their college degree. The topic of rural students in relation to college access and completion made sense both professionally and personally. Though I was a rural student and worked with rural students for ten years, I had not expanded my knowledge beyond personal experience. I needed to slog my way into the scholarly literature if I wanted to understand the unique qualities of rural students and their experiences related to college access and completion.

### **What Rural Means**

Through a literature review, a mutually agreed upon definition of the term "rural" was difficult to find. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic (USDA) Research Service system includes an urban-rural continuum based on number of residents and proximity to a metropolitan area, and it defines "rural" as a town with less than 2,500 residents that may or may not be adjacent to a metropolitan area (Beasley, 2011; Gublo-Jantzen, 2015; Koricich, 2013; Yoder, 2007). Yoder (2007), for example, utilized the USDA's definition of rural because of the simplicity of aligning zip codes to the rural-urban classification. Other researchers cite the National Educational Longitudinal Study's (NELS) usage of rural as delineated into three categories: urban, suburban, and rural (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, n.d., 2010; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Byun & Kim, 2014; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Howley, 2009; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011; Meece et al., 2013; Meece, Askew, Agger, Hutchins, & Byun, 2014).



Drawing on the NELS longitudinal data sets, Byun and colleagues conducted research on rural area students' progression to college. It is important to note that the NELS data set organizes categories based on urban classification, such that populations of less than 50,000 outside a metropolitan area are considered rural. However, in Idaho and other less populated states with large geographic footprints, this categorization based on population size may be unrealistic. For the purposes of this dissertation for ease and clarity, the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of "rural" as a town with a population less than 2,500 (United States Census Bureau, 2016) was chosen.

### **Rural Education and College**

In addition to an inconsistent definition of the term "rural", there were few research articles exploring rural student college access and completion. I performed two searches using the University of Idaho's Academic Search Premier Database. The first search, for "rural student college access," yielded 279 articles. Eleven of the 279 articles explicitly covered rural student college access, with four of the eleven pertaining to rural students outside the United States. The second search, for "rural student college completion," produced 39 articles, with only five of the 39 articles specifically addressing rural student college completion.

The most relevant research was quantitative, based on the NELS from 1988-2000, and performed by a common group of researchers. They found that rural youth were more likely to be *first-generation college students* (neither parent having completed a bachelor's degree) and to come from low-income households than their metro peers (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). Irvin et al. (2011) concluded that parental education level was predictive of

the perceived educational barriers rural students identified. Rural youth were directly impacted by the educational level of their parents.

The majority of rural youth studied using the NELS desired to attend college, receive a two- or four-year degree, and gain jobs and careers that required a college education. However, their aspirations were directly related to the family income level and parental college expectations (Meece et al., 2013). Parents and teachers who had high educational aspirations correlated to high educational aspirations for rural youth (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). Rural youth sought a college education, and their parents and teachers influenced those desires. Yet their desires were hampered by issues that differed from their urban peers.

Rural youth were less likely to have completed a rigorous high school curriculum (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). Rural youth from high poverty households found increased high school performance with lower student-to-teacher ratios and higher aspirations if advanced coursework and college preparation activities were available (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Similar to this researcher's experience, higher performance and aspirations can be limited by what the school is *able* to offer versus students *choosing* to take less rigorous coursework. Additionally, rural youth were more likely to delay college entry, less likely to attend selective colleges, and less likely to be continuously enrolled in college than their urban counterparts (Byun et al., 2015). Rural students possessed less choices in regard to high school curriculum, type of college, and flexibility in starting college the fall after graduation and not stopping out.

Choosing to remain in a rural community versus leaving is a constant pull for rural youth. Charles Fluharty, president and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the

University of Iowa, expresses the paradox rural youth may experience when encouraged to leave their community to pursue college. “[It’s] like suggesting that the child should not do what I have done, should not be where I have been, and should not value all that I have raised them to honor” (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Petrin, Farmer, Meece & Byun (2011) found that rural students who had high positive interpersonal competencies, such as academic, behavior, and social adjustment in school and high teacher-rated characteristics, had more positive perceptions of rural lifestyles and an interest in staying or returning than their peers who had low positive personal competencies and held more negative teacher-rated characteristics. This makes sense, considering that a student who feels more confident and supported in an area would be more likely to want to return than a similar student who experienced the opposite.

Byun, Meece, & Irvin (2012) in their study of rural-nonrural postsecondary education attainment disparities, found, even with the varied community experiences, rural youth possessed higher levels of community social resources. The higher levels of community social resources led to an increase in the likelihood of college graduation. Additionally, rural students who were active in social clubs, fraternities, or sororities had higher college completion rates than those who were not active (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012). This supports research by Hodsdon (2012) where participants sought to replicate the sense of community from their rural town to their college experience. It is worth noting Price and Tovar, (2014) in their study of student engagement and graduation rates at community colleges, found more involved students graduated at higher rates than those deemed less involved. Knowledge of community resources, as well as reestablishing community at college, were important factors in college completion.

Byun et al. (2012) examined data from the National Education Longitudinal Study to see what factors may predict bachelor's degree completion among rural students. Interestingly, they found few differences in postsecondary attendance and attainment when rural and urban students were matched on preexisting background characteristics like parental education level, family income, family structure, and academic achievement in the twelfth grade. The degree attainment disparity between rural and non-rural students from disadvantaged backgrounds existed at the same percentages as when differences were unmatched. Notably, it is those gaps in degree attainment that must be addressed and remedied. Recently, researchers revisited the urban-rural bachelor's degree gap and found it had grown from 11% to 14% during 2000-2015 (Marré, 2017).

The quantitative research that exists found challenges that are specific to rural youth concerning college aspirations, limited advanced curriculum opportunities, and community influence. While quantifying some of the challenges that rural youth face in comparison to their urban counterparts, this research did not delve into the students' particular experiences that led to the challenges. Thus, I sought out qualitative research in hopes of finding the voices of the students.

Unfortunately, little qualitative research looked specifically at rural students. Rural youth were often overlooked for their unique qualities and instead grouped in with such categories as low-income and first-generation. This is problematic considering the differences in rural and non-rural students from the quantitative research. This research partially addresses this problem and contributes to the body of knowledge concerning rural students' college access and completion, suggest strategies for colleges toward helping rural students succeed based on their experiences, and suggest ways for communities to support

and encourage their youth that will also help them to return to their home communities after completing college.

### **Guiding Questions**

Given the necessity of increasing the number of rural youth who attend and graduate from college, increasing understanding of their affordances and challenges is a worthy goal within the education profession. Thus far, many articles addressing college access and completion have focused mainly on urban students or quantitative questions, and rarely examine the issue from a rural student's point of view. In order to understand the experiences that shape rural students' views of college, as well as the issues that surround entering and completing college, it is necessary to look at the perspectives of participants.

This study began with a concrete research objective: discover the affordances and challenges for the college access and completion experience of high school graduates from a small, rural community. Once identified, I developed research questions that would help me realize the goal. Understanding participants' perspectives is often the goal of qualitative research, while quantitative research seeks an explanation or cause. As I began considering research questions for the study, I kept in mind Merriam's (2009) basic premise of qualitative research: "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13). How did rural youth perceive their rural community and, furthermore, how many have influenced their college access and completion decisions?

Maxwell (2005) states that research questions are at the heart of qualitative research design. Research questions connect the topic, the literature surrounding the topic, and the tentative theories concerning the topic. Research questions should not be too general as to not

make clear connections or too specific, which may cause researcher biases to sneak in. Stake (1995) states that research questions should “direct the looking and the thinking enough but not too much” (p. 15). Research questions, provided below, were based on the theoretical framework and also drove the interview protocol questions.

1. What factors did the participants perceive helped them access college?
2. What factors did participants perceive helped them complete college?
3. What challenges did participants experience during their college experience?
4. What influence, if any, did growing up in a rural area have on college access and completion?
5. How did participants develop the knowledge, skills, and ability necessary to complete college?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Through the course of studies in graduate-level courses, I was introduced to many theoretical frameworks. Social capital theory (Coleman, 1988) interested me immediately because it fit personal experiences of having been raised in a rural community. Limited resources in a rural community lead to the necessity of knowing people who can help to avoid the time and expense of going to a bigger city. For example, in a small town you might not have a mechanic’s shop. However, you know people you who have mechanical skills if your car breaks down. This, in turn, led to opportunities in college when I would reach out to others in my “community” (students, instructors, friends) to gain information that I needed.

In addition, the theory of planned behavior’s (Ajzen, 1991) focus on what goes into the decisions people make or are likely to make fit well with the research goals and initial questions. To better understand why rural students decide to enter and complete college (or

not) was assumed to be affected by many aspects, most strongly, other people's information and influence.

I was able to select the most relevant components from each theory to inform the dissertation research. Without such recombination, I would have missed out on critical elements of participants' experiences. I created a theoretical framework grid that connected each part of both theories while tying those to the research questions and, ultimately, the interview protocol. The grid is discussed fully in Chapter 3.

**Theories used in this study.** The theoretical framework of this study was based on Ajzen's (1985) theory of planned behavior and Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital. The theory of planned behavior (TPB) explains decisions that people make, proposing that human behavior is guided by three factors: a) attitude toward the behavior (beliefs about the likely consequences of the behavior), b) subjective norm (beliefs about the expectations of others), and c) perceived behavioral control (beliefs about confidence and ability to perform the behavior) (Ajzen, 1991). See Figure 1 for a graphical representation of the relationship between these constructs.

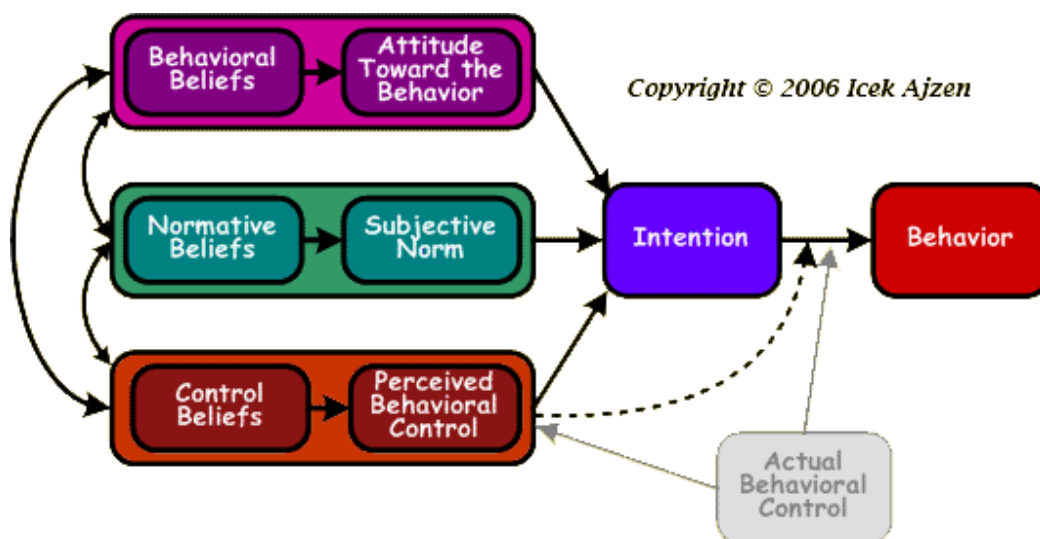


Figure 1.1. Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2001)

Davis, Ajzen, Saunders and Williams (2002) evaluated TPB in their study of decision-making by male African-American students concerning the completion of high school. They found that TPB served as a valid theoretical framework for the development of a predictive survey instrument concerning the probability of 160 African-American male high school students graduating high school. The developed instrument was shown to be valid in that it could predict, with statistical significance, whether a student in their sophomore year of high school would graduate. The purpose of TPB is to understand the connection between an individual's intentions to perform a behavior versus the actual outcome of the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). It is a model to analyze one's decision-making process and better understand what factors shape decision-making (Ajzen, 1985). I apply TPB to this research to better understand what elements shape an individual's decision-making and what attributes play a role in rural youths' decision-making process toward college access and completion.

The second piece of this study's theoretical framework, the theory of social capital, is an appropriate and necessary piece toward understanding the relationship between rural youth and their college experience because social capital research recognizes that the topics of college access and completion are based heavily on relationships and networks. Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital states that it is a "relation between people which is used for action" (p. s100). In other words, it asserts that the *relationships between people involve action*. Coleman further describes three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. This study applies social capital theory to understand the family and community relationships rural students build in order to access and complete postsecondary education.



## **Assumptions**

It is important to recognize and address the assumptions imbedded in this study. First, the community is an important influencing factor on participants. This assumption was based on the premise that rural town populations are small and community members are in close, proximal contact. Second, this study assumes that participants had the desire to complete college. This assumption was based on participants being previous Talent Search participants where college access and, therefore, college completion was the ultimate goal.

Third, participants would need to leave their rural town to access and complete college. This assumption was based on knowledge of the geographical area, lack of educational resources in the case study school, and the time and cost commitments of commuting to the nearest college. Fourth, participants would cite specific college access actions, such as FAFSA completion or college entrance test waivers, as what helped them access college. This assumption was based on participants' previous Talent Search participation, as well as knowledge of the services offered by the Talent Search program. These assumptions will be examined again in Chapter 6 to reevaluate their credibility based on the completed study.

## **Significance of Study**

Given that approximately 20% of public school enrollments are students from rural school districts, studying the unique needs of rural students continues to be relevant and necessary. While the amount of rural education literature has increased during recent years and tens of thousands of rural students have been studied, the research findings cannot be generalized across all rural locations (Meece et al., 2013) due to the variance between rural communities. Even less research has focused primarily on rural student college access and

completion. Byun et al. (2015) note that future research should include comparing college access and completion among rural and non-rural students to see if differences indeed exist, as well as considering the effects of attending a rural high school on college experiences and pathways.

In examining qualitative research, and specifically case studies, Merriam (1998) urges researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of a situation and examine how it is seen by those involved. This is not to say that case study research is generalizable between all settings. The goal of case study research is not to understand other cases but to understand *this* case in particular (Stake, 1995). Qualitative research encourages viewing situations concurrently through the participants' experience and the researcher's lens. Until more is known about rural student college access and completion, it would be difficult to develop a one-size fits all approach to high school and college supports to positively influence outcomes.

### **Definition of Key Terminology**

For the purposes of this study, the key terms are defined below:

*Affordance* – The result of the mental interpretation of things, based on our past knowledge and experience applied to our perception of the things about us (Gibson, 1979, p. 219)

*Access* – Permission for the right to enter

(<http://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/access>) accessed 6/6/2017

*College access* – The belief that all students, regardless of income, age, race, or ethnicity, deserve an equal opportunity for a college education

([http://www.collegeaccess.org/Why\\_College\\_Access\\_Success\\_](http://www.collegeaccess.org/Why_College_Access_Success_)) accessed 6/6/2017

*College access programs* - non-profit organizations designed to increase the number of students who pursue education beyond high school. The mission of these organizations is to open doors to postsecondary education by providing financial counseling, last dollar scholarships, college visits, career guidance, tutoring, and test preparation courses (Bowman & Shoecraft, n.d.)

*College graduate* – A student who completed at least a certificate program up to and through a bachelor’s degree (Complete College Idaho, 2012)

*Case study* – A case study involves exploring an issue within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007)

*Education desert* – A place where no colleges or universities are located nearby or where one community college serves as the only nearby broad-access institution (Hillman & Weichman, 2016, p. 4)

*Low-income* – Low-income means an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150% of the poverty level amount (*Higher Education Opportunity Act, Pub. L. No. 110-315*, 2008)

*First-generation* – First-generation college students are those whose parents did not graduate with a bachelor’s degree (*Higher Education Opportunity Act, Pub. L. No. 110-315*, 2008)

*Social capital* – Social capital is a relation between people that is used for action (Coleman, 1988, p. 100).

*Human capital* - The amount of skill within a person that can be “rented” on the labor market (Jischke, 2000).

*Rural* - Rural towns have less than 2,500 population (United States Census Bureau, 2016).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the scholarship concerning college access and completion among rural youth. This chapter begins with a definitive explanation of college access, why it matters, and how it is addressed in education today. Different perspectives on college completion are examined, including how rural culture shapes perceptions of college access and completion. Next, the chapter describes and explains the use of college completion and what it may mean for rural students. Rural youth are defined in-depth and distinguished from urban youth. Gaps in the current literature related to rural students are discussed. Because there is a heavy focus on participants' perceptions and socio-cultural influences, the theories of planned behavior and social capital are appropriate theoretical lenses to analyze rural youths' perceptions and behaviors toward college access and completion.

### **Methods and Databases**

Resources from organizational and governmental websites, articles from open and subscription-based journals, ERIC documents, and print books were examined to complete the literature review. The National Rural Education Association (NREA) website was used for information on their research agenda. Several U.S. government websites were reviewed to gain information concerning federal definitions of rural as well as census data. The Google Scholar website was searched for articles and books, then moved to, primarily, EBSCO databases and ERIC to find original journal articles. The University of Idaho's library collection was searched and requested print books through interlibrary loan when needed.

Reviewing article and book bibliographies led to new research paths and discovering foundational works.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of planned behavior is applied to the research goal and questions to better understand what elements shape an individual's decision making and what attributes play a role in rural youths' decision-making process toward college access and completion. Because several research articles stated that college access and completion is based heavily on relationships and networks, the theory of social capital is an appropriate and necessary piece toward understanding the relationship between rural youth and their college experience. A detailed explanation of both theories is provided below.

**Theory of planned behavior.** The theory of planned behavior is a model to analyze one's decision-making process and better understand what factors shape decision making (Ajzen, 1985). Ajzen (1991) further clarifies the theory as the connection between an individual's intentions to perform a behavior versus the actual outcome of that behavior. The theory proposes that human behavior is guided by three factors: a) attitude toward the behavior (beliefs about the likely consequences of the behavior), b) subjective norm (beliefs about the expectations of others), and c) perceived behavioral control (beliefs about confidence and ability to perform the behavior) (Ajzen, 1991).

**Attitude toward the behavior.** As mentioned above, attitude deals with the belief in the likely consequences of the behavior. Kroshus, Baugh, Daneshvar, and Viswanath (2014) studied male high school athletes in relation to the behavior of reporting concussions. Students shied away from reporting concussions due to its implications on short-term athletic performance. Examples included being held out of a game, hurting the team's performance,

and not being allowed to play by athletic staff or trainers when the player felt they were ready to return. The athletes believed that reporting their concussions would have negative consequences on themselves and the team, so they were less likely to report this key medical issue even though reporting had the positive effect of avoiding further injury.

Related to college access and completion, Fichten et al. (2016) studied high school graduates before attending college. Based on their findings, Fichten et al. suggested providing key information, such as future salary, finding a job fit, and not feeling left out, to increase the positive attitude toward college graduation. Giving high school graduates information that could help them see the benefits of college graduation increased the positive beliefs in the outcome of attending and graduating from college.

**Subjective norm.** Subjective norm refers to the beliefs about the expectations held by others, whether it is friends, family, or society in general. Kautonen, van Gelderen, and Fink (2015) studied the entrepreneurial intentions of individuals wanting to start a business and those who actually did. Questions to determine subjective norms inquired, using a Likert scale, what the following people thought about the individual starting a business: family members, best friends, and people who were important to the individual. Subjective norms were the strongest predictor of getting a business started within the following twelve months. Likewise, Fichten et al. (2016) found that providing positive views from peers and even famous figures concerning college completion could increase graduation rates.

**Perceived behavioral control.** Perceived behavioral control is related to an individual's perception of their ability to perform a behavior. Davis, Ajzen, Saunders and Williams (2002) used TPB to inform their study of decision making by 160 male African-American students concerning the completion of high school. To measure perceived

behavioral control, sixteen factors were identified from an earlier pilot study and used to develop two rated questions concerning what may prevent students' graduation plans. Students were asked to rate the factors on a scale from one to seven, first, on the importance of the problem, and second, on the likelihood that the problem would interfere with their graduation goal. Though the study's results did not produce a significant correlation between perceived behavioral control and behavior, it did find that certain factors, such as academic difficulties, arguments with students or staff, and lack of energy to go to school, suggested students were less likely to graduate.

In another study, de Leeuw, Valois, Ajzen, and Schmidt (2015) researched the pro-environmental behaviors of high school students. Researchers found that decreasing the number of barriers increased the students' perceived behavioral control over pro-environmental behaviors. Two suggestions to lessen barriers and increase control were having a duplex printer (prints on both sides of the paper) and recycling bins at home. These small changes led to participants believing they could perform pro-environmental behaviors.

**Summary of the theory of planned behavior.** Research examining the theory of planned behavior was reviewed for its meaning and application toward intentions and behavior. Attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control lead to intentions that influence the likelihood of a behavior. In Chapter 2, these factors will be examined in relation to college access and completion research.

**Social capital theory.** Every person has characteristics, such as integrity, creativity, and educational level that she brings to a situation. Human capital is "created by change in persons that bring about skills and capabilities which make them able to act in new ways"

(Coleman, 1988, p. 100). While human capital exists within a person, social capital is manifested in the relationships between people.

Social capital is a “relation between people which is used for action” (Coleman, 1988, p. 100). Coleman describes three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and sanctions. Putnam (1995) also describes social capital as a network though focuses on the ties within the network. In this study, social capital theory is applied to understand the relationships that rural students build to access and complete postsecondary education.

**Obligations and expectations.** Obligations and expectations come from doing something for someone else with the expectation that they will do something in return in the future. This action is beneficial to both parties. The local Lion’s Club gives Susie a \$150 scholastic scholarship for college. There is now an obligation for a reciprocal action. Susie is able to pay for a few books and, in return, the Lion’s Club expects that she will attend her college classes and they will ask for updates from her parents. Parental expectations are an important factor in college access and completion. Beasley (2011) found that many participants in her study did not have a back-up plan if they did not attend college.

