A Dissertation

entitled

Navigating a Shifting Sense of Self and Relationships: Experiences of Low-Income Rural Community College Students

by

Lori J. Robison

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education

_____
Debra Brace, PhD, Committee Chair

_____
Penny Poplin Gosetti, PhD, Committee Member

_____
Snejana Slantcheva-Durst, PhD, Committee Member

_____
Thomas Stuckey, PhD, Committee Member

_____
Dr. Scott Molitor, Acting Dean
College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

May 2023

An Abstract of

Navigating a Shifting Sense of Self and Relationships: Experiences of Low-Income Rural Community College Students

by

Lori J. Robison

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education

The University of Toledo
May 2023

This qualitative study sought to further understand the experiences of rural community college students of low socioeconomic status as they navigate higher education and a differing class culture. By exploring their lived intra- and interpersonal experiences, this study also sought to better understand how these students integrate and apply new and existing cultural capital to their varied social contexts. Using naturalistic inquiry, data was collected through focus groups and individual interviews with a total of 10 participants. Data analysis included a cyclical process of coding and categorizing the data, which then allowed for themes to emerge. An analysis of the participants' interviews concluded with key findings embedded in the three main themes that emerged from the retelling of their experiences. They are: (a) *managing identity*, which captured the ways in which students viewed themselves and their environments differently since attending college; (b) *managing relationships*, or the ways in which college-going challenged current relationships, ending some relationships and creating new, and deepening others;

and (c) *managing deficits*, or the ways in which participants adapted to the challenges of college while managing current roles and responsibilities.

Findings in the study have several implications for practice for community colleges who are rural serving. These institutions should consider the implementation of the following recommendations if not already in place on their campuses: institutional navigators; flexible hours of service; alternatives to in-person meetings; technology training and support; modified plans of study; employer support; and enhanced connections with faculty, peers, and staff.

An implication for institutional policy that emerged from the findings suggests that students would benefit from the provision of the technological devices required to access college services and course materials. This would include the provision of Wi-Fi hot spots for reliable access to the internet in their rural communities.

Finally, the findings in this study provide implications for further research. More could be gained from the replication of this study with rural students of low-socioeconomic status in other regions of the country; rural students of low SES who represent a racial or ethnic minority; students who dropped out with no plans to reenroll; and an examination of the low participation rates of students of low SES in the College Credit Plus Program.

This dedication is in loving memory of my son, Phillip, who shared my enjoyment of reading and interest in research. I miss you every day, even the debates with you that I could never win. And in loving memory of my sister, Jayne, who was the first in our family to attend college but taken from us at the end of her freshman year. I doubt I would have travelled this far if you had not shown me the first step. I still miss you, Sis.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my husband, Rex, whose unwavering love and support has sustained me through this journey. I could not have done this without you. A special thanks to our children --Shannon, Megan, and Joseph, and soon to be daughter-in-law, Shannon. Your love, laughter, and support are my oxygen. And my grandchildren--Gavin, Abby, and Kai. You enrich my life and bring me so much joy. You are the best distractions! A thank you, also, to my parents, though deceased, I know they are with me and celebrating this accomplishment with pride.

I would also like to acknowledge my extended family and amazing circle of friends. I am so blessed. This journey has certainly had its valleys of darkness and sorrow. Thanks for showing up, for sharing the tears, for sending up prayers, and reminding me I was not alone. I love you all.

I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge my colleagues in the University of Toledo Columbus cohort. I am so glad we stayed in touch. Thanks to all of you for your words of wisdom and encouragement to stay-the-course.

And finally, I want to acknowledge my committee members. My committee chair and advisor, Dr. Debra Brace, thank you for your guidance and mentorship. I appreciate the many hours you so graciously spent in getting me to this goal. To Dr. Snejana Slantcheva-Durst, Dr. Penny Poplin Gosetti, and Dr. Thomas Stuckey. Thank you for serving on my committee and sharing your time, wisdom, and experience with me. Your feedback was invaluable, and I feel honored to have worked with each of you.

And most of all, I thank God-- my strength, my rock, my fortress, in whom I take refuge (Psalm 18:1-2).

Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements vi

Table of Contents vii

List of Tables xiii

List of Figures xiv

I. Introduction 1

A. Background of the Problem 1

B. Statement of the Problem 5

C. Theoretical Framework 7

D. Purpose of the Study 11

E. Research Questions 11

F. Significance of the Study 12

G. Methods 15

i. Participants and Sample Selection 15

ii. Data Collection and Analysis 16

H. Assumptions of the Study 17

I. Delimitations of the Study 18

J. Limitations of the Study 20

K. Definitions of Terms 21

L. Summary 24

II. Literature Review 25

A. Introduction 25

B. Social Class Defined 27

C. Social Class as an Aspect of Identity 29

D. Awareness of Class Differences 31

E. The Challenges of Upward Social Mobility 35

F. Role of Community Colleges 37

G. Retention of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds 39

H. Social Roles in Community College 41

I. Cultural Capital 42

J. Building Cultural Capital 45

K. Class Conflict 46

L. Codeswitching 49

M. Summary 50

III. Methods 52

A. Introduction 53

B. Research Questions 53

C. Research Design 54

i. Method 56

ii. Research Site 56

iii. Participant Recruitment 58

iv. Instrument 60

v. Pilot Test 61

vi. Data Collection 61

vii. Data Analysis 62

D. Delimitations of the Study 63

E. Limitations of the Study 64

G. Summary 65

IV. Findings 67

A. Overview of Key Findings 67

i. Managing Deficits 68

ii. Managing Relationships 68

iii. Managing Identity 69

B. Participants 70

i. Demographic Survey 70

ii. Vignettes 73

C. Process of Data Analysis 76

i. Coding 77

ii. Categories 81

a. Coping 81

b. Motivation/Aspiration 81

c. Personal Growth/Change 83

d. Perspective Shift 84

e. Relationship Challenges 85

f. Supportive Relationships 85

g. Threats to Success 86

C. Themes 89

i. Theme 1: Managing Deficits 89

a. Lacked Knowledge 90

b. Challenges with Technology 91

c. Lacked Planning and Finances 92

d. Time Demands 94

e. Fears/Doubts 94

f. First-generation 95

g. Coping Strategies 95

h. Motivation/Aspiration 96

i. Faith/Spirituality 96

j. Supportive Relationships 97

ii. Theme 2: Managing Relationships 97

a. Family Tension/Conflict 98

b. New Friendships and College Credit Plus Peers 99

c. Relationship Loss/Distance 99

d. Parents/Family Support 99

e. Friends/Peer Support 100

f. Texts/Social Media/Emails 101

g. Employer Support 101

h. College Supports 102

iii. Theme 3: Managing Identity 103

a. Personal Growth/Change 103

b. Communicating Needs 103

c. Applies Learning 104

d. Perspective Shift 104

e. Emerging Professional 105

f. Appreciates College 105

D. Summary 106

V. Discussion 109

A. Introduction 109

B. Summary of Key Findings 109

i. Theme of Managing Identity 110

ii. Theme of Managing Relationships 111

iii. Theme of Managing Deficits 112

C. Discussion of Findings 113

i. Research Sub-question 1 and Managing Identity 113

ii. Research Sub-question 2 and Managing Relationships 117

iii. Research Sub-question 3 and Managing Deficits 121

D. Implications 125

i. Implications for the Application of Theory 126

a. Use of Theory 126

b. Evaluation of Theory 128

ii. Implications for Practice 129

a. Institutional Navigators 129

b. Flexible Hours for Student Services 130

c. Alternatives to In-person Meetings 131

d. Technology 131

e. Modified Plans of Study 132

f. Employer Support 133

g. Building Connection 133

iii. Implications for Policy 134

iv. Implications for Further Research 135

E. Summary and Concluding Remarks 137

References 140

Appendices

A. Recruitment Email 150

B. Demographic Survey 151

C. Interview Protocol 153

D. Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions 154

E. Member-Check Email 155

F. Copyright Permission 156

List of Tables

Table 1 Demographic Survey Data. 71

Table 2 First Cycle Coding Process Example. 78

Table 3 Second Cycle Coding Process Example. 79

Table 4 Table of Subcategories and Categories. 82

Table 5 Table of Subcategories, Categories, and Themes. 90

List of Figures

Figure 1 Expanded model of community cultural wealth. 10

Chapter One

Introduction

I am more concerned with what happens when class and education collide: specifically, how working-class, first generation college-goers often cheat themselves out of some of the best opportunities their colleges and universities have to offer…Definitions of class may evade us, but the consequences certainly don't.

– Julio Alves, *Class Struggles*

Background of the Problem

Higher education has been considered the primary means of attaining upward mobility and success in the U.S. (Nelson, et al., 2006; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). To this end, community colleges have played a key role in providing access to higher education for large numbers of non-traditional, low-income, and under-prepared students (Stephens, & Townsend, 2013; Stuart, et al., 2014). For many of these students, community college may be the only choice for enrollment. This is especially true for students who live in rural areas because research has indicated that proximity to institutions of higher learning as well as tuition costs are important factors for students in determining whether to attend college (Scott, et al., 2016). Unfortunately, students who live in rural areas are less likely to attend college (29%) than their peers who live in urban areas (48%). In addition, researchers have predicted that only one in five (20%) rural adults will earn an associate degree or higher compared to the national average of 49% (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020).

In the fall of 2018, the American Association of Community Colleges (2020) reported that 41% of all U.S. undergraduates attended a community college. Of the more than 1.5 million students who enroll in community college each year, more than 80% indicate that they plan to earn a bachelor's degree; unfortunately, however, after six years, less than 40% actually do complete a degree or certificate program (League for

Innovation, 2015). Of those students who do manage to earn an associate degree, fewer than half (48%) do so without stopping out at least once. In fact, 26.7% experienced two or more stop outs, which extended their length of time to completion (Shapiro, et al., 2017, p. 25). Research has clearly indicated that students who attend community colleges are less likely to complete a certificate or degree than students who attend four-year institutions (39% as compared to 68%), and they are more likely to be older with families, attending part-time, and working (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Karp & Bork, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2017).

These factors are believed to account for the low rates of degree completion, the slow rates of degree completion, and the intermittent progress community college students make in attempting to complete their degree programs. These factors have also fueled student retention efforts that focus on community college students' financial needs; academic remediation needs; part-time status; and other extracurricular needs, such as employment and family responsibilities (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Ma & Baum, 2016). Unfortunately, the numerous programs and initiatives aimed at addressing these problematic issues have not brought about the desired results.

For example, the Complete College Ohio Taskforce recommended policy and program initiatives aimed at increasing student access, aligning college readiness standards, reducing time to completion, and improving developmental education (Ohio Board of Regents, 2012). However, data from 2013 indicated only minimal progress in that only 17% of Ohio's full-time, two-year college students completed a baccalaureate degree within four years. Part-time students, African American students, and Hispanic

students fared even worse (Complete College America, 2014). According to Bragg (2019), an evaluation of career pathway programs conducted by the non-profit organization Jobs for the Future indicated that the "results of four of the five evaluations of career progression show no significant difference in college enrollment following participation in an initial career pathway program, or in earning a subsequent college credential, relative to the control/comparison group" (p.15). Likewise, according to Mayer et al. (2014), one of the most renown national education initiatives, Achieving the Dream, admitted that "translating institutional reform into practices that substantially change the experiences of large groups of students--and observing changes in institution-wide student outcomes--may simply be more difficult, and may take more time, than first anticipated" (p. 41). Furthermore, a focused effort by the Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative to assist 618 rural students in attending college found only 56% of their program participants returned for a second semester, and only 45% for a second year (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Although well-intentioned, these policy and program initiatives do not appear to have fully identified the factors that impede the persistence and completion of rural students, students of low-income status or other under-resourced student populations.

Researchers have begun to understand more about the experiences of students from rural and low-income backgrounds as they enter the middle-class milieu of higher education and move between two economic cultures. Studies of rural students have indicated that in addition to managing costs, culture shock can be a problem. Rural students often graduate from small classes of 80 or 90 students. Community colleges may have more students than their entire town (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017).

Studies of social class as it relates to the experiences of students in higher education have emerged in the past decade. A study of university students (Martin, 2012) found that students from low-income backgrounds were quite aware of the social class differences between themselves and their middle- and upper-class peers. However, according to Martin, students from low-income backgrounds minimized the importance of social class as an aspect of their social identity and their college experience. Each participant reported managing differently the ways that they perceived and performed their social class within the social context of their socio-economically advantaged peers. Martin found that many participants experienced "dissonance"--feelings of alienation and frustration with their higher-status peers--but at the same time an unwillingness to admit any feelings of disadvantage or weakness due to their socio-economic status. Interestingly, Martin reported that while participants downplayed the importance of social class in their college experience, most participants described an awareness that they modified to some extent aspects of their social identity: "All students in the study acknowledged an awareness that they thought, spoke, and acted differently than their families and their friends who did not matriculate into higher education" (p.113). These cognitive and behavioral changes are not without consequences and implications, especially for the community college student who must live, socially interact, and perhaps work in two (or more) differing social class environments. Morton (2019) has referred to these consequences and implications as "the ethical costs of upward mobility" that impacts "many aspects of our lives that we value--relationships with family and friends, our connection to communities, and our sense of identity" (p. 4). That is, social mobility that results in an increase in status may have "significant effects on one's sense

of self" because individuals must renegotiate their identity within the context of their social environments (Aries & Seider, 2007, p. 139). Students may experience feelings of alienation from their family and cultural background while at the same time feeling that they do not belong in the new middle- or upper-class academic environment they have just entered (Nelson et. al., 2006; Scott, et al., 2016; Soria, et al., 2013).

These feelings can be especially challenging for rural, low-income community college students because they are often the first in their families to attend college. They must learn to navigate the middle-class realm of higher education while also maintaining relationships in their home and work environments.

Statement of the Problem

The challenges of "class jumping" have been well-documented in the research literature (Nelson et al., 2006). For example, Sennett and Cobb (1972) in their study of blue-collar workers identified a defense mechanism that occurs within individuals caught in class conflicts that they termed "the divided self" (p. 206). These authors described the divided self as a split between "the real person and the performing individual" (p. 206). They further described the defense mechanism of a divided self as (a) a way to manage uncomfortable feelings, such as uneasiness or guilt, about achieving a higher status than their family members or peers as well (b) a way to avoid causing pain to others or feeling pain themselves. According to Sennett and Cobb, "The divided self is like most other kinds of conscious defenses human beings erect for themselves; it stills pain in the short run, but does not remove the conditions that made a defense necessary in the first place" (p. 219).

Researchers have examined social class in the experiences of first-generation college women (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001), Mexican male college students (Schwartz, et al., 2009), college professors from lower-class backgrounds (Nelson et al., 2006) and students attending four-year public and private universities (Aries & Seider, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). Results of these studies have indicated that students from lower-class backgrounds often feel a sense of exclusion and alienation in the university setting. At the same time, these students also have expressed feeling uncomfortable in their culture of origin when returning home to family and friends. "Most or all of our participants described experiences of social isolation and deprivation, of feeling like social misfits in many of their contexts" (Nelson et al., p. 8).

According to Stewart and Ostrove (1993), social class position influences one's worldview in that it can "shape, constrain, and mediate the development and expression of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, motives, traits, and symptoms" (p. 476). In this way, one's social class creates the context for one's sense of self in their social environment. When the context changes, one must renegotiate their social identity, and perhaps their social relationships, because a new environment may challenge the behaviors, attitudes, and values of the previously internalized class (Nelson et al., 2006). Jones (1998) found that students from low-income backgrounds who move into "professional milieus" will soon "become aware of differences in relational and communication styles, values, beliefs, and practices which reflect contradictory class ideologies and practices. Encountering these class differences can be disorienting and may require negotiating self and multiple identities" (p. 152).

This naturalistic inquiry sought to address a gap in the research literature regarding whether the negotiation of social class differences may be a reason why rural community college students of low socioeconomic status fail to persist and complete college. Minimal research has been conducted exploring the experiences of rural community college students of low socioeconomic status as they navigate bi-cultural worlds and move between home, college, peer group, and work environments on a daily basis. Similarly, minimal research has been conducted exploring the ways in which these students successfully manage the integration of new knowledge and behaviors into their self-identity and social relationships. Furthermore, while studies have identified strategies for providing information and support to students of low-income backgrounds who are entering college, little attention has been paid to the inter- and intra-personal challenges these students may face and the influence of such experiences on their decision to remain in college. It stands to reason then, that managing challenges to one's social class identity and close familial ties, while managing other challenges to success in college, will increase levels of stress for these students and contribute to their lack of persistence and completion. However, there is no existing theory which posits a relationship between social class identity and the retention of rural community college students of low-socioeconomic status.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that best guides this study is based on the pioneering work of French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu along with his contemporaries, Tara Yosso (2005) and Sara O'Shea (2016) who expanded his theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu is perhaps best known for his theory on social reproduction

(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and its role in the U.S. educational system. More specifically, Bourdieu viewed educational institutions as the primary means of reproducing the desired values, behaviors, tastes, language, etc. of the dominant or ruling class within society. He has explained that the transmission of *capital* (economic, social, and cultural) occurs not only across family generations but also within educational systems. Thus, higher education institutions, which represent the middle- and upper-classes, perpetuate their cultural practices and therefore also perpetuate social inequalities, which maintain the power and privileges of certain dominant groups to the exclusion of other groups.

Individuals who lack capital--economic, social, and cultural--have been disadvantaged from the start in the U.S. educational systems. They have largely been viewed from a deficit perspective--that is, from a perspective that focuses on the absence of capital. However, building upon Bourdieu's theory, Tara Yosso (2005) has challenged the deficit view of cultural capital among students from low socio-economic backgrounds and other marginalized groups, and she has subsequently proposed an alternative nomenclature that she terms *community cultural wealth.* Yosso has suggested that educators operate from a strengths perspective and has recognized the various forms of capital that students bring to the college campus and to the college classroom, especially students from communities of color. She has identified cultural wealth as consisting of six types and has suggested that these should not go unacknowledged: aspirational capital, navigational capital, social capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, and resistant capital.

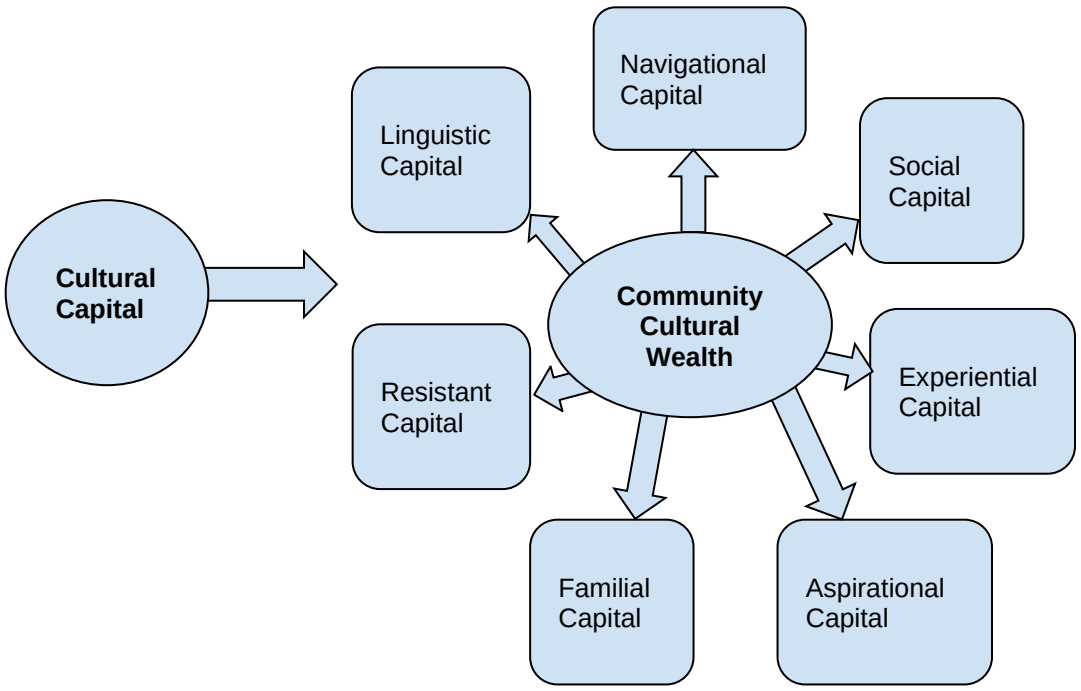
Yosso (2005) developed her Community Cultural Wealth model (CCW) through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). She challenged the application of Bourdieu's theory to students of color as "a way to explain why academic and social outcomes… are significantly lower than the outcomes of Whites" (p. 70). To Yosso, "the assumption follows that People of Color 'lack' the social and cultural capital required for social mobility" (p. 70). Yosso disagreed with the Bourdieuian view that White, middle-class culture is the standard and that students of color arrive at college with multiple deficiencies. She proposed a reframing of these "deficiencies" or "deficits" in knowledge, skills, and abilities as unrecognized assets.

While Yosso focused her CCW framework on students of color, Sara O'Shea (2016) applied the CCW framework in her study of Anglo-Australian students who were the first-in-family to attend a university. O'Shea stated that "this framework has much to offer research on broader under-represented groups in the university landscape…. This reconceptualization should consider the very strong capitals that learners arrive with, regardless of ethnicity, SES status or educational background" (p. 75). O'Shea's research led her to add another type of cultural capital to Yosso's CCW model: experiential capital. She found that the participants who were older (non-traditional age) brought valuable knowledge and skills from previous life experiences--that is, their "pre-student lives" --which was a significant strength. O'Shea described the older students' experiential capital as "providing skills in managing competing demands, dealing with difficult people (sometimes staff) and also maintaining resilience in often very trying circumstances" (p. 74).

The reconceptualized model (see Figure 1) illustrates the addition of O'Shea's (2016) experiential capital to Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model. Thus, cultural capital, according to Bourdieu's (1990) definition, expanded to include seven personal attributes, or potential resources that individuals may use in their pursuit of upward mobility.

Figure 1

Expanded Model of Community Cultural Wealth.