Parents who communicated high college expectations to their children set a strong tone and encouraged activities that stimulated college enrollment action (Israel & Beaulieu, 2004). In addition, once expectations were set, both parents and children followed the verbal behaviors with concrete actions. Israel and Beaulieu further found that families with higher expectations spent more time engaging in activities that encouraged college-going behavior while those with lower expectations spent less time in such activities.



**Information channels.** Information channels yield social capital as one seeks information from others prior to action. A student requests information from a counselor concerning how to apply to a local college. There is neither an obligation nor an expectation for the information. The information is simply gathered prior to making a decision. Parental involvement with other parents who have knowledge concerning college positively influences student outcomes (Kao, 2004). Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss and Gray's research (2013) showed that first-generation students with support from friends on social media, such as Facebook, had more confidence in the college application process. While students may feel increased confidence in their actions, the information must be correct to be of value.

**Norms and sanctions.** The third form of social capital (Coleman, 1988) involves norms and sanctions. Established norms can inhibit certain behaviors while encouraging others. A student is told they are smart and capable so they strive to get good grades because it is what is expected of them. Another important aspect of this form of social capital is when the individual forgoes his or her own self-interest in the interest of the collective. Often, educationally gifted rural youth, encouraged by family and teachers, stay in school, enroll in college, and leave their rural communities to find higher paying jobs in larger cities (M. L. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). From the messages they received from these influential parties, rural youth believed that going to college was the norm and that they would disappoint those important to them by not attending.

**Social capital ties.** Putnam (1995), like Coleman, describes social capital as a network while making sure to emphasize the importance of horizontal ties over vertical ones (p. 10). Vertical ties are known as bonding capital while horizontal ties are bridging capital.

Bonding social capital reinforces groups and their exclusiveness. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, encourages inclusion across different groups (Putnam, 2000). Bridging behaviors are positive connections between people who understand that they are not part of the same socio-demographic group and benefit from the provided information exchange and external assets (Rostila, 2010). Figure 1.2 is a visual representation of the connections between bonding and bridging social capital.

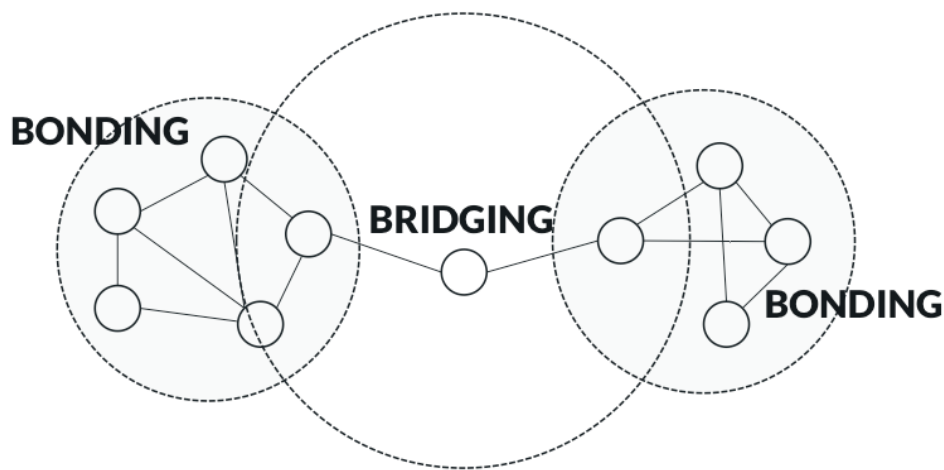


Figure 1.2: Bridging and bonding social capital  
<https://areynol4.wordpress.com/2015/05/02/community-organizing-and-social-networks-bridgers-and-weak-ties/>

Bonding social capital, as it relates to a rural community, is built by knowing most of the community members and understanding that you belong to the community. An example of bridging social capital occurs when a person from a rural area goes to college and needs to join multiple new groups, each with a variety of capital to offer. Youth tend to have more bonding social capital as they are trying to establish belonging to a group, and their networks consist mostly of family and friends (Shire, 2008). Youth want to use the social capital within their network before expanding and bridging to other circles.

Social capital is both built and used, thus adding to or taking away from the amount stored by expectations of future reciprocity (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). Depending on the outcome, people may view the interaction as positive or negative, which affects the amount of social capital. It is the quality and quantity of interactions that matter.

**Summary of social capital theory.** Research using social capital theory as a framework was reviewed for its meaning and application toward intentions and behavior. Both Coleman's view of obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and sanctions, as well as Putnam's assessment of bridging and bonding social capital were examined. As mentioned earlier, these factors will be examined in relationship to college access and completion research in Chapter 2.

**Summary of theoretical framework.** The uniqueness of rural youths' college access and completion stories necessitates applying two theories to fully explore the perspectives presented in this dissertation. Ajzen's (1985, 1991) theory of planned behavior explains how certain beliefs, in addition to intentions, influence whether a certain behavior is displayed or not. Coleman's (1988) and Putnam's (1995) views of social capital add another layer to the rural youth college access and completion discussion by examining the relationships between people and how such relationships are utilized to gain information and influence.

The next section focuses on defining college access, college completion, and rural youth in relation to urban youth. The relevant research concerning national and state college access and college completion rates and activities for improvement are examined. In addition, differences between rural and urban youth research gaps will be examined.

## College Access

In education, the term college access is “the belief that all students, regardless of income, age, race, or ethnicity, deserve an equal opportunity for a college education” ([www.collegeaccessnetwork.org](http://www.collegeaccessnetwork.org)). However, in scouring the literature, very few studies actually define college access. Researchers at all levels, including several dissertation candidates, seem to assume that the term is general knowledge and has a common, understood meaning. In the context of this dissertation, college access includes the process that a potential college student goes through prior to beginning classes. To the layperson, college access is typically thought of as continuing formal education after postsecondary education, generally in terms of community colleges or four-year colleges. However, the notion of college access is considerably more complex.

The idea of simply attending college after high school overlooks the minutiae involved in navigating the major steps necessary to enroll in and prepare to enter college. Knowledge of the system, paperwork, and financial costs, and understanding the financial aid world, along with the mental and cognitive preparations of leaving high school and moving to college, all present huge changes to students’ lives. For example, college access involves, but is not limited to, applications, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), scholarships, entrance test scores, living arrangements, and, ultimately, amidst all the influx of information, making a final choice. College access then shifts to actually attending college that fall semester and not changing one’s mind before the term begins. Bozick and DeLuca (2005) found that students who do not attend college immediately after high school are less likely to graduate from college. In their study, they found that 64% of delayed-entry students

did not graduate from college. Getting a student to college is merely the first step in the long road to college graduation.

The emergence of college access as a concept is relatively new. The first American colleges were created to train clergy (Lucas, 1996). As colleges grew in numbers, strict admissions policies were adopted, which limited those who could apply to rich, white men. As time went on, colleges were created specifically for women, people of color, and those of the Jewish religion. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s made college access a social justice imperative and a nationwide movement. Desegregation in public schools and affirmative action rules played a major role in fueling the college access movement as it is understood today. In addition, governmental college funding initiatives began in programs such as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant, now known as Pell grants (The Pell Institute, 2013), and TRIO, which was the first federal college access program aimed at low-income students (<http://www.coenet.us>).

**Why it matters.** Today, through the public eye, college access is largely seen as attainable, and it is taken for granted by most people, regardless of income or parental degrees. However, a large gap still exists between the numbers of high- and low-income students who attend college. The top family income quartile (\$116,466 and above) had 80% of its 18-24 year-olds enrolled in college, while only 45% of the same age group in the bottom quartile (less than \$34,933) were enrolled (The Pell Institute, 2016). While popular discourse suggests that college access for the academically inclined is a given, going to college is not widely considered a foregone conclusion in all places.

Rural towns like Lincoln, Idaho (pseudonym) that once relied heavily on the logging industry, which did not require much, if any, postsecondary education, are now struggling to

adapt to a more service-centered economy. Most jobs there require at least one year of postsecondary training. A study from the Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce estimates that 61% of jobs in Idaho will require at least some form of postsecondary training by 2018 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Only 24.4% of residents of the county in which Lincoln resides possess at least an associate degree (United States Census Bureau, 2013a). In 2015, Idaho ranked forty-seventh in the nation in postsecondary enrollment rate the fall immediately following graduation (Education Week Research Center, 2015). Lincoln's college enrollment rates match the state percentage at 46% in fall 2015 (Lewis-Clark State College, Talent Search Annual Performance Report, 2015). However, improving college access is not at the forefront of all people's minds.

Rural students are largely understudied and treated as experiencing the same challenges faced by other underrepresented populations. According to Calzaferri (2011), traditionally, underrepresented populations are thought to be racial/ethnic minorities, students of low socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. Rural students, while intersecting differing underrepresented characteristics, encounter challenges unique to their situation as it relates to college access and completion low income, first-generation, non-rural students do not face.

Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012) examined bachelor's degree completion for rural students at four-year colleges. Previous studies lacked factors that may hamper the persistence of rural students in college, and they attempted to address this gap. The research found that rural students were less likely to graduate with their bachelor's degree if they had delayed entry into college, attended part-time rather than full-time, and had less involvement on campus. Further research by the same group examined college attendance patterns by

rural youth, another previously unaddressed research gap (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). The researchers discovered that socioeconomic status (SES) affected rural youth more than non-rural youth and was directly related to delayed college entry as well as impeding continuous college enrollment.

Forty-nine percent of K-12 students in Idaho schools qualify for free or reduced lunch (Lunch eligibility by district 2015-16, <http://apps.sde.idaho.gov/CnpEligibility/Report>). This number has increased each year for the past three years. In addition, only 16.9% of Idahoans age 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree with 8.4% holding a graduate or professional degree (United States Census Bureau, 2016a). Low-income students often gravitate toward community colleges and two-year programs because of low cost.

Gublo-Jantzen (2015) wanted to address the gap in research concerning the unique college choice process for rural students at a liberal arts four-year college. In that study, rural students were found to make their final college choice decision based on whether the college was welcoming, encouraged student involvement, and provided the ability for students to build strong relationships with others. Another study examined the educational and economic aspirations of rural students (Meece, Askew, Agger, Hutchins, & Byun, 2014). They found that high parental expectations had the largest influence on all outcome measures and called for further research to address college and career opportunities presented during high school.

It is important to note the significance that community colleges and two-year programs play for underrepresented populations in terms of college access (Mullin, 2012). Low-income students tend to enroll in two-year and less expensive four-year colleges (Goodman, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2014). For rural students in particular, Jaeger, Dunstan & Dixon (2015) see community colleges as helping rural high school students access college by

enrollment despite lack of academic preparedness, low costs and college-going support. Community colleges are a good option for rural students and sometimes the only choice; however, that is not always true in rural areas due to distance and availability. Perna's (2006) comparison of college choice between economic classes highlights the disparity in enrollment rates between low- and high-income students. In addition, low-income students tend to enroll in two-year and less expensive four-year colleges, which some see as lower quality institutions (Goodman, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2014). As many rural youth are also low-income, the two-year community college seems like a good option. As mentioned prior, distance can be a hindrance to access. It is worth repeating that Lincoln is 76 miles from the closest college, and some of the rural students in that region do not have high enough entrance test scores to gain acceptance.

As previously outlined, college access requires a multitude of support and information that is not proportionally accessible to different populations. Underrepresented populations face considerable challenges when addressing access; with additional structural barriers, such as physical location and compounding issues of low-income and first-generation status, rural student inequitably struggle with college access. While community colleges and two-year programs mitigate some of these issues, many rural students, because of the extended physical proximity to these institutions, are not able to access the resources. The next section of this chapter reviews how college access is currently addressed and what programs are touted as exemplary.

**How college access is currently addressed.** One would think that today's students have a wealth of college access information via the internet. However, low-income and first-generation high school students often do not have the ability to contextualize the information



and must rely on contacts around them to help (Brown, Wohn, & Ellison, 2016). Gublo-Jantzen (2015) found that rural students had an “incomplete understanding of...conceptions of cost, benefit, supply of resources, and demand for postsecondary opportunity” (p. 2). Simply possessing college access information is not enough; schools are expected to create a college-going culture. To address Osegura’s (2013) argument to create a college-going culture, there is a need for formalized college access programs in secondary schools as mentioned by Bernhardt (2013) versus relying solely on informal modes such as peers (Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2015) and the internet (Brown et al.).

Such examples of formalized college access programs can be found through programs such as TRIO, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), and Gear Up. These programs assist low-income and first-generation students to see themselves as college material as well as give them the college knowledge, such as entrance testing, college applications, scholarships, and financial aid (Damico, 2015). TRIO, AVID, and Gear Up programs place college access staff directly in the schools to interact not only with the students but also with the staff and parents.

College access programs help students search for various forms of financial aid to pay for college. While examining financial aid in California, Johnson (2014) discovered that students who receive grant aid are more likely to go to a four-year college initially than those who do not. He called for higher education to adopt policies to help more students complete the FAFSA so that they are aware of all the available aid.

College access is addressed through an availability of information, but the availability of information is often not enough. Government programs have been implemented to aid underrepresented populations in understanding the college access information as well as to

develop a college-going culture in the schools. College access, however, is merely the first piece of the puzzle. Once students are in college, they are expected to persist to graduation to be considered successful.

### **College Completion**

This section addresses college completion and current trends, and it includes an evaluation of what college completion means for low-income, first-generation college students. The section concludes with college completion benchmarks and predictors.

**Definition.** College completion, for the purposes of this dissertation, is when a person completes a bachelor's degree. Programs like TRIO Talent Search consider any postsecondary completion, whether a certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree, as college completion. Students must complete a bachelor's degree to no longer be considered a first-generation college student. In 1940 when the United States Census started tracking educational attainment, only 25% of those age 18 and older had completed high school and only 5% held a bachelor's degree or higher (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). While the number has greatly increased over the past 75 years, room for improvement still exists.

**College completion – United States.** President Obama, in his 2009 State of the Union address, declared that America would have the highest proportion of college completion in the world by 2020 (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong, 2011). This rate included those with an associate degree or higher. Today, 28% of adults age 18 and older have at least a high school diploma (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). However, only 39% of U.S. citizens age 18 and older possess an associate degree or higher, with 30% holding at least a bachelor's degree (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). Kelly & Whitfield (2015) highlighted the need to improve the number of older adults (age 25 and older) with bachelor's degrees. In 2015,

46,212,000 adults had completed some college credits but not earned a college degree (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015).

**College completion – Idaho.** According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 2009-2013 5-Year Estimates, Idaho ranked thirty-seventh in the nation at 24.4% with respect to the number of people age 25 and older who attained a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The percentage of individuals with educational completion below a bachelor’s degree is considerably lower at 15% in the county that Lincoln is located. Idaho’s State Board of Education has a current goal of 60% of adults age 24-35 achieving a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2020 (Complete College Idaho, 2012). Only 35% of Idahoans held an associate degree or higher in 2011, compared with Idaho County’s 19.2% (Complete College Idaho, 2012). To address the gap, Idaho intends to strengthen the college pipeline, address remediation, and build a structure for success. Mostly made up of rural communities, Idaho must address the role that rural students will play in the achievement of the 2020 goal. To meet the Complete College Idaho Goal, it is imperative to understand how to best support and guide rural students beyond college access so that they can succeed academically and graduate from college.

**State funding/institutional support.** Nationally, state funding for higher education has consistently decreased since 2008. Between 2008 and 2013, states decreased higher education funding by 28% nationwide (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman, 2013). During the same time period, Idaho had a decrease of 39.6 %, or a loss of \$4,038 per student (Oliff et al.). A decrease in state funding has forced colleges to increase tuition, cut staff and programs, and increase the debt load of students (Oliff et al.). Published tuition in four-year public institutions rose by 40% from 2005-2006 through 2015-2016 (College Board, 2015).

Jones (2015) suggests remedying the situation by linking state higher education funding to college completion rates, credit accumulation, and remedial course success. State funding is not the only issue needing to be fixed. Higher education institutions must collaborate with the K-12 system to improve college-going methods.

Presumably, the more prepared high school students are for college, the better they will do in college, which decreases their time to graduation and moves them into becoming tax-paying workers faster (Vargas, 2013). Valdez & Marshall (2013) found that when college faculty collaborated with high school teachers to come to a common understanding concerning expectations of college-ready students, enrollment in college-level courses increased. In addition, higher education should provide greater links to first-generation high school students through field trips, first-generation student panels, and transition planning (Petty, 2014). Petty calls for programs that help first-generation students with their strengths and weaknesses, as well as to understand intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors (2014). Other research suggests that students who have the intention of completing college desire perceived institutional support, which is the student's belief that the institution cares about them (Thomas, 2014). These are several actions that higher education institutions can take to encourage college completion among their students while waiting for state higher education funding to increase.

**Role of community colleges.** Community colleges can play a vital role for those students who have lower entrance scores, seek an affordable college choice, and need additional college-going support and information (Jaeger et al., 2015). Students who need remediation have lower college graduation rates (Jackson & Kiurlaender, 2014). Vaysberg & Fagan (2015) encourage a gap year between high school and college where students either go

to community college or college prep programs to increase academic skills or look at vocational schools instead of a four-year degree. However, students who delay enrollment in college are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Getting students up to collegiate academic levels can lengthen the time necessary to obtain a college degree.

As mentioned above, many adults have completed some college but not a degree. Bers and Schuetz (2014) term some of these students *nearbies*. Nearbies are composed of adults who have college credit at the community college level but do not complete their studies. For example, a nearbie might have earned 45 credits, a C GPA, then left without a degree or transferring. Bers and Schuetz call for community colleges to communicate value and the shortest path to a degree, to lay out clearly advising and additional direction, especially in relation to remedial courses, and to allow for the additional time necessary for completion. These efforts require colleges to go beyond a focus of merely enrolling students. Persistence needs to be valued at all levels. Helping students see clear paths to completion sets them up to be in charge of their fate.

**Non-cognitive factors.** Non-cognitive factors are an essential part to successfully serving low-income and first-generation students. Non-cognitive behaviors include academic behaviors, academic mindsets, perseverance, social and emotional skills, and approaches toward learning strategies. For a student to persist in college, he or she must possess *academic self-efficacy*, which is the perception a person has of the ability to accomplish various school-related tasks (Thomas, 2013, p. 227). Naumann, Bandelos, and Gutkin (2003) reviewed factors influencing first-generation student success in college and found that a positive correlation between control beliefs and student strategies (accessing academic

resources and choosing relevant learning strategies) was stronger for first-generation students.

Additional non-cognitive factors have an effect on college persistence and completion. Students with higher emotional intelligence have better access and completion rates (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). Higher emotional intelligence includes behaviors such as empathy, social responsibility, and impulse control. This form of human capital leads to increased opportunities to gain social and cultural capital.

**Social and cultural capital.** Social capital is defined in a number of ways. For the purposes of this study, it is a relation between people that is used for action (Coleman, 1988, p. 100) or the “investment in social relations with expected returns” (Lin, 2001, p. 19). Cherng, Calarco & Kao (2013) discovered that having a childhood best friend with a college-educated mother significantly increased the likelihood of college graduation, but a best friend with high-income parents did not. Communities also played a role in the success of their students through providing strong social networks that have powerful local, cultural meanings (Derden, 2011). Cultural meanings are tied to cultural capital.

Cultural capital includes “verbal facility, cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials” (Dumais & Ward, 2010, p. 246). Dumais and Ward state that the more information parents were able to offer their children concerning the navigation of the educational system, the better the odds of college graduation. Urban students often lack the social and cultural capital to be successful in college (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013).

### **What Does This Mean for Low-Income and First-generation Students?**

Low-income and first-generation college students possess a unique set of challenges that hamper their ability to complete college. Cherng et al. (2013) found that while “students from resource-rich families are often doubly advantaged, those with less resource-rich families are instead doubly disadvantaged” (p. 98). It is clear that those students with higher educational capital are more likely to complete college (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013). In addition, the more information that parents are able to offer, the better the odds of college graduation (Dumais & Ward, 2010). As previously mentioned, first-generation and low-income students often lack the necessary information to be successful. Possessing the information is one factor that influences college completion. However, students face additional responsibilities.

First-generation students have more outside time and financial obligations and are less prepared to succeed as they enter college (Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). Not surprisingly, Ragland (2016) found that the level of state need-based and merit-based aid was a predictive indicator of low-income student college graduation. Low-income students receiving need-based aid were less likely to complete college than those who received merit-based aid. Low-income and first-generation students struggle to be on an equal playing field with their college peers.

### **Rural vs. Urban Youth**

This section will discuss the varying definitions of rural as well as the definition chosen. It also reviews rural research and where gaps occur. The section concludes with how rural youth differ from urban youth.

**Rurality.** Definitions of rural vary. The U.S. Census uses a place-based approach and defines rural towns as those with a population of less than 2,500 (United States Census Bureau, 2013b). Nationwide, 19.3% of the population is considered rural while 29.4% of Idaho is rural (United States Census Bureau, 2012). In 2009, an Idaho rural education task force suggested that the state adopt the following rural definition in any instance where two out of the four indicators are met: “school district’s average daily attendance is under 1,000, school district is in a county with fewer than 150 people per square mile, school district’s largest population center does not exceed 2,500, and school district’s student enrollment is less than 25 students per district square mile” (Smith, 2009, p. 4). The Census definition was chosen for this dissertation instead of the previously mentioned USDA definition, where rural is considered those who live outside an area with 50,000 people, since only five cities in Idaho are not considered rural under that definition. The lack of a consistent definition hampers rural research.

**Community.** Brown & Schafft (2011) describe many challenges that rural towns face: fewer locally placed governmental resources at their disposal, which may be due to place and/or size; a smaller population from which to collect taxes directly impacts local school district funding; and, fewer amenities available, such as social service agencies or medical care. Weber et al. (2005) reviewed literature pertaining to poverty and rurality. Their research found that rural communities face higher poverty than non-rural areas. They also suggested further studies on how different strategies for decreasing rural poverty.

Urban areas, on the other hand, possess many of these services as well as choices between multiple providers of the services. Urban areas possess greater diversity in income, race, and sexual orientation as well as more job opportunities. Rural areas are less diverse



and have fewer opportunities for employment, especially jobs requiring a college degree. According to Winters (2010), The number of college-educated people is a strong predictor of future population growth. Winters goes on to posit that rural areas have much “greater difficulty in attracting educated workers” (p. 20).

There are less economic opportunities for those in rural areas, so graduates may leave for urban areas. This is commonly referred to as *brain drain* (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Schafft, Petrin, & Farmer, 2011; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Rural youth also find greater educational opportunities in urban areas. Petric, Schafft, & Meece (2014) cite economic opportunity as one of the strongest predictors of rural student out-migration.

Rural students often realize that there is a distance to travel to the closest college, which makes daily travel difficult if not impossible. Urban youth have local access to colleges and a variety of choices, from community colleges to public and private institutions. Many rural students move from their community to college, where they must establish a new community. Sparks & Nunez (2014) indicated rural youth, due to their community engagement, may have an easier time developing social capital at college than their urban peers.

Rural communities feel a common bond to their members and “share a common fate” (Poplin, 1972, p. 5). Community connotes a belief that people watch out for each other and care for the group (Wood Jr. & Judikis, 2002). Brown and Schafft (2011) found that community members have a shared identity as well. Community networks are essential to a sense of place. Even with limited economic opportunities, rural community members tend to hold positive views on their social and community structure (McManus et al., 2012). Rural youth are part of the whole community, the whole town. Urban youth, on the other hand, may

have a limited sense of the collective whole because the community is the area of town they live in, not the entire town or city.

A rural town is a tight-knit community to which members have a strong commitment (Howley & Howley, 2000). This commitment is displayed by dependence upon one another and in an attachment to the town and its norms. Parents may even turn down jobs with greater income in more urban areas if it means staying in their rural town (Howley, 2006). One cannot help but interact with community members in a rural town, and the focal point for these interactions is often the local school.

**Education.** Rural community members consider school to be the center of the town (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The rural school is the social point of contact. There are other options for social interaction, such as a variety of schools, community centers, and, in urban areas, Boys and Girls Clubs. Rural communities have an effect on the youth that come from the community as a result of the aspirations they hold (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Student achievement can be increased when parents and community members understand the potential of having higher expectations (Arnold, 2004). Still, the impact of higher expectations is limited by the availability of resources.

In both 2015 and 2016, Idaho ranked dead last in the nation in regard to per pupil expenditures (National Education Association, 2017). Rural youth have limited access to higher-level courses such as Advanced Placement (AP) or dual credit. Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) found that 47.2% of rural schools had no AP offerings compared to 2.6% of urban schools. At a typical rural school, for instance, there is not enough money to have more than one math teacher, and that teacher *is* the math department. The teacher instructs everything from consumer math to algebra and geometry. Even if they were able and willing, the teacher

may not find enough hours in the day to teach higher-level courses. For example, in an urban school setting, one teacher may teach the same level of algebra class each hour of the day.

**Rural research.** Little research has focused specifically on rural students and their college access and completion. Several recent dissertations have attempted to address this gap while focusing mainly on rural college access behaviors (Armstrong, 2010; Beasley, 2011; Calzaferri, 2011; Gublo-Jantzen, 2015). Hodsdon's (2012) dissertation took into account rural college access and completion. Several studies reviewed rural student social capital and the quantitative differences between rural and urban youth when considering college access and completion (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2010b; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Byun & Kim, 2014; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). However, the data these researchers often cited was from the National Educational Longevity Study from 1988-2000.

While this data is certainly relevant, more recently gathered data related to college access, financial aid, and college completion may show that changes have occurred since the original data was collected. Little qualitative research has looked specifically at rural students. Rural youth are often overlooked for their unique qualities and instead imperfectly grouped into the student categories of low-income and first-generation (Koricich, 2013). However, Lichter & Brown (2011) suggest greater interdependence between rural and non-rural values and institutions and that this interdependence begs further study.

Marré (2014) found that college completion rates in rural areas lag behind those in urban areas. There are less economic opportunities for those in rural areas, so graduates may leave for urban areas. According to the 2015 American Community Survey, 19% of those

age 25-64 in nonmetropolitan areas have a bachelor's degree or higher while 33% in metropolitan areas do (United States Census Bureau, 2015). According to the United States Census Bureau, a metropolitan area has a population of greater than 50,000. In comparison to rural students, urban students lack social and cultural capital to be successful in college (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013). More research, both quantitative and qualitative, needs to be completed specifically with rural students to determine how their needs fit into the college access and completion equation (Coladarci, 2007).

### **Literature Review Summary**

After defining college access, college completion, and the term rural, the relevant research concerning national and state college access and college completion rates and activities for improvement was reviewed. Research showed gaps specific to rural students. The next section describes how these factors relate to the theoretical framework of the theory of planned behavior and social capital.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the experiences of high school graduates who came from a rural community and to examine their college access and completion experiences. A small, rural Idaho community was selected to explore the college access and completion experiences of rural students who graduated from Lincoln High School between 2008 and 2011. Ten high school graduates from this rural community participated and engaged in a two-stage interview protocol. The interviews and subsequent analysis contributed to the development of answers to the research questions guiding the inquiry.

### Research questions.

1. What factors did the participants perceive helped them access college?
2. What factors did participants perceive helped them complete college?
3. What challenges did participants experience during their college experience?
4. What influence, if any, did growing up in a rural area have on college access and completion?
5. How did participants develop the knowledge, skills, and ability necessary to complete college?

The limited amount of quantitative research that has been published suggests that rural youths' challenges concern college aspirations, lack of advanced curriculum opportunities, and community influence (Byun et al., 2010; Byun, Meece, et al., 2012).

While quantifying some of the challenges that rural youth face in comparison to their urban counterparts, the existing research did not delve into the students' particular experiences that

led to the successes and challenges. In addition, because of the quantitative nature of the studies, the research did not lend itself to discovering the participants' perspectives. To achieve this goal, a qualitative approach to the research methods was chosen.

### **Rationale for Research Approach**

**Qualitative research design.** Quantitative research seeks to find a cause of events, which can then be used to foresee future events. Quantitative research purposely focuses on more “remote, inferential empirical methods and materials” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 9) to maintain distance and refrain from developing preconceptions from participants outside of the evidence. Qualitative methods were considered for use within this study, but based on the research questions and objectives, a qualitative approach was selected as the best choice for this study. As discussed previously, quantitative research has mainly been used to compare rural and urban students and their educational aspirations relating to accessing and completing college. While quantitative data was available for this same group of participants, qualitative research design was more appropriate for addressing this study's research questions.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) differentiate qualitative research from quantitative research by asserting “the province of qualitative research is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect culture” (p. 2). The research questions of this study sought to examine participants' experiences as well as what influenced those experiences. Using a qualitative approach allowed me to enter the rural students' world and attempt to make sense of their college access and completion experiences.

Merriam (2009) describes the constructivist approach of qualitative research, which assumes that people create their own reality of an event and that each person's reality will differ. The

constructivist approach allows for an understanding of rural students' perspectives through their lived experiences and words without the expectation of the same reports from each student. Qualitative research is interpretive and emergent (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

In a qualitative study, the researcher acts as the primary research conduit in that they interact directly with participants to collect the data (Merriam, 1998). Because of this, the qualitative researcher must be aware of the biases and assumptions he or she has and attempt to put them aside. At the same time, it is understood that the researcher's experiences cannot be entirely held separate from what they are studying since they, too, are creating their reality of the event based on their previous experiences. Thus, the researcher's biases and assumptions should be identified and regularly evaluated.

**Case study methodology.** According to Denzin & Lincoln, no specific qualitative methodology is more important than another (2011). The case study method was chosen for this study over other qualitative methodologies, such as grounded theory (generating a theory based on research results) or ethnography (the researcher's immersion in the everyday lives of participants), for several reasons. Case studies are best used to gain an in-depth understanding of a situation and how it is seen by those involved (Merriam, 1998).

A case study represents the case, not the world (Stake, 2005). The goal of case study research is not to understand other cases but to understand *this* case (Stake, 1995). For example, this case study is bound by both the rural town chosen as well as graduates from the same (and the town's only) high school during a specific period of time. Case studies are bound by time and place and valuable when they have identifiable boundaries (Creswell, 2007). While participants from neighboring towns and schools could have been included,

examining the varied experiences among the ten participants allows for an understanding across cases.

Case studies do have limitations. These include issues around inference and the researcher's biases (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are not generalizable through statistical methods. It is up to the reader to evaluate whether a particular situation or finding is applicable to their situation (Merriam, 1998, p. 211). According to Flyvberg (2011, p. 301) “knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field”. Case studies offer a valuable insight into participants’ lived experiences.

Qualitative methods place the researcher in the unique position of interacting directly with research participants. Altheide and Johnson (2011) state researchers “share an ethical obligation to make public their claims, to show the reader, audience, or consumer why they should be trusted as faithful accounts of some phenomenon (p. 584). Thus, it is essential for the study to state their positionality in relation to who and what is being studied.

### **Overview of Research Design**

Figure 3.1 graphically represents the research design used for this study. It shows the details and order of methods.



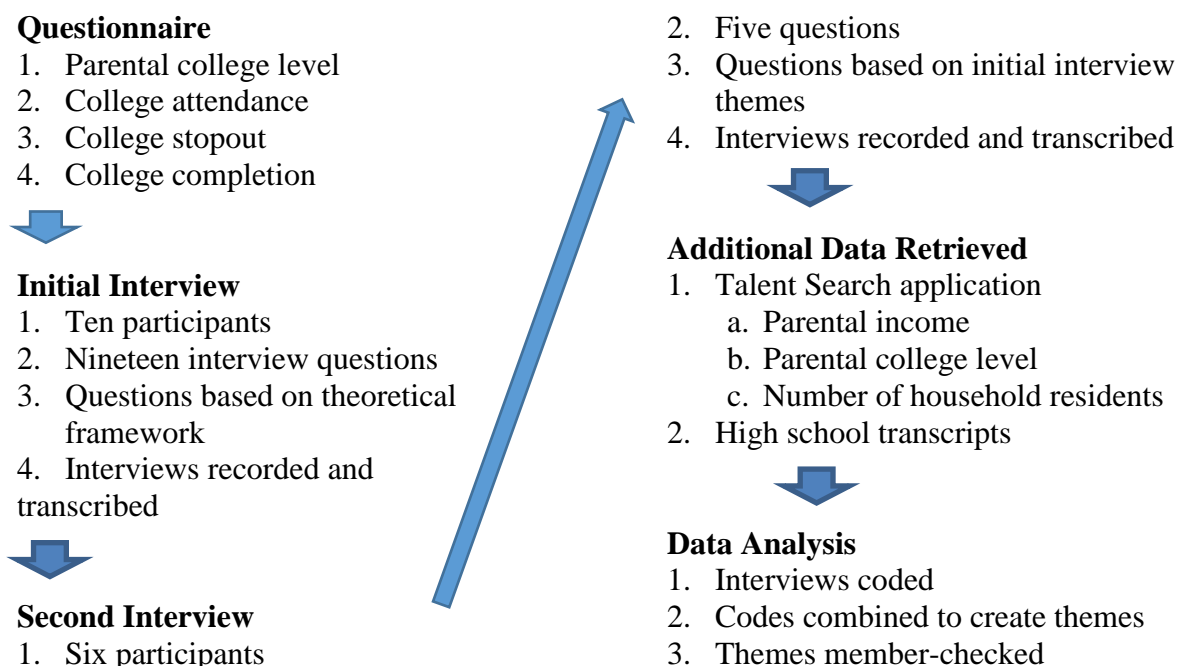


Figure 3.1. Overview of research design

**Sample and population.** Lincoln is a town served by the federal program TRIO Talent Search. The goal of Talent Search is college enrollment and completion. The program has been in Lincoln Jr./Sr. High since 2006. As part of the federal program requirements, two-thirds of participants must be low-income as well as potential first-generation college students. The other third can be low-income only, first-generation only, or neither low-income nor first-generation. At Lincoln High School, approximately 90% of the school population have been selected to participate in the program. Because of the program's inclusion of those who may not be low-income or first-generation, virtually anyone can participate in the program providing that two-thirds of participants are both low-income and first-generation. In addition, program outcomes such as secondary education graduation, college access, and college enrollment are gathered and reported to the federal government annually.

The sampling frame of possible study participants was all those who graduated from Lincoln High School (pseudonym) between 2008 and 2011. Because each of these participants were part of the Talent Search program, data was available about participants' college access and completion rates. Potential participants were contacted using the social media application Facebook and invited them to participate in the study. Potential participants were reminded they were Talent Search participants in high school and explained the purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of people who came from a rural community and had the opportunity to attend college. If interested, participants responded via private message or directly by cell phone.

After initial contact, potential participants were sent the consent form that described the study, explained that they could choose to discontinue the research participation at any time, and provided permission to use their information (see Appendix D). Participants signed the consent, and the completed forms are kept in a locked file cabinet. Ten participants, three male and seven female, consented to participate in the study. Nine of the ten participants' races were white which reflects Lincoln's racial makeup of 90% white (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Participants completed a short questionnaire prior to individual interviews in order to provide current demographic information (see Appendix A). Participants' earlier Talent Search applications were reviewed to determine demographic data at the time of program entrance.

**Data collection phase I: questionnaire.** Questionnaires completed by each participant gathered demographic and background data such as gender, first-generation status, and college attendance (see Appendix A). Questionnaire data was used for descriptive statistics only. No formal statistical analysis was performed on the questionnaire data, which

was combined with the Talent Search application data to give a clearer initial description of each participant (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

*Participant Demographics*

<u>Name</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Talent Search Eligibility</u>	<u>Taxable Income</u>	<u>Household Members</u>	<u>Graduation Year</u>	<u>High School GPA</u>	<u>Parents in household</u>	<u>Graduated college</u>
Albert	M	LI	\$25,333	3	2010	4	Both parents	Yes
Alea	F	FG/LI	\$4,055	4	2011	3.91	Both parents	No
Cecilia	F	FG/LI	\$26,267	5	2011	3.38	Both parents	No
Clarence	M	FG/LI		4	2010	1.48	Both parents	No
Ellen	F	FG	\$66,000	4	2008	3.57	Mother and guardian	Yes
Ethel	F	FG/LI	\$11,000	4	2008	3.96	Mother and guardian	Yes
Mya	F	Neither	\$75,000	3	2009	3.49	Both, but separately	No
Taj	M	FG/LI	\$3,007	3	2009	3.85	Mother only	Yes
Thelma	F	FG	\$35,000	3	2008	3.73	Father only	Yes
Tina	F	FG/LI	\$25,500	5	2008	3.82	Both parents	Yes

*Note.* FG = First-generation, LI = Low-income

This data was placed in Dedoose, a web application used for qualitative and mixed-methods research, for purposes of storing the demographic data and interview transcripts and was used for coding purposes.

**Data collection phase II: initial interview.** After questionnaires were completed, participants were interviewed individually. Table 3.2 demonstrates how the theoretical framework was tied to the research questions. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and was conducted either in-person or over the phone, depending on where the participant was geographically located at the time of the interview. Ten participants were interviewed. Prior to asking the interview questions, to put the interviewee at ease and feel something of a connection with them, the purpose of the research was reiterated, that they could opt out at any time, and the researcher's connection as a rural town graduate. Audio interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. These recordings and transcriptions have been kept securely on a password-protected computer. After transcribing each interview, the transcribed text was sent to the participant for review and approval. Appendix B shows the list of questions asked during the first interview.

Table 3.2

*Theoretical Framework Grid*

<u>Social Capital Theory</u>	<u>Theory of Planned Behavior</u>	<u>Research Questions</u>	<u>Interview Protocol</u>
Bridging and bonding social capital	Behavioral beliefs	1) What factors did the participants perceive helped them access college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tell me about people you knew that went to college.</li> <li>● Did you think college would be good for you?</li> <li>● Did you think you could succeed in college?</li> <li>● Would you go back to college?</li> <li>● What obstacles got in your way during college?</li> </ul>
	Control beliefs	2) What challenges did participants experience during their college experience?	
		3) What factors did participants perceive helped them complete college?	
Obligations and expectations	Normative beliefs	4) What is the relationship between growing up in a rural area and college access and completion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What was it like growing up in a small town?</li> <li>● What did you like? What didn't you like?</li> <li>● Did you want to go to college growing up?</li> <li>● Did you feel supported in your choice either to attend college or not?</li> <li>● What did your parents say about going to college?</li> <li>● What did the community think of you going to college or not?</li> <li>● What feedback did you get from your community about going to college?</li> </ul>

Information channel	Control beliefs	5) How did participants develop the knowledge, skills, and ability necessary to complete college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Some people don't choose to leave their rural community, why did you leave?</li> <li>● Will you go back? Why?</li> <li>● Who talked to you about college?</li> <li>● Why did you decide to attend or not attend college?</li> <li>● Did you think going to college was for you? Why or why not?</li> <li>● What did you think success in college looks like?</li> <li>● What would have helped you go to/complete college?</li> </ul>
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**Data collection phase III: second interview.** Participants were contacted for a second interview approximately nine months after the first interview after follow-up questions emerged out of the initial interviews, their transcription, and initial analysis. Six participants agreed to a second conversation and were interviewed individually. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and was conducted in-person or over the phone depending on the participant's location. Participants were asked about their lives since the first interview and learned that some additional questions had arisen from the first interview responses.

Appendix C shows the list of questions asked during the second interview. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed by the third-party transcription company Rev.com, and kept on a password-protected computer. Transcripts were reviewed by myself and compared to the recordings to ensure transcription accuracy. In addition, I sent the text to each participant for them to review and approve, as with the first interview.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

Transcripts were analyzed for emergent themes (Saldana, 2009). The web application Dedoose was used to keep the transcribed interviews, demographic information, interview excerpts, and a record of all coding. Saldana states, "Coding is not a precise science; it's primarily an interpretive act" (2009, p. 14); and further, "Each qualitative study is context-specific and your data are unique, as are you and your creative abilities to code them. I don't have the answers to your questions, but you and your data do" (2009, p. 30). Attribute coding began with the questionnaires and Talent Search applications, which included basic descriptive information as seen in Table 3.1 in Chapter 3. First interviews were coded from the transcriptions. These codes came about from thoughts that quickly came to mind or phrases from participants that stood out. This process was allowed to be free-flowing without



a lot of second-guessing. The coding morphed as the transcripts were continually reviewed. After coding the first interview, the meaning for certain codes was refined and reflected on coding subsequent interviews. Most of the time this involved the code becoming more descriptive or even a new code emerging altogether. After coding the first interviews, there were 99 codes and after the second interviews, 174 (see Appendix F). The coding involved finding similarities both within and between the interviews.

During second cycle coding, after coding the first interviews as well as the five subsequent interviews taken six months later, the initial codes were reorganized and reanalyzed to see how they fit together and whether they could be consolidated or not based on those that seemed to fit together. Morse (1994) describes the process as a “process of conjecture and verification, of correction and modification, of suggestion and defense. It is the creative process of organizing data so that the analytical scheme will appear obvious” (p. 25).

Research questions were used to narrow and group identified codes while further analyzing the interview transcripts. Chapter 4 describes the results of those groupings and includes participants’ voices as they told their stories. After categorizing the results in Chapter 4, possible themes arising from participants’ responses were discovered. DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) define theme as “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (p. 362). In attempting to capture what the participants’ voices seemed to convey overall, the interviews and codes were examined many times. The three themes that ultimately manifested out of this process were

finances, voices, and community. These themes are further explored and discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Issues of Validity**

Research validity, reliability, and generalization are seen as the holy trinity of quantitative research (Kvale, 1995). The research can easily be replicated with similar outcomes and generalized across groups. However, qualitative research, as mentioned previously, cannot be generalized and is not meant to be directly replicated expecting the same results. Though qualitative research does not have the same “holy trinity” of its quantitative counterpart, this does not mean that qualitative research is somehow less rigorous or credible. Case studies provide additional knowledge which may have been formally unknown. Merriam (1998) cites several ways to enhance a qualitative study’s validity, including triangulation, member checking, and peer examination. These methods were used to assure research validity, as outlined below.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation involves examining several types of data to give an “in-depth understanding of the phenomenon” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.5). In this study, participant interviews, questionnaires, and high school documents were used to triangulate the data. Instead of relying on one form of data to understand participants’ views, the research was able “rely on multiple forms of evidence rather than a single incident or data point in the study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129).

**Member checking.** Member checking is described as having research participants review the researcher’s writing to see if the researcher’s interpretation “rings true” (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). While all participants were asked to review the transcripts for accuracy of their

words, one participant reviewed the findings chapter to affirm that the data and themes were representative of her experiences and provided an accurate description of her views.

**Peer examination.** Peer examination occurs by having a person (who can be familiar or not with the topic) review your findings and see whether they come to similar conclusions (Merriam, 2009). My major professor and dissertation committee acted as peer examiners. I also had several colleagues who were familiar with rural studies and recently completed their doctoral work review my manuscript to ensure clarity and reliability of the data.