Note. Adapted from " Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth" by T.J. Yosso, 2005, *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), p. 78. (DOI: 10.1080/1361332052000341006). Copyright 2005 by Taylor & Francis Group Ltd.

This expanded model of community cultural wealth provides the most appropriate and useful lens through which to better understand the experiences of students from low-income backgrounds entering higher education as they navigate a differing social class

context. Firstly, this model allows for the exploration of the fluidity of what Bourdieu (2006) has termed the *habitus* of students. That is, the model allows for the exploration of the practices and dispositions that students possess, as well as the practices and dispositions associated with the social class position to which they aspire and have begun to adopt and integrate. Secondly, the expanded model of community cultural wealth also provides a framework for understanding the sources of capital that students may draw upon to facilitate, navigate, and traverse the challenges, barriers, conflicts, or simply the unfamiliar social terrain of a differing social class environment. For this study, seeing beyond the negotiation of a new self-identity, and to broaden the view to include the negotiation of the individual within the context of their new and varied social relationships and environments is imperative.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the intra- and interpersonal experiences of rural community college students from low socio-economic backgrounds as they navigate the middle-class realm of higher education. A secondary purpose of this study is to better understand how these students integrate and apply new and existing cultural capital to their varied social contexts.

Research Questions

The following research question guided this study.

Primary research question: How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status navigate their experiences of entering higher education and a differing class culture?

Sub-questions:

1. How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status navigate a shifting sense of self in and among their varied social and academic contexts?
2. How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status navigate shifting interpersonal relationships in and among their varied social and academic contexts?
3. How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status, entering higher education, integrate and make use of personal and cultural capital to manage their differing social class environments?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it identified factors that contribute to the lack of degree completion among rural students from low socio-economic backgrounds and contributes to a greater understanding of the unique needs that arise for them while navigating the college environment. This understanding can assist rural community colleges in redirecting limited financial resources into programs and services that maximize student persistence and completion. Programs aimed at increased financial support and addressing academic under-preparedness have not brought about the desired rates of completion or reduction in student stop outs. Ideally, exploring the inter- and intra-personal socio-cultural adaptations required by rural students from low socio-economic backgrounds provides insight into sources of stress and frustration among these students and, therefore, identifies potential barriers to success.

Armed with a greater understanding of the experiences encountered by rural students from low socio-economic backgrounds, community college administrators can more effectively meet the needs of these students and educate their faculty and staff members to do the same. With greater awareness comes the likelihood of greater responsiveness.

Rural students of low socio-economic status (SES) will benefit if they are made aware of the true challenges they will face negotiating a new self-identity while negotiating family, school, and work relationships. The students could be equipped with tools and strategies to navigate the new socio-cultural environment of higher education and anticipate the inter- and intrapersonal challenges that may arise. Students of low SES will have the most to gain if they feel a greater sense of competency and if the new learning environments are more amenable to the unique challenges these students face. An environment that provides support and enables students to respond quickly to ameliorate barriers to success, will likely improve not only the rates of degree completion for these students, but also reduce the time it takes for students of low SES to complete a degree.

Completing a two-year degree can translate to the attainment of a family sustaining wage and an improved quality of life for the student and their household. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), workers with an associate degree average 19% more in weekly earnings than workers with a high school diploma ($887 per week as compared to $746) and experience lower levels of unemployment (2.7% compared to 3.7%). Higher earnings are associated with jobs that provide benefits, including health insurance, paid leave, and retirement. Other benefits of a higher income

include the ability to purchase healthy foods, to access medical care, and to have leisure time to exercise (Center on Society and Health, 2015). However, the opposite is also true: "Conversely, the job insecurity, low wages, and lack of assets associated with less education can make individuals and families more vulnerable during hard times---which can lead to poor nutrition, unstable housing, and unmet medical needs" (Center on Society and Health, 2015, p. 3). In fact, studies across several countries, including the U.S., consistently found that individuals with higher levels of education reported better health, higher levels of well-being, and lower mortality (Murray, 2009). The benefits of higher education were reported to include "healthier diet, less smoking and less alcohol consumption, more exercise, greater use of health services, and greater use of seat belts" (Murray, p. 238).

Communities also benefit from graduates who bring the technical and professional skills required to fill job vacancies in business and industry. According to Carnevale et al. (2018), "The new competitive environment generated by the synergy of automation and globalization has led employers to demand a higher level of skills from workers, leading in turn to the upskilling of the workforce in most industries" (p. 9). The "middle-skills" sector (workers with more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree) has experienced significant growth, as good jobs for workers with associate degrees "grew by 83% between 1991 and 2016," while good jobs for those with a high school diploma have declined (Carnevale et al., p. 12). A trained workforce attracts and retains businesses within a local region, which contributes to stable and thriving communities. Higher wage earners contribute to a higher tax base, which funds local, state, and federal economies. However, social benefits also accrue when more

individuals in a community attain higher levels of education. Research has shown that individuals with a college education are less likely to be associated with crime and antisocial behavior and more likely to be civically engaged, to volunteer, to make charitable contributions, and to be involved with their children's education (Malveaux, 2003; Murray, 2009). Thus, increased access to higher education and increased levels of educational attainment positively benefits communities within the U.S. as well as the nation as a whole (Malveaux, 2003; Murray, 2009).

Methods

This study used naturalistic inquiry, that is, a basic qualitative design to explore the intra- and interpersonal experiences of rural community college students of low socio-economic status as they entered the middle-class culture of higher education and to explore the ways in which they made use of the cultural capital they possessed and acquired. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state "the overall purpose [of a basic qualitative study] is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 24). They explain that "qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24), which aptly describes the intents and purposes of this study.

Participants and Sample Selection

Participants for this study were identified through purposeful criterion sampling of students enrolled in rural Ohio community colleges. Ohio was selected as 26% of the state's population is classified as rural with food, agriculture, and manufacturing as its leading industries (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). In addition, Ohio established a

statewide attainment goal that “at least 65% of Ohioans, age 25-64 years old, hold a degree, certificate, or other post-secondary workforce credential” by 2025 (Ohio Department of Higher Education, 2021, par.1). Rural community colleges were identified according to the Carnegie classification of Associate’s Colleges which are rural serving. Participants met the following three inclusion criteria: (a) low socio-economic status; (b) first-generation status; and (c) attainment of 30 semester hours or more.

Low-socioeconomic status was an important criterion due to the study’s focus on the navigation of social class environments. Therefore, students who qualified to receive a Federal Pell Grant were recruited to participate in this study as an indicator of having met this criterion. “Federal Pell Grants usually are awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, par.1).

Participants were also selected based on their status as “first-generation” college students. For the purposes of this study, the definition of first-generation college students is the definition used by the National Center for Education Statistics in their reporting: “First-generation college students are students who are enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any post-secondary education experience” (Redford & Hoyer, 2018, p. 3).

The third criterion for participant selection consists of the number of credit hours completed. Participants completed a minimum of 30 college credit hours. This criterion increases the likelihood that participants will have (a) experienced intra- and interpersonal experiences navigating the middle-class realm of higher education as well

as (b) experiences integrating and applying new and existing cultural capital in their varied social contexts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were recruited from two rural community colleges in Ohio, by means of a batch email asking them to participate in a focus group interview. Twenty-two students responded to the email, and fifteen students were scheduled to attend one of four focus groups held. Ten participants completed interviews, with 9 attending one of the four focus groups, and 1 participant rescheduled as an individual interview. Thus, the groups consisted of 2 to 3 participants each. The interviews were semi-structured and averaged 65 minutes in length. The interview protocol consisted of nine open-ended questions. Students were also asked to complete a brief demographic survey consisting of twelve questions. The researcher used a pilot test to refine the demographic survey and interview questions and inform the data collection process. All interviews were digitally recorded. Participant interviews were conducted until saturation occurred. Interview recordings were transcribed and produced 229 pages of data. The data was then coded for analysis.

According to Creswell (2007) the primary elements of qualitative data analysis are "coding the data (reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments), combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data, graphs, tables and charts" (p. 148). First-cycle coding produced 496 initial codes. As coding continued, second-cycle coding reduced the initial codes to 45 categories, and subsequent rounds resulted in 7 categories. From

these categories, three main themes emerged. An analysis of the data is presented in both in Chapter Four and a discussion of the findings is presented in Chapter Five.

Assumptions of the Study

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), assumptions are "postulates, premises, and propositions that are accepted as operational for purposes of the research" (p. 135). Assumptions reflect what the researcher believes to be true in relation to the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. This study is subject to three assumptions. The first assumption is that participants answered the interview questions truthfully. This is based on the premise, that when assured of anonymity and confidentiality, research participants spoke openly and honestly.

The second assumption is that the participants experienced social class differences. This is based on the premise that by the time an individual reaches adulthood, they have had opportunities for interactions with persons of greater or lesser socioeconomic status. While many college students may be uncertain as to their families' social class standing, they can recognize attributes of a higher or lower class.

The third assumption is that the participants are a representative sample of the population studied. This assumption is based on the premise that participants are selected based on the established criteria and are able to discuss the phenomenon under study.

Delimitations of the Study

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) have defined delimitations as "self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (p. 134). This study was delimited in three ways. The first delimitation was that the study focused on community college students. Though underrepresented in much of the research literature,

community colleges enroll 42% of all undergraduate students (Ma & Baum, 2016). In fact, research has found that 46% of students who completed a degree at a four-year institution, attended a two-year institution at some point, and of those students, 47% did so for five or more terms (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015).

> Community colleges play a crucial role in American higher education. Their open admission policy, coupled with low tuition and geographic proximity to home, makes them an important pathway to postsecondary education for many students, especially first-generation college students and those who are from low-income families, as well as adults returning to school to obtain additional training or credentials. (Ma & Baum, 2016, p. 1).

The second delimitation is that the study focused on social class. Despite a common belief in anyone's ability to attain the American dream, research suggests otherwise, "finding strong associations between class origins and educational and income attainment" (Swartz, 2008, p.13-14). Most adults are found to be in the same or nearly the same social class as their parents, or what Swartz (2008) terms, "intergenerational class reproduction". Instances of one moving from the lower class to the upper class is actually quite rare. Interestingly, Swartz (2008) found that though the research "documents class origins as a predictor of socioeconomic status, it does not reveal the mechanisms that facilitate achievement" (p. 14). Much is still to be learned about what factors influence one's life chances and outcomes in the quest to achieve academic and economic upward mobility.

The third delimitation is that this study focused on rural community college students. Though rural students graduate from high school at rates above the national

average and perform better on national assessments than their urban peers, they are less likely to attend college (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Of the 42% of persons ages 18 to 24 enrolled in higher education, only 29% are from rural areas compared to 48% from cities (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016). Furthermore, only 30% of rural adults (age 25 and older) attain an associate or bachelor's degree compared to 43% of urban adults (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2020). This may account for the income gap between rural and urban households, whereby rural household income falls 20 to 25% less than urban household income.

Charles Fluharty, president and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the University of Iowa believes cultural influences contribute to the educational trends found in rural communities (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Fluharty cites a history of living wages from farming, manufacturing, mining, and timber-harvesting that did not require a college education. To encourage college attendance, Fluharty surmises, may be viewed as devaluing and dishonoring the work of members in one's family and community (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017).

Limitations of the Study

This study contains certain limitations common to qualitative research methodology. "Limitations of a study are not under the control of the researcher. Limitations are factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings or generalizability of the results" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 133). While generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, it is anticipated that the findings will have transferability. Transferability "is about how well the study has made it possible for

readers to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in depth how they occur at the research site" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.113).

The first limitation of this study is that the sample of students was drawn from a single state in the Midwest. As such, there may be similarities or differences in the context of this study that the reader may wish to consider when making applications to their own settings. I provided adequate descriptions of the setting and sufficient details regarding the participants in order for a reader to determine the usefulness of the study for their own purposes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Researcher subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research. Therefore, bias due to my own experience as a low-income, first-generation college student is the second limitation of this study. To challenge the potential for researcher assumptions during data collection and reduce the risk of researcher expectations influencing the findings, a faculty reviewer was used to check the coding and interpretation of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Jones, et al., 2006).

Definition of Terms

Aspirational capital: This form of capital is a type of resilience defined as "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Cultural capital: According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is a form of capital that is "subject to a hereditary transmission"(p. 18) and exists in three forms: the embodied state, i.e., in the form "dispositions of the mind and body" or rather, tastes and preferences; in the objectified state, in the form of "cultural goods (pictures, books, ...

etc.)"....and in the institutionalized state, "…as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications"(p. 17).

Community Cultural Wealth: An expanded view of cultural capital that challenges White, middle-class culture as the standard. Community cultural wealth "is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Familial capital: The cultural knowledge that comes from extended family and kinship ties. This includes "a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition" that "informs our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

First-Generation: "First-generation college students are students who enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any post-secondary education experience" (Redford & Hoyer, 2017, p. 3).

Linguistic capital: The skills and abilities associated with communicating in multiple languages or styles, which also includes the ability to communicate through music, art or poetry (Yosso, 2005).

Low-Income: Low-income status is determined by demonstrating financial need as defined by the eligibility requirements for the Federal Pell Grant. "Nearly 80% of Pell Grant recipients attending community colleges in 2009-2010 had family incomes (based on a family of four with 2 children) below 150% of the poverty level" (Baime & Mullin, 2011, p. 7).

Multiple identities: The acknowledgement that identity has many dimensions, defined both internally and externally, by self and others. Social identities may be roles,

categories, traits or behaviors shaped and influenced by the experiences, social contexts, and self-perceptions of each individual (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Navigational capital: This is defined by Yosso (2005) as the "skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (p. 80). This form of capital is called upon most when institutional processes are unfamiliar, stressful, or even hostile.

Resistant capital: This form of capital consists of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that challenge inequality and resist subordination (Yosso, 2005).

Rural community college: The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education defines Associate's Colleges as institutions in which their highest degree conferred was the associate degree or bachelor's degrees accounted for less than 10% of all undergraduate degrees (American Council on Education, 2021). Institutions classified as *rural-serving* are those in non-urbanized areas. Urbanized areas are Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) with a total population of greater than 50,000 according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

Social capital: This form of capital consists of the people and community resources in our network of support. Yosso (2005) defines social capital as "peer and other social contacts [that] can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (p. 79).

*Social class: "*Social class refers to a particular location within a class stratified society and is generally differentiated by occupational prestige, education and income" (Jones, 1998, p.146).

Social identity: Race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and other aspects of an individual that become socially constructed categories. These categories

"take on meanings in relation to systems of inequality that rely on privilege and oppression" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 38). The meanings may change over time and in differing contexts.

Stop outs: A "stop out" is the term applied to a period in which a degree seeking student is not enrolled. The time must be for more than four months or for more than 123 days. Thus, summer break or the time between May 1 and August 31 would not be considered a stop out (Shapiro, et al., 2016).

Summary

This research study sought to contribute new insight into the experiences of rural community college students from low socio-economic backgrounds as they navigate the middle-class realm of higher education. A secondary purpose of this study was to better understand how these students integrate and apply cultural capital to their intra- and interpersonal relationships within the context of their varied social environments.

Added knowledge and understanding informs our work with students and improves the educational opportunities and services we provide. "Both individual-and institutional-level changes that, if implemented, would ensure that all students, regardless of background, know that they belong. Increasing students' sense of belonging may have important implications for their transition to college, their persistence to graduation and their ultimate success at college" (Ostrove & Long, 2007, p. 384).

Chapter Two

Literature Review

I suppose the first major class conflict of my life was my decision about where to go to college...I did not realistically consider what it would be like to cross the boundaries of class, to be the working-class girl attending the rich school. No wonder my parents feared for me and my fate. They could see what I could not see.

– bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*

Introduction

Two decades ago, bell hooks (2000) described her experiences with class privilege and "class shame" when she left her family and friends in Kentucky to attend Stanford University in California. In her book *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, hooks speaks frankly about the challenges she faced attending an elite university; the challenges of staying connected to her friends and family; and the economic inequalities of race, class, and gender that remain so deeply embedded in American culture.

Around the same time, Ruby Payne and her colleagues published *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* (Payne, et al., 2001). This book became an essential resource and was heavily used in training programs designed to help individuals who worked in social services agencies. More specifically, this resource helped agencies (a) to provide assistance to low-income individuals seeking employment and (b) to reduce the number of individuals receiving government assistance. While groundbreaking in that Payne et al. openly described class differences in terms of values, behaviors, and attitudes, *Bridges Out of Poverty* sparked controversy for doing so. Kunjufu (2006) criticized the book for advocating what was perceived as a deficit model of poverty and for "blaming the victim." Moreover, he found that the work failed to address issues of race and capitalism as important and influential factors that contributed

to economic inequities and barriers to upward mobility. Despite these criticisms, the concepts and strategies proposed by Payne and her colleagues began to influence the field of higher education, most notably in the book *Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students: A Fresh Look at the Influence of Economic Class on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Becker, et al., 2009). This book was touted as a "first of its kind" because it was aimed at helping faculty members, administrators, and student-services personnel understand the barriers to success faced by students from low-income backgrounds. In addition, it was aimed at identifying strategies to counter the cultural mismatch evident between students from low-income backgrounds and the higher education environment. While an important step in bringing social class to the forefront of conversations related to student retention and success, two specific issues have remained unaddressed in the dialogue: (a) the ways in which students from low-income backgrounds experience their transition into higher education environments and (b) the strategies and resources that are most helpful to students as they navigate this journey. This research study intends to give voice to these students' perspectives.

The following chapter provides a foundation from the research literature to guide and support this study. First, social class is defined, and social class as an aspect of identity is described. Next, a summary of the research is presented that describes the process of how individuals become aware of social class differences, as well research describing the social-emotional costs of upward mobility. A presentation of the mission and role of community colleges as a gateway for upwardly mobile individuals follows, along with a review of research that has been conducted on (a) student retention in relationship to students from low-income backgrounds and (b) cultural capital as a

necessary mechanism that facilitates social mobility. The chapter concludes with a review of the literature related to (a) class conflict as experienced by students from low-income backgrounds and (b) codeswitching as a mechanism employed to cope with navigating in bicultural worlds.

Social Class Defined

The terms *social clas*s and *socioeconomic status* (or *SES)* are often used interchangeably. They are terms that commonly refer to one's economic position in society as determined primarily based on income, but these terms also can refer to one's level of education and occupation. However, researchers have failed to agree on a clear definition of either concept or which term is best applied for the purposes of academic and social research (Jones, 1998; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Rubin et al., 2014; Soria, 2018). In fact, the authors of one study exploring counseling psychology research reviewed 710 journal articles that featured the term "social class." They reported that "448 different words [were used] to describe social class" and found significant inconsistencies in how social class was measured (Liu et al., 2004, p. 3).

Ostrove and Cole (2003) suggested that the term "socioeconomic status" provides "objective indicators" (e.g., income, occupation, level of education) for determining one's social class, while the term "class" implies "a particular relationship between social groups characterized by discrimination, power, and or exploitation" (p. 682). In higher education research, Rubin et al. (2014) and Soria (2018) noted that parental income, parental education, and occupation comprise the SES indicators most frequently used to determine students' social class. They further noted that these indicators tend to reveal more about the students' parents than about the students themselves, especially in

reference to non-traditional students. Soria also pointed out that inconsistencies in what constitutes "income," varying definitions of what qualifies as "first-generation" status and the absence of a consistent system for classifying occupations in the U.S. makes exclusive reliance on these indicators questionable. Soria recommended that in addition to the SES indicators associated with economic capital, researchers in higher education should also consider measures of students' social, cultural, familial, and human capital. Soria further indicated that although they are much more complex and difficult to measure, "these forms of capital are critical in understanding the foundations for social classes--and they matter in predicting students' experiences in higher education" (p. 54).

For the purposes of this study, the term *social class* "refers to a particular location within a class stratified society and is generally differentiated by occupational prestige, education and income. It is a sociological concept that is attributed to a person or group" (Jones, 1998, p. 146). The household income tiers of lower-, middle-, and upper-income for this study are based upon the Pew Research Center (2016) analysis of U.S. government data and are defined as follows:

- Lower-income households have incomes of less than 67% of the national median income.
- Middle-income households have incomes above 67% but below double the median income.
- Upper-income households have incomes more than double the median income.

All incomes are adjusted for household size and the cost of living in the area.

Social Class and an Aspect of Identity

According to Nelson et al. (2006), "a person's identity is deeply tied to the internal experience of social class and… it should be considered an important aspect of the person's psychological and cultural makeup" (p. 12). However, social class is an often-overlooked aspect of social identity, particularly among student development theorists. Researchers frequently have investigated issues of race, gender, or sexual orientation as to the extent that these constructs relate to the experiences of college students. Social class, on the other hand, is underrepresented as a topic of investigation within the identity development research literature. According to Evans et al. (2010), "A paucity of literature exists on how students from different social classes develop in college because no social class developmental model exists" (p. 240). Perhaps one reason for this underrepresentation is because social class is often complex, hidden, and difficult to identify. Jones (1998) has suggested that "class--like sexuality--is not always apparent" (p. 145) and, in fact, is difficult to examine and separate from the other aspects of identity, such as race or sexual orientation. Jones, along with McEwen (2000), therefore have considered social class to be one of the multiple dimensions of identity that "intersect" and which may include "racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities" as well as "social class, religious, geographic or regional, and professional identities" (p. 405). The difficulty of defining social class was most aptly summarized in a study conducted by Jones and Abes (2013), who suggested that social class intersects "with other social identities, such as race, culture, and sexual orientation, in complicated ways… a challenging issue to address in identity research" (p. 90).

Another reason that social class may be underrepresented as a topic of investigation within the identity development research literature is because social class is a subject fraught with tensions that often provoke discomfort. That is, discussions about social class often call into question the systemic stratification in U.S. society between the "haves and the have-nots" and the accompanying judgments individuals make regarding one's occupational prestige, level of education, or income (Jones, 1998). Conversations about social class force individuals to examine reasons why the pursuit of the "American Dream" eludes so many and why so few individuals actually improve the social class position into which they are born.

Payne (2001) has suggested that social class heavily influences patterns of thought, social interactions, and cognitive strategies--so much so that even if individuals improve their social class position, these patterns of thought are likely to endure. Many individuals are not consciously aware that these patterns of thought serve as hidden rules and norms that reflect the socio-economic class into which individuals are born and raised. These hidden rules and norms highly influence (a) communication styles and ways of relating to others; (b) approaches to decision making and problem solving; and (c) the processes by which values, beliefs, and attitudes are developed (Jones, 1998; Payne, 2001). Thus, if individuals encounter challenges to their social class status, they simultaneously encounter challenges that extend to the very core of their identity and sense of self.

Within the limited scope of research that has been conducted on social class, researchers have examined social class and identity development among first-generation college women (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001), Mexican male college students

(Schwartz, et al., 2009), college professors from lower-class backgrounds (Nelson et al., 2006) and students attending four-year public and private universities (Aries & Seider, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). Results of these studies indicated that students from lower-class backgrounds often experience a sense of exclusion and alienation within the university setting. At the same time, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have expressed feeling uncomfortable in their culture of origin when returning home to family and friends after matriculating in a higher education environment. According to Nelson et al., "Most or all of our participants described experiences of social isolation and deprivation, of feeling like social misfits in many of their contexts" (p. 8). As a result, socioeconomic factors provide a fertile context for identity development. When the context changes, individuals are challenged to renegotiate identity because the new environments they encounter may challenge existing behaviors, attitudes, and values established in the previously internalized socioeconomic context (Nelson et al., 2006).

Awareness of Class Differences

Awareness of social class differences most often occurs when opportunities allow for social comparison. For individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds, a move into upper-class or middle-class professional environments, such as employment or educational settings, provides a context for this type of social comparison. For many individuals, entering a college environment represents the first opportunity to experience an acute awareness of social class differences, and this experience can be disorienting (Jones, 1998). Hidden-curriculum theorists have argued that educational systems are, in fact, the primary mechanisms for perpetuating social class structures through the informal

and unconscious inculcation of values. These mechanisms of socialization include the manner in which class lessons are structured, the choice of textbooks, student-teacher interactions, and even grading and exam procedures (Kentli, 2009).

Of the few studies conducted on social class as a contributing factor to identity among college students, the majority has been conducted at 4-year institutions and often explored the experiences of two groups: (a) students acclimating to elite college or university settings (Aries & Seider, 2007; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Soria, 2012; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014) or (b) students who successfully navigated the university and are employed in professional roles (Jones, 1998; Mallman, 2017; Ostrove, 2003). Despite their limited focus on these two groups, findings from these studies, nevertheless, can inform the way that faculty members, administrators, and academic advisors work with community college students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Themes identified in these studies have indicated that students from low socio-economic backgrounds often (a) feel that they do not belong in a college environment, (b) feel that they are "outsiders," and (c) feel that they are unprepared or lacking information and knowledge that their middle- and upper-class peers seemingly possess. According to Crozier and Reay (2011), "Nearly all the students across the two institutions [that participated in the study] experienced struggle, challenge and difficulty and crisis of confidence, particularly in the first year although for some it endured until they finished" (p. 151). These findings would appear to have serious implications for student persistence, completion, and academic performance, regardless of the specific higher education academic setting. In fact, Ostrove and Long (2007) in their study of 324 college students reported that "social-class background was strongly related to a sense of

belonging in college, which in turn predicted social and academic adjustment to college, quality of experience at college, and academic performance" (p. 379, 381). Ostrove and Long concluded that feeling as though one does not belong in college "affects the extent of participation in class, the willingness to seek help as needed and other critical behaviors that influence college success" (p. 381).

Further contributing to the research conducted on social class as an aspect of identity among college students, Reay (2018) studied the experiences of 41 academically successful, low-income students as they transitioned to elite institutions of higher education. Reay found that these students experienced to a substantial degree "confusions and ambiguities about the sort of self they were seeking" (p. 5). Additionally, Reay reported that these students often experienced fear, anxiety, and "an acute sense of being out of place" (p. 5). According to Reay, students from low socio-economic backgrounds described feeling isolated and excluded by their middle- and upper-class peers. They also described choosing to exclude themselves from social activities in order to focus on academic success. Reay concluded that "the fight for a successful academic identity often means forfeiting a successful social identity" (p. 9).

Interestingly, several of the previous studies indicated that students from middle- and upper-income backgrounds reported experiences that were opposite from those reported by students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Aries & Seider, 2007; Swartz, 2008; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). For example, Ostrove (2003) surmised that socialization influenced the values and opinions among the students from upper-class backgrounds, leading them to believe "that certain domains are 'theirs' and are created to maintain their class position and to isolate them from the rest of society" (p. 773). While

their peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds struggled to fit in and belong, the students from upper-class backgrounds began to increase their awareness of the class privilege they had experienced, or what Swartz described as 'hidden advantages' that are "largely taken for granted" (p. 18). According to multiple studies, students from affluent families pursued educational and occupational goals consistent with those of their parents or other family members who went before them (Aries & Seider, 2007; Ostrove, 2003; Swartz, 2008; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). Aries and Seider (2007) found that "the affluent students recognized their class status was related to the quality of education that they had received" (p. 144) and that "their educational opportunities had put them on a different path in life" (p.144). Thomas and Azmitia (2014) found that after engaging in social comparison experiences, "social class was very much on the minds of these upper-class students, and they grappled with feelings of guilt and being blessed as the fortunate ones" (p. 208).

The students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, on the other hand, grappled with minimizing or rationalizing their disadvantages and developing other self-protective strategies in an attempt to confront negative attitudes and/or treatment and negotiate a positive identity (Aries & Seider, 2007; Stephens &Townsend, 2013). Ultimately, although many students learn to cope with these experiences, research has indicated that the experience of repeatedly being the target of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination can decrease students' level of identification with higher education and lead them to feel that they do not belong (Stephens & Townsend, 2013, p. 5).

The Challenges of Upward Social Mobility

A few studies have provided insight into the challenges faced by individuals who seek upward mobility through higher education. These studies have indicated that students from low socio-economic backgrounds quickly begin to realize that the social and emotional skills they acquired to navigate their home environments successfully have not prepared them to navigate middle- and upper-class environments. In higher-education environments, these students are called upon to acquire new skill sets--in language, attitudes, and behaviors--and adapt to new social contexts, all of which begins to alter their perspective, shift their identity and in turn challenge relationships with their family members and friends (Curl et al., 2018; Mallman, 2017; Morton, 2019; Nelson et al., 2006). Clearly, research has indicated that

> advancing to higher education may entail making profound shifts in a person's social contexts and supports. Most important, perhaps, the challenge of upward mobility may also involve negotiating a new identity and incurring the losses related to abandoning the old one. (Nelson et al., 2006, p. 2)

Students of low socioeconomic status who enter higher education begin to engage in new experiences and encounter new opportunities that challenge their existing perceptions and reshape their understanding of the world. Curt et al. (2018) reported that research participants from low socio-economic backgrounds who entered higher education reported the benefits of "broadening their horizons," "trying new things from different cultures," and "meeting a broader range of people" (p. 884). However, after encountering these new perspectives and experiences, these students then wrestle with the process of integrating the "old self" with the "new self." That is, students face the

challenge of deciding which perspectives and values from their family of origin to retain, which to revise, and which to abandon. Likewise, they face the same challenge in deciding which perspectives and values from their new higher education environment to adapt or embrace. In this process, they experience a psychological and social push to move forward and attain upward mobility, while at the same time, they also experience a pull not to become too different or distanced from family members (Mallman, 2017; Nelson et al., 2006). According to Curl et al. (2018), "Some cultural dispositions from childhood are replaced, but other cultural dispositions persist. As a result, upwardly mobile respondents are poised to be in conflict with family and childhood friends" (p. 891).

Morton (2019) characterized the losses that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds experience as they move into higher education and a different social class environment as "the ethical costs of upward mobility" (p. 4). According to Morton, the "trade-offs" and "sacrifices" these students experience are often "invisible" and absent from the stories of success that institutions identify and disseminate. For example, O'Shea (2016) reported that non-traditional-age women in her study experienced feelings of guilt and anxiety as they moved into higher education. This was particularly true for those women who were caregivers. As further evidence of the costs required to move into a higher education environment, Mallman (2017) also identified what he termed an additional "hidden cost of upward mobility" in that participants in his study intentionally limited themselves "in order to mitigate a sense of risk" (p. 28). In other words, the participants from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Mallman's study often lacked confidence and chose security over opportunities when facing life choices on the path

upward. For example, one participant waited fifteen years to enroll in college because of her father's warning that a job was "more sensible" (p.26). Swartz (2008), in a study of family capital, reported instances of young adult college-goers from low socioeconomic backgrounds financially assisting their parents while pursuing upward mobility, a situation that not only affects their well-being but may also limit their level of attainment.

> The traditional narrative of upward mobility in this country acknowledges the academic and financial hurdles that strivers have to overcome to succeed, but it does not do a good job of preparing students for the emotional, psychological, and ethical challenges they will confront. We rarely tell students that their success may come at the expense of some of the things that they hold most dear--their relationship with family and friends, their connection to their communities, and their sense of who they are and what matters to them. (Morton, 2019, p. 12)

Role of Community College

Policy researcher Hannah Halbert (2014) stated that "post-secondary education and credentials are essential building blocks for family self-sufficiency and shared economic progress. Even in a slow economy, education is an insulator against unemployment and a pathway to work with a decent wage and benefits" (p. 2). Community colleges have demonstrated a long history of serving as a point of access to higher education and upward social mobility, especially for members of underrepresented groups (Romano & Eddy, 2017).

Public community colleges evolved from the junior college trend of the 1920's as an effort to provide access to higher education by offering the first two years of the baccalaureate liberal arts curriculum (Thelin, 2004). As a state with one of the largest

educational systems in the U.S., California was a leader in the effort to modify the purpose and name of the "junior college" to the "community college" in the 1940s. Additionally, major events, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s and the need to accommodate the volume of returning veterans of World War II, fueled the momentum of the movement. Thus, the dual mission of the junior college to serve transfer students and to serve students seeking vocational education within their local communities led to the name change from "junior college" to "community college" across the United States. By the 1960's, these institutions offered a variety of courses and programs--e.g., "welding classes coexisted with courses in philosophy"--and provided "a port of entry for the underserved" (Thelin, 2004, p. 301).

According to the Community College Research Center (2020), nearly 10 million students were enrolled in community colleges during the 2017-2018 academic year and accounted for 44% of all undergraduates attending an institution of higher education. Of these 10 million students, 29% were the first in their generation to attend college, and 33% met the income guidelines to receive a Federal Pell grant (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Survey data have indicated that of the more than one-third of community college students receiving Pell Grants, two-thirds of these recipients live below the poverty threshold (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017). Thus, community colleges have remained true to their mission in providing access to higher education for underserved populations, particularly economically disadvantaged individuals. "Because of their geographic availability, open admissions policy, and low cost, these colleges have expanded educational opportunities to millions of Americans, young and old" (Romano & Eddy, 2017, p. 55). Today, however, the focus has now

shifted from access to completion, and in this area, community colleges have not fared well. A recent study of community college students who began their education in 2011 indicated that less than 38% completed a degree within six years. These rates are substantially lower than completion rates among students starting at four-year institutions. For example, Shapiro et al. (2017) reported a 64.7% completion rate at public four-year institutions and a 76% completion rate at private four-year institutions.

These data are troubling for several reasons. Currently, the labor market reflects fewer jobs and higher unemployment for those individuals with a high school diploma or less education. Individuals who have completed some college, but no degree, will find little difference in wages from individuals with a high school diploma (Phillippe & Tekle, 2017). However, completing an associate degree, particularly in technical fields, may actually yield earnings higher than individuals who complete four-year degrees upon graduation (Kelly, 2015). Thus, community college is "a good investment for both the individual and society" (Romano & Eddy, 2017, p. 57), and failure to improve college completion rates, particularly at two-year institutions, has implications for persons living in poverty and for the American economy as a whole (Kelly, 2015).

Retention of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

In a review of more than 40 years of retention research, Vincent Tinto (2006) stated that both two-year and four-year institutions have failed to make substantial gains in rates of student persistence and graduation. In fact, he reported that low-income students have actually lost ground. He cited a 28% decline in the enrollment of Pell Grant recipients attending four-year colleges and universities from 1973-1974 (62.4%) to 2001-2002 (44.9%). He further pointed out that there is "less socioeconomic diversity than

racial and ethnic [diversity] at the most selective colleges and universities" (p. 11). Despite the substantial amount of research that has been conducted on the importance of student involvement and best practices for academic and social integration, Tinto stated that "there is still much we do not know and have yet to explore" (p. 2). And with particular regard to students from low-income backgrounds, Tinto challenged academic researchers to explore factors that contribute to persistence among student from low-income backgrounds both at two-year institutions as well as four-year institutions:

> We need to know more about the nature of their experiences in both two- and four-year institutions, the ways those experiences influence persistence, and more importantly the sorts of institutional and state actions that enhance their success in higher education (Tinto, 2006, p. 12).

Both Tinto (2006; 2017) as well as Bean and Eaton (2001) have suggested shifting retention practices from a focus on institutional practices to a focus on individual students. If retention can be viewed from the lens of the student perspective and focused particularly on the psychological processes vital to an individual's academic and social integration, then there is a greater likelihood of retaining a student to graduation (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Simply providing opportunities for students to interact with others on campus is not enough, "as it is student perceptions of those interactions and the meanings they derive as to their capacity to succeed in college, their sense of belonging in the institution" (Tinto, 2017, p. 263). Moreover, students who (a) gain a sense of control over their circumstances, (b) develop self-efficacy, and (c) establish a repertoire of coping strategies will possess the attributes to successfully integrate into their academic and social environments (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Social Roles in Community College

Langhout, et al., (2007) support the premise that it is not enough to get students from low-income backgrounds through the door, but that institutions must create an environment that is "hospitable and welcoming" (p. 177). Though their research was conducted at a private, elite university, their study of classism in higher education has implications for all types of institutions, including community colleges. Langhout, et al., define classism as a form of discrimination in which "people occupying lower social class levels are treated in ways that exclude, devalue, discount, and separate them" (p. 145). Their research described the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of classism in the experiences of students from low-income households who transition into higher education. Participants in their study reported comments or jokes about people who are poor; assumptions that students could afford course materials, books, or certain supplies; scheduled activities or course requirements outside of class that conflicted with their hours of employment; and assumptions that students could provide their own transportation. Classism was found to not only be perpetuated through institutional policies and procedures, but also in the behaviors of faculty, staff, and fellow students.

Soria, et al. (2013) had similar findings in their study of the experiences of working-class students as compared to their middle- and upper-class peers. Working-class students reported a "less welcoming campus climate" and are "less likely to feel as though they belong on campus" (p. 228). These students reported more barriers to success, such as job and family responsibilities, poor academic preparation in math and English, poor study skills and behaviors, and bad study environments. "There may indeed be implicit, structural mechanisms within higher education that systematically wear down

working-class students as they confront daily norms and expectations out of their reach" (Soria, et al., pp. 229-230). Not surprisingly, the working-class student participants were found to report feelings of depression, stress and upset more frequently than there upper-income classmates. Unfortunately, little training exists related to how to foster inclusiveness relative to social class on college campuses, unlike training and workshop materials available to change campus climates related to gender or racial disparities.

Realizing that changing institutional norms is a lengthy process, Karp and Bork (2014) posed an alternate approach for assisting students "who are from cultures other than the middle-class, White culture upon which collegiate norms are based" (p. 36). These researchers focused on identifying the *social role* expectations of students that are currently necessary for success in the community college. Their aim was to clarify these expectations and to provide strategies to educate and inform incoming students about how to meet these expectations. Their research warned that the inability to perform the expected role would likely result in "poor academic outcomes" (p. 21). According to Karp and Bork (2014):

> Meeting students where they are, in terms of norms, expectations, and understanding, and helping them generate more detailed and actionable understandings of community college expectations can help them become comfortable with and successful in community college while maintaining cultural pluralism (p. 36)

Cultural Capital

Karp and Bork (2014) contend that students new to community college would have fewer frames of reference and experiences to guide them, which creates a disadvantage. They

suggested that students not surrender their home culture identities, but when in the college environment, "be able to adhere to institutional cultures" (p. 20). Bourdieu (1986) would have referred to this approach as the building of social and cultural capital.

These finding were replicated in a study by Crozier and Reay (2011) that followed 17 university students from low-income backgrounds over two academic years. They found that "not only are their financial resources limited, they start out with little or limited knowledge of what to expect and what is expected of them and little understanding of the structure and overall requirements of their course" (p. 148). The researchers also found that students from low-income backgrounds lacked knowledge of the resources available to assist them in both the academic and social arenas. This was compounded by working part-time and living at home, which impeded the students' opportunities for experiences that might have provided access to social and cultural experiences in which to build capital. Crozier and Reay state, "success in the education system is arguably predicated on having the right kinds of cultural and social capital" (p. 146). Without such capital, students "are thrown back on themselves to make sense of the rules" (p. 149).

Similarly, Nelson et al., (2006) found that the university professors from lower-class backgrounds in their study reported little to no access to sources of social capital. That is, no one provided knowledge and information about educational and career opportunities and the ways in which to pursue those opportunities. The participants reported lacking knowledge of the language and cultural practices in their new social contexts, unfamiliarity with how to navigate organizational systems, and how to manage money. Participants also felt that their early schooling prepared them poorly and added

to their struggles, as did certain decisions such as early marriages and unplanned pregnancies. "Most of the participants did not have access to such wisdom; therefore, they were required to piece together a vision of the future" (p. 9).

Swartz (2008) affirms this premise in her study of families as a source of social and cultural capital for young adults between the ages of 18 and 34. She found that families could provide both advantages and disadvantages to their children in terms of the capital they provide, which then contributes to the reproduction of the family's social class status. Family capital, Swartz describes, might consist of material, human, emotional, social, linguistic, and psychological resources. She states, "the notion of family capital helps recognize and highlight the ways families continue to directly influence their children's life chances and outcomes well into adulthood" (p. 15). Swartz contends that families have unequal access to resources, which results in unequal outcomes in attainment and upward mobility of their children. She asserts "…such assistance (or lack of it) can make the difference between earning a college degree, landing a middle-class job, or owning a starter home in early adulthood, all with long-term effects on subsequent attainments and lifestyles"(p. 18).

Furstenberg (2008) asserts that differences in social and cultural capital impact life chances even earlier. He cites disparities between the experiences of affluent and low-income youth in schooling, neighborhoods and employment which affect health, achievement and social development for the long term, not to mention second chances. Furstenberg suggests that "among the poor, the school system and the criminal justice system are often far less forgiving"(p. 5) than for their more affluent adolescent peers. The inequity continues upon entrance into higher education, as Furstenberg notes that

low-income students see education as a means to employment and will drop-out if offered full-time work. However, affluent students take a "leisurely pace" through college, allowing themselves time to acquire more social and cultural capital through additional opportunities for education, work, and travel.

Thus, students from low-income backgrounds are disadvantaged, in terms of social and cultural capital, prior to entering college and are likely to remain so while attending college. Not only are these students lacking financial resources, in comparison to their middle- and upper-class peers, but also lacking knowledge of the social norms and academic expectations of the higher education context. With minimal social and cultural capital, students from low-income backgrounds are not in a position to maximize the educational opportunity before them.

Building Cultural Capital

Following a study of over 23,000 students from varied economic classes, "bridge programs" were suggested to close the cultural gaps and meet the needs of students from lower-income backgrounds (Soria, 2012). The study found that students from lower-income backgrounds were more likely to be "academically disengaged" i.e, skip class, be unprepared for class, miss an assignment, or turn in assignments late. Bridge programs, often offered in the summer for new students, can "enhance the academic adjustment" of students by encouraging students to "connect with faculty inside and outside of class and help students to develop confidence in speaking with faculty about academic matters" (p. 52). Such programs, along with trained academic advisors and student orientation practitioners are thought to assist students of low-income backgrounds with

"acculturating to the new social and cultural norms of campus, while still maintaining and valuing their class identities" Soria, pp. 51-52).

Ostrove and Long (2007) support the premise that institutions of higher education should become more "welcoming and inclusive" (p. 384). Yet they express concern that programs aimed at doing so, such as the one mentioned above, puts the focus of change or adjustment primarily on the student rather than changing the institution. Nelson et al., (2006) agree stating that students would be most helped if mentors and advisors "simply break the silence about social class, integrating it more centrally into conversations about multiculturalism" (p. 13). Their research made clear that participants who chose to advance their social class position would ultimately find it necessary to develop "multiple cultural identities" (p. 7). Nelson, et al., found that for students of color, entering higher education would require the ability to manage a "tricultural identity", that is, identities associated with "their ethnic culture of origin, White culture, and the culture of higher education" (p. 8). While White students from low-income backgrounds, on the other hand, had to manage a different challenge. Their experience, commonly referred to as "the imposter syndrome", was that others "automatically assumed that they were from a privileged background" (p. 8) and had no idea of the difficulties they faced. Their struggles were hidden so others could not see or fully appreciate what it took to reach their goals. In either circumstance, the onus was primarily on the student to manage their bi-cultural or tri-cultural identities in this new context of higher education.

Class Conflict

A few researchers have given insight to what often occurs for upwardly mobile individuals from low-income backgrounds who encounter people from differing social

classes. As these individuals explore the differences and perhaps begin to change aspects of their "habitus" or cultural dispositions, conflicts emerge with their families and childhood friends (Curl, et al., 2018; Mallmann, 2017; Morton, 2019; Nelson, et al., 2006; Stephens & Townsend, 2013). Mallman describes these instances as *tension points* that "strain their identities, relationships, and life trajectories" (p. 29). Curl, et al., labeled them *flashpoints*, or "moments of interaction when our respondents felt tension or distance, experienced overt judgment, or engaged in conflict" (p. 879). Most often these tension or flashpoints occurred on return visits home, during which participants felt pressure from multiple sources to conform to the class expectations of their family and community.