Furthermore, my husband and a friend who had no personal understanding of the topic reviewed the writing to see whether it made sense to them and read well. The involvement of both academic and non-academic reviewers strengthened the writing and added a sense of credibility to the findings.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

For the purposes of this study, only rural students from Lincoln who were Talent Search participants were contacted. As part of the federal program requirements, two-thirds of participants must be low-income as well as potential first-generation college students. The other third can be low-income only, first-generation only, or neither low-income nor first-generation. Because of the program's inclusion of those who may not be low-income or first-generation, virtually anyone can participate in the program providing that two-thirds of participants are both low-income and first-generation. The focus was on those who graduated from the same high school during a similar period of time, thus having an assumption of similar experiences. Though access to Talent Search students from other rural towns was available, Lincoln was as the sole point of interviewee origin since prior research with participants from this town.

## **Methodology Summary**

This chapter provided a description of the methodology used prior, during, and after data collection and analysis. Qualitative research and case study design were examined to set a rationale for the approach for this study. The sample and population were described. The methodology for data collection, including the use of a questionnaire and interviews, was reviewed as was the data analysis techniques and efforts to synthesize data. Finally, the chapter examined issues of validity using triangulation, member checking, and peer examination. Delimitations of the study were discussed.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Introduction

Chapter 4 provides the findings of how the study's participants described their experiences in Lincoln. This includes when participants moved to Lincoln and their views on Lincoln, high school graduation, and possible college attendance and completion. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the background and college entrance and completion experiences of rural students who graduated from Lincoln High School between 2008 and 2011. The following research questions are addressed:

Research objective: Discover the affordances and challenges for the college experience of high school graduates from a small, rural community.

Research questions:

1. What factors did the participants perceive helped them access college?
2. What challenges did participants experience during their college experience?
3. What factors did participants perceive helped them complete college?
4. What is the relationship between growing up in a rural area and college access and completion?
5. How did participants develop the knowledge, skills, and ability necessary to complete college?

Participants graduated from Lincoln High School between 2008 and 2011. The average high school grade point average (GPA) was 3.519. Their age at first service in Talent Search ranged from 13 to 17 years old. Five participants lived with both their mother and father, while one participant lived with her mother part-time and father part-time. Two participants lived with their mother and guardian, and two participants lived with their

mother or father only. Six of the ten participants have graduated from college with a degree ranging from associate's to bachelor's. One participant is currently in graduate school. All participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Participants, while hardly varying racially (9 white, 1 Asian), had several points of contact where several could be grouped together. Half of participants were originally from Lincoln or moved in during elementary school. The other half moved to Lincoln starting in middle school. Of those interviewed, eight had a high school grade point average above a 3.5. Nine of the ten participants attended a college no further than 100 miles from Lincoln the fall following high school graduation.

Table 4.1				
<i>Participant profile summary</i>				
<u>Name</u>	<u>Year Graduated High School</u>	<u>Intention</u>	<u>Outcome</u>	
Albert	2010	Graduate from college	Bachelor's Degree	
Alea	2011	Graduate from college	No degree; not attending college	
Cecilia	2011	Graduate from college	No degree; not attending college	
Clarence	2010	Graduate from college	No degree; not attending college	
Ellen	2008	Graduate from college	Associate Degree	
Ethel	2008	Graduate from college	Master's Degree	
Mya	2009	Graduate from college	No degree; not attending college	
Taj	2009	Graduate from college	Bachelor's Degree	
Thelma	2008	Graduate from college	Associate Degree	
Tina	2008	Graduate from college	Bachelor's Degree	

## Research Questions

In the following section, the findings are discussed in relation to the research questions. Research questions of this study sought to examine participants' experiences as well as what influenced those experiences. The findings are based on participants' answers to the questions.

**Research Question 1: What factors did the participants perceive helped them access college?** In asking this question, I expected that there would be some specific strategies, such as help with college applications or FAFSA or help taking the ACT that would influence participants' decisions to enter college. The answers turned out to be both larger and more complex than I had anticipated.

Participants focused on the expectations and perceived obligations placed upon them by others to go to college. Surprisingly, parents who had attended college *and* those who had not attended college held such expectations. Whereas college-attending parents wanted to see their child attain the same advantages they had, non-college-attending parents wanted their children to have economic advantages that they had never experienced.

Some participants' parents were extremely explicit about the expectation for their children to attend college. There was never really a question.

All three of my parents [father, stepmother, and mother] went to college, so it was expected that that's [what] I would do. So it was a standard that you were going to make it through high school and you were to go to college. That's what was expected of us. (Mya, personal communication, 8/5/14)

The college discussion began in Alea's household long ago. "We've [my parents and I] been talking about college ever since I was in fourth grade...They've always been trying to

help me decide which major. And they've always been supportive in every way" (personal communication, 8/19/2014). A similar discussion occurred in other Lincoln households.

Albert's parents saw college as an opportunity and encouraged him to pursue it as such. "My father, I'd say, pushed me, kind of. Well, my parents, both of them, they pushed me to take opportunities when I can, too" (personal communication, 7/29/2014). College as an opportunity was a concept that permeated his growing up.

We never sat down and said, "College, this is what you should do and should not." Really, I've just kind of known you go to college if you, not even so much that you want to succeed because they [my parents] say, "Whatever you do, whatever you choose to do. Do what you like. Do what you love and you'll be ok." But it was always kind of implied you should go to college and learn and take in that experience at least. (Albert, personal communication, 7/29/14)

Several participants' parents took more of a guiding role instead of coming out with a college decree.

They [my parents] thought I should go. At first, I wanted to go to an art school and everything. They kind of told me it doesn't matter what school you go to. It's more what you get out of it... They were like, "Don't limit yourself to thinking you should go to these types of schools because you can get your education anywhere as long as you apply yourself." So, yeah, they encouraged me to keep open but definitely go to college. (Taj, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

Thelma discussed how her mother asked her what she wanted to do with her life and that college could be a conduit and that she would help her the best she could. Thelma went



on to describe the challenges that being a first-generation college student has upon parents who want to help but may be unsure how to best succeed.

I feel like a lot of people...that live there never really went to college, like their families never really thought that, never really got the push from their families to go, like I knew a few of them that are still stuck in Lincoln, that had kids in high school that never really went anywhere. And I feel like they just didn't have the education from their families to go. (personal communication, 8/4/2014)

Parents were happy that their children attempted college, even if they did not finish. Clarence stated, "Everybody was really proud of me when I just wanted to go to college. And even when I made the decision to, 'I can't do it,' they were still proud of me going to college" (personal communication, 5/7/2014). Attempting college was seen as a huge first step for some families. Other parents want to make sure that their children not just begin but *finish* their college experience.

They were thrilled. My mom doesn't even have her GED [general education diploma]. She dropped out in the ninth grade. My adopted dad, stepdad, he's really impressed with it and like not going back when I dropped out of school. He's like, "You're going to go back. You can't not go back. You love to learn. You're always going to be in school." (Cecelia, personal communication, 7/28/2014)

Grandparents also played a large role. Some participants had grandparents who opened college savings accounts for them as a toddler. Grandparents whose children did not attend college wanted more opportunities for their grandchildren than their own children had known. Several participants talked about their grandparents' influence being as strong as or stronger than their parents'.

According to Ethel, “My grandma really beat it into my head that I was going to go. That was what was going to happen. Honestly, it did not really seem like there was any other option. That was just what was going to happen” (personal communication, 4/13/2014). For Ethel, even with questions about the viability of college, her grandmother’s support held strong.

Like, my grandma was really supportive...My mom was kind of, she wasn’t not supportive, but she [was] kind of like, “What’s the point? Why are you doing this sort of thing?” On one side, she was proud of me, but I think on the other side, she didn’t really get why I was, why I wanted to go to college or what I was doing there. I wouldn’t really consider her very supportive of it, but my grandma was definitely very supportive...My grandma was always, you know, “You’re so smart. You’re going to college someday.” But of course she never went to college. No one in my family had. That was more like, “You’re going to do this,” but there was no *how* [emphasis added] to do this. (personal communication, 4/13/2014)

Ellen also felt the weight of her grandparents’ expectation that grew to include an obligation to her whole family.

So they [my grandparents] saw a lot of hardship, and they see college as a...if you go to college, you have a much better chance at succeeding. They definitely have a point... I felt an obligation to do it for my family to make things ok for them. It is a big concern for my granddad. My granddad is not doing well at all, right now. He's getting up there and he's quite feeble. I think he would feel more at ease. I felt like I needed to do that because he prepared me and prepared that fund for me. He started saving when I was seven years old for me to go to college, so that was very helpful

and I'm very grateful. But he kept asking me after I moved out, "Are you in school yet? Are you in school yet?" Every time I'd say, "No, I'm not ready," he would say "Well, you need to do that." (personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Besides parents and grandparents, community members (including school personnel) created an expectation to attend college based on statements concerning ability with common phrases such as:

"You're smart. You should go."

"It's a waste if you don't."

Or economics:

"You'll never make any money if you stay here."

"There aren't any jobs available."

Whether the push came from parents or grandparents, the encouragement to go to college sometimes did not include advice about *how* to do so. This seems fitting if the parents had not completed or even attended college, since the knowledge base had to come from elsewhere.

I feel like most people I talked to [thought] going to college was fairly acceptable, so it wasn't a big shock if someone went to college. So if I went back on the weekend or something and they were like, "Hey, how's college going?" Like it's a camp or something. "You're just going to have fun." So I don't think they really thought of it like this big, life-altering thing. Like, "Oh, your parents are making you go, so have fun." (Taj, personal communication, 7/14/2014)

Ethel did not like comparing herself to her classmates who did not go to college. She did not want to judge them.

I think on one hand there was like a “Yay! You four [classmates] go out and go to college. You’re the smart students. You go do that.” At the same time, it was almost kind of weird because most of the other people...were just going to get jobs in the area and just stay there. (personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Teachers sometimes believed more in the participants than they did in themselves.

The teacher saw the potential to succeed and wanted the participant to see it, too.

They [teachers] scored my art because that’s pretty much what I was good at. Art and writing and that sort of thing. So they were a little bit disappointed [that I didn’t go to college the fall after high school], but they weren’t like, “Oh, you’re going to faaaiiiilllll. You’re going to be miserable and living in a cardboard box.” They weren’t horrible about it. They were just like, “What’s going on?” (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Cecilia felt the college-going culture and expectation more strongly. “I don’t know, high school kind of made you think that if you didn’t go to college, you’re going to be a failure in whatever you do. So that’s kind of why I was supposed to go to college” (personal communication, 7/28/2014).

The ability to attend college was not the only driving factor within the community; money also played a large role. Money changed things. It could offer additional opportunities that would lead to a better financial life. The common perception was that opportunity only existed outside of the town limits. The town held few options for jobs, wealth, and progress.

One, growing up in the household I did, it was college ingrained. "You'll get more opportunities. Go and learn." So, I have that background of go to college, experience it, get outside of the small town, because there's more out there than just Lincoln. But

then also, at the time I was in high school started the economic downturn, too. So then it was, "Well, there aren't any jobs if you don't go to college." So that kind of [added] more emphasis, and that actually played a little bit [of a] role into the degree I decided to pursue. (Albert, personal communication, 7/29/2014)

It's like, well, if you're here you're never going to make it. You're going to barely survive. That's all you're ever going to do. Go on to college. Get out. See the world. (Cecilia, personal communication, 7/28/2014)

For some participants, the economic importance of college was less about learning and more about job opportunities and financial stability. Participants expressed the belief that leaving Lincoln would give them more freedom and possibilities for success. College would be their way out.

Honestly, I felt like college would be the only option I had because Lincoln is really...it's in the middle of nowhere. There is not enough jobs to go around. [There was an] expectation to get a better job and a better life and not be poor. And to get out of Lincoln and be able to have a little more freedom to choose where I wanted to live and what I wanted to do. (Ethel, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

I think people think it's a good idea [to go to college]. I mean...they want their kids to succeed in life so...I believe they probably still believe, if you can go, go. Lincoln is kind of a poorer community, too, [so] if you got the money or the funds to do it, get out of here and make something of yourself. (Tina, personal communication, 6/27/2014)

While parents and community members held expectations for participants, many participants expressed how siblings and peers created a more powerful model to follow (or not). The closer age of a sibling suggested an equalizing experience to Taj. “I think siblings are seen more equal, so you see...if I had a bigger brother and he went to college versus if my dad went to college, probably [I] would see my brother going as more attainable” (personal communication, 5/14/2015).

Albert's parents were teachers at his school. He was not a first-generation college student, however, his sister's words resonated with him more than his parents' did.

Your parents always tell you, this, this, this, and you do your best to listen to them, but at the same time, it's your parents. “Oh they haven't gone through it recently. They don't quite fully understand.” Having a sister who is a fellow sibling, she's just recently has gone through it [sic]. You see where she is going in her life and the success that she's had. I think that plays a role into my acceptance of it. (personal communication, 5/12/2015)

Several participants held the belief that parents do not know anything, especially when trying to tell their kids something important. In contrast, siblings were perceived as a more reliable information source.

One, she's [my sister] a younger generation or a different generation than my parents, and two, she'd been through college. She'd already started a career and had her life settled down. So one, she wanted me to do it because she knows what it's like to get out of Lincoln and experience [life], and then two, she knew how important it was to have a job and a good career, so she didn't want me to become an art major. She

wanted me to [go to] college to do something that I could actually have a job and pay well. (Albert, personal communication, 7/29/2014)

Really the only people I really knew was Marci Bonner [name changed], who's, I think, a master's of music and teaching at U of I. She was just like me, all music and every single extracurricular activity she could get her hands on. And then there was my brother, who he just complained clear through college and didn't party or do anything that I care of...Then my sister-in-law, who was at the time wasn't my sister-in-law. She went to [the local college] as well, like my brother. (Cecilia, personal communication, 7/28/2014)

On the other end of the spectrum, siblings also provided powerful cautionary tales. He [my older brother] actually dropped out of high school at 16. He actually tried to drop out earlier than that, but he couldn't without my mom's permission and she wouldn't give it. He stayed in [high] school for a year but just completely didn't participate. He went to school, but he didn't do anything...He never finished high school. He did, eventually, get his GED. I think...after he did that, he hasn't really done anything with it. I guess we're almost complete opposites on that front. (Ethel, personal communication, 5/9/2015)

Several participants drew more from the experiences and influence of their friends rather than family, especially those friends who were classmates. Classmates played a large role in whether a participant accessed college.

People I knew who went to college...there were quite a few actually out of my graduating class. I remember my class president went into law school. A few people went on to college that I knew. I had a pretty diverse group of friends. You know,

more like the honor roll students and...friends who came from the other side of town, you know. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Friends could not only influence college attendance but act as a small, supportive community.

I got my acceptance letter. Am I going or not? I think my friends were going and I did not want to feel like I was left behind...My friends were going [to college], too. Some of them. So it probably helped that there was a little community around me that was going to college. (Taj, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

Interestingly, friends could provide insider access, offering a glimpse of the participant's possible future.

I had friends from the class ahead of me that went. So they were already there. I came to visit them. I'd see sort of the student side of it. You know, you see the tour but that doesn't show you student life, really. But I kind of got to see that, as well. (Ethel, personal communication, 4/13/2014)

Alea could see the influence that friends had even on her younger sister who was contemplating college. "Like, my sister, she just likes having her peer group and she always has that. If her friends decide not to go to college, then she'll probably decide that too, but if they decide to go to college, then she'll do that, too" (personal communication, 5/11/2015). While outside influences seemed to shape the college-going behavior of participants, a definite shift occurred when it came to completing college.

Overall, external influences in accessing college were strong. Participants felt the weight of expectations to go to college and did not want to disappoint those around them, whether it was parents, grandparents, siblings, or friends.



**Research Question 2: What challenges did participants experience during their college experience?** Participants cited several challenges that they experienced during college. Money was cited as an issue by many. In addition, participants had a difficult time trying to balance their time between college, work, and life. Some participants felt a lack of support, which stemmed from lacking assistance in high school or college.

*Money.* Clarence remarked, “I didn’t have enough money. That was the biggest problem” (personal communication, 5/7/2014). He was not alone. Half of the participants cited finances as the foremost challenge they experienced during college.

Definitely money. I was really fortunate enough to not have to take out loans during my undergraduate degree because I got a four-year presidential scholarship on top of a full Pell grant, so, using that money wisely, I was able not to take out any loans. But doing that sometimes [I] still did not have enough money for groceries and things like that. I think, too, when you’re a low-income student, it’s very much like you only have that one chance, so you can’t screw it up. You can’t make a mistake or get the wrong degree. (Ethel, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Probably money. I figured if I didn’t get any scholarships, then I probably wouldn’t be able to go. And my first year, I got a full ride. I didn’t have to pay for anything. I only went for a year or so... I forgot to apply for scholarships, so I didn’t have the money to attend the next year and I also ended up meeting somebody. We ended up getting married and a bunch of things happened, so I just never went back. And then after my divorce, I came back here and I had my son and I needed a way to take care of him so I decided to apply and all that...It is just the same now, if I didn’t get any funding. If I didn’t get any Pell grant or scholarships, I know I wouldn’t be able to

afford it. I'd probably just be working instead of going to school. (Tina, personal communication, 6/27/2014)

Financial. That was a big problem. It didn't get in the way, but it was kind of a pain to get the scholarships but you kind of have to if you want help...I didn't have a car...

You have to live close enough that you can walk if you need to or books were a big problem for financial life. I think it was more financial for me than anything.

(Thelma, personal communication, 8/14/2014)

Mya felt the challenge of finances, even though she was not raised in a low-income household. She still felt a certain disadvantage as she is bearing her own educational cost. I think the biggest obstacles that ever got in my way was like it was really hard for me to get scholarships because of the amount of money my parents made when they necessarily weren't paying for my college. So being able to get the scholarships and stuff. It was really hard. I think my second semester I only qualified for \$500 and I'm like, "That's a lot of money to have to put out and not be able to get." Kind of felt at a disadvantage because of the amount of money my parents made. (personal communication, 8/5/2014)

**Time.** Balancing finances was not the only trial. Attempting and learning how to balance work, school, and being an adult brought challenges of its own. Clarence soon realized, "You kind of have to do everything" (personal communication, 5/7/2014).

I'm not as well off grade-wise as when I first started. When I first started, I did really well and had a lot of time to focus and I was staying at home. I work seasonally during the summer at a park and then during the winter, I had all winter to focus on school. I could sit there and focus and study and I had straight A's there for a while and did really good, and then it just kind of petered off a little bit because I had to go

back to work and all the other stuff that was going on in life. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Cecilia suggested that future college students consider “not working full-time. Definitely not working full-time. Forty hours a week, when you are doing full-time college, is not possible. Well, it's possible, but you're going to be stressed out to the hilt” (Cecilia, personal communication, 7/28/2014).

***Lack of support.*** Several participants felt a lack of support. Some experienced it in high school when they were not a star student, while others had a difficult time adjusting to the difference between high school and college instructors and their own performance.

They [the school] were really focused on some of those star students who had been there since kindergarten sort of thing. So since I hadn't been there that long, I wasn't a priority so much. So I didn't really feel...It's not like I felt like they didn't care or didn't want me to go. I felt like I was definitely second string to some of these other students who had been there forever. (Ethel, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

I always felt a little too young when I went to college and I wasn't sure. I didn't really think it through. I just kind of jumped right into it and just went. I think I was still in the high school mentality going. They still hold your hand and stuff. I didn't know that teachers in college just dropped you. They just teach you stuff and give you tests. They don't care. (Clarence, personal communication, 5/7/2014)

Ellen discussed how she felt by herself compared to the relative safety of Lincoln. I would say that in the beginning I wasn't ready. That was my biggest obstacle was I wasn't. I didn't feel ready at all. I was kind of booting myself out into the big, scary world. I was

kind of scared in general. So, it was just me and myself. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

**Research Question 3: What factors did participants perceive helped them complete college.** Factors that influenced college completion were more intrinsic than those affecting college access. Participants had gathered social capital and put it to use to achieve their educational goals. They no longer relied on a push from others. Many participants realized that their success was dependent solely on their personal choices and behavior.

Not only did I want something better for my life, but I also kind of wanted to prove to my family that you can become something more than just what my family is...I knew that it was only up to me and no one else would be there to...like it was just me doing the work. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/4/2014)

I think having goals, not looking at the whole thing like four whole years of one giant thing I have to accomplish. 'Cause I did look at it like that sometimes and it was very overwhelming. And sometimes I would just want to stay in my dorm and just cry in the corner. But, you know, like having weekly goals or assignment goals and saying, "All right! I'm going to get over this little hump and then I got this plateau and then I'm going to do it again." And just keep going, keep pushing forward. (Taj, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

I think it's going to be interesting [returning to college]. I'm 23 now and so it will be interesting going. I won't be a freshman. I'll be a sophomore [and] older than the other kids. Where kids that are going in that are coming straight from high school being like, "I want to do this," whereas I'm in a job that has *made* me want to do that.

Instead one day I just woke up and decided that's what I wanted to do. (Mya, personal communication, 8/5/2014)

I just decided to go [to college] and [it] ended up being really fun and I liked it so...I guess I had better self-esteem in myself...It was just. I did it all myself. I chose where I wanted to go. It was kind of all me. (Tina, personal communication, 6/27/2014)

The participants' definition of what success in college looked like changed drastically over time as well. They shifted from a belief that equated strong grades to college success to one of being a well-rounded person as a college student and enjoying the experience.