Ironically, Nielson (2015) found that while "family members are most often the main source of conflict", they are also found to be "the biggest reason to pursue college" for students from low-income backgrounds. Families are very much a source of social identity and heavily influence one's educational and occupational strivings (Aries & Seider, 2007; Soria, 2012). Swartz (2008) believes that only by attending closely to family dynamics, will one uncover the hidden mechanisms by which social class is transmitted across generations, including the resources and assistance that may be offered.

The areas in which students from low-income backgrounds often conflicted with family and friends were in food preferences and attitudes toward health. Language was another *flashpoint* (Curl, et al., 2018). Students' learning enabled them to recognize mistakes in language usage of their family and friends or to make healthier food choices. Students reported "being called 'snob' by their family member" (p. 893). Others reported

"mixed messages" in that they felt parents were proud of their advancement, yet resentful of their upward move "out of the class structure of the family (Nelson, et al., 2006, p. 4). Students from low-income backgrounds have to be mindful how they manage these points of tension and conflict as the consequences could impact not only their relationships with others, but their living arrangements, childcare, money, and other resources necessary to stay enrolled (Nielson, 2015). Morton (2019) reported students struggled with internal conflict as well, feeling guilt and loss over their choices, even when students were sure their choices were the right ones.

Tension points also occurred in the classroom. Karp and Bork (2014) found that students from low-income backgrounds faced culturally biased rules and assumptions from instructors and staff as they moved into higher education. For example, "the notion that college should be *the* prominent, or at least a prominent role in student's lives….is an assumption made by the staff and administration at college" (p. 27). Yet, for students from low-income backgrounds it is unrealistic and an unfair expectation. Another example of cultural bias is the expectation that students actively seek help. The idea of asking an instructor or administrator for assistance may be "anxiety-provoking", "challenging or even identity-threatening" (Karp & Bork, p. 35). College instructors were also found to have certain class-based standards of behavior that showed respect and communicated that students took their education seriously. These behaviors included "modes of dress, language, interpersonal behavior, work ethic and reliability" (p. 24), all of which put students from low-income backgrounds at a cultural disadvantage as they may not have been socialized to many of these norms. Stephens and Townsend (2013) refer to this as a "cultural mismatch" that sends the message that students from low-

income backgrounds do not belong. They assert that such encounters "diminish students' sense of comfort, render academic tasks difficult, and undermine their academic performance" (p. 4). Nelson et al., (2006) report that about all the participants in their study described feeling like "social misfits in many of their contexts" (p. 8). These participants, who managed to achieve academic success while navigating in bi-cultural or tri-cultural contexts, described feelings of "social isolation and deprivation", "stress and alienation" and did not feel a sense of true belonging in any of their contexts. These feelings were often internalized, and the stress was not always visible to those around them. "Discomfort related to adapting to new cultures has been termed *acculturative stress* and has been linked to numerous symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality" (p. 11).

Codeswitching

A few researchers have identified a strategy that individuals seem to employ in managing biculturalism termed *code switching* or *cultural codeswitching* (Kaufman, 2003; Morton, 2019; Nelson, et al., 2006). Borrowed from sociocultural linguistics and the practice of linguistic code switching, cultural codeswitching goes beyond a shift in language or dialects when communicating in varied contexts (Nilep, 2006). Rather, "it requires that one change how one behaves, talks and presents oneself as a response to a change in cultural context. Cultural codeswitching cuts closer to the self" (Morton, p. 76). Morton found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds would employ cultural codeswitching to maintain ties with their home communities while adapting to new educational and career environments. The ability to code switch allowed upwardly mobile students a way to "fit in" with their families of origin, and also feel less an

outsider in middle- and upper-class milieus. Morton sees cultural codeswitching as "a way of pushing back on the pressure to change one's identity" (p. 78).

Kaufman (2003) found that code switching allowed his participants "some degree of fluidity" (p. 500). His research with 40 university seniors seeking to change social class positions revealed that some students had "the ability to move back and forth between distinct social identities, to be a social chameleon" (p. 500). Kaufman surmised that this allowed them the security of not cutting ties with the familiar and having a "fallback" if not accepted or fitting in the realm of their new social class status. Kaufman posits that the students seeking to successfully change social class position, i.e., *social transformation*, must distance themselves from their former social class associations and embrace those in the social class to which they aspire. Finally, Kaufman states that individuals must manage their *presentation of self* and learn to perform the social role congruent with the social class to which they aspire.

Morton acknowledges the costs of this ongoing cultural push-pull for students of low-income backgrounds navigating higher education. She states,

> …neither dividing the self nor pretending is a viable strategy. What we need is a way to codeswitch that allows us to be clear about what matters to us—that allows us to define and articulate our values—and that thus helps us thread the needle between blind assimilation and equally blind resistance. (Morton, 2019, p. 90).

Summary

A review of the research literature reveals that a growing number of Americans are losing economic ground and unable to find their way to a family sustaining wage in

the middle-class. In response, higher education has been touted as the primary means for upward mobility and community colleges identified as the point of access for all. Yet, improving access is not enough. After years of various efforts in the form of programs and services aimed at improving retention and completion rates for community college students, few gains have been made. Graduation rates for rural students from low-income backgrounds are particularly low.

Social class matters. Researchers in higher education are beginning to recognize that not enough attention has been paid to the impact of social class differences on the experiences of students in higher education, particularly in rural community colleges. Of the studies that have been conducted with regard to students of low-socio-economic status, most have focused on those students who are entering elite institutions or four-year colleges and universities. However, the studies reveal that attempts at addressing financial need and academic unpreparedness have been insufficient as have programs and services that compel social and academic integration. Programs such as learning communities, first-year experiences, and faculty or peer mentorship still have not brought about the gains in graduation rates among under-resourced students. The literature has provided clues about the factors that shape students' motivation to persist and succeed--i.e., a sense of self-efficacy and control; feelings of belonging and fit; and strategies to adapt and cope with challenges. Yet when students from low-income backgrounds lack a sense of self-efficacy and question their ability to be successful, when they do not feel they belong or fit, when they may lack the social and cultural capital to navigate the challenges, we know little about the strategies they used to adapt and cope.

Academic researchers and higher education professionals must listen closely to the voices of students from low -income backgrounds as they describe their perceptions and experiences within their academic and social contexts. Then, and only then, can the academic community hope to structure a more effective institutional response.

Chapter Three

Methods

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the intra- and interpersonal experiences of rural community college students from low socio-economic backgrounds as they navigate the middle-class realm of higher education. A secondary purpose of this study was to better understand how this population of community college students integrated and applied new and existing cultural capital to manage in their varied social contexts. Given these purposes, this study employed a naturalistic inquiry or, more specifically, a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) conducted from a social constructivist perspective. "A central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructivism thus underlies what we are calling a basic qualitative study" (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 24). Therefore, within the guiding principles of qualitative research and a social constructivist perspective, this chapter presents (a) the research questions under study, (b) the rationale for the research design and methods, (c) delimitations of the study, (d) description of the participant sample, (e) the data collection process, (f) the data analysis process, and (g) the limitations of the study.

Research Questions

The following research question guided this study: How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status navigate their experiences of entering higher education and a differing class culture?

To answer this research question, the following sub-questions will further define the scope of this investigation:

1. How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status navigate a *shifting sense of self* in and among their varied social and academic contexts?
2. How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status navigate *shifting interpersonal relationships* in and among their varied social and academic contexts?
3. How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status, entering higher education, integrate and *make use of personal and cultural capital* to manage their differing social class environments?

Research Design

This research study explored (a) the intra- and interpersonal experiences of rural community college students from low socio-economic backgrounds as they entered the middle-class culture of higher education as well as (b) the ways in which these students made use of the cultural capital they possessed and acquired. I chose a basic qualitative design to help explain a phenomenon that a quantitative design cannot--that is, (a) the experiences of rural community college students; (b) their motives for remaining enrolled in college; and more importantly, (c) the influences of various cultural forces, interpersonal relationships, and personal and cultural capital on their ability to navigate college. Merriam &Tisdell (2016) state "the overall purpose [of a basic qualitative study] is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 24). They explain that "qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their

worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24), which aptly describes the intents and purposes of this study.

Creswell (2007) also suggests that qualitative research is best suited for "inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). Whereas quantitative research strategies consist of collecting and analyzing numerical data to explain, compare, or predict a phenomenon under investigation, qualitative research methods are "interpretive and grounded in people's lived experiences" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 30). Qualitative researchers explore and interpret what they have come to see, hear, and understand about the problem or issue from the multiple perspectives offered by research participants. Qualitative research is conducted in the field or "natural setting" related to the issue, and the researcher becomes the key instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007). In contrast to a quantitative research design, a qualitative research design is more likely to collect rich, detailed information that captures participants' experiences and perspectives.

A social constructivist perspective suggests that reality is historically, culturally, and socially constructed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Constructivist researchers understand that participants occupy subjective realities and create personal meaning from their experiences. According to Creswell (2007), constructivist researchers focus on the "processes of interaction among individuals" (p. 21) and consider the contexts of the interactions, such as where participants live and work. Constructivist researchers act as "the facilitator of multivoice reconstruction" (Bloomberg & Volpe, p. 29) and join participants in order to make sense of and draw meaning from their experiences. The constructivist perspective was best suited for this qualitative research study because this

perspective emphasizes the importance of listening to participants' stories in order to give "voice" to their thoughts and feelings without adding to or taking from their experiences.

Method

The methods used for this study are indicative of naturalistic inquiry and basic qualitative research in that while planned with some degree of specificity, were emergent as the study progressed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain "what emerges as a function of the interaction between inquirer and phenomenon is largely unpredictable in advance; because the inquirer cannot know sufficiently well the patterns of mutual shaping that are likely to exist" (p. 41). What follows is a description of methodological steps taken, with the understanding that there were "refinements in procedure" based upon the results as they emerged (Lincoln & Guba, p. 102).

Research Sites

Ohio community colleges were selected as research sites due to statewide initiatives directed at educating the state's adult workforce and improving rates of degree attainment at public institutions. The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) directed several strategic initiatives, the most significant of which was the implementation of a new state funding model in 2013 (Complete College America, 2014). Ohio's community colleges were particularly impacted by this new model as funding is no longer based on enrollment, but rather rates of students' course and degree completion. Adding to the degree completion momentum, the Governor's Executive Workforce Board established an "Attainment Goal" in 2017. This goal resolved to have at least 65% of Ohioans, age 25-64 years old, hold a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary workforce credential of value in the workplace by 2025, which amounted

to an estimated increase of 1.2 million adults with postsecondary certificates or degrees (ODHE, 2021).

Ohio is largely an agricultural and manufacturing state (United States Department of Agriculture, 2021.) and both sectors have experienced rapid change due to shifting demands and new technological advances. Given that 44% of Ohio is considered prime farmland and 99% of the farms are owned by farm families, rural serving community colleges are uniquely tasked with educating or retraining these hard-working individuals who are often working in both sectors simultaneously in order to support their families.

The community colleges contacted for this study were selected based on their membership in the Ohio Association of Community Colleges and the Carnegie classification of Associate's Colleges (American Council on Education, 2021). Institutions are considered rural-serving if they are not in a primary metropolitan statistical area (PMSA) or metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) with a total population above 50,000, according to the 2000 Census.

Four institutions were contacted via an email to their Chief Academic Officer (CAO). This email was followed by a phone call to the CAO office to answer any questions about the study and confirm a willingness to be a research site. The email and phone call communications resulted in agreement by all four CAO's to allow the recruitment of their students for the study. However, only two sites returned a signed site permission letter and forwarded the recruitment email to their potential student participants.

Each participating site provided a reserved classroom space in which to conduct the interviews. The classrooms were familiar to the participants, easily accessible, and

conveniently located. The space offered privacy and was free of distractions and interruptions. The classroom furnishings allowed students to be seated at movable desks, arranged in a small circle for the duration of the interviews.

Participant Recruitment

The recruitment email was sent to students who met the following three inclusion criteria, which are common identifiers for data reporting at institutions of higher education: (a) low socio-economic status; (b) first-generation status; and (c) successful completion of 30 semester credit hours or more.

The navigation of social class environments is a focus of this study, therefore low-socioeconomic status was an important criterion for participant recruitment and selection. As a result, students who qualify to receive a Federal Pell Grant were recruited to participate in this study. “Federal Pell Grants usually are awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, par.1). Financial need is determined by considering the students’ cost of attendance and their expected family contribution. The expected family contribution varies and is based on income and family size. For the 2021-2022 academic year, students would have no expected family contribution and would be eligible for the maximum Pell award if family income was $27,000 or less. However, the income limits to qualify for a partial award for dependent students and their parents’ combined income (or for an independent student and their spouse) was $49,999 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Participants were also selected based on their status as “first-generation” college students. The term “first-generation,” as applied to college students, has been defined in a

variety of ways, but typically this term refers to students who are the first in their family to attend college. For the purposes of this study, the definition of "first-generation college students" from the National Center for Education Statistics (Redford & Hoyer, 2017) will be used: "First-generation college students are students who are enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any post-secondary education experience" (p. 3).

The third criterion for participant selection consisted of the number of credit hours completed. Participants were to have completed a minimum of 30 college credit hours. This requirement ensures that students, whether full-time or part-time, will have completed the equivalent of at least two semesters of college coursework prior to participation in the research study. This criterion increased the likelihood that participants will have experienced intra- and interpersonal experiences navigating the middle-class realm of higher education as well as (b) experiences integrating and applying new and existing cultural capital in their varied social contexts.

Each participating research site was asked to send a batch recruitment email (see Appendix A) to potential student participants who met the inclusion criteria. The email invitation explained the purpose of the study, provided assurances of participant anonymity and confidentiality, and explained the option of exiting the study at any time or for any reason.

Twenty-two students responded to the recruitment email and fifteen consented to a scheduled interview. Four focus groups were scheduled: three groups of four participants and one group of three participants. Students were sent a confirmation email with attachments of the participant consent form and the demographic survey for advance

review. Despite a second email reminder, only nine of the fifteen scheduled respondents attended the face-to-face focus group sessions and one opted for an individual session via video conferencing. In retrospect, the failure of five respondents to attend the scheduled focus group interviews aligns with the data. Findings revealed that managing time demands was a common struggle for the students and their days had little to no margin for additional activities.

Thus, data collection occurred via one individual interview, three focus groups with two participants each and one focus group of three participants, for a total of 10 participants. The length of the interviews ranged from 46 minutes to 95 minutes with an average of 65 minutes. Participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire to collect demographic data and confirm the background information related to the sampling criteria. Participants were given a gift card for their participation.

Due to the small size of each group, participants had ample time to share and elaborate on their responses. For this reason, individual follow-up interviews were not conducted. By the fourth focus group, saturation of the data began to occur. Jones, et al., (2006) suggests that sample size "continuously evolves" and one should continue "until patterns in the data continuously emerge" (p. 71).

Instrument

Two instruments were used in this study—the brief demographic survey (see Appendix B) and a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). The semi-structured interview protocol features open-ended questions. Follow-up, or probing questions were used as the interviews progressed and were based upon participants' responses (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008). According to Baskarada (2014), researchers using a

semi-structured interview protocol should remain flexible: “In semi-structured interviews, a researcher is able to refocus the questions, or prompt for more information, if something interesting or novel emerges" (Baskarada, 2014, p. 11). The initial semi-structured interview questions are directly aligned with the research questions (see Appendix D). The researcher used a pilot test to obtain feedback and refine the questions in order to improve the data collection process.

Pilot Test

The demographic survey and interview questions were piloted with twelve undergraduate students attending a four-year, private liberal arts college in Ohio. Students were divided across two focus groups, one group of four students and one group of eight. Each group met for 75 minutes, or the equivalent of one class period. Regarding the demographic survey, feedback indicated that the students found the questions to be clearly written and the multiple-choice options were adequate and made for ease of responding. No changes to the demographic survey were suggested. Regarding the interview questions, student feedback also indicated that the questions were clear and readily provoked responses. One suggestion was made to expand the follow-up prompt for Question 2, which reads: Since attending college, have you found yourself thinking about things in new or different ways? Please give an example. A student suggested modifying the phrase “Please give an example” to “Please give an example of how your thinking has changed.” This recommendation was noted for use as a follow-up prompt when needed. No further suggestions were made.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, this research proposal was submitted to the University of Toledo Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval and the assurance of compliance with required ethical standards and protocols relative to conducting research with human subjects.

Prior to the start of each focus group interview, sample participants were provided a statement of informed consent which was reviewed with them before signing. Participants were also asked to complete the demographic survey. A review of the expectations for confidentiality was conducted and students were given an opportunity to ask question or have concerns addressed before proceeding. The interviews were digitally recorded to allow for transcribing and coding.

I kept a journal throughout the research process to note observations in the field during the interviews and to capture thoughts during periods of self-reflection afterward. This will allow me to "continually monitor [my] own subjective perspectives and biases" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 112). The journal will also aid in keeping an accurate record of the sequence of steps taken in both collecting and in analyzing the data.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were initially transcribed by the transcription feature in Microsoft Word. Following this initial transcription, this researcher checked for accuracy by playing the audio recording while simultaneously reviewing the transcript. Errors and omissions in transcription were corrected during this review. This process was repeated a second time with each transcript to ensure the audio-recorded participant responses were documented as accurately as possible.

Next, as a form of member-checking, participants were sent an email (See Appendix E) in which they were invited to review the final transcripts for accuracy. Participants were encouraged to note errors in their responses. No participants brought forward errors.

Delimitations of the Study

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) have defined delimitations as "self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (p. 134). This study was delimited in three ways in that it focused on community college students, social class status, and rural settings.

The first delimitation is that this study focused on community college students. Though underrepresented in much of the research literature, community colleges enroll 42% of all undergraduate students (Ma & Baum, 2016). In fact, research has indicated that 46% of students who completed a degree at a four-year institution, attended a two-year institution at some point, and of those students, 47% did so for five or more terms (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015).

> Community colleges play a crucial role in American higher education. Their open admission policy, coupled with low tuition and geographic proximity to home, makes them an important pathway to postsecondary education for many students, especially first-generation college students and those who are from low-income families, as well as adults returning to school to obtain additional training or credentials. (Ma & Baum, 2016, p. 1)

The second delimitation is that the study focused on social class. Despite a common belief in anyone's ability to attain the American dream, research has suggested

otherwise, “finding strong associations between class origins and educational and income attainment” (Swartz, 2008, pp. 13-14). Most adults are found to be in the same or nearly the same social class as their parents, or what Swartz (2008) has referred to as “intergenerational class reproduction” (p.14). Instances of individuals moving from the lower class to the upper class is actually quite rare. Interestingly, Swartz (2008) found that though the research “documents class origins as a predictor of socioeconomic status, it does not reveal the mechanisms that facilitate achievement” (p. 14). Much research is needed to better understand which factors influence one’s life chances and outcomes in the quest to achieve academic and economic upward mobility.

The third delimitation is that this study focused on rural community college students. Although rural students graduate from high school at rates above the national average and perform better on national assessments than their urban peers, they are less likely to attend college (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Of the 42% of persons ages 18 to 24 enrolled in higher education, only 29% are from rural areas compared to 48% from cities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Furthermore, only 30% of rural adults (age 25 and older) attain an associate or bachelor’s degree compared to 43% of urban adults (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2020). These statistics may account for the income gap between rural and urban households, whereby rural household income falls 20 to 25% below urban household income.

Limitations of the Study

This study contains certain limitations common to qualitative research design and methodology. “Limitations of a study are not under the control of the researcher. Limitations are factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings or

generalizability of the results" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 133). While generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, it is anticipated that the findings will have transferability. Transferability "is about how well the study has made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in depth how they occur at the research site" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113).

The first limitation of this study is that the sample of students will be drawn from a single state in the Midwest. As such, there may be similarities or differences in the context of this study that the reader may wish to consider when making applications to their own settings. This researcher plans to provide adequate descriptions of the setting and sufficient details regarding the participants in order for a reader to determine the usefulness of the study for their purposes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Researcher subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research. Therefore, bias due to the researcher's own experience as a low-income, first-generation college student is the second limitation of this study. To challenge the potential for researcher assumptions during data collection and reduce the risk of researcher expectations influencing the findings, a faculty reviewer was employed to check the coding and interpretation of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Jones, et al., 2006).

Summary

This research study explores (a) the intra- and interpersonal experiences of rural community college students from low socio-economic backgrounds as they enter the middle-class culture of higher education as well as (b) the ways in which these students make use of the cultural capital they possess and acquire. In this research study, I used

the qualitative research approach of naturalistic inquiry within the paradigm of a social constructivist perspective. This methodology was employed with ten participants recruited from two rural-serving community colleges in Ohio. Data was collected through four focus groups and one individual interview.

A qualitative research design enabled the collection of rich, detailed information that captured participants' experiences and perspectives. The constructivist perspective emphasizes the importance of listening to participants' stories in order to give "voice" to their thoughts and feelings without adding to or taking from their experiences. In order to answer the questions under study, the researcher listened closely to the voices of students from low-income backgrounds as they described their perceptions and experiences within their academic and social contexts.

Data was analyzed via a cyclical process of coding and categorizing which brought forth similarities and differences between the participants, allowing for patterns and themes to emerge. A thorough discussion of the process of data analysis and the resulting findings will be presented in the following chapter.

Chapter Four

Findings

This study sought to expand the literature regarding rural community college students of low socioeconomic status and their experiences entering college. More specifically, this study sought to answer the research question, *how do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate their experiences of higher education and a differing class culture?* By exploring their lived intra- and interpersonal experiences, this study also sought to better understand how these students integrate and apply new and existing cultural capital to their varied social contexts. Using a qualitative approach of naturalistic inquiry, data was collected through brief demographic surveys and face-to-face group and individual interviews with a total of ten participants. Data analysis included a cyclical process of coding and categorizing the data, which then allowed for themes to emerge.

This chapter presents an overview of the key findings; a description of the participants, including a description of the demographic survey; the process of data analysis of the interview transcripts; a description of the emergent themes from the analysis of the data collected; and a closing summary of the findings.