When I first started, it was 4.0, kind of what I looked at in high school. Where it is a 4.0, excel, being involved in lots, which my outlook is still like that... I've learned through my many challenges in classes that it's more important to understand and get the material...I found that to be important to know the material, but then also I found it's even more important to be involved in clubs and other outside activities and different involvement that shows that you're a more well-rounded person. (Albert, personal communication, 7/29/2015)

I think in high school I was more, getting A's was success and in college it was more experiencing everything instead of just focusing on just one academic thing. I think doing well academically but being active and everything. Just experiencing everything kind of helped me feel successful. That I was able to branch out a lot more. (Taj, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

Participants, additionally, felt strongly about improving their financial situations from what they had known growing up. They sought the additional stability and opportunities that

a college degree could offer. Only two of the ten families had an annual taxable income above \$35,000. Having a limited income was a daily reality for most participants.

When I was growing up, I lived very poor. There was sometimes when we lived in hotel rooms or in tents and things like that. So I know what it's like to be very poor and also to be hungry so that was a very big motivator. I'm thinking, if I get this degree, that's never going to happen to me again, ever. I will be okay. That was a very big motivator for me. No matter how hard it got, I was like, "If I finish this, then I'm okay. I won't have to worry about those things anymore." (Ethel, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

But when I did go and finally enroll, I felt that it was a step in the right direction for me, as well. I felt that I was in a good situation, a good relationship with a reliable income, that I could build a career and make my life better. I felt like I was on the right track for myself and my partner and our lives together and the lives of the people around us. I felt that that was a good thing. You could build a career and we could buy a house and things we need without having to struggle, because we were definitely struggling financially. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Albert did not want to be "one of those people stuck in town" who left their potential there. "[I want] to become successful, pursue a promising career and, even more so, to get out of Lincoln. Get out and experience" (personal communication, 7/29/2014). Leaving seemed to be the only viable option for expanded opportunities.

A college degree held a new concept for many participants—one of a career instead of a job, and one of financial stability instead of financial insecurity. This was a stark contrast to their parents' lives, and participants wanted to distance themselves from their past.

I was the only one out of my family that wanted to do it [attend college], and I wanted a better career path. Because before I was going to college, I was working a pretty decent job that I was making a little bit over minimum wage. And I was like, I haven't been through it that long, but I don't want to make next to nothing. I want to learn something in college and try to increase my income. (Clarence, personal communication, 5/7/2014)

It would help me figure out what I want to do in my life because that's kind of what helped me do that. Also, it helped me realize that you have to work for something that you want. So it gave me motivation, determination, a sense of self because you really found yourself. I also know it would help me make more money in the long run because I had degrees. I felt better about myself knowing that I could actually have a career for me and my future family. Obviously, having a degree in something that you enjoy and then being able to make a good living and live comfortably instead of living from check to check. Living comfortably and having things that you enjoy and that makes your family happy. Money doesn't buy happiness, but it helps. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/14/2014)

I wanted to make sure I got a good job because my parents struggled through my whole childhood, never having enough money and hating their jobs all the time. So I really wanted to go [to college], and I didn't want just to be a waitress or a bartender or a shopkeeper or something. I wanted to go and do something other than that...The expectation to get a better job and a better life and not be poor. And to get out of

Lincoln and be able to have a little more freedom to choose where I wanted to live and what I wanted to do. (Ethel, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Participants felt as if they had control over their future income and the best way to go about making it. This assumed, of course, that their parents had little control over income and opportunities.

**Research Question 4: What is the relationship between growing up in a rural area and college access and completion?** This question elicited polar-opposite responses from participants on several subjects. Growing up in a rural community influenced participants' views on their openness to interacting with others.

I didn't make as many social interaction[s] in Lincoln because there's not that many people. That social thing is probably the most important thing in life. In order to succeed you need to know how to deal with people. That probably was the biggest thing I ever had to overcome because I'm naturally a shyer kind of person. It took me a little bit to break out that shell. That probably had to do with living in a small town to a certain extent. (Taj, personal communication, 5/14/2015)

Taj felt that the rural community was positively correlated to his shyness. In contrast, other participants saw coming from a rural town and school as a valuable asset in approaching others.

I would say one thing is friendliness, to go out and meet new people and be able to not be shy and miss those opportunities...It's not like one big incident, it would just be the little things. Whether it's helping somebody, say you start a new class, you don't know anybody and start talking to them. Then help each other back and forth



with homework, or say a living situation as far as moving, or just knowing the area. Different things like that. (Albert, personal communication, 5/12/2015)

You have a lot more of a personal relationship with your teachers, whereas in a larger school, you'd be lucky if they remember your name in the hallway instead of just your name in front on the paper, but like at Lincoln High School, I mean, a lot of times your science teacher was also your basketball coach, and you saw them all the time at the grocery store and stuff, and if you ever had a question on anything, they were more than happy to help you. (Alea, personal communication, 5/11/2015)

Probably more personal with my teachers because in Lincoln everyone knew each other. That's how it is at [the local college] anyway, but I'm kind of used to it. It was just easy for me to get in there and call my teachers by their first names. Some people probably wouldn't be as comfortable with that. (Tina, personal communication, 5/4/2015)

I definitely don't think I was completely prepared for the culture change of being in this small town too...[A college town of 20,000 people] is not really that big, but it's a lot bigger than where I went to high school. My school is very small and all the systems that were in place in the high school were pretty informal, and you just ask somebody at the office, "Can you do this?" When you go to college, it's this giant campus where nothing is even in the same building and you have to get five people to sign a paper to do anything. I think, maybe, if you come from a less rural area and you have a big high school, it probably wouldn't be the same level as it is in a college, but I think it would be less of a shock going from, "I'll just go ask the office

lady” to “I have to go to these five different buildings and get all these signatures.”

(Ethel, personal communication, 5/9/2015)

A disparity existed between those who found independence in Lincoln and others who felt a dependence on Lincoln. Thelma felt that she was “more independent growing up in a smaller town just because my parents felt comfortable. It made me more independent...because I relied on myself” (personal communication, 6/23/2015). Alea witnessed the opposite in some peers.

I know a lot of kids, they go to big universities... They went there, but they eventually either came back to Lincoln or they started going to [the local college] because they needed the peer support that they had all those years from being rural. (personal communication, 5/11/2015)

One participant saw the lack of resources as a drawback. Another participant saw it as an opportunity for less scholarship competition.

I would say there aren't a whole lot of resource[s] in a small town. Probably appreciated the opportunities they had at college and I took more advantage of them...A small town doesn't really nourish that [the arts] as much. So I felt like I wanted to go somewhere more like that. (Taj, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

For those in terms of actually traveling to college, it was helpful others from Lincoln attended the same college. “I end[ed] up [attending] school with a few of my peers I went to high school [with]. That was really helpful because I already knew them and we could carpool when we need to go back to see family” (Ethel, personal communication, 5/9/2015)

Lincoln offered fewer advanced courses due to its size, which left Albert feeling at a disadvantage compared to less rural peers.

Then once in college, I would say being from a rural community is just from the studies in school standpoint in high school and what you learn, sometimes we didn't get to have the in-depth classes or the more specialty classes offered...I'm an engineer so I need more math. For me specifically, I think that kind of hindered me a little bit. (personal communication, 5/12/2015)

On the other hand, Ellen expressed concern over a lack of knowledge of more basic life skills. She thought the school should have done more to help her.

The school really pushed and it wasn't really fair to me because when I got out on my own, when I moved out, I didn't even know how to write a check...I felt that they [the school] spent so much time pushing us to go to college and be on campus and be a part of the college that they didn't really...I don't feel that they really taught us how to be adults and take care of ourselves in the real world. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Rurality influenced participants in several ways, from personal interaction to independence and knowledge levels.

**Research Question 5: How did participants develop the knowledge, skills, and ability necessary to complete college?** Participants established a support network early in their college career, with some coming ready-made in the form of peers from Lincoln. Ethel described how she “already had some support when I went there [to college] or going with other people and we had the support within each other from being from this common place” (personal communication, 5/9/2015). Ethel built upon those established networks and broadened them to include additional peers from her major area of study.

When I was an undergrad, it was really helpful to have friends that were at the same school and even in the same program that were also trying to graduate. When you're around people that are also going for the same thing as you that makes it easier, I think, to keep on track. Also just wanting a better future. (personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Cecilia used the same support people in college that she had in high school.

I had a petition because I left halfway through the semester, so I had to do the whole "late withdraw two years later" type of deal. Brian [her TRIO advisor] was right there the entire time with me. I mean, if I need help with college stuff now, I call Brian. "Brian, I'm so lost! Are you going to be up here?" He's like, "Skype me. We'll figure it out." So I mean even now I'm supported. (Cecilia, personal communication, 7/28/2014)

The development of a network of professional relationships was key, as well. One student reflected that it began while in high school.

I think a lot of my teachers, especially from the eighth grade on, they taught us about making personal relationships and I had always shown interest to my teachers so they [helped] open doors...My junior year, we got to work with the Science and Aerospace Summer Program. I still have people on Facebook that I met during there. Some of them are majoring in the same thing as I am, and who know[s] what kind of doors that can open? I mean, and then at college, you're going to meet people...You're going to meet people that you'll probably either use as a reference some day or maybe who knows? It's important to have those professional

relationships and really understand how important it is. (Alea, personal communication, 5/11/2015)

What started with teachers and professors grew as participants learned how to use those networks to link to their future schooling or career.

The more professors that I knew closer [was] definitely better because everything that I've progressed in as far as my field goes then almost completely related to how I network with my professors and how they got me in line with whoever. All of those contacts I developed. I still talk to those professors about opportunities and stuff. (Taj, personal communication, 5/14/2015)

That goes back to the discussion of college is the foundation, the ground work, of your discipline, whatever you learn. A lot of employers realize that. I'm sure [who] you know, over what you know. You have that foundation. The person who knows somebody is going to get further than that person with just the same foundation. Try to make yourself marketable. (Albert, personal communication, 5/12/2015)

Interacting with instructors was one thing, but being active with the college community was another. According to Cecilia, "To have a successful college career, you need to be able to be involved in the college community. You're not just there to go to school" (personal communication, 7/28/2014). Albert reiterated Cecilia's advice and found his initial entry into college had him a bit more secluded. "When I got to college, I originally backed off and was less involved, and as I went along more and found where the opportunities were of how you could get involved, I stepped out" (personal communication, 7/29/2014). Many other participants echoed a similar experience and thought others should put themselves out there.

Try college and do all the fun stuff because I know a lot of people who tried college and they didn't really branch out and they tucked themselves away in their dorm room that whole year and ended up hating it and dropping out because they didn't enjoy themselves at all...The most that [I] took away from college was the extracurricular stuff that I did. Any club that I could join and participate in because it enriches your personal life. Kind of adds to your education in that way. I would say immerse yourself in the culture of college and really experience as much as you can while still giving the proper attention to academic[s] and not just trying to breeze through it really quick...Just experiencing everything kind of helped me feel successful. That I was able to branch out a lot more. (Taj, personal communication, 7/29/2014)

I think really put yourself out there. Joining clubs, and stuff like that really helps... I've been in Psych club for two semesters. I've been in the National Society of Leadership and Success, which I'm the Vice President of now. I've been in the GSA [Gender Sexuality Alliance] club. The Ambassador Honors society. There's one that my advisor had. It was the associate legal students' thing...When you need people, maybe they are really good at a subject that you want. You can always get help with different problems you have. A lot of ... Extracurricular activities always look good on resumes, because it means you're putting yourself out there. You're helping out. Especially with volunteering, is a really good idea, too. (Tina, personal communication, 5/4/2015)

I would probably tell them [high schoolers] that it's scary. If you're going to go to a bigger school, it's scary not having your peers there all the time. If you stick with it,

and you're stepping outside the box, you'll find there's a lot more opportunities than just in Lincoln. (Alea, personal communication, 5/11/2015)

I always thought college was about going to school and doing classes. I wish I had stepped back, went to the dorms. Go to the dorms. Have the college experience. That's how you succeed. Do your classes. Stay on your homework. Work part-time. Don't work full-time like I did. Go to school full-time. Always have a job because you get bored. But to have a successful college career, you need to be able to be involved in the college community. You're not just there to go to school. "No, I'm not going to stay in the dorms. I'm not going to do this I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to bite off more than I can chew." I wish I would have bit off a little less homework and more of the actual extracurricular activities. (Cecilia, personal communication, 7/28/2014)

Participants cited a few specific skills that aided their success in college. Tina discussed how college instructors are different than high school teachers. "Push yourself to get your assignments done because you don't really have the teachers looming over. It's harder because you've just got to get things done," she explained.

Organization was another essential skill, according to Thelma. She wanted to encourage others to develop the skill.

It's important to be organized because you're going to have those skills because I wish I would have been more organized on my scholarships and my loans and stuff, keeping track of where you're getting your loans through, and be saving money, and being prepared in that kind of way. (personal communication, 6/23/2015)

To be successful in college, participants spoke little of specific skills such as time management or organization. Participants focused on the importance of putting yourself out there and networking both with other students and professors.

### **Other Findings**

**Thoughts of returning to Lincoln.** Though most participants enjoyed growing up in a small town, only two had moved back to Lincoln after leaving for college. The reasons varied from lack of opportunities, both personal and employment, to sheer boredom.

Oh, I hated it [Lincoln]! I didn't hate it, but I knew I had no opportunities. When I moved here [a bigger city], I realized there were so many options out here. So many things I could be and so many things I could do. And there [Lincoln] I felt like I was stuck. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/4/2014)

Taj desired expanded opportunities that included more of his interests. "I just wanted more. Being very artistic in my thoughts and stuff. A small town doesn't really nourish that as much. So I felt like I wanted to go somewhere more like that" (personal communication, 7/24/2014). Lincoln could not provide this type of enrichment. Similarly, Albert's parents saw the limited opportunity potential in Lincoln.

[I left Lincoln] because I know some people don't. It goes back to my parents pushing and showing us kids there's more out there. There's more than just Lincoln. Go out and learn and experience so that you realize there is more than this and there are other opportunities and things to be involved with and places to go and be. (personal communication, 7/29/2014)

Ellen's choice to leave Lincoln related to desiring more employment options.



Well, I chose to leave for the most because I thought I needed to get out on my own and find a job. I was 18. When I graduated, I stayed with my parents for a couple of months and I really wasn't getting along with my stepdad. So, I was like, I got to get out of here. I felt I had a better chance to move out of a smaller community into a larger community. I felt that I had a better chance of getting a good start, a job to start myself off with. (personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Small town life tends to stay static. Some enjoy the predictability rural towns offer, however, that predictability can also bring boredom to its young residents.

I chose to leave because I got bored with the same stuff every day. I was just back there [visiting] this weekend and it was like, "This is the exact same as it was two and a half years ago when I left." There, nothing changes. So it gets boring. Maybe once I was retired [I would move back]. (Mya, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Cecilia and Ethel did not mind small town living. However, they found Lincoln was not where they preferred to be. Cecilia stated, "I didn't stay mostly because I've moved around a lot and when I finally found a place to settle, I didn't like it [Lincoln]" (personal communication, 7/28/2014). On the other hand, Ethel wanted to go "home" where her extended family lived.

Honestly, I probably would not move back to Lincoln, but I have actually considered moving back to Kendrick, where I originally was from, which is also a small town.

There is nothing wrong with it [Lincoln]. It's just that I don't really have family there.

It's not really where I'm from. (personal communication, 4/13/2014)

**Judgment.** An additional finding that several participants expressed was one of being judged or that Lincoln was a judgmental place. They felt that it was difficult to be different in a rural town.

When I was in high school, I decided I wanted to start reading Tarot cards and everybody thought I was a satanic worshiper or something. They [community members] start assuming things because you're a little bit different. If you say you're gay or bisexual, then everybody knows it and everybody is kind of weird about it. Then you pretty much you kinda get almost chased out in a way. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Ellen not only felt judged by her townspeople but also recognized them judging others, as well.

Like, I remember there was a part [of town] over on the east side of Lincoln that everybody called "toilet town." It was like the trailer park and a lot of kind of back-woody, hickey, hickish-type people. There was a little bit of redneckness, a little bit of racism and sometimes people got a little uppity about that, kind of looked down on them. But then there is also the rednecky type thing where it's like, "This is our town. We don't want any Mexicans here. We don't want any people who are different here." It kind of turned me away from it [the town]. I was like, "Don't judge." (personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Ethel discovered that thinking against the grain causes challenges of its own. Also, it's [Lincoln] a little more close-minded, especially towards LGBT people, which is kind of negative to me because I'm very supportive of that. So it [caused]

friction between me and other people that are not so supportive of that. (personal communication, 4/13/2014)

Cecilia was the most vocal opponent of Lincoln, with a hard stance on why she left and noting that she had no plans to return. “I haven’t been to Lincoln since Christmas. It’s been almost a year...Everybody [there] think[s] they are better than everybody” (personal communication, 7/28/2014).

### **Findings Summary**

This chapter used descriptions of participants’ lived experiences to answer the stated research questions. Participants explored the influences of family, school, and the community with accessing college. Moreover, participants described their views on what made them successful during college. Chapter Five condenses the codes created from the data into three emergent themes: finances, voice, and community.

## Chapter 5: Analysis

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the experiences of high school graduates who came from a rural community and the influences on their college entrance and completion. A small rural, Idaho community was selected to explore the college access and completion experiences of rural students who graduated from Lincoln High School between 2008 and 2011. Ten high school graduates from this rural community were interviewed.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the general themes that emerged from the participants' stories. First, I review the theoretical framework. Second, I break down each of the three themes that emerged, which included finances, voice, and community. Within each theme, I explore how the theme emerged from the participants' words. Next, I examine how each theme fits within the theoretical framework. Then, I show how the theme fits among the literature review.

### Theoretical Framework Review

**Theory of planned behavior.** The theoretical framework of this study was based on Ajzen's (1985) theory of planned behavior and Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital. The theory of planned behavior (TPB) explains decisions people make. It proposes that human behavior is guided by three factors: beliefs about the likely consequences of the behavior (behavioral beliefs), beliefs about the expectations of others (normative beliefs), and beliefs about factors that may help or hurt the performance of the behavior (control beliefs) (Ajzen, 1991). As presented in Chapter 3, Table 2 provides a graphical representation of the relationship between these constructs.

The theory of planned behavior has been used to inform studies investigating decision-making and behavior. Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, and Williams (2002) used the theory to inform their study of decision-making by male African American students concerning the completion of high school.

**Social capital theory.** Social capital is defined in a number of ways. For the purposes of this study, it is a relation between people that is used for action (Coleman, 1988, p. 100) or the “investment in social relations with expected returns” (Lin, 2001, p. 19). Coleman (1988) describes three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and sanctions.

### **Theme One: Finances**

Participants cited finances as a major challenge related to their college experience. Part of this is to be expected given that all but two participants were considered low-income while in high school. Five of the ten participants stated directly that money was their biggest obstacle. An additional two participants cited the challenge of needing to work while attending school. Financial difficulty manifested in several different ways: constant struggle to make ends meet, the cost of funding college along with the time cost of working, and participants wanting to distance themselves from the uncertainty they felt growing up. Furthermore, participants felt the struggle associated with growing up poor included a lack of stability and a feeling of continuous trial. For example, Ethel stated:

Growing up I lived very poor. There was sometimes when we lived in hotel rooms or in tents and things like that. So I know what it was like to be very poor and also to be hungry...My parents struggled through my whole childhood, never having enough money and hating their jobs all the time. (personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Thelma said, “I don't come from a wealthy family. I was just lucky that my grandma saved that money for me [for college]” (personal communication, 8/14/2014). Ellen said, “My dad was a logger. He was on a logging crew. He has been doing that his whole life so pretty much we moved where he needed us to be. So, it was a lot of moving around” (personal communication, 7/2/2014).

Also, the narrative of the participants' parents “wanting more for their children” was evident. Parents often wanted more for their children so they might not have to struggle the way they did. Many participants' parents thought their child's only chance for upward economic mobility was through college, but at the same time, they had little knowledge in how to help them get there. Discussed in the theory of planned behavior, Ajzen's (1991) behavioral beliefs describes this challenge when he states that “we learn to favor behaviors we believe have largely desirable consequences and we form unfavorable attitudes toward behaviors we associate with mostly undesirable consequences” (p. 191). Ethel's grandmother demonstrated these behaviors through her high expectations and of first-hand knowledge. Ethel stated:

My grandma was always you know, “You're so smart. You're going to go to college someday.” But of course she had never went to college. No one in my family had. That was more like, “You're going to do this,” but there was no how to do this. (personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Thelma described a similar experience. “My mom and my dad never went to college, they had no advice for me. They didn't know what to expect. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know any way to help me” (personal communication, 6/23/2015). Clarence stated:

I was the first person to attend college after high school in my family. So they thought it was really impressive and my dad wanted me to go into computers so that's what I did...So I mean he was proud of me for that. (personal communication, 5/7/2014)

Some parents may not have realized their influence. According to Taj:

I'm sure if I decided not to go to college, they would support me but I'm sure they'd rather me go to college. I think my family really encouraged me to go to college. And I think maybe if they discouraged me, I wouldn't have gone. (personal communication, 7/24/2014)

All of these participants illustrate how their parents and/or grandparents demonstrated the desirable behavior (going to college) with the implicit assumption that not going to college (undesirable behavior) was discouraged.