Overview of Key Findings

An analysis of the participants' interviews concluded with these key findings embedded in the three main themes that emerged from the sharing of their experiences. The themes are labeled: (a) *managing deficits,* (b) *managing relationships,* and (c) *managing identity*

and will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter, but a brief summary of each is provided here.

Managing Deficits

The theme, managing deficits, is defined as the ways in which the students in this study lacked the requisite knowledge, skills, or resources to be successful in college and the strategies they used to cope. This theme emerged from the data that was coded and categorized as *threats to success, coping,* and *motivation/aspiration.* This theme captured the many instances in which study participants were unprepared or underprepared for the college experience. These students described the obstacles, challenges, and barriers they faced in getting enrolled and staying enrolled in college. Findings in this theme indicate that students experienced difficulties from the start, in attempting to navigate college processes and adjust to classroom practices and expectations. They experienced feelings of overwhelm and stress as they managed multiple roles and responsibilities and impossible demands on their time between their studies, their employment, and their home and family. However, students also shared the strategies they employed to help them through the difficulties and described their motivations to keep going. Findings suggest that students used strategies such as self-talk, prayer, and a focus on their goals for a better life and less struggle as motivations to keep going. A common strategy students used was to remind themselves of the temporary nature of their circumstances.

Managing Relationships

The theme, managing relationships, is defined as the ways in which students renegotiated the relationships in their social environment as a result of college-going. This second theme was quickly recognized as a topic of great importance to participants.

Participants discussed at length the individuals in their lives that they relied upon for emotional, social, and psychological support, as well as practical supports, such as financial assistance or childcare. This theme emerged from data coded and categorized as *supportive relationships* and *relationship challenges.* Findings revealed the significance of having supportive family systems, supportive employers, supportive friends, and the importance of connecting to peer networks and college supports to navigate the many challenges associated with attending college. Students also shared the number of relationships lost or distanced as a result of their college-going. Findings suggest students lost relationships due to less availability for social events and interactions. They also found themselves distanced from friendships or high school peers in which they now had less in common. Findings indicated that conflict and tension frequently arose between student participants and members of their household in renegotiating tasks and responsibilities and carving out time and space for their studies. To summarize, this theme identified the many ways in which college-going impacted student relationships by challenging current relationships, ending some relationships, and bringing new relationships into their social environment.

Managing Identity

The theme, managing identity, is defined as the ways in which students negotiated changes in themselves, changes in how they viewed themselves, and changes in how they viewed their world. This third and final theme emerged from participants' descriptions of the ways in which they viewed themselves and the world around them differently since attending college. This theme emerged from the categories of *perspective shift* and *personal growth/change*. Most all participants felt they had

personally grown or matured. Findings suggest that students believed they had become more responsible, more organized, or better communicators since attending college. Findings also indicated that students aspired to have different lives for themselves, lives that differed from their parents or their high school peers. Findings also suggest that educational experiences influenced a shift in students' thinking about values, beliefs, parenting, and social issues. Perhaps most impactful in the findings, participants described developing a sense of agency over their lives and their learning. They described taking more responsibility for themselves and holding themselves accountable. Some saw themselves in a professional role for the first time and it spurred them forward.

The experiences of the participants in this study, though fraught with challenges, are both hopeful and informative. These students provide a window into what goes on "behind the scenes" for them, before and after class and the ways in which they navigate it all.

Participants

This section provides a detailed description of the ten participants in this study based on an analysis of responses to the Demographic Survey (See Appendix XX) and data collected from the group and individual interviews. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity and maintain the confidentiality of their responses to the degree possible, given the group interview setting. Below is a table of participant responses on the demographic survey (See Table 1). This is followed by a descriptive analysis of their survey responses and finally, an individual vignette of each participant based on excerpts from the interviews.

Demographic Survey

Of the 10 participants interviewed, seven identified as female and three as male. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 55 years, with an average age of 29. Nine participants identified as White, with one indicating Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity; and one participant identified their race as Black.

Table 1

Demographic Survey Data

Name	Age	Gen	Race/Ethn	Work	1st Gen	Child	# in House	Income	Credit Hours	Population of Town
Brenton	20	M	W, Hi/La	PT	N	0	3	50K+	63	3,340
Cassie	23	F	White	PT	Y	1	4	50K+	17	35,868
Erica	34	F	White	FT	Y	3	5	30-39K	67	204
Gary	55	M	Black	DIS	Y	3	5	50K+	50	16,971
Joe	22	M	White	PT	Y	0	1	<20K	52	11,625
Kathy	28	F	White	PT	Y	0	1	30-39K	44	8,794
Madilyn	19	F	White	PT	N*	0	2	40-49K	15	3,419
Marcia	35	F	White	FT	Y	4	6	30-39K	34.5	8,638
Maureen	37	F	White	PT	N*	3	4	<20K	68	3,870
Tricia	20	F	White	PT	Y	0	2	20-29K	44	268,508**

*****students indicated parents had some courses/no degree

**excluded from calculations

All but one participant was employed. This participant was disabled and of veteran status. Seven were working part-time; two were employed full-time. Half of the participants were parents with children living at home, most of which had 3 or more children.

When asked to confirm first-generation status, according to the definition provided (parents do not have any post/secondary experience), all but three students responded affirmatively. Of the three students that responded "No", two went on to explain that "mom took some courses, never graduated" and "mom and dad attended 1 semester". One student offered, "dad never graduated high school". This information meets the common alternate definition which defines first-generation as neither parent

attained a college degree. The minimal college experience indicated was not considered problematic for the purposes of this study.

Household income varied with the majority (seven participants) indicating annual incomes at $39,000 or less; two of which had annual incomes below $20,000. The three participants indicating annual household incomes of $40,000 or above lived with parents, a family member, or spouse who was employed full-time.

Student participants varied in number of credit hours completed. The average number of credits accrued was 45 hours, with a low of 15 and a high of 68. The median was 47 credit hours; the mode was 44. The sample selection criterion I had established was a minimum of 30 credit hours. Two participants were below that threshold but permitted to remain in the study as their experiences were relevant to the purposes of the study. It should be noted that students reported *completed* credit hours as opposed to *attempted.* Given that several participants reported dropping out at some point in their college experience, it is likely that students, if asked, would have reported a higher number of credit hours *attempted* as compared to the number of credit hours *completed* with a passing grade (grade "D" or higher). The distinction would reflect where they *could* be in their college journey, had they been successful, as opposed to where they *are*, and provide context for those that shared feelings of "wasting time and money" in the interviews.

Participants reported the zip code of their current home residence in the demographic survey. Results found that the students were living in rural communities with a population range from a low of 204 residents to a high of 35,868. The average population of their hometown was 10,303 residents, with a mean of 8,638. Thirty percent

of the students lived in communities with between 3300 and 3900 residents. One outlier reported living in a metropolitan area with a population of over 268,000 and was excluded from these calculations. The interview revealed that this student changed residences recently due to a roommate conflict. The zip code provided is outside the service area of the rural community college and represents a commute of at least 50 minutes or more for the student each way.

The information gleaned from the Demographic Survey reflects a diversity and range in age and life experience of this sample of rural community college students, and also the varied socio-economic contexts and communities from which they come.

Participant Vignettes

A brief description of each participant follows. Information was extracted and summarized from the interview data. Participants are presented in alphabetical order by their assigned pseudonym.

Brenton. Brenton is a 20-year-old, White, Hispanic/Latinx male seeking an associate degree in engineering. He described living with his parents, who both work full-time and whom he rarely sees due to their differing schedules. Brenton is employed part-time at a local retail store, stating he works eight-hour shifts Friday thru Sunday, the days he does not have classes. He aspires to transfer to a four-year institution to obtain his bachelor's degree.

Cassie. Cassie is a 23-year-old, White female enrolled in a Radiology Technician program. She recently moved back home with her parents to have support in caring for her young son. She works occasionally for an employer who offers her the flexibility to come in when she is able. Cassie stated she wants a career in which she could provide

her son “everything he needs and not have to worry”. She stated she would eventually like to further her education and perhaps specialize in oncology or cardiology.

Erica. Erica is a 34-year-old, White female pursing a degree in nursing. Erica is married and resides with her husband and three children. She completed an associate degree as a physical therapy assistant. But when Erica was “pulled in to COVID to help the nurses” at the hospital where she worked, her goals shifted. Her current employer agreed to provide tuition reimbursement for her to obtain her nursing credentials via a licensed practical nurse (LPN) to registered nurse (RN) program.

Gary. Gary is a 55-year-old, Black male who is pursuing an associate degree in human services. He is disabled and of veteran status. Gary is married and has three children. He resides with his wife and two of his children. His adult son is in the Navy. Gary started college 20 years prior, but dropped out when he learned his girlfriend was pregnant. He worked full-time until joining the service. He stated he had always hoped to go back to college to finish his degree and was disappointed to learn that none of his previous credits transferred.

Joe. Joe is a 22-year-old, White male who is completing an associate degree program to become a Surgical Technician. Joe was previously enrolled at a university as a pre-med major but dropped out in the first year. He attributes that decision to the deaths of two grandparents during that time, in addition to other stressors. This time, Joe plans to complete his goal in a sequence of smaller steps: attaining his associate of science in Surg tech, then a Bachelor of Biology, then applying to Med schools. Joe lives with his parents to save money, but says, “I’ve had the taste of freedom and I’ve had the taste of opportunity….I know that I will never stay here [hometown]. I know I can succeed.”

Kathy. Kathy is a 28-year-old, White female who is employed part-time as a State Tested Nurse Aide (STNA) while attending college to become a Registered Nurse (RN). Kathy lives on her own in an apartment and vacillates between full-time and part-time employment while attending classes. She admits that she was advised not to work while in the nursing program, but stated she needed to work enough hours to obtain the health insurance required to be in the program and to pay her bills. Kathy first attended college right out of high school but dropped out. She felt it was her parents' desire she attend, not hers. However, her views changed. "We struggled growing up," she said. "I don't want to struggle that much." Kathy stated she reenrolled because she wants to "get a good job, then be financially okay."

Madilyn. Madilyn is a 19-year-old, White female that resides with her brother whom she credits with influencing her to "start saving money and take care of myself". Madilyn states she lived with her mother while growing up, and was not close to her father, as her parents were divorced. Money was tight and Madilyn contemplated a career to make money and "have the life I want to have." However, she opted for a degree in Education and reasoned, "if I manage the money I make well, then I will be perfectly fine." Madilyn has a boyfriend who also attends college, and she describes their relationship as supportive, but at times, conflictual.

Marcia. Marcia is a 35-year-old, White female that resides with her partner and four children who range in age "between almost 16 and 7." She is employed full-time as an STNA while enrolled in a Nursing program. She states she works three 12-hour-days on the weekend in order to attend class and clinicals during the week. Marcia was previously employed in a factory and "drove [a] tow motor for 15 years". Marcia always

wanted to attend college but became pregnant “right out of high school”. She wrestles with the amount of money she could be earning in her former position because “the STNA position was a $5 an hour pay cut.”

Maureen. Maureen is a 37-year-old, White female who resides with her three children. She was employed full-time but reduced her hours to part-time (two days a week) in order to enroll in a Nursing program. Maureen states “it’s really hard” financially and feels “definitely more stressed”. She receives public assistance to help support her family but is aware of the perception that “people that are on assistance are on it forever”. Maureen stated that her children are a motivating factor and that her experiences with her 8-year-old son and his diagnosis of epilepsy influenced her interest in health care.

Tricia. Tricia is a 20-year-old, White female who shares an apartment with a roommate and works part-time as a barista. She stated, “I respect all my co-workers, but I know I never want to do that for the rest of my life”. Tricia enrolled in college directly from high school and is majoring in engineering technology. She recalls her mother’s struggle as a single parent raising her, and two sisters. She remembers her mother wanting more for her daughters. Tricia admits, “it was her [mother’s] goal first, but then I got here and I was like, OK, I want to be in college.”

Process of Data Analysis

To begin the process of data analysis, I read through each transcript and highlighted exemplar quotes. Exemplar quotes are segments of the transcript that I deemed relevant to the research questions in my study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain this beginning process of data analysis as “identifying segments in your data

set….which [are] a potential answer or part of an answer to the question(s) you have asked in this study" (p. 203) They call each segment "a unit of data" and these data units "can be as small as a word a participant uses to describe a feeling or phenomenon, or as large as several pages of field notes describing a particular incident" (p.203).

There were 229 pages of narrative data. A total of 738 exemplar quotes were extracted from the transcripts. Examples of exemplar quotes follow:

Exemplar Quote 1: "I had no idea what I was getting myself into. It was all on impulse."

Exemplar Quote 2: "My week is spent at school, in class, in clinicals, studying, taking kids to and from their sports."

Exemplar Quote 3: "Because of all the mother-in-the-household and all those duties were still on my plate while I was working long hours on the weekends and going to school during the week and I couldn't take it anymore. I kinda broke."

The transcripts were reviewed a three times and highlighted exemplar quotes were entered into an Excel spreadsheet codebook. A subsequent review of each transcript was made to ensure each exemplar quote highlighted was captured in the codebook. Next, I will discuss the process I used to code the data.

Coding

The next step was to begin to code the data. A two-step process was employed whereby I created a *description* and a *code* for each exemplar quote. The *description* was a summary of the exemplar in my own words. The *code* extracted key words from the exemplar quote or assigned a term or concept that captured the exact words from the quote (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saldana (2021) refers to this step as "first cycle coding" and describes a *code* as "a word or phrase that symbolically assigns a

summative, salient essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p.5). A second pass was made over the exemplar quotes with some adjustments made to the descriptions or codes. "Coding is a cyclical act. Rarely is the first pass or first cycle of coding data perfectly attempted" (Saldana, p. 12). There were 496 initial codes assigned to the exemplar quotes (or segments of data). Examples of the first cycle coding process can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

First Cycle Coding Process Example

Exemplar Quote	**Description**	**Code**
"definitely my girlfriend...she's kind of my peace when it gets a little rough and shaky, so it's nice to have that one person that can really help you through the hard times"	Girlfriend provides support through hard times	Girlfriend supportive
"the difference from this and high school is there's definitely a lot more freedom."	College differs from high school; more freedom	More freedom in college
"Every single place that I have worked for. They say they care. They don't."	employers say they care, but they don't care	employers do not care
"If it's a corporation, I mean they will just, they don't care. You're in college. Why would they care?"	employers don't care you're in college	employers do not care

Member-checking occurred at the conclusion of first cycle coding. I consulted with the faculty co-researcher about the coding process. I also kept reflective notes in a journal to track thinking and insights. Saldana (2021) recommends "shop talk with a

colleague or mentor about coding and analysis as you progress through them….as a way to validate the findings thus far" (p. 5). The faculty co-researcher reviewed the codebook and the initial codes and concurred with the assigned codes. This affirmed my interpretation of the data thus far.

Next, I entered a process of second cycle coding to organize and group the codes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe this process as *categorizing*. They suggest a system of constant comparison whereby the researcher examines each unit of data and decides whether the codes "look-alike" or "feel-alike" (p. 347). Placement may be "provisional" as rules for each category emerge, and new categories are created (p. 348). Saldana (2021) suggests that categories hold data that reflect a shared characteristic and "the beginning of a pattern" or "a move toward a *consolidated meaning*"(p. 13). See Table 3 for an example of the second cycle coding process.

Table 3

Second Cycle Coding Process Example

Initial Code →	**Category**
Copes by crying	Coping strategies
Copes by exercising	Coping strategies
Uses positive self-talk	Coping strategies
Let's go of small stuff	Coping strategies

The first round of second cycle coding collapsed the 496 initial codes into 43 categories; a subsequent round resulted in a total of 45 categories. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that "categories should be examined for possible relationships…It is

possible that certain categories may be subsumable under others; that some categories are unwieldy and

should be further subdivided; and/or that some categories are missing" (p. 349). Saldana (2021) concurs, stating " as you progress toward second cycle coding, you might rearrange and reclassify coded data into different and even new categories" (p.16).

The next round of coding I collapsed the 45 categories. This process took place over a week's time. Categories were arranged in groups. After stepping away and reviewing categories in the context of the codes and, in some cases the exemplar quotes, categories were rearranged. . For example, initially it was challenging to determine a grouping for "Changed Major" as it could be viewed as a "Threat to Success" or a "Perspective Shift". However, after re-reading the codes and even going back to the exemplar quotes, to ensure the essence of meaning was captured, it became clear that students were changing their majors as a result of discovering what *they* wanted for a career goal. Thus, "Changed Majors" fit best under the category, "Personal Growth/Change". Creswell, (2007) provides a helpful description of this process:

> Using the constant comparative approach, the researcher attempts to "saturate" the categories—to look for instances that represent the category and to continue looking…until the new information obtained does not further provide insight into the category. These categories are composed of subcategories, called "properties," that represent multiple perspectives about the categories (p.160).

A final pass at collapsing categories resulted in the 45 categories becoming subcategories of 7 newly identified categories. The new categories with corresponding

subcategories (or properties) are listed in Table 4. What follows is a brief description of each of the seven categories.

Categories

The seven categories identified in the data include: *coping, motivation/aspiration, personal growth/change, perspective shift, relationship challenges, supportive relationships, and threats to success.* A discussion of each category and its subcategories follows, along with exemplars from the data in Table 4.

Coping. The category coping is defined as how student participants described the variety of means used to manage the external and internal stressors they experienced. Subcategories of this category include *coping strategies, minimizes struggles*, and *faith*. Coping strategies ranged from healthy activities, such as exercising, positive self-talk, and "keeping everything in balance" to activities that distract from the stressor such as drinking and working more. One participant offered, "going to work is actually like another good break …it just kind of separates the school from the rest of your life, for at least like a couple of days…it's a nice change of pace." Participants who minimized their struggles as a means of coping compared themselves to others who they assessed as "worse off". They told themselves they should be "grateful" as they had it "easier" than some. Faith, as a subcategory of coping, reflects students who shared that they practiced prayer and belief in a "greater power".

Motivation/aspiration. This category is defined as goals and aspirations expressed by the students as their reasons for attending college and their motivations for staying enrolled. The subcategories include *aspirations/goals, parental approval,*

parental expectations, *modeling for children*, *career influences*, and *spirituality*. For example, a frequent aspiration/goal cited by participants was related to financial

Table 4

Table of Subcategories and Categories

Subcategories (45) →	**Categories (7)**
Coping strategies Minimizes struggle Faith	Coping
Aspirations/goals Parental/grandparent approval Modeling for children Parental expectations Career influences Spirituality	Motivation/Aspiration
Personal growth/change Communicating needs Changed major	Personal Growth/Change
Applies learning Appreciates college Emerging professional New perspective Reflects/new thinking HS preparation Rural HS CC difference	Perspective Shift
Family tension/conflict Relationship loss/distance Parental disapproval New friendships College Credit Plus peers	Relationship Challenges
Co-worker support Friends supportive Partner support Peer support Parents/family support Mentor support Employer support College supports Texts/social media/email	Supportive Relationships
First-generation Lacked knowledge Lacked planning Lacked finances	Threats to Success

Lacked employer support
Culture shock
Employment (FT/PT)
Fears/doubts
Time demands
Quitting
Challenges (Misc. ex. Technology)

stability or providing a better life for themselves and their families. Maureen stated "I want to own a home someday. I want a car that doesn't break down every other week." Parental approval and parental expectations as subcategories were related in that students were motivated by a desire to make their parents proud or to fulfill a parent's dream or hope for their future. Participants who were themselves parents were aware that their children were watching. Thus, the subcategory, modeling for children, reflects this awareness as a motivation to complete college along and the desires expressed by some participants for their children to follow suit. Career influences as a subcategory encompassed the people, circumstances, or experiences that participants identified as clarifying their choice of vocation. Finally, spirituality was a subcategory for participants that described a "greater power" or inner voice that was leading them or "clearing the path" forward.

Personal growth/change. This category is defined as feelings of maturing, developing, growing or changing since attending college. This category emerged as a code early in the data analysis and in second cycle coding, subsumed two other subcategories, *communicating needs* and *changed major*. An exemplar quote reflecting this category states, "I have definitely changed…I just know that I'm very much not the same person that I used to be from when I first started college." The subcategory of *communicating needs* is defined by participants descriptions of learning to ask questions, learning to ask for help, and learning to assert their needs in their social environments. *Changed major*, as previously discussed as a subcategory, reflects the instances in which

participants modified their career goals as a result of discovering their true interests, likes, and preferences apart from previous external social influences and tendencies to conform.

Perspective shift. This category is defined as a change in either how students view themselves or a change in the student's thinking about the world around them. This category holds the subcategories of *applies learning, appreciates college, emerging professional, new perspective, reflects/new thinking, high school preparation, rural high school,* and *community college difference.* One exemplar quote in the subcategory of *applies learning* came from Brenton. He stated, "because of Physics, you know I'm constantly thinking about how fast the tires are spinning, what kind of resistance the car's going through when it's driving, just different stuff like that."

The subcategory *appreciates college* captured the ways in which participants expressed valuing their educational experiences and enjoyment of learning in college, which differed from their high school experiences. *Emerging professional* captured the instances in which students began to see themselves as professionals or others acknowledged them in a professional role. *New perspective* is defined as shifts is thinking about something or looking at something anew. Students may describe coming to a realization or having their eyes opened. *Reflects/new thinking* is similar but is specific to past events, that only upon reflection, did students see people, settings, circumstances, or their past experiences in a new or different way. *High school preparation* is the way in which participants viewed their preparedness for college. *Rural high school* captures the students' perceptions of the experiences they found unique to attending a small rural school as compared to their current college environment. Finally, *community college*

difference are captures the students' awareness of the distinctiveness, advantages, or disadvantages of the local 2-year college as compared to 4-year college or university setting.

Relationship challenges. This category is defined as the various ways in which participants experienced changes and challenges in their social relationships as a result of enrolling in higher education. Subcategories include *family tension/conflict, relationship loss/distance, parental disapproval, new friendships, and College Credit Plus peers.* Examples of participant experiences in this category encompass the *loss or distancing* of close friends, less time for connection with significant others, and missed social events. Maureen shared, "I actually lost my best friend because of nursing school. She always wanted to go out and do stuff and did not understand that I didn't have time. And that was a big problem between us." She adds, "And I haven't dated in years. I just don't have time."