Coleman's social capital theory, particularly norms and sanctions, is also applicable in this situation. Established norms encourage certain behaviors while inhibiting others. A conflict exists between the spoken norm ("go to college") and the historical norm, where eight of the ten participants' parents either did not attend college or did not complete a four-year degree. Alea said, "We've been talking about college ever since I was in fourth grade" (personal communication, 8/19/2015). Thelma said:

[My] dad really didn't say much. My mom was the one that was asking me what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go and that she really wanted me to go to college and that she would help me the best she could. (personal communication, 8/4/2014)

Mya had additional influence from her stepmother:

All three of my parents [father, stepmother, mother] went to college, so it was expected that that's [what] I would do. So it was a standard that you were going to

make it through high school and you were going to go to college. That's what was expected of us. (personal communication, 8/5/2014)

Tina's mother had a positive influence on her. "I asked her if she thought I should go back to college and she said it would probably be a good idea to do that. She's been really supportive and helping me out" (personal communication, 6/25/2014). At this time, both Thelma and Tina have completed college. Parents and grandparents encouraged participants to attend college but had little to no understanding of how to do so. In turn, participants had little social capital in how to proceed.

Parents passed down the knowledge that college would be a change agent to financial security. In this case, parental encouragement toward the desirable behavior (college) was founded on the assumption that college meant more income. Ellen's family not only encouraged college but also the type of major she should choose:

I had a lot of pressure to begin with from my family. My dad and my granddad were big-time. Like, "You're going to college." I wasn't sure what I wanted to go for and...I have a lot of interests, you know? So I'm like, "Maybe I'll get into biology," and my granddad would say, "That's not going to put bread on the table." He wanted me to be a doctor, lawyer, actor. He wanted me to do the typical things that would make money and that wasn't what it was about for me. (personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Albert shared a similar situation:

One, growing up in the household I did, it was college ingrained. "You'll get more opportunities. Go and learn. At the time I was in high school, started the economic downturn, too. So then it was, "Well, there aren't any jobs if you don't go to college."



So that kind of a more emphasis and that actually played a little bit [of a] role into the degree I decided to pursue. (personal communication, 7/29/2014)

Mya was influenced by her parents and what they had been able to provide since they had college degrees. “I mean I saw the amount of fun and stuff and where it got my parents by going to college and the stuff we were able to have because my parents went to college. And so being able to see that made me want to go” (personal communication, 8/14/2014). Parents had the ability to influence their child’s behavior whether the parents had attended college or not.

The parental influence on college attendance for their children is supported in research conducted by Byun and Kim (2014). In their study, they found a positive relationship of college completion if parents and participants discussed college (2014). However, in a contrary way, the findings from this dissertation study found that two participants completed degrees when parents had not talked about college. Additionally, three participants who have not completed college had parents who discussed going to college. Byun and Kim also found that if parents prepared financially for their child’s college, the participant was even more likely to graduate from college. Three participants who completed a college degree had grandparents, not parents, who financially prepared for their post-secondary education. In addition, three participants completed college whose parents or grandparents had either not prepared financially for college or did not mention it during the course of the interviews. Two participants whose parents financially prepared for their child’s college have not completed college. The remaining two participants who have not completed college also did not have parents or grandparents who saved for their college. While this study cannot be generalized, what it does suggest is that parental discussion of

college and preparing financially for participants is a bit more complicated and needs further study.

Ragland (2016) found that levels of state need- and merit-based aid was a predictive indicator of low-income student college graduation. Five of the ten participants received scholarships, with three of those participants graduating from college. The challenge several participants cited was the lack of receiving scholarships after their freshman year, when the financial aid package often has the sweetest deal. Johnson (2014), while examining financial aid in California, discovered that students are more likely to go to a four-year college initially if they receive grant aid than those who do not. Eight of the ten participants in this study attended a four-year college directly after high school. However, the most likely reason behind this choice was the distance of the closest in-state community college, about 175 miles from Lincoln.

The costs of college revealed challenges to participants, as well, and these costs went beyond just tuition. Participants had a difficult time balancing school, work, and family, and often school paid the ultimate price. Clarence found, "I just got out on my own and I had a hard time balancing work, going to college, bills, all at the same time. I figured out you kind of have to do everything" (personal communication, 5/7/2014). Tina and her husband were both going to college and working full-time but found that they still were not making enough money. Tina made the decision to drop out to get a full-time job and provide the support for her husband to complete college. Unfortunately, the relationship didn't last. Tina later returned to college with the help of scholarships and federal student aid. Yet, she recognized how close she was to returning to work and leaving school, again, if funding fell through.

I figured if I didn't get any scholarships, then I probably wouldn't be able to go. And my first year, I got a full ride. I didn't have to pay for anything. I only went one year, so...I have to sign up for more scholarships. It[']s just the same now, if I didn't get any funding. If I didn't get any Pell grant or scholarships, I know I wouldn't be able to afford it. I'd probably just be working instead of going to school. (personal communication, 6/27/2014)

Participants also struggled to work enough to pay for college while at the same time putting enough time into school to succeed. Cecilia suggested that future college students consider “not working full-time. Definitely not working full-time. Forty hours a week, when you are doing full-time college, is not possible. Well, it's possible, but you're going to be stressed out to the hilt” (personal communication, 7/28/2014). Ellen found that when she did not have to work, she did better in school:

I work seasonally during the summer at a park and then I had all winter to focus on school. I could sit there and focus and study and I had straight A's there for a while and did really good, and then it just kind of petered off a little bit because I had to go back to work and all the other stuff that was going on in life. (personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Budgeting time, money, and school proved to be a challenge for participants and one they did not necessarily expect. The challenges of balancing work and school affirmed research conducted by Mehta, Newbold, and O'Rourke (2011), who found that first-generation students have more outside time and financial obligations as they enter college. Of the eight first-generation participants, five worked while attending college. Overall, seven of the ten participants worked while in college, ranging from part-time to full-time.

However, staying in Lincoln to live and work while at college was not an option. The nearest college was 75 miles away. This is in sharp contrast to urban students who can continue to live and work in their community while attending college. Many urban students continue to work in their community after college graduation. Eight of the ten participants stated that they would not move back to Lincoln after graduation. Reasons varied from lack of opportunities to not feeling part of the community.

Thelma knew that she had limited opportunities and felt like she was stuck. Albert's parents felt similarly and encouraged their children to explore other options.

[I left Lincoln] because I know some people don't. It goes back to my parents pushing and showing us kids there's more out there. There's more than just Lincoln. Go out and learn and experience so that you realize there is more than this and there are other opportunities and things to be involved with and places to go and be. (personal communication, 7/29/2014)

Ellen felt that she had more employment options outside of Lincoln. "I had a better chance moving out of a smaller community into a larger community...a better chance of getting a good start, a job to start myself off with" (personal communication, 7/2/2014).

Thelma, Albert, and Ellen confirm the concept of "brain drain," where rural youth leave their community for additional economic and educational opportunities in urban areas (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Schafft et al., 2011). Lincoln's largest employer of college-educated workers is the school district, and only Albert wanted to be a teacher. Unfortunately for him, he was an art teacher and arts education is often the first victim of funding cuts.

Cecilia and Ethel did not mind small town living. However, they found that Lincoln was not where they preferred to be. Cecilia stated, "I didn't stay mostly because I've moved

around a lot and when I finally found a place to settle, I didn't like it [Lincoln]" (personal communication, 7/28/2014). On the other hand, Ethel wanted to go "home," where her extended family lived.

Honestly, I probably would not move back to Lincoln, but I have actually considered moving back to Kendrick, where I originally was from, which is also a small town.

There is nothing wrong with it [Lincoln]. It's just that I don't really have family there. It's not really where I'm from. (personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Many participants thought of being low-income as a habit that they wanted to drop. They sought to make a better life for themselves and their future families than their parents had been able to provide. Phrases such as "I'm not going back there" or "I want more" were common from participants. They felt as if they had control over their financial future. In the theory of planned behavior, Ajzen calls these control beliefs (1991). Higher resources and opportunities lower the obstacles, resulting in higher control over an outcome. Participants were influenced to pursue college because they felt that they could control the output.

I was the only one out of my family that wanted to do it [attend college] and I wanted a better career path. Because before I was going to college, I was working a pretty decent job that I was making a little bit over minimum wage. And I was like, I haven't been through it that long but I don't want to make next to nothing. I want to learn something in college and try to increase my income. (Clarence, personal communication, 5/7/2014)

Not only did I want something better for my life, but I also kind of wanted to prove to my family that you can become something more than just what my family is...I knew that it was only up to me and no one else would be there to...like it was just me doing

the work...I felt better about myself knowing that I could actually have a career for me and my future family. Living comfortably and having things that you enjoy and that makes your family happy. Money doesn't buy happiness, but it helps. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/14/2014)

I wanted to make sure I got a good job because my parents struggled through my whole childhood, never having enough money and hating their jobs all the time. So I really wanted to go [to college] and I didn't want just to be a waitress or a bartender or a shopkeeper or something. I wanted to go and do something other than that...The expectation to get a better job and a better life and not be poor...That was a very big motivator for me. No matter how hard it got, I was like, "If I finish this, then I'm okay. I won't have to worry about those things anymore." (Ethel, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Participants desired a better life and believed that a college degree, with its promise of a higher earning potential, would deliver it. Possessing a college degree did not guarantee a brighter financial future, but it certainly increased the chances.

### **Theme Two: Voices**

All participants talked of different influences on their decisions concerning college. While the voices that the participants first heard were from family, community members, or school personnel, over time and with experience, a stronger voice emerged from within, and this voice was the participants' own, telling them that college was *their* choice, not someone else's. The following section chronicles the participants' experiences in this regard.

**Outside voices.** The term *outside voices* means influences from those who surround the participant. Participants heard outside voices from many angles, whether from family,

peers, or the community. The voices came in both positive and negative forms, and they influenced participants' behavior. Positive forms involved encouragement and support, while negative forms ranged from lack of comment to out-and-out discouragement. Social capital theory's concepts concerning *obligations and expectations* states that obligations and expectations come from doing something for someone else with the expectation that they will do something in return for you in the future (Coleman, 1988). In this way, people are influenced by what others think and say. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior has a similar term called normative beliefs, which are beliefs about the expectations of others.

Participants in the study spoke strongly of the expectations that others communicated to them about going to college or not. Family, peers, and community influenced the participants, some from a very young age, about college access and completion.

**Family.** A person's family can have a large impact on one's decisions. Family, for the purposes of this study, includes parents, grandparents, and siblings. Studies have shown that parents influence their child's college attendance in spite of whether they themselves have graduated from college (Byun et al., 2012; Oseguera, 2013). It is worth mentioning that only two of the ten participants' parents graduated with a bachelor's degree, yet parents had an influence on their child concerning college. One participant, Taj, recognized the influence that his family had on his decision to attend college. "I think my family really encouraged me to go to college. And maybe if they discouraged me, I wouldn't have gone" (personal communication, 7/24/2014).

Clarence's parents did not attend college, yet they were proud of him when he started. "I was the first person to attend college after high school in my family. They [my family] thought it was really impressive and my dad wanted me to go into computers so that's what I

did. So, I mean he was proud of me for that” (personal communication, 5/7/2014). Pleasing one’s parents was part of the return on investment that participants wished to give back.

Some parents began the college discussion when their child was young. Alea said, “They've always been trying to help me decide which major. And they've always been supportive in every way. We've been talking about college ever since I was in fourth grade” (personal communication, 8/19/2014). Mya and Albert’s parents had attended and completed college. There was an unspoken expectation in their families that not attending college was not really an option.

All three of my parents [father, mother, stepfather] went to college so it was expected that’s [what] I would do. It was a standard that you were going to make it through high school and you were going to go to college. There was no question that that's where I was going. Being able to see that made me want to go. I mean I saw the amount of fun and stuff and where it got my parents by going to college and the stuff we were able to have because my parents went to college. (Mya, personal communication, 8/15/2014)

One, growing up in the household I did, it was college ingrained. We never sat down and said, “College, this is what you should do and should not.” I've just kind of always known you go to college. They [my parents] say, “Whatever you do, whatever you choose to do. Do what you like. Do what you love and you'll be ok.” But it was always kind of implied you should go to college and learn and take in that experience at least. And then as it got further along in school, they were like, discussed more the economics and benefits and that side. At the time I was in high school started the



economic downturn, too. So then it was, "Well, there aren't any jobs if you don't go to college." (Albert, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

Mothers played a particular part in four participants' stories. While the mothers had not attended or completed college, two supported their child in the best way they knew how.

Um, my dad really didn't say much. My mom was the one that was asking me what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go and that she really wanted me to go to college and that she would help me the best she could. I think a lot of it was everyone talked about it. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/4/2014)

My mom didn't go to college. She got married right out of high school. My dad, he went for a couple of years but he never graduated or got a degree or anything. He went, but he ended up marrying my mom, so... My mom helped me. She helped me with money a little bit to get out and go to college. My mom's always been there for me. (Tina, personal communication, 6/27/2014)

The other two mothers were more direct about their concerns with attending college. They did not want their child to attend college if the child wasn't ready or needed more time to grow up.

Well, she [my mother] was supportive of me going to college, but she was more like, "If you're not ready right now and you want to go experience the real world, then you go for it." She said, "If you're not ready [then] you're going to be paying a lot of money to go to college." (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

My mom doesn't even have her GED. She dropped out in the ninth grade. My mom kind of looks at it like... "You don't need college to succeed. You need to find your

own feet and then go to school instead of going to college, spending all this money, and going some totally different place and letting your degree go to waste.” (Cecilia, personal communication, 7/28/2014)

A parent also played a role when participants left college prior to completion.

Cecilia’s stepfather expressed his concern when she dropped out of college: “He was not [impressed] when I dropped out of school. He's like, ‘You're going to go back. You can't not go back. You love to learn. You're always going to be in school’” (personal communication, 7/28/2014).

Participants listened to their parents and the expectations they held. However, parents were often not the only voices that participants heard on the subject.

Grandparents played an important role as well. It did not seem to matter that relatively few grandparents had attended college themselves. Ethel’s grandmother and mother gave conflicting advice. “He [my brother] got the same message as me, I think. Our grandma was very much, ‘Stay in school, go to college.’ Our mom was kind of like, ‘You know, whatever you want to do’” (personal communication, 5/9/2015). Thelma’s grandmother relayed her own positive college experience to her granddaughter. Ellen felt pressured by both her father and grandfather to attend college.

I had a lot of pressure to begin with from my family. My dad and my granddad were big-time, like, “You're going to college.” I felt an obligation to do it for my family to make things ok for them. It is a big concern for my granddad. My granddad is not doing well at all right now. He's getting up there and he's quite feeble. I think he would feel more at ease. I felt like I needed to do that because he prepared me and prepared that fund for me. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Siblings influenced participants' behavior in much the same way as parents and grandparents. Nine of the ten participants had siblings in their family. Seven had older siblings, while two participants were the oldest child in their family. Tina's sister helped her decide which college to attend. "That [my sister's opinion] influenced where I was going. She said it was a really great college" (personal communication, 5/4/2015). Albert had older sisters whom he followed to college. Upon reflection, he found their impact to be stronger than his parents'.

One of the biggest pushes would be my oldest sister and my other sister. My sister went to college when I was in third grade. I remember coming up to visit her here [at college] and I got to experience it at that young of an age. They [my sisters] are even the ones I still listen to a little bit about going and getting my master's... I think it's kind of in [your] nature sometimes. Your parents always tell you, this, this, this, and you do your best to listen to them, but at the same time, it's your parents. "Oh, they haven't gone through it recently. They don't quite fully understand." Having a sister who is a fellow sibling, she's just recently...gone through it. You see where she is going in her life and the success that she's had. I think that plays a role into my acceptance of it. (personal communication, 5/12/2015)

Taj held a similar belief, stating, "I think siblings are seen more equal... If I had a bigger brother and he went to college versus if my dad went to college, [I] would probably see my brother going as more attainable" (personal communication, 5/14/2015). However, not every participant held their sibling's experience in a positive light. Ethel's brother gave her an idea of what she *did not* want to do:

He [My brother] actually dropped out of high school at 16. He actually tried to drop out earlier than that, but he couldn't without my mom's permission and she wouldn't give it. He stayed in school for a year but just completely didn't participate. He went to school, but he didn't do anything. He never even finished high school. He did eventually get his GED. After that, he hasn't really done anything with it. I guess we're almost complete opposites on that front. (personal communication, 5/9/2015)

Participants built social capital from their families' expectations that they go to college. The expectations that family held for their children, grandchildren, and siblings influenced participants' normative beliefs as well. This is in line with Coleman's (1988) description of obligations and expectations, as well as Ajzen's (1991) normative beliefs.

**Peers.** Four participants discussed the influence of peers in their decision to attend, or not attend, college. Holland (2011) in her study of urban African-American students, found that peers had a "noteworthy influence" (p. 1029), either positive or negative, on their friends' academics, college planning, and college attendance decision-making. This study supports those findings. Taj discussed the strong influence of his peers. "I got my acceptance letter. Am I going or not? My friends were going and I didn't want to feel like I was left behind" (personal communication, 7/24/2014). Alea used her sister in a similar example. "She [my sister] likes having her peer group. If her friends decide not to go to college, then she'll probably decide that, too, but if they decide to go to college, then she'll do that, too" (personal communication, 5/11/2015). Clarence cited the large number of his classmates who went on to college. "I went to [college] with a few of my peers from the area I went to high school in. My graduating class was only 31. But I'm confident at least 14 of them probably went to college" (personal communication, 5/7/2014).

Currently, a gap in research exists specifically in how this influence may differ between rural and urban students, a gap that warrants further study. Half of the participants had lived in Lincoln prior to the start of elementary school. Given the small class and school size, they interacted with nearly the same students for the duration of their entire educational career, and because of this unique situation, research outcomes on rural students may differ from those of urban students.

Older peers played a part in influencing college choice, as well, according to Ethel. They served as a model to follow.

I had friends from the class ahead of me that went [to college]. So they were already there. I came to visit them. I'd see the student side of it. You know, you see the tour but that doesn't show you student life, really. But I kind of got to see that, as well.

That [having peers from Lincoln] was really helpful because I already knew them and we could carpool when we needed to go back to see family. (personal communication, 4/30/2014)

In their study concerning peer influence on college attendance, Hill et al. (2015) found that peers do have an influence. However, participants in this study often did not attend college immediately after graduation and, additionally, chose less selective colleges. However, this can be different in rural areas where a lack of options exist concerning further education. As noted earlier, the closest college of any type to Lincoln was 75 miles away, and the closest in-state college was more than 100 miles away. Of those four participants who specifically mentioned peer influence, all four attended college the fall after high school graduation, which suggests that these participants did not experience the gap in college enrollment that the students in Hill's study did. The participants' peers exerting a positive

influence instead of a negative one may account for this. An additional consideration is that a lack of options (e.g., jobs or advanced schooling) led participants toward college attendance immediately following high school graduation.

**Community.** Community, in the context of this study, includes those people who are neither family nor peers. Participants thought of community as both school employees and other people who considered Lincoln home. Community members were not generally the primary influences on participants in relation to college, but they still affected participants' actions.

Though family had strong social capital relating to obligations and expectations and normative beliefs, most parents and grandparents lacked the information channel social capital necessary to answer participants' questions about how to access or complete college. According to Coleman's (1988) theory, information channels yield social capital as one seeks information from others prior to action. There is neither an obligation to act on nor an expectation to receive the information. The information is simply gathered prior to making a decision. Since eight of the ten participants were first-generation college students, their parents did not possess the information needed to make an informed decision concerning college. Participants were not upset with their family for not having the information, however, the lack of information forced participants to seek the information from other sources, mostly at their school.

Since my mom and my dad never went to college, they had no advice for me. They didn't know what to expect. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know any way to help me, so it was me relying on my own knowledge and asking teachers and

advisors and stuff like that for help, so at least I'd have the knowledge. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/14/2014)

I definitely plan on being involved in my kids' academic career a lot more than my own mother was. I want to help them through that process. My mom didn't know how to help me. I don't feel like she didn't want to, I just think she didn't know how.

(Ethel, personal communication, 6/23/2015)

My parents always told me college was expected but my Ag teacher was always the one who really supported me and going for what I wanted to go to college for, not necessarily what everybody else wanted me to go to college for. And picking where I wanted to go, not where everyone else wanted [me] to go. (Mya, personal communication, 8/5/2014)

As the school district was the largest employer of college-educated people, it was not surprising that participants approached school district employees about insights into college access and attendance. Alea thought of her teachers as always helping with financial aid or applying for scholarships. As well, two other participants found the information that they received from the school helpful.

I think it [college] was actually supported because I felt like in high school that's what we talked about. We were playing like, "Oh, what are you going to do after you graduate? What are *you* going to do? Where are you going to work at?" And then the counselors and all our teachers were helping us fill out our FAFSA and filling out and writing essays for scholarships and thinking about where I want to go and what I want

to do for college. I think a lot of it was everyone talked about it. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/4/2014)

It was more the school that was telling me [to go to college] and then I brought it home. I don't know what I wanted when I was growing up. I wanted to be a rock star (laughs). I don't think I knew what it took to get to what I wanted. I just think I knew what I wanted. Like I knew I wanted to do something in art, somehow. And not until high school did I know I had to go to college to do it. And even then I just wanted to be an artist, just a painter or something. Everyone around me kind of told me that "you probably should have a backup plan." So that kind of evolved from people telling me that kind of stuff. Yeah. It was late when I started thinking about college, when I think about it. (Taj, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

Teachers helped participants gain the necessary information capital to complete the college access process as well as examine possible academic majors, which fit into future employment desires. This supports the research of Brown et al. (2016), which states that low-income, first-generation students rely on others to help them contextualize college information. Though teachers possessed information, they also had expectations that participants would go to college. Participants saw the community as having similar expectations. Arnold et al. (2005) found that the higher aspirations that communities held for their children, the more likely the youth would stay in college. In contrast, Arnold et al. additionally found that communities can negatively influence those children for whom they hold lower aspirations. Research participants described a similar experience, where expectations and aspirations were not the same for all students at the school.



I felt like when I was in Lincoln, a lot of the teachers and stuff didn't really encourage people going to college. There were the top kids in the class and sure, college might be good for them, but for everyone else, it's like, "That's for really smart people. It's going to be way too hard for you." I think that probably persuaded a lot of people that could have easily made it in college, but they just got the message that, "That's really hard. That's not really your thing. It's not worth your time to try." That attitude, I think is just not valid. I think they made college sound harder than it really is. (Ethel, personal communication, 5/9/2015)

Five of the ten participants felt as though they were part of what they described as the chosen few who were expected to attend college based on their good grades in high school or on aptitude that others, such as teachers and community members, witnessed. Alea found positive backing from community members who thought that college would be a good decision. According to her, "I was the type that could probably hack it" (personal communication, 8/19/2014). Cecilia received a more pointed message: "Everybody [in the community] was like, 'Go to college or you're going to fail at life.' So, they're supportive of college." (personal communication, 7/28/2014). Mya and Ethel felt similarly supported.

They [the community/teachers] were really supportive. I think mainly because I was involved in FFA [Future Farmers of America] and stuff. I was always one of the "smart cookies" type person that it was expected [that] they would [go to college]. They were proud of me that I was able to get to that point. (Mya, personal communication, 8/5/2014)

I think on one hand there was like a "Yay! You four go out and go to college. You're the smart students. You go do that." At the same time, it was almost kind of weird

because most of the other people were just staying there and they were just going to get jobs in the area and just stay there. (Ethel, personal communication, 4/30/2014)

Albert, who was not first-generation, experienced the push or expectations of the community that he go to college. He was seen as having college potential by school and community members, and he knew that not everyone was encouraged to go to college.

I'd say that it's almost a toss-up, 50/50, of some people saying...not like anybody said, "You shouldn't go to college." But it was like, if you didn't, that's ok, that's fine. But you also have people, particularly with the school or in church, that would push you more and suggest and recommend that you go to college. (personal communication, 7/29/2014)

The community's expectations were not unlike those of family and peers. Participants receiving social capital consistently described the expectations they felt applied by family, peers, and community members. The outside voices encouraged participants to attend college. However, it was the inside voice that helped participants go beyond accessing college to completing college.

**Inside Voice.** The term *inside voice* refers to a shift in what drives an individual's behavior, changing from others' expectations to a realization that success or failure depends on the individual and their self-efficacy. As a reminder, academic self-efficacy is the "perception a person has that they have the ability to accomplish various tasks related to school" (Thomas, 2014, p. 227). Four of the ten participants said, "It was all up to me," or they used the term "I" instead of "them" or "we."

It was never like, "Oh my gosh! You have to go to college," like some people force their kids to follow them through college. It was just. I did it all myself. I chose where

I wanted to go. It was kind of all me. My parents never really expected it. It was just awesome to do. I decided to go [to college] and it ended up being really fun and I liked it...I guess I had better self-esteem in myself... I did it all myself. (Tina, personal communication, 6/24/2014)

Finishing school [college] is one of my top priorities because I feel that if I quit, then I'm just going to fail. It's not going to solve anything to quit. It's only going to make things more difficult. If I persevere and focus and finish school, it will make me a stronger person in general. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Participants spoke of their future selves and the control they felt over that possibility. Ajzen's (1991) control beliefs describe this feeling as beliefs about factors that may help or hurt the performance of the behavior. The behavior in this situation was completing college.

I knew that it was only up to me and no one else would be there...It was just me doing the work...Not only did I want something better for my life, but I also kind of wanted to prove to my family that you can become something more than just what my family is. It [college] would help me figure out what I want to do in my life because that's kind of what helped me do that. Also, it helped me realize that you have to work for something that you want. So it gave me motivation, determination, a sense of self because you really found yourself. I felt better about myself knowing that I could actually have a career for me and my future family. (Thelma, personal communication, 8/4/2014)

I think it [college] is going to be interesting. I'm 23 now and I'll be a sophomore being older than the other kids. Where kids that are going in that are coming straight

from high school, being like, "I want to do this," whereas I'm in a job that has *made* me want to do that. [Success is] being able to have a steady job that has a future in it, not just a dead-end job working at the local grocery store. Being able to have a job where I'd be able to get promotions and things like that and have the things I've always wanted to have...Because I knew to have a successful future that's what I was going to have to do. (Mya, personal communication, 8/5/2014)

Thelma and Mya understood the work required to finish college. Their desire and image of their future self helped them to feel control over college success and completion. Naumann et al. (2003) reviewed factors that influence first-generation student success in college and found a positive correlation between control beliefs and student strategies (e.g., accessing academic resources and choosing relevant learning strategies). This study supports their finding in that participants with increased control beliefs were able to access more successful student strategies.

### **Theme Three: Community**

Almost every participant talked about experiencing a sense of community while living in Lincoln. Community was so much more than a geographical location. It elicited a feeling of belonging. Community made them feel independent, supported, and comfortable by offering a sense of freedom and safety while, at the same time, knowing that everyone knew each other and were familiar with each other's lives. Community was important to each participant, yet attending college meant leaving the community. In turn, several participants found themselves developing their own, new community.

Putnam (2000) uses the terms *bonding* and *bridging* to explain how social capital is developed by being in a community. Bonding social capital reinforces groups and their

exclusiveness. Bonding social capital is built within a rural community by knowing and understanding that one belongs to a community. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, encourages inclusion across different groups. An example of bridging social capital occurs when a person from a rural area goes to college and sees the benefits of joining multiple new groups with a variety of capital to offer.

**Established community.** Lincoln's community was established long before the participants arrived. Beyond a geographical location, participants reported that their community provided a sense of belonging as well as a strong culture built on established norms and traditions. Every participant described the bonding social capital they felt living in Lincoln. Alea said that she "felt comfortable [in Lincoln] and my family was there" (personal communication, 8/19/2014). Thelma had a similar experience: "I had more people around me that knew me and that I knew them. I felt like I had more support and it [Lincoln] was more relaxed. And everyone got along with everyone more than in a bigger town" (personal communication, 8/4/2014).

Bonding social capital in Lincoln provided security to participants as well as ties to others in the community. These ties were important to participants not only for belonging but also for establishing their own unique place in the community. This is paralleled in Brown and Schafft's (2011) research, which found that community members have a shared identity.

I prefer Lincoln but then like my family is in Lincoln, friends live in Lincoln. I mean, that's where I grew up. I know so many people in Lincoln. There's just something about the small town that I like. I liked how small it [Lincoln] was. My dad was a carpenter, so he knew everybody. Everybody knew him so we had a good name and all that. (Clarence, personal communication, 5/7/2014)

When I was in sixth grade, my mom would let me and my friend go swimming down at the river all day long every day of the summer by ourselves or we'd go running around by ourselves. It was that kind of freedom, not having to worry about many things. [The] disconnect from the outer world, too. It goes back to the slower pace of life. Everybody knows everybody. You get a lot more town involvement. You have the town pride. I really enjoy that. (Albert, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

Participants' accounts supported statements by Derden (2011) and Poplin (1972) who found in their research that a community provides a strong social network that has powerful, local cultural meanings and provides a common bond to its members who "share a common fate." Participants' statements also supported findings by Byun, Meece and Irvin (2012), who found that rural students had more advantages in community social resources than their non-rural counterparts. Community social resources included parents knowing their child's friends and the frequency of communication with the parents of a child's friends.

Wood Jr. and Judikis (2002) demonstrated that community connotes a belief that people watch out for each other and care for the group. Ellen found the helping nature of her community as well as the protection she felt from being a member of the community.

They'll [Lincoln] reach out to you and help if you're in a pickle. I think that's a great thing...Pretty much everything was in walking distance. If you wanted to go over to so and so's house, you could, pretty much let your kids walk over and you can be confident that they can get over there and you talk to your neighbors enough if somebody stopped and talked to your kid they'd probably know you and say, "I saw some guy talking to your kid." There's a little more protection there, I think. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

Community members consider school as the center of the town (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The rural school is the social point of contact. Rural youth are part of the whole community, the town. One cannot help but interact with community members in a rural town, which often happens at the local school.

I think you kind of get thrown out in the world...instead of knowing every single person in your school because you only have a hundred people in all four grades. You're with 4,000 other kids. It isn't like a big family anymore. It's a little scarier... You had a lot more of a personal relationship with your teachers, whereas in a larger school, you'd be lucky if they remember your name in the hallway instead of just your name in front on the paper, but like at Lincoln, a lot of times your science teacher was also your basketball coach, and you saw them all the time at the grocery store and stuff, and if you ever had a question on anything, they were more than happy to help you 'cause in a smaller school everyone knows everyone. (Alea, personal communication, 5/11/2015)

Personally knowing their teachers left an impression on participants. Ethel described another unique quality of rural schools. "My high school was really small, so I knew all of the teachers even if I wasn't in their class" (personal communication, 5/19/2015). Taj's experience echoed Ethel's. He appreciated the fact that it is harder to hide or slip through the cracks in a rural school.

When I was applying [to college], I was kind of nervous to be out in that world. I felt like I was very sheltered in my small town with my family and everything...I really enjoyed the school life part of it. Because you get to know everybody in your school. You get a really close relationship with your teachers. Very one-on-one. I feel like in

a city that's not quite as possible and you can kind of go underneath the radar.

(personal communication, 7/24/2014)

Another positive aspect of rural schools, from the participants' view, was the flexibility that teachers can exercise due to small class sizes. Mya described her high school physics class in Lincoln compared with classes at a larger high school.

I like that it's a small town because it's a smaller school so you're able to have smaller class sizes. Like my physics class was three people. So being able to have that one-on-one attention in physics and go completely off the book and say, "Well, we want to build catapults." When I went to a bigger [school], it sucked because you had to do exactly what was in the curriculum. You couldn't go and be like, "Hey, I want to build this project," and because there was five kids, the teacher would say, "Yeah, go ahead." It was nice to have that individualized attention. (personal communication, 8/5/2014)

While participants appreciated the community they experienced in Lincoln, they also talked about how they wanted to get out of Lincoln because of the lack of opportunities it provided. Participants did not have a choice but to leave home, considering that the closest college was 75 miles away and that the cost of daily commuting, both in time and money, was too expensive.

Although the community did not want to see their youth move away, they nonetheless expressed the idea that leaving was the only option for economic and personal growth. Ethel said, "It was like a 'Yay! Go out and do stuff,' but at the same time it's kind of weird because you're apart from the community because you're doing that" (personal communication, 4/30/2014). Even when she first moved there, Thelma realized that many opportunities were



not available in Lincoln. Tina expressed, “I think people think it's a good idea [to go to college]. Lincoln is kind of a poorer community so, ‘If you got the money or the funds, do it. Get out of here and make something of yourself’” (personal communication, 6/27/2014).

Many other participants echoed their classmates.

It goes back to my parents pushing and showing us kids there's more out there than just Lincoln. Become successful, pursue a promising career and even more so get out of Lincoln. Get out and experience...Realize there is more than this and there are other opportunities and things to be involved with and places to go and be. (Albert, personal communication, 7/29/2014)

It's like if you're here [Lincoln], you're never going to make it. One of the old substitutes [teacher], told me when I ran into her last Christmas, "Just get out of Lincoln. If you come back here, you're just barely going to survive. Go to school and get out of here." (Cecilia, personal communication, 7/28/2014)

I'm planning this fall on moving back [to Lincoln]. If I don't find something substantial there, I'm going to have to move elsewhere into a larger, near a larger place. I don't want to live in the city. I like smaller communities. It's just harder to find work in small communities. (Ellen, personal communication, 7/2/2014)

The simultaneous push and pull from the community provided a certain level of disconnect for participants. Participants felt strong connections to their family, school, and community and, for the most part, enjoyed the support and protection they provided. However, participants were then told, both verbally and non-verbally, that staying in Lincoln was not an option if they desired more opportunities and economic freedom.

As mentioned earlier in relation to finances, Coleman (1988) discusses norms and sanctions as a form of social capital. However, the norms and sanctions that participants described when talking about community differ from those concerning finances. Community norms are expressed less verbally and more modeled through behavior. Participants used terms such as “personal support”, “watching out for one another”, “belonging”, and “legacy” in describing what they liked about their small hometown. These norms were important to them not only when growing up but also in the communities they built after leaving Lincoln.

**Building community.** Participants found ways to create their own new community, much like the small one that they grew up in. The bonding social capital that participants built as a resident of Lincoln gave them the desire to rebuild a new community at college in which to find belonging and support. However, in order to build a new community, participants first had to reach out and develop ties with new people and new groups through bridging social capital.

Five of the ten participants spoke of the importance of “putting yourself out there.” This was meant in a way of stretching, of trying things outside of their comfort zone, such as meeting new people, joining a new club, or simply being away from home. Tina, Albert, and Alea spoke of how their rural upbringing helped them in college.

[Being] more personal with my teachers because in [Lincoln] everybody knew each other. That's how it is at [the college I attended] anyway but I'm kind of used to it. It was just easy for me to get in there and call my teachers by their first names. Some people probably wouldn't be as comfortable with that. (Tina)

I would say one thing is the friendliness to go out and meet new people and be able to not be shy and miss those opportunities. [Being] willing to help, and, vice versa,

being able to help other people a lot. [It's] relationships and, kind of, what comes around goes around. (Albert)

A lot of my teachers, especially from like eighth grade on, they taught us about making personal relationships, and I had always shown interest to my teachers, so they opened doors. I got to work with Idaho Housing and Finance Bureau when I was a freshman. My junior year, we got to work with the Idaho Science and Aerospace Summer Program. I still have people on Facebook that I met during there. Some of them are majoring in the same thing as I am, and who knows what kind of doors that can open? I mean, and then at college, you're going to meet people. You're going to meet people that you'll probably either use as a reference some day or maybe who knows? It's important to have those professional relationships. (Alea)

The effort to be uncomfortable does require a degree of vulnerability that something would or could go wrong and the participant could feel embarrassment. Overall, the risk was worth it. Cecilia said, "To have a successful college career, you need to be able to be involved in the college community. You're not just there to go to school" (personal communication, 7/28/2014). Other participants mentioned the same benefits of involvement. Participants' experiences are supported by findings from Byun, Irvin & Meece (2012), who found that rural students who participated in social clubs and/or fraternities or sororities were more likely to earn a college degree.

The more professors I knew closer [was] definitely better because how I've progressed in my field [is] almost completely related to how I networked with my professors and how they got me in line with whoever. All of those contacts I developed. I still talk to those professors about opportunities and stuff...I was able to

branch out a lot more... In order to succeed you need to know how to deal with people. (Taj, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

I've had the opportunity through a couple honor societies I've been with to travel and go to conferences. For me, it worked out really well because I was in an engineering honor society and you have a bunch of engineering professionals who were top of their class also at these events. Being able to make those connections, you never know. It's just being open and seeing those opportunities, and just to meet people. That goes back to the discussion of college is the foundation, the ground work, of your discipline, whatever you learn. The person who knows somebody is going to get further than that person with just the same foundation. (Albert, personal communication, 7/24/2014)

The new community was a way of developing social capital information channels. Whether it had to do with studying or finding work, participants took the knowledge of networking that they learned and that was valuable in their rural community and used it to develop support systems around them. Albert had friends from high school who went to the same college as he did, "so it probably helped that there was a little community around me that was going to college." Ethel had a similar experience:

I guess already having some support when I went there or going with other people, and we had support within each other from being from this common place... When I was an undergrad it was really helpful to have friends that were at the same school and even in the same program that were also trying to graduate. When you're around people that are also going for the same thing as you that makes it easier, I think, to keep on track. (personal communication, 05/29/2015)

Cecilia appreciated the support she received from her college community. It mimicked her rural community in that she felt she could reach out to others when she needed help and they, in turn, would be willing to provide help.

I had a girlfriend, who is now in the Navy that lived in [the dorms]. I loved going to the galley and sitting with everybody. If somebody is good at math, you can ask them. If somebody is good in English, "Can you read my paper?" If you're having a bad time, you have somebody there...somebody who is going through your exact situation at that time. (personal communication, 7/28/2014)

While participants described the necessity of leaving Lincoln to pursue college opportunities, it is evident that the norms they learned and experienced in Lincoln continued to influence their behavior after they left. Howley and Howley (2000) described a rural town as a tight-knit community to which members have a strong commitment. Community was so important to participants that they created new, comparable communities at their respective colleges.

### **Analysis Summary**

Chapter 5 provided an analysis of the general themes that emerged from the participants' interviews, which included finances, voice, and community. First, I reviewed the theoretical framework. Second, I broke down each of the three themes that emerged, exploring how the theme arose from the participants' words. Next, I examined how each theme fits within the theoretical framework. I also discussed how the themes were situated among the literature review.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Recommendations

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the college access and completion experiences of high school graduates from a rural community. The case study involved ten rural students and their experiences concerning college access and completion. The study did not attempt to examine all rural students, but to examine rural students in a particular area and their experiences. The students' voices told the story of unique affordances and challenges during their college journey. As a critical qualitative researcher, I am conscious of personal positionality as a former rural student who attended college and now works in college access and completion. With this positionality in mind, I let the participants' stories come through as unfiltered as possible.

In the previous chapters, the research objective was described and research questions reviewed. Then, the rural literature was examined, which showed rural students were often included in other underrepresented populations, such as first-generation, low-income, and minority. Rural area students, while intersecting differing underrepresented characteristics, encounter experiences unique to college access and completion that low-income, first-generation, non-rural students do not face. Rural students' unique qualities have only been examined in a few quantitative studies and even fewer qualitative studies. The theoretical frameworks of planned behavior and social capital were introduced. The choice to use both qualitative research and a case study methodology was examined. Methods used to select participants, to code and analyze data, and the emergence of themes were discussed. Chapter 4 introduced each participant and offered their unique voices to answer the research questions. The emergent themes of finances, voice, and community were examined. This

chapter presents the study's conclusions, offers recommendations for rural students, families, and communities, leaders of higher education institutions and policy makers, and includes suggestions for further research.

### **Dissertation Summary**

The research objective of this dissertation was to discover the affordances and challenges for the college experience of high school graduates from a small, rural community. The questions listed were designed to answer the research objective and guide participant interviews:

1. What factors did the participants perceive helped them access college?
2. What factors did participants perceive helped them complete college?
3. What challenges did participants experience during their college experience?
4. What influence, if any, did growing up in a rural area have on college access and completion?
5. How did participants develop the knowledge, skills, and ability necessary to complete college?

Before selecting and interviewing participants, the reviewed literature identified gaps in research concerning rural students' college access and completion experiences. The theories of planned behavior and social capital helped guide the formation of research questions. The theory of planned behavior is a model to analyze one's decision-making process and better understand what factors shape decision-making (Ajzen, 1985). Ajzen (1991) further clarifies the theory as a connection between an individual's intentions to perform a behavior versus the actual outcome of the behavior. Social capital is defined as a "relation between people which is used for action" (Coleman, 1988, p. 100). Coleman

described three forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information channels, and norms and sanctions. The combination of these two theories helped examine participants' stories through a lens that included both decision-making and the social nature of rural communities. Chapter 2 more thoroughly examined the rural literature and the theoretical framework.

These guiding questions helped me select participants, as described in Chapter 3. Through purposeful, non-random sampling, previous Lincoln High School students were contacted through Facebook Messenger, outlined the research's purpose, listed contact information, and gave information about how to sign up for the study. Ten students replied, signed consent forms, and completed a brief demographic survey.

Each participant was initially interviewed and asked the same guiding questions with follow-up questions asked when needed. A second interview took place approximately six months later, in which six participants were interviewed. All interviews were transcribed and coded. Dedoose, a web application, was used to manage the large amount of data and aid in the coding process.

Saldana's (2009) coding methods were reviewed and utilized. The survey and Talent Search application information was examined using attribute coding to group basic demographic information. Initial coding found common experiences among participants based on the interviewees' stories. Descriptive and literal coding, which focus on a word or short phrase either from the researcher or directly from participants, informed the work, as well. Due to the interest in the attitudes, beliefs, and values of participants, so value coding was also helpful. Structural coding helped to find the number of times a certain code was used.



During second cycle coding, pattern coding was used to look for groupings of smaller codes into themes. In addition, focus coding looked at the most used codes. Initially, a simpler, more basic, approach to finding emergent themes using giant sticky notes was used. Participants' voices and their responses to the interview questions were studied enabling me to "hear" what they told me. Saldana describes this process in holistic terms that are comforting to a novice coder. "Each qualitative study is context-specific and your data are unique, as are you and your creative abilities to code them. I don't have the answers to your questions, but you and your data do" (Saldana, 2009, p. 30). The themes of finances, voices (internal and external), and community were established.

The themes were further described in Chapters 4 and 5, which provided participant voices to answer the interview questions, as well as offers support of the themes. Most participants discussed the challenges of being first-generation, coming from a poor community, and managing finances once in college. The term *voices* describes how participants moved from relying on what others advised or suggested to taking control of their decisions and motivations. Finally, participants discussed the affordances and challenges that come from being raised in a rural community. Briefly, others' expectations and their personal drive helped participants, while money, time management, and lack of support hindered them. Chapter 6 offers comparison of previous research and how this study situates itself among previous findings, as well as recommendations and a final reflection on the dissertation process.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the current research study was to explore rural students' lived experiences concerning college access and completion. The study findings are supported by other existing

research findings as well as provided participant voices and added personal perspectives to existing quantitative data. Rural students can fit in with other defined underrepresented populations such as being low-income, first-generation, and people of color. However, rural students are uniquely situated concerning the prospect of leaving their deep-rooted community connection to go away to college and possibly never return.