The subcategory of *family tension/conflict* captures areas in which misunderstandings, stressed resources, problematic behaviors or other negative points of contact occur with loved ones related to the student's attendance at college. *Parental disapproval* is defined as a parent's expressed disappointment or disagreement with the choices of the participant. *New friendships* are the relationships formed since attending college and the challenges associated with forming new attachments. The subcategory of *College Credit Plus peers* captures the unique challenges presented to adult students by having classmates who are minors, still attending high school.

Supportive relationships. This category emerged as a significant area of focus for the participants. Each student talked extensively about the sources from which they

receive various forms of support, such as emotional, financial, and academic support. Students also discussed the importance of their supportive relationships in helping them stay enrolled and balance college demands with the need to work. Subcategories include *parents/family support, partner support, peer support, friends supportive, co-worker support, mentor support, employer support, college supports, and texts/social media/email.*

Parents/family supports and *partner supports,* were by far, the most frequently discussed sources of support. Parents, grandparents, spouses, partners, siblings, and children were cited as most often offering words of encouragement and assistance. An exemplar quote from Erica states, "so as it gets busier, I mean, everyone seems supportive. I have a great family and I'm hoping that support just maintains…So it's just them being involved. They know when I have a test and they're like, 'well get it mom, you're gonna get that A!'…Yeah, that helps."

Peer support differed from *friends supportive* in that *peers* were classmates in the college experience *with* them. Thus, *peer support* offered a sense of knowing and understanding in a way that participants' friends did not. However, both were meaningful to participants.

Co-worker support and *employer support* were critical for students balancing work, college, and home life. Since students spent many hours in the work environment, the support of co-workers and the flexibility of an employer helped mediate stress felt from juggling multiple demands on time and energy.

College supports were identified as the faculty, staff, and advisors who provided guidance in navigating college processes and systems. Students discussed the importance

of having someone walk them through a process for the first time or answer their many questions as to their understanding of an assignment.

Texts/social media/email proved to be a way for participants to obtain support on-the-run or at all hours of the day or night. This subcategory captures the ways in which the students stayed connected to their support systems, countered feelings of overwhelm and aloneness, and found validation and affirmation for their efforts.

Threats to success. This final category brings to light the impediments that participants faced while navigating higher education. Participants openly revealed the challenges they experienced both inside and outside the classroom. I labeled this category "threats to success" as the student's ability to resolve the issue or challenge, as it arose, could have been the deciding factor as to whether to remain in college for many of the participants. Brenton sums it up this way in his exemplar quote, "Yeah, the type of stuff you gotta go through, I mean it's insane."

Subcategories include: *first-generation, lacked knowledge, lacked planning, lacked finances, lacked employer support, culture shock, employment (FT/PT), fears/doubts, time demands, quitting, and challenges (miscellaneous).* As these subcategories emerged in the data, I believe they accurately reflect the various deficits in personal and cultural capital that the participants were trying to overcome as they pursued their degree.

First-generation as a subcategory captured the stories of students who felt alone in preparation for college and that no one in their family fully understood how it felt to be in their shoes as they were first-in-family to attend college. The next three subcategories reflect deficits in information related to college processes -*lacked knowledge*; deficits in

planning ahead for college or planning while in college -*lacked planning*; and deficits in meeting living or college expenses before or while attending college -*lacked finances.*

Lacked employer support is described as employers' indifference to students scheduling needs and unwillingness to be accommodating, making it difficult for students to attend classes or maintain their employment. *Employment(FT/PT)* captures the moves in and out of employment, the increase or decrease in hours, changes in shift and other ongoing modifications to work (and subsequent earnings) that participants were making throughout their education.

Culture shock is the ways in which students experienced the college environment as differing from their high school or hometown environment due to size. *Fears/doubts* are the instances in which participants questioned themselves, their decision to attend college, and whether they could be successful. This also includes questions about whether to stop out and work full-time. This category aligns closely with *time demands*, which is the strain participants felt under the varied and continuous demands on their time from family and household responsibilities to college classes, clinicals, and study time, to employment schedules. The frenetic pace of life and the inability to maintain a sense of balance that was felt by all participants was captured in this subcategory.

Finally, *quitting* emerged as a thought in back of the minds of most all participants at some time during their college experience. For some, the thought of dropping out was a constant threat to continuing. For others, they had quit, and returned and quit again, only to return one more time. *Challenges* became a miscellaneous category for the myriad circumstances that got in the way of a students' progress in college. A common challenge was difficulty or unfamiliarity with college's learning

management system; another was difficulty with the registration process. Other challenges included unplanned pregnancies, the unexpected death of family members, illness of a family member, and lack of childcare. All of the above proved to be viable threats to derailing a student's progress in a given semester.

In summary, the categories and subcategories have provided a way to organize and examine the details about the data thus far. Saldana (2021) notes that "when you compare major categories to each other and consolidate them in various ways, you transcend the 'particular reality' of your data and progress toward the thematic, conceptual, and theoretical" (p. 17). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe this as moving between the "trees" and the "forest" multiple times in the process of your data analysis. Now it is time to step back and examine the bigger picture of what the data is communicating. In the following section, I will discuss the larger themes that emerged from the data.

Themes

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of data and the inductive and deductive movement among the categories and subcategories. See Table 5 for a visual overview. The three major themes are: (a) *Managing deficits*, (b) *Managing relationships*, and (c) *Managing identity*. Each theme will be discussed in detail.

Theme 1: Managing Deficits

This theme, as previously defined, captures the many ways in which the students in this study lacked the requisite knowledge, skills, or resources to be successful in college and the strategies they used to cope. The categories related to this theme identified the deficiencies participants possessed in terms of their internal or external resources and the

Table 5

Table of Subcategories, Categories, and Themes

Subcategories (45) →	Categories (7) →	Themes (3)
Coping strategies		
Minimizes struggle	Coping	
Faith		
Aspirations/goals		
Parental/grandparent approval		
Modeling for children	Motivation/Aspiration	
Parental expectations		
Career influences		
Spirituality		
First-generation		
Lacked knowledge		
Lacked planning		Managing deficits
Lacked finances		
Lacked employer support	Threats to Success	
Culture shock		
Employment (FT/PT)		
Fears/doubts		
Time demands		
Quitting		
Challenges (ex. Technology)		
Family tension/conflict		
Relationship loss/distance		
Parental disapproval	Relationship Challenges	
New friendships		
College Credit Plus peers		
Co-worker support		Managing relationships
Friends supportive		
Partner support		
Peer support		
Parents/family support	Supportive Relationships	
Mentor support		
Employer support		
College supports		
Texts/social media/email		
Personal growth/change		
Communicating needs	Personal Growth/Change	
Changed major		
Applies learning		Managing identity
Appreciates college		
Emerging professional	Perspective Shift	
New perspective		
Reflects/new thinking		
HS preparation		
Rural HS		
CC difference		

ways in which they managed those deficits. Participants spoke of instances of lacking knowledge about college from the start. They reported feeling overwhelmed and alone in figuring out what steps to take. Cassie stated, "the first year can be very overwhelming" but then offered, "until you get the correct resources, and you get familiar with certain things." Words like "overwhelmed," "terrified" and "am I really sure I want to do this" were common.

Lacked Knowledge. The students described problems beginning with the registration process. Gary stated he almost quit at this step, "I almost didn't make it. I came to TRIO, and B--, she helped me." TRIO is a Federal initiative that targets low-income, first generation, and disabled students and funds eight different programs that provide support from middle-school to post-baccalaureate (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). One research site was a recipient of a TRIO grant that provided advisors. Two students mentioned this program and the assistance they were offered. One said, "So they're like your success coach. I mean basically they're like your cheerleader in the corner and they can help you through anything." Erica agreed that registration "is pretty hard" but took more issue with the learning management system [LMS], stating, "that's a challenge, yes!" She stated she would be getting assistance from a TRIO staff member prior to the start of her first online course. She explained, "She's going to help me with my first online class, 'cause I'm scared. She's like, 'okay, we're meeting on this day before it starts. We are going to sit down and I'll show you everything on [the LMS].'"

Challenges with Technology. Students talked about how pervasive the use of technology is to their classroom instruction. Cassie states: "You need it [technology].

Yeah, there's no way. Not a single class that I don't need it." Then she shares, " while I was in the hospital, I found out that [the] MacBook I had was not compatible with the programs I needed. So, I had to wait until I got out of the hospital. I'm already a week behind in the first week of school."

Gary states he "cannot stand" the LMS and schedules a weekly appointment with his instructor to review "missing assignments because I do not understand [the LMS]." Two students talked about "out of date" syllabi or "old due dates" that confused them in the LMS because faculty have not updated their courses. One opined, "If you missed it [an assignment], it's basically not because you're just neglecting your work. You're just not sure of the technology."

Lacked Planning and Finances. Many students reported that they lacked planning, which then translates to time and money lost, both of which participants could not afford to lose. Finances were a constant concern for all the participants. "Wasting money", "cover the costs" and "pay my bills" were some of the thoughts often on the minds of participants. Paying bills, avoiding debt, and providing for their children were common stressors. These students had little margin in their lives between classes, study, and employment in efforts to meet college expenses and living costs.

Of the participants in the study enrolled in health programs, all ignored the advice not to work while completing the program because it was not an option for them. Resolving financial concerns could be particularly stressful for these students because working more hours to earn money meant less time to devote to study or attending class, and failing class meant "wasted money". "Definitely trying to work and do college at the

same time is 100% rough," says Kathy. "You're doing clinicals and then working third shift on top of that. You're getting no sleep."

Some students saved money by living with parents or siblings, but still struggled to cover their expenses. These students expressed an understanding that their parents or family members were not in a position to help subsidize their education, though they could offer housing or childcare. Joe explains:

> I have friends who, their parents pay for literally everything during their college experience. The only thing that I get is, I don't have to pay for rent. My parents don't help me pay for my degree. They don't help me pay for even textbooks. Like, they don't help with anything. I pay all my own bills. The only thing I do not pay for is rent and food.

For students like Kathy, who pays for her own housing, the burden feels greater. She says, "the whole trying to survive-live. I live by myself in an apartment that is definitely way too much money to live in, on top of coming here [college]. So, I think that's the hardest part."

The Pell grant was not deemed near enough to cover the true costs of attending college. For students in health programs, costs were particularly felt when they were spending full-time hours in clinical settings for no pay and charged tuition for those hours. Yet students also expressed concern over going into debt to pay for college, with statements such as "These loans are long term. You got to pay" and "I've been trying to save up and have enough, trying not to go into debt and pay interest on student loans for the rest of my life."

Students were reticent to borrow money for their education and seemed to prefer as pay-as-you go model. This could explain why all but one student was employed. Hours of employment varied, and many students experienced stress in adjusting hours of work around their course schedules. Many moved between full-time and part-time when their employers offered that flexibility. Some opted for third shift or 12-hour weekend shifts to better accommodate their class schedule but sacrificed sleep or time with family and friends as a result.

Time Demands. Managing demands on time was a constant challenge for students. The pace was of moving between home, work and school was not only physically demanding, but also psychologically demanding. Students expressed feeling exhausted, stressed, and overwhelmed as they juggled multiple roles and responsibilities. One student shared, "balancing everything at once…you've got like, three different classes, and then your job, and then your housework." Maureen adds, "just squeezing everything in. Everything you said, plus three kids, a sick parent, their dogs, their horses, their house, my house, --just way too much."

Fears/Doubts. The challenges described above compounded the feelings of doubt and the fears that participants carried throughout their college experiences. Students described wrestling with thoughts of quitting frequently, if not on a daily basis. Many asked themselves if the stress was worth it and questioned whether they should just return to employment in a factory setting.

One participant shared, "It's a long journey,…there's doubts all the time, if it's even worth it. So it's hard to keep going." Erica said that when her co-workers question her about college, she begins to doubt her decision. She states:

> They looked at it, well you are already working, why do you want to change? But nursing is going to open up a lot more opportunities for me. Not just now, but in life…just makes me question myself. Just lets me think, 'why am I doing this?' Yes, it just has increased the self-doubt, which I battled with this whole entire time.

First-generation. As first-generation students, participants often felt alone with their academic stress and financial pressures. Statements such as, "They've never really done any of this before. Yeah, they [parents] don't really understand what it's like." Tricia admits "getting annoyed" with her mother, explaining: "just like my mom doesn't understand how stressed like either me or my twin, can be about just money in general, 'cause there isn't much time for work in between this." Cassie laments, "because I couldn't ask my parents, 'well what classes would you or what did you guys take?' Or, 'how would you have handled this?' They don't know. They don't know anything about that."

Madilyn's parents had some college experience, but she felt similarly in that they were not able to offer her guidance in navigating the processes of higher education. She states:

> If my parents had understood the…I guess, the checklist to college. Because both of my parents went to college but was only like for a semester. …and it was however many years ago. So I guess I felt like I was doing it all on my own, like I was preparing for college all on my own.

Coping Strategies. In these times of exhaustion, questioning, and overwhelm students would rally their internal and external supports to help them through. Joe

remarked, " mental health is something that should be the one of the first things you think about, but everyone has different ways of coping." Kathy share, "I just cry. A good cry helps a lot." Maureen concurred, referring to her cohort peers "I mean we probably all seen each other cry." Participants also described the mechanisms by which they would stay focused on their goals and face down their challenges. Students often utilized self-talk to remind themselves that their circumstances were temporary and that their academic achievements will be worth the current struggles. Madilyn relayed a recent discussion with her boyfriend, "We remind each other that it is temporary. We remind each other that eventually we will be facing bigger problems that what we are facing now."

Motivation/Aspiration. Students also reminded themselves of the pride they will have in themselves and the admiration of family and friends for attaining their goal. Madilyn states that her paternal grandmother "never saw any of us going to college, just because of how that side of the family grew up. But she always tells me how proud she is of me for overcoming the circumstances that have been thrown at me." Others describe the importance of modeling for their children, in hopes that they, too, might consider higher education in their future. Marcia shares, "now I don't want to disappoint my daughter, you know? She wants to go into nursing, just like mom."

Faith/Spirituality. For some participants, failure was not an option and called on sheer determination to keep going or a higher power. Two participants shared a belief in a "greater power" that led them forward. Erica said, "I honestly think that kind of led me to this, I mean my finalized decision…when everything lines up, more than you think is

perfect, I mean, I do think that comes from a greater power". Gary added, "so do I, so do I. …like that little person talking right here."

Supportive Relationships. Others were spurred on by external supports. College supports such as academic advisors and programs like TRIO were found to be critical in navigating students through unfamiliar processes and systems, for problem solving, and connecting students to important resources. Simple words of encouragement from students' social networks were a powerful motivator. The affirming words of faculty, mentors, employers, peers, and even Facebook friends were catalysts for staying the course. Encouragement from parents and partners were welcomed, but also held out as from sources that do not truly understand the challenges the students were facing. Madilyn said, "I guess my advisor played the biggest role. Because, like, my brothers didn't go to college. My parents went for a semester….None of my cousins have gone to college. I'm really the first one." The importance of supportive relationships for students will be further discussed in the next theme.

Theme 2: Managing Relationships

This theme, as mentioned earlier, was defined as the ways in which students renegotiated the relationships in their social environment as a result of college-going. Participants' stories revealed the many ways that their social relationships were impacted by their decision to attend college. Students experienced distancing with close friends, due to demands on time and the lack of their availability to socialize, sometimes resulting in complete relationship loss. Quotes from participants explain, "I miss a lot of the birthday parties" and "multiple times I had to cancel 'cause I had a test or something. I think he just got sick of it."

Family Tension/Conflict. Students also reported the frequency in which tension or conflict with partners, spouses, and parents also occurred. Often these occasions would be precipitated by the stress of multiple and increasing demands at work, school, and home. Students would become particularly annoyed when words of encouragement such as, "you can do it" or "you got this" were offered from non-college going family members or friends at times of overwhelm, confusion, and complete sense of aloneness in their circumstances.

Marcia recalled, "as far as significant other relationships, it, yeah, did really take a toll on mine. Just a couple of months ago there was talk of like, separation and stuff. He's kind of stepped up since then, so it helps a lot, take some stress off me." Cassie adds, "they're [family] more understanding now. But at the beginning, they just didn't get it. They didn't get how much time you really have to dedicate. Even though you're only in class for a few hours, you have twice that you have to dedicate outside."

The strain on these relationships were exacerbated by two factors, a lack of communication in asserting needs and asking for help and a lack of understanding on the part of loved ones. An excerpt from Madilyn's interview:

> There was a lot of tension between him [boyfriend] and I when I decided to change my major…But there was definitely arguing because he had thought that I was just making a decision that I didn't really know if I wanted…and I tried to explain to him, this isn't a decision that just popped in my head, I've been thinking about it…So there was definitely arguing with that because he had thought that I was, not necessarily making a mistake, but making a decision too quick.

New Friendships and College Credit Plus Peers. While some students were able to form new relationships and attachments with a college peer group, it was difficult for others to make similar connections. Joe said, "When I came to [community college], I felt like it was so hard to make friends." Cassie added, "I've made no friends here. I come to school." She continues, " I also feel like the older I get, the harder it is for me to make friends, in a way, 'cause, I'm just like, awkward."

Peer group relationships seemed to form more readily for those students in programs that used a cohort model. New relationships in college were also complicated by the influx of high students admitted early to college via the College Credit Plus program. Adult students were reticent to form relationships with minors in their classes and programs of study. From Joe's perspective, "It's a little discouraging to make friends when you know a couple of those people might still be in high school. As much as I want everyone to have friends and everything, I just don't want to have friends that are still in high school."

Relationships Loss/Distance. Most all students reported a distance if not a complete disconnect from high school relationships. Students reported that high school friends who moved away, had not stayed in touch. The friends that had stayed in home communities were viewed as "stuck", perhaps in the same lives or jobs, while participants had "moved on" to "new experiences and opportunities".

Parents/Family Support. The most supportive relationships for student participants appeared to be when participants were able to communicate openly with family members or friends. Those who communicated openly about their stresses and what specifically was most helpful to them, such as help with chores, undisturbed time to

study, or help with children, reported that it brought them closer to their parent or partner and fostered an appreciation for them.

Monica shared that her mother's support of her college attendance has strengthened their relationship. "I will say my relationship with my mom got stronger because of school, because she has really, really helped with my kids as far as like, keeping them overnight if I was trying to study for a test or something. She really helped. Still helps."

Kathy talked about her father's offer of support: "They've [parents] been very supportive since I've been going back. My dad's even said if you need help financially, like, he's offered."

Friends and Peer Support. Friends and college peers were another important source of support for the students in this study. As with family, participants offered ways in which their friends offered words of encouragement or mutual assistance. Maureen states, "You just learn who your real friends are in school…ones that can understand. I mean, just people that you wouldn't think, I guess, to be encouraging are still there."

Gary notes, "I have a couple close friends here, but we help each other out a lot. And so he called me a couple times to pick up his son from work, or to take him to work…so I don't mind. And he sometimes cuts my son's hair for free."

Peer support seemed to be of particular value in times of stress due to their insight and ability to empathize with the student's current situation. Maureen describes her nursing cohort: "We're in for the two years. It's the same people that entire two years because they only offer the class one time. So we're together for each semester, and we've formed these different groups, these are my study groups. And if I'm stressed out

about something, I can call them, because they know exactly what I'm going through. Or if they're stressed out, they can call me."

Tricia describes mutual support with her classmates: "Like in my class, where someone mentions, oh, they're so behind on this one assignment, I'm like, 'me too!' We're not alone."

Texts, Social Media, Emails. What emerged from the data as an additional source of friend, peer, and family support was social media and text messaging. Half of the participants mention the use of technology in enabling them to stay connected to family and friends and to obtain words of encouragement and support. Brenton texts his parents: "I try to fill them in as much as possible and then texting is pretty much like the easiest way I am able to go back and forth, because I can't always be home. So it does help." Maureen texts her peers: "we definitely communicate when we are not together. Oh, we text probably daily." She adds that she also uses social media: "It's very random, but I could post something on Facebook that says, 'I passed a test' or whatever, and I mean the amount of support on just that."

Employer Support. Employers were an important source of support for working students. Erica stated that when she learned her employer approved her tuition reimbursement, that was the deciding factor to reenroll. She states, "that was the carrot thing. If they were going to help with that [tuition], I'm like, OK, OK. I've got a supportive boss to help my schedule."

Madilyn cited a similar experience with her general manager: "I have always had some sort of connection with my GM now…She knew that I was young, but she knew

that I was also growing and she had understood that. And when I started college, she was super flexible with my schedule."

College Supports. Participants identified college faculty and staff as important sources of support specific to finding their way through institutional processes and adapting to classroom expectations and technology. One student became tearful when she spoke of an encouraging email she received from a faculty member. Monica describes it this way: "I actually got an email from my instructor yesterday. I emailed her…because it was Teacher Appreciation Day. Just said, like 'thanks for everything you do.' Yeah, she sent me back a really long email. I can't read it or I'll cry. Yeah, so that will be saved, to read it when I need it."

Mentor relationships have also played a supportive role. One student shared that she has gotten a lot of support from the nursing staff she works with, "they're like, no, I think you'd be great." And Monica was moved by a phone call she received from her caseworker upon acceptance into the nursing program. She recalls, "she called me and she's like, 'just stick with it. You got this.'" Words of encouragement, such as these, by those in positions of status, authority or influence appeared to have almost a greater impact on the students than similar words of support from family members and friends.

Supportive relationships in the form of those persons in the students' social environment who carry knowledge, information, skills, resources, and emotional support were found to be a critical factor in these students' success and survival in college.

Theme 3: Managing Identity

This final theme, as defined earlier, captured the many ways student participants reported changes in themselves, their views of themselves, and their views of the world around them as a result of attending college.

Personal Growth/Change. Participants recognized growth and skill development, beyond natural maturation. They reported becoming better students, some viewed themselves as better parents, or as better employees. Decision making, reasoning, and interpersonal skills were said to have improved for most students on some level, such as listening, accepting differences of opinion, admitting mistakes, and developing empathy. Gary stated, "Well, I used to just blurt out stuff. But now, instead of blurting out, I try, and I think I am doing a pretty good job of listening to other peoples' comments before I make a comment." He goes on to say that he also sees a change in the way he parents his children. "I think I'm more understandable with my kids and instead of jumping off the rooftop, I listen to if they did something wrong, so they can explain." Cassie stated that her education has "made me a better mom and a better employee."

Communicating Needs. Most participants identified ways in which they improved their communication skills, with the most important skill development in the ability to ask clarifying questions and to ask for help. Cassie describes her experience:

> Usually I would kind of just turn things in anyways, give it my best try. But now if I have a question, instead of just going, "oh, it's OK. I can figure it out," I will actually go ahead and ask and it cuts down on a lot of time, 'cause I can get the professor's opinion and stuff…."hey is this what you want? Does this look right?"…And you can get a better grade. Or I'll ask my mom, "hey, can you

> watch the baby for maybe an hour or so, so I can study for this exam in the morning?"…I noticed if I don't do that, then I fail the exams.

Applies Learning. They also recognized ways in which they were applying their new skills in their differing social environments: home, work, college. Participants reported becoming more organized, better at planning ahead, better with managing finances, and the ability to "let go" of unrealistic expectations of themselves and others. Kathy shares, "I've changed a lot. Not even just like with school, but home life and stuff. I've kept all A's this time around, and I've been more strict. And I've seen it in my home life because of cleaning, making lists every day to stay on track of everything. I feel I definitely changed."

For Cassie, learning to acknowledge mistakes was the most important lesson from which she experienced growth and change. She tells this story:

> Acknowledge the mistake you made. If I would have acknowledged what I was doing at the time, and how I was messing up, instead of just panicking, and like, shutting down. I don't know. I never did that before, so I don't really know how to handle anything. I wasn't sure what was going on... I was in a whole new experience.

Perspective Shift. This theme also captured ways in which participants began viewing themselves and their social and physical environments differently. Many students described viewing their high schools and home communities as having limited opportunities for them. A common refrain was that of "wanting more" for themselves and their children. Some students had "aha" moments about high school peers who were popular or from prominent families in the community, that they now see as "going

nowhere" and "stuck" in the family business or working in fast food restaurants. Joe laments, "now I understand that even though I would have 100% supported anyone from high school, I know that none of them would support me the way the people that I've met, because of my experiences and opportunities. I know that none of the people from high school will support me that way." He goes on to say, "I think it's because like smaller schools are usually rural areas where people are driven to one type of like, point of view and everything."

Finally, some students saw changes in their value systems and beliefs. Their learning deepened their understanding of certain social issues and health issues. Some participants shared how their views were broadened, and they now see the complexities of many situations and do not rush to judgment.

Emerging Professional. Students also began to see themselves as emerging professionals. Students who were experiencing internship or clinical experiences and those employed in entry level positions in their field of study, spoke of validating moments when they applied their learning to a situation or when a supervisor or coworker recognized their abilities. Marcia shares, "at work, because I work as an STNA, so I always paid attention. Now I pay closer attention just because I know a little more."

Appreciates College. Student views on their education also shifted. Gary reflected, "in high school, I was young and I just wanted to go through the motions. But in college, it's a different animal, so I wanna, I really want to learn." Erica expressed her view that "education is a gift to keep your mind open…I've enjoyed it. I've really, although it's been a hard job to start."

Cassie was direct about her shift in perspective on education when she reenrolled. She said, “I chose to go back on my own time. So, I actually enjoy these classes a lot more. I actually pay attention a lot more. I’m not just going to school, ‘cause I have to…I’m doing this ‘cause I want to.”

Some students came to understand that their future was in their hands and expressed a new sense of agency about their lives. Cassie said it best: "The only thing that was stopping myself was me. But I didn't know that."

Summary

This chapter presents the findings from data collected through interviews with ten first-generation students from low-income backgrounds attending two rural community colleges in Ohio. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 55 years of age , seven were female, three male, and half were parents. Participants came from a variety of living arrangements: living alone, living alone with children, living with parents, living with spouses and children, and living with a roommate. Participants were also in varying stages of their academic careers. All participants had completed 15 credit hours or more. Three students were toward the end of their academic programs with 60 credits or more.

The interviews produced 229 pages of narrative data for analysis. A total of 738 exemplar quotes were extracted from the narrative data. The data was then coded using a process of first-cycle coding, in which a summative word or phrase is assigned to each segment of data. There were 496 initial codes. This process was followed by second-cycle coding, which uses constant comparison to begin to group the codes by those that *look* and *feel* alike. The second-cycle coding process, which took several rounds, resulted in 45 categories, which were later collapsed into 7 categories. From these

categories, and through a process of inductive and deductive movement through the categories and subcategories, three major themes emerged: (a) *Managing deficits,* (b) *Managing relationships,* and (c) *Managing identity*.

The first theme, *managing deficits,* revealed the many ways that students lacked internal or external resources upon entering college and during their college experiences. Students were found to be lacking in certain knowledge and information from the start. Financial concerns were found to be a constant threat. This theme also captured the ways in which students managed these deficits and continued to persist in college. Students called upon certain internal strategies to cope and stay motivated, but what came to light was how critical supportive relationships were to their persistence. This is discussed in the next theme, *managing relationships.*

The second theme that emerged from the data, *managing relationships,* captured the many ways that students' social relationships were impacted by their decision to attend college. Students experienced the loss and distancing of some relationships, a deepening of others, and the need to avail themselves of new and supportive relationships along the way. These supportive relationships, in the form of those persons in the students' social environment who carry knowledge, information, skills, resources, and emotional support were found to be a critical factor in these students' success and survival in college.

The third and final theme, *managing identity,* captured the many ways student participants reported changes in themselves and their views of the world around them as a result of attending college. Students identified ways they matured, developed skills, applied new learning and how they began seeing themselves in a professional role.

Students described other ways that their perspective shifted from how they viewed their education, to seeing their hometowns and high school classmates through a new lens.

In summary, the findings revealed the complex circumstances and challenges that the participants in this study navigated in order to obtain a college degree. Though data was collected from a small number of participants, their experiences provide insight into what other students may face from similar backgrounds. This information has significant implications for institutions of higher education who serve these students, especially institutions with low rates of retention for this population. If we assert that community colleges are to be a gateway to upward mobility for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, then the stories of these students indicate that there is more we can do to improve their educational experiences and assure them that they are not alone.

The next chapter will discuss the findings relative to the research questions, as well as the implications of the findings for theory, practice, policy, and future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

The preceding chapter provided an explanation of the process of data analysis and a detailed description of the findings that emerged. This chapter will examine the findings in the context of the research questions posed by this study. Furthermore, this chapter will expand upon those findings and offer a discussion of the results as it relates to the current literature. As this study sought to expand our knowledge and understanding of the experiences of rural community college students from low-income backgrounds, this chapter will also address ways in which the findings might inform policies and practices in higher education and direct further research on the topic. Therefore, this chapter presents a summary of the key findings; a discussion of the findings relative to the research questions under study; the implications for theory, practice, policy, and research; and concluding remarks.

Summary of Key Findings

Minimal research has explored the experiences of rural community college students from low-income backgrounds as they negotiate bi-cultural worlds in their movement between home, college, community, and work environments on a daily basis. Furthermore, little research has explored the ways in which such students successfully manage the integration of the new knowledge and behaviors attained in college into their current identity and social relationships. Even less is known about the strategies they employ and how they manage deficits in knowledge and understanding of the world they are about to enter. Thus, this naturalistic inquiry sought to answer the primary question:

How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate their experiences of higher education and a differing class culture? The answer to this question was revealed in the following ways: (a) students learned to negotiate changes in themselves as they experienced growth and integrated new knowledge and skills; (b) students negotiated changing views about themselves and the world around them; (c) the changes in themselves provoked changes in the their relationships, which required students to negotiate new attachments, renegotiate current attachments, and distance or let go of others; and (d) students navigated higher education by managing multiple demands, challenges, and stressors by making use of social and cultural capital such as supportive relationships, institutional resources, and internal coping strategies.

This study also answered the following sub-questions:

1. How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate a *shifting sense of self* in and among their varied social and academic contexts?
2. How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate *shifting interpersonal relationships* in and among their varied social and academic contexts?
3. How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status, entering higher education, integrate and make *use of personal and cultural capital* to manage their differing social class environments.

These questions were answered through the analysis of data from interviews with the 10 participants in this study. Key findings identified three emergent themes which align well with the three research sub-questions. The emergent themes are: (a) *managing identity*, which captured the ways in which students changed and how they viewed

themselves and their environments differently since attending college; (b) *managing relationships*, or the ways in which college-going challenged current relationships, ending some relationships and creating new, and deepening others; and (c) *managing deficits*, or the ways in which participants adapted to the challenges of college while managing current roles and responsibilities. Each theme is briefly summarized below.

Theme of Managing Identity

Findings suggest that participants in the study viewed themselves and the world around them differently since attending college. Participants described feeling they had grown or matured. Students reported that they had become more responsible, more organized, or better communicators since attending college. Findings also suggest that educational experiences influenced a shift in students' thinking about values, beliefs, parenting, and social issues. Perhaps most impactful in the findings, participants described developing a sense of agency over their lives and their learning. They described taking more responsibility for themselves and holding themselves accountable. Some saw themselves in a professional role for the first time and it spurred them forward. Findings also revealed that students aspired to have different lives for themselves, lives that differed from their parents or their high school peers. This suggests that students were managing a separation from their "old" self and beginning to adopt a "new" and separate identity.

Theme of Managing Relationships

Relationships were found to be of great importance to participants. Participants discussed at length the individuals in their lives that they relied upon for emotional, social, and psychological support, as well as practical supports, such as financial

assistance or childcare. Findings revealed the significance of having supportive family systems, supportive employers, supportive friends, and the importance of connecting to peer networks and college supports to navigate the many challenges associated with attending college. Students described coming to terms with the relationships they lost or that had become distanced as a result of their college-going. Findings suggest students lost relationships due to less availability for social events and interactions. They also found themselves distanced from friendships or high school peers in which they now had less in common. Findings also indicated that it was common for conflict and tension to arise between the student participants and members of their household. Conflict often centered around the need to renegotiate household tasks and responsibilities as well as the need to carve out time and space for their studies. Participants described the importance of supportive partners or parents in helping them through, even when these family members did not fully understand what they were going through. These findings confirmed that college-going impacted student relationships by challenging current relationships, ending some relationships, and bringing new relationships into their social environment.

Themes of Managing Deficits

Findings related to this theme indicated that students often experienced feeling overwhelmed in that they were unprepared or underprepared for college. Study participants described the difficulties they experienced from the start in attempting to navigate college processes and adjust to classroom practices and expectations. Students described the numerous obstacles, challenges, and barriers they faced in getting enrolled and staying enrolled in college. As they progressed in their studies, students reported

feelings of overwhelm and stress as they managed multiple roles and responsibilities. All participants reported feeling exhaustion due to impossible demands on their time between their course work, employment, and home and family responsibilities. However, findings also indicated that students made use of several strategies to help them through the difficulties and described their motivations to keep going. Students used strategies such as self-talk, prayer, and a focus on their goals for a better life and less struggle as motivations to keep going. A common strategy students used was to remind themselves of the temporary nature of their circumstances.

The findings presented above, which align well with the research questions posed in this study, will be discussed next in greater detail.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study provided answers to the primary research question, *how do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate their experiences of higher education and a differing class culture?* The key findings suggest that in order for students to successfully navigate higher education, they must successfully *manage identity*, *manage relationships*, and *manage deficits*. The ways in which the study participants managed intra- and interpersonal changes that were happening as a result of attending college and their strategies for managing deficits in social and cultural capital are described in more detail and discussed in response to each of the three research sub-questions that follow.

Research Sub-question 1 and Managing Identity

How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate a shifting sense of self in and among their varied social and academic contexts?

The theme that emerged as *managing identity* addresses sub-question one. As the theme suggests, participants experienced changes in themselves, changes in how they viewed themselves, and changes in their views of the world around them. Jones and Abes (2013) explain that student identities are "deeply embedded in and created out of contexts" (p.88). These contexts include one's sociocultural conditions (i.e., social class), family background, and current life experiences. Thus, as participants moved into higher education and new life experiences, this new context influenced change and a reshaping of their identities.

In terms of changes in themselves, students reported feeling they had "matured" and described ways in which they had grown and begun to take more responsibility for themselves. Phrases such as "holding yourself accountable", "I grew up" and "self-discipline" captured this attribute. Students recognized a separation and distancing from parents and a sense of agency over their future life course. Students stated their "beliefs and values" changed. They also described having developed a better sense of career options and what it was they truly wanted to do, apart from external influences, such as parents. Baxter Magolda (2001) describes this shifting of identity from external influences and the approval of others to a more internalized sense of self as the "journey of self-authorship". She explains that for the adult students in her study , "intense self-reflection and interaction with others helped participants gain perspective on themselves and begin to choose their own values and identity" (p. 120).

Participants recognized ways in which they developed skills required for success in college. Improved organizational skills, better time management, and the ability to plan ahead to meet deadlines were mentioned in the data. Communication skills, such as

learning to ask questions and the ability to ask for help, presented as important areas of growth and development for participants. Karp & Bork (2014) note that learning how to seek help actually evolves as a three-step process for community college students. They explain,

> students must first recognize that they need help, then must understand the possible places to get help from, and finally follow through on asking for help. Successful role incumbents learn about this process and enact it throughout their college careers (p. 31).

Students wrestled against thoughts of appearing "weak", being viewed as "dumb", or that their questions were "stupid". As students learned to assert their needs, they began to experience the benefits of doing so, which helped to build a sense of self-efficacy. All of the above skills were found to be helpful for students who transferred these skills to their home and work environments, in addition to their academic environments. The literature supports that the ability for a student to communicate their needs and receive assistance from supportive relationships in response, helped to mediate their adjustment to college and proved critical for student persistence and ultimate success (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp & Bork, 2014; Reay, 2018; Soria, 2012).

These findings are further supported in the literature regarding the importance of academic and social integration of students. Again, though much of the data is based on the experiences of students entering four-year institutions, however Tinto (2006; 2017) found that it is important for students to recognize their capacity to be successful in college and achieve a sense of belonging. Bean and Eaton (2001) identified three attributes for a student's successful integration to college: (a) a sense of control over their

circumstances, (b) self-efficacy, and (c) a repertoire of coping strategies or skills. As the students in this study were moving forward towards attaining their degree, it appears that these three attributes were indeed a reflection of the ways in which they were reflecting their own successful integration into the college environment.

Students were also moved by instances in which others began to view them in a professional role, which helped them to see themselves in this role. (Baxter Magolda, 2002; O'Neill &Thomson, 2013). This was especially noted by students in health professions who either worked in entry level positions or were engaged in their program's clinical settings. Situations in which the participants' skills were noted by others or when family members sought their advice, helped to counter feelings of self-doubt, and offered validation of their ability to be successful in their chosen vocation. Nielsen (2005) notes, "Success in college is something [students] could look to as a source of worth. It is a way to 'prove' they are 'smart' and 'worthy'" (p. 275).

Findings in the study also revealed that students experienced shifts in their perspectives about the world around them. Their attitudes about education in general shifted, as participants expressed a " new appreciation" for learning which differed from their experiences in high school. Some described a shift in thinking about community colleges themselves and realized the advantages of a two-year degree for less cost and the same transferability. Students viewed their home communities and high schools as limited in opportunities in ways they had not considered before attending college. These findings are supported in the literature as Curt, et al. (2018) explain that upon entering higher education, exposure to new experiences and perspectives challenges students to

integrate the “old self” with the “new self”. They must decide which perspectives and values from their family of origin to retain, revise, or abandon.

Some recognized in retrospect that their preparation for college was lacking, and that they “never had to study” in high school. High school classmates who were once viewed as popular, were now seen as “stuck” or “going nowhere”. Students also recognized the economic struggles of their families of origin. Findings showed the frequency in which participants described wanting more and “a better life” for themselves and their children, than what they had experienced. This psycho-social push-pull juxtaposes the student’s desire to move forward and embrace their new environment, but also pulls them back so as not to become too different or distanced from family members (Mallman, 2017). Morton (2019) calls this the “ethical costs of upward mobility” or the “trade-offs” and “sacrifices” that students of low-socioeconomic status must wrestle with when they move into higher education. This movement back and forth between to different social worlds contributes to students feeling as they do not belong in either one (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

These finding suggest that we can do more to assist students in recognizing the strengths they bring, support them in the acquisition of new skills needed for success in college, and yet acknowledge the difficulty of letting go of aspects of their background that are unhelpful to them. The second sub-question further examines the impact of college-going on the students’ social networks and interpersonal relationships.

Research Sub-question 2 and Managing Relationships

How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate shifting interpersonal relationships in and among their varied social and academic contexts?

The findings that address this research question align closely with the theme regarding *managing relationships.* The topic of relationships was discussed at length in the interviews, and it became clear that family relationships were an important source of support for participants. Prior research indicates that family support has been found to be a factor in student success (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018; Swartz, 2008). What emerged from the data is that the students experienced ongoing shifts in their relationships upon entering college. It stands to reason that as students experienced shifts in their identity, that there would be subsequent shifts in their interactions with those closest to them. For example, students perceived that their partners, family members and friends who did not have college experience lacked a true understanding of the stressors they were managing. This lack of understanding often frustrated students and they found themselves rebuffing words of support, such as "you can do it" or "you got this" from loved ones who they felt were "no help" and "had no idea" about the pressures they were feeling.

The findings also revealed that students experienced relationship loss and distancing. As demands on students' time increased due to class schedules and time studying, their availability for socializing decreased. Students lost time for dating relationships and attendance at family gatherings. One student lost a dating relationship because she "canceled too many times." Another stated her cousin stopped coming to her children's birthday parties because she had missed the parties of her cousin's children. One student lost housing due to her ongoing absence from the apartment. Between class and full-time work, her roommates deemed her negligent of her assigned chores. Curl, et al., (2018) called these instances "flashpoints" in which upwardly mobile students "felt tension or distance, experienced overt judgment, or engaged in conflict with family

members" and close childhood friends (p. 879). Other researchers reported that parents were outwardly "resentful toward them for breaking out of the class structure of the family" (Nelson, et al., 2006, p. 4).

A common source of tension or conflict was the need to shift roles, responsibilities, or routines to accommodate classes or study time. Often the degree of tension or conflict were found to be contributing to the students' level of stress or feelings of overwhelm. Stuart, et al., (2014) uses the term "psychic costs" to describe the instances when students must choose between spending time on their education or spending time with their children, families, or friends (p. 334). This continuously puts students in a no-win situation, as either choice has consequences whether academic or social-emotional, or both. One student shared thoughts of separation from her partner until they were able to talk openly about the need to shift responsibilities and had resolved to do so. Another student shared that if her husband had not been supportive, she would not be enrolled. Morton (2019) cautions that for students who live at home while attending college, their families need to "think very carefully about what they can reasonably expect from them or run the risk of undermining their path through college" (p.70).

Relationships formed beyond the home and family environment were found to provide much needed additional support and practical assistance related to navigating the academic environment. Students in this study availed themselves of peer supports by engaging with classmates. Peers were a means of validating students' feelings of stress or overwhelm, a source of assistance in understanding a confusing assignment, or a resource for other valuable information in navigating the academic arena. Additionally, college

supports, such as faculty, staff, and advisors, were also critical for providing information that students lacked in order to be successful. College personnel became helpful guides in understanding college processes, clarifying assignments and expectations, navigating the college's learning management system, and assistance in selection of classes appropriate for their major field of study. Without such assistance, students lacked direction for next steps and expressed feeling "lost" or "alone". The literature suggests that "role models, mentors, and allies" are essential for students' success (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 63). Not only do these individuals assist students in navigating institutions of higher education and college expectations, but help students make sense of other cultural expectations and do so without judgement (Bean & Eaton, 2001). These individuals can be faculty, staff, coaches, church leaders, or other role models that understand and translate middle class rules and values. This "was important, given that much of what they need to know to be successful in college are not lessons or tools they learned at home" (Schwartz, et al., p. 58).

A final and equally important source of support was from the participants' employers. All but one participant in the study was working while attending class and finances were a commonly reported stressor. Under-resourced students may often feel pressured to choose their job over their education (Becker, et al., 2009). A cooperative and supportive employer, who was willing to accommodate fluctuations in work hours and the ebb and flow of academic demands was viewed as invaluable to participants. Participants with employers who were inflexible, stayed only temporarily (i.e., until the semester began) and left in search of other opportunities. I did not find anything in the literature that specifically addressed the significance of employer mentorship and support

of low-income students pursing higher education. Much of the literature appears focused on cooperative learning opportunities in the context of career pathways with institutions of higher education. That is, institutions of higher education partner with business and industry primarily to meet the needs of employers. The focus is not on the student, which is a missed opportunity for employers, particularly those in rural communities with small labor pools. The students in this study revealed the important role employers play in supporting their success in college by allowing flexibility with scheduling, encouraging their growth and skill development, and investing in their continuing education via tuition reimbursement. In turn, students expressed an appreciation for and commitment to their employers. Institutions of higher education should consider the possible linkages that could be made with local employers to further opportunities for such mutually beneficial relationships.

As the findings and literature suggest, social supports are a key component of a successful college experience for students from low-income backgrounds. Creating an environment in which students can easily identify and access sources of help should be paramount for institutions of higher education. In addition, we should consider ways in which we can facilitate connections to mentor relationships such as faculty and classmates and recognize that students may have experienced relationship losses as a result of their decision to attend college. The use of social supports or *social capital* leads us to answering the next research question regarding how students further integrated and applied various forms of capital to manage the deficits they experienced while navigating higher education.

Research Sub-question 3 and Managing Deficits

How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status, entering higher education, integrate and make use of personal and cultural capital to manage their differing social class environments?