Lincoln is like other rural towns described by past researchers. The school in Lincoln is the center of town both in terms of activity and college-educated individuals (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Participants enjoyed the sense of community provided in Lincoln where people watch out for each other and care for the group (Wood, 2002). Brown and Schafft (2011) mentioned the lack of government resources and amenities in rural towns as well as the limited tax base to fund the school activities. Lincoln has one grocery store, no stoplights, and approximately 600 residents.

The current research supported other researchers' results concerning the rural term brain drain. Brain drain is where rural youth leave their community for additional economic and educational opportunities in urban areas (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Schafft et al., 2011; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Participants discussed they would like to stay and live in Lincoln but there are not many jobs or any colleges. Participants also expressed their desire to return to Lincoln but it would not likely happen until retirement due to lack of jobs needing college-educated workers. Families and community members alike encouraged participants to leave Lincoln to explore the additional resources available in a bigger town.

The previous research findings from this study are consistent with findings that found rural students' college aspirations were directly related to parental and teacher college expectations (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Meece et al., 2013). Meece, Askew,

Agger, Hutchins and Byun (2014), in their quantitative study, discovered high parental expectations had the largest influence on rural students' college access and completion. This research study found support for the finding that parents play a large role on participants' choice to attend college whether the parent possessed a college degree or not. However, the current study also found influences from grandparents and siblings sometimes held a greater influence than parents.

Higher level academic courses are often not an option in a rural school due to lack of resources and teacher qualifications. The current research supports findings similar to Byun, Irvin and Meece (2012) which found rural students are less academically prepared for college. Furthermore, Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) found a great disparity between Advanced Placement availability between rural and urban students. The results of the current study found Lincoln High School offered few advanced level courses and no Advanced Placement courses. Several Lincoln students reported they would have taken higher level courses, if they had been available.

Past research mentioned community colleges as an effective option for rural, low-income, and first-generation students due to the colleges' open enrollment standards, low cost, and additional resources for underprepared students (Goodman, 2014; Jaeger, 2015; Mullin, 2012). While community colleges remain a viable option for students, the closest four-year college to Lincoln was 75 miles away and the closest in-state community college 185 miles away. Study participants chose the closest college or four-year university an additional 25 miles away and only one participant chose to attend college 380 miles from Lincoln only to transfer back to the local state college one year later.

Brown (2016) found low-income, first-generation students rely on others to make sense of college information. The research participants did the same many times relying on teachers, counselors, or college access employees to provide guidance. In terms of finances, first-generation students have more time and financial obligations outside of college than non-first-generation students (Mehta, 2011). Participants described this extensively as a challenge to completing their degree.

Furthermore, Gublo-Jantzen (2015) linked rural student college choice of campus being welcoming, encouraging student involvement, and providing ability for students to develop strong relationships with others. Byun, Meece and Irvin (2012) found the more community resources a rural student possessed, the more likely the student would complete a college degree. This falls into line with the study findings concerning participants creating a new community at college which mimicked their home sense of community.

**Theoretical framework revisited.** The uniqueness of rural youths' college access and completion stories necessitated applying Ajzen's theory of planned behavior *and* Coleman's social capital theory to fully explore the perspectives presented in this dissertation. The theory of planned behavior explained decisions people make, proposing that human behavior is guided by normative beliefs, behavioral beliefs, and control beliefs (Ajzen, 1991). Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital was a "relation between people which is used for action" and includes obligations and expectations, social norms, information channels (p. s100). Research findings supported aspects of both theories.

Ajzen's normative beliefs and Coleman's description of obligations, expectations, and social norms were consistently described by participants. Participants cared about others' beliefs whether family or community members. Those outside voices influenced participants'

behavior with regards to college access. While the norm in Lincoln included the belief that a college education was the path to financial success, few residents possessed a college education.

Participants understood the likely consequences (behavioral beliefs) of going to college while questioning their ability (control beliefs) to successfully complete. The lack of college-educated people surrounding participants provided few guides to follow on the road to college completion. In the end, participants accepted that the responsibility of their success was solely in their hands -- whether they completed college or not.

Participants' information channels came from many people. The school provided much of the college access information. After college entry, college professors continued the informational process. Though the educational system is expected to provide content material, participants spoke highly of the information they received through networking. Networking channels were developed during college and nurtured thereafter.

## **Conclusion**

Low-income, first-generation youth face abundant challenges while attempting to access and complete college. However, adding rurality to low-income and first-generation perspectives poses new, and often unacknowledged, challenges.

Due to limited available resources, county and state social service agencies often oversee large areas of operation through regional offices. Therefore, rural, low-income residents face a lack of accessible social services located within their community. Low population numbers are often associated with fewer employment options, as well.

Rural, low-income youth are linked to developing and tapping into the social capital around them. The small communities they are part of can give rural youth a sense of

belonging and being part of a greater whole as they may have had the same classmates from kindergarten through high school graduation. The community is like a big family—whether they like each other or not. Yet, choosing to attend college takes rural youth away from that family structure and sense of belonging.

Going from a high school of 100 students to a college of even 3,000 is a huge change. Youth no longer know most of the people in town, and they have little frame of reference for how things work in a “large” city. Rural, low-income youth cannot typically afford to stay in their hometown while attending college 75 miles away as in Lincoln’s case. The cost of driving back and forth in addition to housing and living expenses can become insurmountable.

Rural, first-generation youth do not usually stay in their hometown to go to college, either. Deep tension exists between rural values and the need to leave the rural community to pursue an education. Marcus’ and Krupnick’s (2017) research participant stated it best. “[It’s] like suggesting that the child should not do what I have done, should not be where I have been, and should not value all that I have raised them to honor”. Research participants often spoke of this tension. The only option for an improved lifestyle meant leaving the rural community. Rural students are told not only by their community, but also their parents that staying in there is not in their best interest and will not lead them to the financial security they desire. Suddenly, the core and foundational rural values are no longer valuable.

As mentioned previously, few college graduates live in Lincoln due to lack of employment options which reward them financially. With many first-generation people in rural towns, including parents of youth who wish to attend college, youth find few places to obtain college information or models of working towards a college degree. Most college

educated people work at the school which lends itself to access. However, rural youth may have a limited or skewed perspective of a sense of college degree leading to job options due to the lack of college educated people around them.

As many rural, first-generation youth must leave their communities, they must also get out of their shell and start establishing a new community to replace the one lost. Getting involved with clubs, sports, and living communities helps these individuals find a new sense of belonging and being part of a greater whole.

Low-income, first-generation youth—regardless of location—do, in fact, share many characteristics and benefit from similar interventions as their urban counterparts. The difference is that the addition of rurality to low-income and first-generation status presents another layer of challenges to college access and completion.

### **Recommendations**

The current research results can offer recommendations to rural students, families, and communities as well as policymakers. The recommendations offer practical suggestions to both honor and keep the rural identity while encouraging discussions of the unique challenges that rural students face.

**Recommendations for rural students.** First, college can be a very exciting and scary thought. It is important for students to remember they are not alone. The college process is not always intuitive, especially when there is no one else to show the way. In this case, students may also feel what has been called the “imposter syndrome.” It describes the feeling that many first-generation students have of not belonging at college and believing that someone will eventually find out and make them leave.

Second, previous rural students found that whether they enjoyed the rural community feeling or not, one thing that helped them be successful was to build new communities of their own at college. They needed to feel part of a bigger whole. Community can be replicated by seeking out others who will care about students and who want to see their success.

Third, students benefit from the resources presented to them. They need to be willing to step out and ask questions and meet your teachers. Rural students are used to doing this at their rural school. College doesn't have to be different.

Lastly, students must be prepared for challenges associated with finances. It usually starts with worrying how to pay for college. While in college, many low-income, first-generation students may need to work to survive. Juggling multiple priorities, such as how much to work while managing school and homework, is a common challenge.

**Recommendations for families of rural students.** Families may not fully comprehend the influence they have on a rural family member attending college. Children listen to their parents, whether the parents think it or not. Parents can help them with college-going simply by encouragement. It is alright the parent might not have attended college or not have much money. There is financial help for that, such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and scholarships. Parents should also seek out college information from teachers, counselors, and college representatives.

Siblings play an important role, as well. Younger siblings are more likely to listen to older siblings than to their parents. They are seen as an expert who is closer to the younger sibling's age and who has more up-to-date, relevant information. Older siblings need to offer advice and guidance, especially in how they navigated the college system, not only when



they started but also during the journey. Siblings should share what helped them succeed and what gave them the biggest challenge.

Lastly, grandparents have a large influence on rural students' college motivations. Sometimes grandparents are the strongest encourager. Grandparents started college savings accounts when grandchildren were born, and grandparents communicated that they wanted more for their grandchild than they had for themselves and, quite possibly, their own child.

**Recommendations for rural communities.** Rural communities provide a unique environment for the children raised there. Rural students appreciate the sense of freedom they got from living in a small town. The experience taught them to be able to easily speak to others and to not be afraid in their verbal communication because everyone talked to everyone in their town. Rural community leaders should work with the schools to find mentors who can help students along their journey.

Though economics is undoubtedly an issue for rural towns, research ways to improve work opportunities that encourage college degrees. Many students want to return to their home community after college to raise their kids in the same way that they were raised. However, if these college graduates cannot be financially stable in their hometown, they unfortunately will not come back except to visit family or to return for retirement.

**Recommendations for leaders of higher education institutions.** Higher education institutions try to set a tone of inclusiveness during recruitment and orientation efforts. That being said, the effort to show a sense of community for rural students is intensified. Many rural students must leave their established communities to attend college. They seek the opportunity to develop new communities at college. Colleges should make a concerted effort to get rural students involved in campus life even prior to moving on campus.

**Recommendations for policy makers.** Policy makers must funnel more money to rural school districts. These districts have a smaller tax base and, therefore, a limited amount of tax revenue to channel to schools and students. Idaho's 51<sup>st</sup> national ranking of per pupil spending (National Education Association, 2017) is an immediate wrong which must be righted, especially for rural school districts. Because of low spending, rural districts often cannot offer advanced placement courses, not keep highly qualified teachers.

In addition to expanded funding, policy makers should examine ways to encourage and support small business development thus encouraging additional economic opportunities. Idaho small business development centers, housed at institutions of higher education, may travel to the rural towns. However, the amount of business there limits their availability and influence in rural towns.

**Recommendations for further research.** One of the gaps in the literature was that a large portion of the quantitative literature on rural students was based on data collected from the National Education Longitudinal Study 1988-2000. The data was last collected in 2000, yet research articles based on that data were last published in 2015, as evidenced by Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2015). A recent quantitative article from some of the same authors used data from the 2007-2008 Rural High School Aspirations Study (Soo yong Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017). This research study offered more recent insights into rural students than relying on decades-old data.

Another gap existed in the way rural students were grouped altogether underrepresented populations: low-income, first-generation, and students of color. Though many rural students overlapped these populations, rural students possess unique experiences that differentiate from an overall underrepresented population. The lack of research taking an

intersectional approach looking specifically at rural communities will not be able to provide quality data which can be used to create systematic change. This is apparent based on the results of the current study showing rural students in the study had to leave their rural community and support system in order to attend *any* college. Most of the participants did not consider returning to Lincoln as a viable option because of the lack of economic opportunities.

Avenues of future research include interviewing participants who chose not to attend college to examine what factors led them to that decision. While it is understood that a four-year college degree is not appropriate for all students, further understanding is necessary to determine whether anything can be done to address this issue. Additionally, research focused on how rural students can be encouraged to move from depending on the expectations of others to a sense of self-efficacy and feeling in control of college access and completion earlier than during college? The current research showed, from the participants' views, families had a large influence on their decision to go to college further research would be interesting to explore family influence on college decisions beyond the studies that focused solely on parents. And finally, future research could focus on how to spur economic growth in rural communities that would be designed to attract more college graduates back to their home towns.

The transitioning voice from others to self demonstrated an interesting theme from the research. However, the theme is broader than rural youth. The shift in what drives an individual's behavior, changing from others' expectations to a realization that success or failure depends on the individual and their self-efficacy. Future research could examine how educational professionals can help students in this transition.

### **A Final Reflection on the Study**

As I reflect upon my personal experience as a rural youth growing up in a rural community, going off to college, and eventually completing my degree, my story is not unlike those of the study participants. I think about my freshman year in college living away from home. That experience forced me to get involved in dorm life as well as utilize support services on campus. I did not really think about the fact that I moved away to attend college and in order to have the best experience, I had to. Yet, to this day, I miss my rural town and the community it provided. I have tried to replicate that sense of community throughout my life, but it has never been the same, nor will it.

Even though rural students make up over 18% of the United States public school population, more work must be done to understand their unique perspectives and needs as they pertain to college access and completion. It is my hope, this dissertation gives voices to quantitative study results. It also provides a different lens to a family of rural students frequently lumped in with other underrepresented populations. Rural students deserve their own category to fully understand how to best support them and their communities as youth aspire to go to and complete college.

*“I think you kind of get thrown out in the world [when you go to college] ...instead of knowing every single person in your school, you're with 4,000 other kids. It isn't like a big family anymore. (Alea, personal communication, 5/11/2015)*

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### Appendix A: Demographic Survey

1. Did either of your parents graduate from college (either 2 yr or 4 yr degree)?  
 Yes     No
  
2. Have you ever attended college? If yes, answer #3-#6. If no, go to #7  
 Yes     No
  
3. At what age did you first enter college?  
 years old
  
4. Once you started college, did you ever stop and start again (not counting summer breaks)?  
 Yes     No
  
5. Did you complete college?  
 Yes     No  
 If yes, go to #6.  
 If no, do you intend on completing college?  
 Yes     No
  
6. If you answered yes to #5, what level was your degree?  
 Certificate  
 Associate's degree  
 Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree
  
7. What did you do after high school, if you didn't attend college?  


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8. Why did you decide not to attend college?  


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9. Will you attend college in the future?  
 Yes     No  
 Why? 

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## Appendix B: First Interview Guide

### Initial Interview Questions

Tell me about your background.

- What was it like growing up in a small town?
- Tell me about people you knew that went to college.
- Did you think college would be good for you?
- Did you think you could succeed in college?
- What did you think success in college looks like?
- Would you go back to college?
- Some people don't choose to leave their rural community, why did you leave?
- Will you go back? Why?

Tell me about your hometown.

- What did you like? What didn't you like?
- Did you feel supported in your choice either to attend college or not?
- What did your parents say about going to college?
- What did the community think of you going to college or not?
- What feedback did you get from your community about going to college?
- What obstacles got in your way?

Tell me about college.

- Did you want to go to college growing up?
- Who talked to you about college?
- Why did you decide to attend or not attend college?
- Did you think going to college was for you? Why or why not?
- What would have helped you go to/complete college?



### **Appendix C: Second Interview Protocol**

1. I was just wondering if there are any updates since we last talked.
2. Last summer, what we were talking about is looking at students from rural communities who go to college or choose not to and what are some of the influences? I was wondering, how did being from a rural community help you access and stay in college and then complete your bachelors? What do you think you brought from the table about being in a small town that was helpful?
3. Now I'm going to ask you the flip side of that. How did being from a rural community have drawbacks to help you accessing and completing staying in college?
4. What advice would you give to a student in Lincoln right now that's thinking about going to college?
5. Since/when you graduate(d) with your bachelor's degree, your children will not be considered first-generation. What advice would you give them? What message would you give them about going to college as a first-generation who is now influencing the next generation?

### **Appendix D: Informed Consent**

You are being asked to take part in a doctoral research study of rural community influence on college attendance. The University of Idaho Institutional Review Board has approved this project.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate the experiences of people who came from a rural community and had the opportunity to attend college. You will benefit from this project by helping us understand your experiences as a graduate from a rural high school. Society will benefit because it will help communities understand how they influence youth in attending college.

You will be asked to complete a survey which should take approximately 20 minutes. After completing the survey, you will be asked to complete an interview to further discuss your survey answers. The interview should take approximately one hour and will be completed at a location and time convenient for you. There are no or minimal risks associated with the project.

If we find the interview is creating stress or emotional difficulty for you, we will stop the interview and all the recording will be stopped and destroyed.

Your real name and home town will not be identified in the dissertation. A pseudonym will be used. All survey information you provide will be placed in a locked file cabinet with access only available by myself. Digital copies and transcripts of the interviews will be kept on a password protected computer available to myself and my faculty sponsor (Dr. Kitchel).

If you have questions about the study, survey or interview, you can ask the investigator during the interview, when the interview is complete, or at a time you feel is appropriate.

#### Investigator

Traci Birdsell  
University of Idaho  
College of Education  
Moscow, ID 83844-3080  
Ph. 208-791-0515

#### Faculty Sponsor

Allen Kitchel, Ph.D.  
University of Idaho  
College of Education  
Moscow, ID 83844-3080  
Ph. 208-885-4437

During the course of this study, you may stop at any time with no penalty, if you do decide to stop, your survey and interview transcript will be destroyed. If you do stop your participation in the study, there will be no penalties associated with your withdrawal. All you need to say is that I no longer wish to participate).

I am 18 years old or older and have reviewed this consent form and understand and agree to its contents.

Participant Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Experimenter Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: University of Idaho IRB Exemption

University of Idaho  
**Office of Research Assurances**  
**Institutional Review Board**  
875 Perimeter Drive, MS 3010  
Moscow ID 83844-3010  
Phone: 208-885-6162  
Fax: 208-885-5752  
irb@uidaho.edu

To: Allen Kitchel

From: Traci Craig, Ph.D.,  
Chair, University of Idaho Institutional Review  
Board  
University Research Office  
Moscow, ID 83844-3010

Date: 4/15/2014 6:03:49 PM

Title: Rural Community Influence on College Attendance

Project: 14-86

Approved: April 15, 2014

Renewal: April 14, 2015

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On behalf of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Idaho, I am pleased to inform you that the protocol for the above-named research project is approved as offering no significant risk to human subjects.

This study may be conducted according to the protocol described in the application without further review by the IRB. As specific instruments are developed, each should be forwarded to the ORA, in order to allow the IRB to maintain current records. Every effort should be made to ensure that the project is conducted in a manner consistent with the three fundamental principles identified in the Belmont Report: respect for persons; beneficence; and justice.

This IRB approval is not to be construed as authorization to recruit participants or conduct research in schools or other institutions, including on Native Reserved lands or within Native Institutions, which have their own policies that require approvals before Human Participants Research Projects can begin. This authorization must be obtained from the appropriate Tribal

Government (or equivalent) and/or Institutional Administration. This may include independent review by a tribal or institutional IRB or equivalent. It is the investigator's responsibility to obtain all such necessary approvals and provide copies of these approvals to ORA, in order to allow the IRB to maintain current records.

As Principal Investigator, you are responsible for ensuring compliance with all applicable FERPA regulations, University of Idaho policies, state and federal regulations.

This approval is valid until April 14, 2015.

Should there be significant changes in the protocol for this project, it will be necessary for you to submit an amendment to this protocol for review by the Committee using the Portal. If you have any additional questions about this process, please contact me through the portal's messaging system by clicking the 'Reply' button at the top of this message.

Traci Craig, Ph.D.

## Appendix F: Themes and Codes

everyone knows me	parental influence
outsider	career choice
known all their life	peer influence
first-generation	community influence
TRIO	college obstacle
college degree	college knowledge
employment	college expectation
option	better future
grandparent influence	born and raised
college success	has child is parent
college success trait	stability
stay or leave	it's all me
small town	friendly
family	freedom
feeling of home	isolation
rural description	sibling influence
benefit	didn't go to college
drawback	multiple priorities
close-minded	stopout
LGBT	dropped out of college
activity	desire to return to college
college residence	more time towards college
proximity	proud of me
feeling of community	changed away from original choice
cost	income
support	travelled outside of area
lack of support	lived there most of my life
"the plan"	successful future
view of school	"bored"
low-income	small class size

graduated hs early  
"figure out what I wanted to do"  
college choice  
high income  
smart  
tolerance  
conservative  
diversity  
opportunity  
struggling financially  
boyfriend/girlfriend influence  
hoops  
playing to strengths  
college course choice  
friend  
safety  
judgment  
school influence  
real world skills  
being an adult  
didn't want to attend college while  
growing up  
related to others in town  
perseverance  
graduate school  
sheltered  
social experience  
well-rounded person  
sense of community  
scared  
"wanted more"

return to small town  
feel left behind  
focused  
failure  
transferred schools  
educationally advanced  
influence on others  
poverty  
know everyone  
employment  
networking  
being involved  
slower pace  
stuck in town  
potential  
responsibility  
no need to study  
gossip  
came here later in school  
have to work for something  
"become something"  
intellectual ability  
transportation  
big school  
drama  
health  
online classes  
saving  
graduated college  
first job after college graduation  
college friends

willingness to help people  
willingness to meet new people  
doing the little things  
college access  
during high school  
during college  
lack of rigorous courses in hs  
dual credit opportunity  
advice to kids from small schools  
need clear idea of what you want to do  
don't waste time if you don't know what  
career you want  
school as a foundation  
critical thinking  
career options  
making yourself marketable  
career fair  
connections  
advice to child  
college not for everyone  
job skills  
scholarships  
less competition  
college completion  
culture change  
move to bigger town  
school size  
large campus  
knew teachers  
don't interact with everyone  
"no sudden movements"  
rural area  
dropped out of high school  
received GED  
family employment  
lack of encouragement to attend college  
"don't try"  
grades  
college major  
name of degree not important  
pressure  
feel like you only get one chance  
college instructors  
lack of money  
volunteer  
clubs  
lack of resources  
did my own thing  
expand your horizons  
going to a larger college - drawback  
independence  
up to me  
should have taken more challenging  
courses in hs  
organized