Findings associated with *managing deficits* provided insight into what was most threatening to the success of student participants, particularly the resources they were lacking and ways they coped and managed these deficits. Study participants called upon both external and internal resources to negotiate the many barriers, obstacles, and challenges they faced in getting enrolled and staying enrolled in college. Students faced obstacles beginning with the admission and registration process. Navigating the sequence of required steps to enrollment was confusing, as was understanding foreign concepts such as placement testing or financial aid. Students lacked the social and cultural capital that would have eased their adjustment to college (Bourdieu, 1986; Crozier & Reay, 2011). These are just a few of the challenges faced by first-generation students. Karp and Bork (2014) suggest that first-generation students are "particularly disadvantaged" entering community college "because they have less familiarity…and know fewer individuals who can help them" (p. 20). One student was shocked to learn that none of his credits transferred from his first attempt at college years prior. This student had no knowledge of accredited versus unaccredited institutions, nor options for prior learning, especially for veterans. All of these challenges translate to lost time and money for students who have little margin for either deficit in their lives. Students in this study turned to peers and college supports, such as advisors and Trio program staff, to

help navigate unknown processes. This shows how critically important these supports are to a student's persistence and ultimate success in college.

Once enrolled, the adjustment to college provided additional challenges. Acclimating to the use of technology, particularly the college learning management system, arose as a significant obstacle for students. Students struggled to understand where to find important course information, how to access assignments, how to submit assignments, and how to take exams online. One student realized her MacBook was incompatible with the nursing programs supplemental course materials and needed to purchase an iPad one week into the semester. Others had to adjust to the first-time use of e-books instead of textbooks. The adaption to new technology is compounded by the limited access to high-speed internet in their rural environments. Students have been known to use the Wi-Fi at their local library or McDonald's restaurant to complete their assignments or take online exams. Soria, et al., (2013) caution against the "structural mechanisms within higher education that systematically wear down working-class students as they confront daily norms and expectation out of their reach" (pp. 229-230). However, the literature also found instances of resiliency in the face of struggle, as did my research. Nelson, et al. (2006) reported that their study participants "demonstrated a capacity to creatively solve problems, to view the obstacles they faced in terms of challenges to overcome and [sought to] devise and seek means to get past them" (p.7). Students sought assistance directly from faculty, peers, family members, and others to resolve their issues with technology and stay on track.

Students were challenged to make internal adjustments, such as learning to plan ahead for assignments and to set their own reminders for due dates and not rely on

faculty. For students transitioning from high school where things came "easy" for them, adjustments to college also included learning how to study. Soria, et al. (2013) reported that students from lower income or working-class backgrounds were indeed more likely to report deficits in math and English, inadequate study skills, poor study behaviors, and bad study environments as obstacles to their academic success. Studying then becomes about "getting through" rather than engaging in the "excitement of learning" suggest Crozier & Reay (2011), due to "a combination of time pressures, not being clear about what is expected of them and limited tutor expectations" (p. 150). Participants in this study were resourceful and turned to their social network for assistance. They learned from classmates to make use of flash cards, or study groups, and even called upon family members to "quiz" them on course materials.

Managing multiple demands on time and keeping multiple schedules seemed a constant underlying stressor, especially for students who were parents. Soria, et al. (2013) also found that students from working-class backgrounds were more likely to report feeling "depressed, stressed, or upset" than their middle- and upper-class peers and that "competing job and family responsibilities were obstacles to their academic success" (p. 228). One student, a single parent, had a nightly call with her mother to review schedules and ensure someone was getting her children where they needed to be the next day. Students regularly questioned whether they could keep up the pace and if the constant exhaustion they felt was "worth it?" They often wrestled with fears and doubts about their ability to be successful. Morton (2019) empathizes with students who struggle with the degree of sacrifice these students must make to persist. She states, "if you come to see that these sacrifices are unfairly leveled on you because of an unjust and unequal

distribution of opportunities and resources, it is not unreasonable to decide that you don't want to embark on continue on that path" (pp. 145-146). However, Morton is of the opinion that educators and parents "give students the best argument in favor of college" (p. 146).

As a way to cope, most participants reminded themselves of the temporality of their current situation. A few had actually counted out the weeks left in the semester or number of days until graduation. They would remind themselves and their families of "how much longer" until the pace would lessen. Other means of coping included focusing on the goal of being the first in their families to graduate college or drawing on the internal resources of faith and prayer. "Spiritual resources can build a sense of empowerment and resiliency; both traits are necessary for college students—especially under-resourced students" (Becker, et al., 2009, p. 58). Ultimately, these students found ways to navigate their way around and through the challenges they faced. They were able to draw upon both internal and external resources to assist them in managing deficits and minimize the threats to their success. O'Shea (2016) similarly found that the students in her study that achieved beyond their social class standing "drew upon both ambitions and desires for the future as a form of motivation" and that "well articulated aspirations provided…a source of strength whilst persisting" (p.74).

These findings revealed the numerous challenges faced by rural community college students from low-income backgrounds due to their deficits in cultural capital as they entered college. However, findings also revealed ways in which these students were able to manage these deficits and persist. Participants in this study drew upon their existing sources of personal, social and cultural capital and, when available, students also

engaged with new sources of capital for help and support. (Bourdieu, 1986; O'Shea, 2016; Yosso; 2005). It is encouraging to learn of the ways in which students were able to successfully navigate the challenges they faced. However, these findings should challenge us to do better to minimize any obstacle or barrier for students so as not to have to navigate them in the first place.

Implications

If community colleges seek to stay true to their founding mission, to be an access point to higher education for all individuals, then more can and should be done to retain and graduate rural students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For these students the local community college may be the *only* access point to higher education within a 50-mile radius. With limited opportunities available for upward mobility on the economic ladder, improving the success rates of rural community college students from low-income backgrounds is even more critical, as more families in the U.S. are struggling to attain a livable wage.

The findings of the research study have significant implications for rural community colleges and the administrators, faculty, and staff who serve their students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Insights gained from the interviews with the participants in this study should inform institutional policies and practices and inspire change, where possible, to reduce the barriers, obstacles, and challenges that hinder the academic progress and ultimate success of these students. This section will review implications for the application of theory, implications for practice, implications for policy, and implications for future research.

Implications for the Application of Theory

The theoretical framework that guided this study was the expanded model of *community cultural wealth* adapted from Tara Yosso (2005) and the later work of Sara O'Shea (2016) on *experiential capital*. Yosso and O'Shea proposed a strengths perspective rather than a deficit model in viewing students from marginalized groups or disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Yosso (2005), students bring six types of *cultural wealth* with them to campus: *aspirational capital, navigational capital, social capital, linguistic capital, familial capital,* and *resistant capital*. Examples of the use of these various forms of cultural wealth can be found in the application of this model to the findings in this study.

Use of Theory. The model of community cultural wealth provided a helpful lens in which to understand the internal and external sources of capital that students in this study used as they navigated and negotiated the challenges, conflicts, and unfamiliar terrain of higher education. In spite of the many obstacles and challenges they faced, the findings revealed that participants in this study mobilized various forms of community cultural wealth they possessed to keep moving forward. The forms of capital were a helpful guide in thinking about the data and enabled me to easily draw connections between the data and the theory.

For example, study participants employed *familial* and *social capital* by learning how to ask for help and accept the assistance offered. Though family members could not assist students with understanding their college course work or understanding college processes, they could assist with housing, transportation, childcare and chores. Students who were willing to build social capital were able to avail themselves of new and

supportive relationships in the college environment such as peers, tutors, study groups, advisors, and faculty found the guidance and validation needed to manage the feelings of being lost, confused, or overwhelmed.

Another example in which the data connected to this theory is the students' use of *navigational capital*. Once students were guided through institutional processes for the first time, such as registration, financial aid, or the learning management system, they were able to attain a level of self-efficacy for future occurrences. Additionally, they were more inclined to reach out for support if they did meet a new barrier or unfamiliar obstacle.

Perhaps most compelling was the use of *aspirational capital.* Half of the participants focused on their children and the desire to provide a "better life" or "more opportunities" and less financial struggle than they had experienced. All participants desired some degree of happiness or fulfillment in a career, not "just a job" in addition to higher wages and improved standard of living. Some students reminded themselves of the pride that will be felt by parents, grandparents, spouses, partners, or children once they reach their goal. For others, they reminded themselves of how they will feel for achieving their dream, especially those who had postponed their education for years in order to provide for their families.

And finally, some students made use of *resistant capital.* O'Shea (2015) referred to this as "capital that nurtures attitudes that challenge the status quo" (p. 63). These students were determined not to give up and stated, "quitting isn't an option". For some of the students, there was an almost oppositional stance in needing to prove to either themselves or someone else that they could and would achieve their goal.

Examining the data in the context of the community cultural wealth framework shifts the focus from what students are lacking in order to be successful, to what students currently possess that will help them meet their goals.

Evaluation of Theory. An understanding of this theory and its application would be helpful for institutions of higher education in order to better serve rural community college students from low-income backgrounds and improve their outcomes. Viewing students from a strengths perspective rather than focusing on their deficits would empower students and draw on skills and resources they already possess. Institutions tend to overwhelm students with expectations to adapt and change to their milieu when it would be helpful to meet students where they are and expand their sources of capital. Programs such as TRIO are one example of how institutions of higher education can provide an additional source of social capital to students. Understanding the power of aspirational capital and resistant capital in propelling students forward could be helpful to student services personnel when talking with students who are struggling. Recognizing and affirming the experiential capital that non-traditional age students bring to the classroom could reduce common doubts and fears about whether they belong. In summary, the expanded model of community cultural wealth would be useful to community college professionals in their service to under-resourced students in general.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study have multiple implications for administrators, faculty, and staff at rural community colleges. Persons who work in higher education most often come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and are likely to have had a very different college experience than the students in this study. It is my hope that the stories

they shared provide insight into their day-to-day lives but, more importantly, that their struggles and challenges provoke necessary changes in how colleges seek to retain and support these students in achieving their academic goals. This section provides several recommendations for practice as it relates to the findings.

Institutional Navigators. Firstly, the students in this study would benefit from assistance in managing deficits related to a lack of knowledge and understanding of college processes, procedures, and expectations. Findings indicate that students lacked cultural capital from the start of their college experience and simply did not know, what they did not know. Students were often at a loss as "next steps" when attempting to navigate processes that were foreign to them. Students would benefit from an *institutional navigator*, similar to what the TRIO program provided to the two students who utilized their services. Guidance through the processes of admission, placement testing, applying for financial aid, selecting a major, and registration were areas that participants needed additional support. The role of an institutional navigator would be to interpret and translate institutional policies and procedures for students and to assist in problem-solving when obstacles arose. Navigators would direct students to the proper office or personnel for problem resolution or actually accompany them to the appropriate resource. Navigators could be paid staff or peer volunteers but need to be accessible and responsive to student's needs. Institutions could choose to centralize this service and provide a "help center" or "one-stop" location.

In addition to these responsibilities, navigators could also serve as guides to the social-emotional challenges that can be expected to arise for these students as they enter college. As the findings suggest, students will experience shifts in their identity and their

social relationships. Trained navigators can serve as sounding boards and normalize the dissonance these students experience. They would also be poised to direct these students to counseling resources on campus or in the community if needed.

Flexible Hours for Student Services. A second implication for practice in the community college setting relative to managing deficits, is to acknowledge the multiple demands on the students' time and provide *flexible hours for student services*. Findings indicated that all but one student was working in addition to attending college. Half of the participants also had children in the home. Institutions need to think differently about the students they serve and the hours they are available to serve them. Unlike four-year residential campuses who may easily serve students between the hours of 8:00 AM and 4:30 PM, community colleges are serving a population who need evening, or perhaps weekend hours. Academic and student services personnel should ensure availability at times that students need. Thought should also be given to reducing the number of required visits to campus in order to complete admission, financial aid, advising and registration processes, as each visit might require that the student arrange time off, childcare and transportation. This leads to the next implication for practice, alternatives to in-person meetings. Much like adult learning online, services need to be made available when they are needed most which means shifting our perspective of how service hours should operate.

Alternatives to In-person Meetings. Colleges should find ways to support students not only at times most convenient to them, but in ways most convenient. Thus, academic and student services should consider alternatives to in-person meetings. For example, virtual appointments might be a more feasible option for half the participants

who have children. Since the pandemic, the use of video conferencing has become more common place and may provide the optimal solution for the students who are also working parents. Services such as tutoring, advising, and counseling services may be underutilized by this population if they are only available on campus during business hours. In addition, providing assistance via texting or chat could be a consideration to support students whose time on campus is limited.

Technology. Students in this study reported numerous challenges with technology. Students would benefit from additional guidance and support in becoming familiar with the technology required for interacting with the institution and accessing their course content. Students are assigned a college email account; a student portal for college registration, financial aid, and academic records; and an account in the college's learning management system (LMS) to access online courses and other course content. These systems can be confusing and overwhelming. Findings revealed that students had the most difficulty navigating their college's LMS. Faculty should evaluate the ways in which students are oriented to their online course content and how a student could find assistance and support should they encounter difficulties while taking an exam or submitting an assignment. Again, community colleges should consider the availability of technical support for students during evening and weekend hours and through alternative means such as phone, texting, or chat.

Modified Plans of Study. An implication related to the multiple demands on time that students experienced concerns the pace at which students complete their academic programs, especially in the health professions. Institutions should consider ways to help students minimize their stress and find a manageable balance between

coursework, employment, and family responsibilities. For example, most institutions encourage students to enroll full-time and take a minimum of 15-16 credits per semester, in order to complete their degree within a two-year period. A modified plan of study might prove a better option for students, especially students like the participants in this study. Perhaps 9-12 credit hours would be a more manageable pace. This would challenge institutions to reconsider processes of advising and scheduling classes. Colleges may also need to rethink part-time student eligibility for scholarships or other programs often limited to students of full-time status.

An additional challenge faced by six students in this study was the requirement to fulfill clinical hours while enrolled in a health professions program. All the students were employed, some full-time, despite being advised not to do so. Health programs require hours of on-site clinical training, most often full-time hours, for periods of four to eight weeks. Students do not receive pay for full-time clinical field work but do pay tuition and fees for the credit hours earned for this training. The combination of these factors was found to be stressful for students in this study. Faculty and administrators of health programs should consider providing part-time options for students. While this may require creative scheduling with clinical sites, such options would reduce the level of exhaustion students feel as a result of working the equivalent to two full-time jobs.

Employer Support. Student employment is another implication for practice. Students from low-income backgrounds feel pressure to work, often at the expense of their education. Institutions of higher education are uniquely poised to advocate for students with regard to employers due to their long history of partnering with business and industry to achieve workforce goals. Previous partnerships have focused on

providing a trained workforce for employers and have not progressed much beyond internship or co-op experiences. If colleges and employers creatively work together, perhaps these partnerships could be expanded to assist students in meeting their academic goals while employed and reduce the stress and frustrations of ongoing conflicts with their schedules. Employers, as partners in student success, should also be acknowledged or somehow rewarded for their role and the support they provide. This could be as simple as a recognition plaque from the college to be displayed at the employment site or perhaps an annual employer appreciation banquet.

Building Connection. A final implication for practice in the rural community college setting is in response to the degree in which supportive relationships were significant for students in this study. Findings indicated that words of encouragement and support from faculty, mentors, and other college personnel can have a profound impact on a student's level of confidence and motivation. A simple communication via email from a faculty member moved a student to tears and was the validation needed to spur her forward.

Students also felt less isolated and alone when connected to peers. Findings revealed that students appreciated support from classmates in their major field of study. Students completing a program with a cohort built a system of mutual encouragement and information sharing. Finding ways to assist students in making connections to peers and encouraging interactions outside the classroom would be of benefit. However, in doing so, institutions need to be mindful not to create additional demands on the students' time with scheduled or required events.

One finding that could be of use to college academic and student services personnel in building connection, is the students' use of texting and social media. Most all students in the study relied on texting or social media platforms to stay in touch with partners, family members, friends, and classmates. This vehicle of social support seemed favored for its ease of use and the availability of an almost immediate response.

Faculty and other college personnel should recognize that they are an important source of social and cultural capital for students from low-income backgrounds, particularly first-generation students. Simple expressions of understanding, encouragement and support can make a profound difference in creating successful outcomes for these students.

Implications for Policy

An implication for policy important for community colleges to address is the lack of access to technology so ubiquitous in the academic environment. Students who lack access to reliable internet, computers, or other devices are managing yet another threat to success. Students reported an inability to purchase needed devices or lacking a device compatible with the software used in their programs of study. Most often, such a purchase, in addition to other expenses of attending colleges, would be quite burdensome for these students. Community colleges should find ways to offer these needed devices to students who enroll in college, in much the same way that they are now provided in the K-12 education system. Students can be loaned the device while enrolled with an option to return or purchase the device upon graduation. In addition, institutions should similarly offer "hot spots" for students in rural areas with limited or no access to Wi-Fi. These devices could be loaned in much the same way.

Implications for Further Research

Participants in this study were predominantly White and the intersectionality of race and social class was not explored in this study. This presents an opportunity for further research. Interviews with rural community college students who are representative of racial and ethnic minorities could provide insight into the degree to which racial and ethnic identities factor into the challenges associated with successfully navigating higher education.

A second recommendation would be to conduct this study with students who stopped out with no plans to reenroll. This study was conducted with students who were currently enrolled and persisting. The participants found ways to successfully negotiate the challenges they faced and stay the course in reaching their academic goals. Research with students who dropped out would most likely have to be conducted at the institutional level, as it would be difficult for an external researcher to access a roster of students no longer enrolled. However, a study with this population has the potential of providing insight into the experiences of students who were not able to successfully navigate a shifting identity or shifting relationships. Perhaps the deficits in capital were too great or the psychological demands too high. In other words, interviews with students who stopped attending might help us determine the tipping point for them in terms of the sacrifices made and the social-emotional "costs" of attending college.

A third area identified for further research is to explore the factors associated with low participation in the College Credit Plus Program by the population in this study. Only one interviewee shared that he had taken advantage of the early college program while in high school. The program has been in existence for some time in Ohio but

expanded in recent years as part of the initiative to increase the number of Ohioans with college degrees. College tuition is free, as are books and supplies. It would seem this would be an ideal program for low-income rural students. In fact, College Credit Plus would be a significant cost-saving opportunity for any student of low socioeconomic status. A qualitative study that examines high school students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their attitudes about the early college programs could assist in improving participation rates for these students.

Finally, this study was conducted with a small sample of rural community college students from a single state in the Midwest. A fourth recommendation for further research would be to replicate this study in rural community colleges representative of other regions of the country. This would provide further information as to what challenges may be common among rural students of low socioeconomic status in general, and perhaps also identify if there may be challenges unique to students attending community colleges in certain geographical regions of the U.S. For example, what additional challenges might rural students from low socioeconomic status face in the Appalachian region or in tribal regions.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

This study focused on the unique experiences of low-income rural community college students as they enter higher education and a differing class culture. These students have been underrepresented in the literature and underrepresented in rates of degree attainment. Findings indicate that participants in this study were challenged in managing both a shifting identity and shifting relationships. Additionally, students faced numerous barriers and obstacles that required them to call upon and make use of the

social and cultural capital they possessed or acquired along the way. The results of this study have implications for theory, practice and policy for community college administrators, faculty and student services personnel. The study also provides recommendations for further research and insights for institutions of higher education.

The theoretical model of community cultural wealth operates from a strengths perspective and provides a helpful lens in which to understand the internal and external sources of capital that students made use of as they navigate and negotiate the challenges, conflicts, and unfamiliar terrain of higher education. Despite these many obstacles and challenges, findings revealed that participants mobilized various forms of community cultural wealth to keep moving forward and persist. An understanding of this theory and its application would be helpful for institutions of higher education to better serve these students and improve their outcomes.

Findings in the study have several implications for practice for community colleges who are rural serving. These institutions should consider the implementation of the following recommendations if not already in place on their campuses: institutional navigators; flexible hours of service; alternatives to in-person meetings; technology training and support; modified plans of study; employer support, and enhanced connections with faculty, peers, and staff.

An implication for institutional policy that emerged from the findings suggests that students would benefit from the provision of the technological devices required to access college services and course materials. This would include the provision of Wi-Fi hot spots for reliable access to the internet in their rural communities.

Additionally, the findings in this study provide implications for further research.

More could be gained from further study with rural students of low SES who represent a racial or ethnic minority, as the intersectionality of race, ethnicity and social class was not explored in this study. At the institutional level, interviewing students who have dropped out with no plans to reenroll could also prove helpful to better plan targeted interventions in reducing their numbers. In addition, an examination of the low participation rates of students of low SES in the College Credit Plus Program would inform colleges as to ways improve access for students, such as those in this study, who would greatly benefit from such programs. Finally, the replication of this study with rural students of low-socioeconomic status in other regions of the country may identify unique challenges associated with certain geographical locations.

This study also contributes to the existing body of literature and provides several insights for higher education professionals. The participants in this study provided the student perspective, a glimpse into the experiences of rural students from low-income backgrounds as they enter community college. The students gave voice to their lived experiences, which is often missing from the data on student retention and completion. This study also fills a gap in the literature specific to community college students. Community colleges have been underrepresented in higher education research despite serving over 42% of undergraduate students (Ma & Baum, 2016). While there are some similarities in the experiences of students who attend a two-year colleges as compared to four-year, this research has identified the many challenges that are unique to community college students. This study adds an understanding of the ways in which under-resourced, rural community college students may be challenged, tested, forced to adapt, and navigate in a foreign environment with little to guide them. This study also adds an

understanding as to the resources and processes that could be modified to be more responsive to students' needs, reduce their levels of stress, and improve their college-going experiences.

I was honored to hear the stories so graciously shared by the students in this study. Their experiences revealed the degree to which each student was remarkably hard working and resilient. It is my hope that this study helps higher education professionals understand the complexity of their lives and the internal and external supports which can make all the difference in whether these students persist and attain their degrees.

References

Alves, J. (2006, October 13). Class Struggles. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. 56–56.

American Association of Community Colleges. (April 2012). *Reclaiming the American Dream: A report from the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges.* https://www.aacc.nche.edu/21stCenturyReport

American Association of Community Colleges. (March 2020). *Fast facts 2020.* AACC. https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/

American Council on Education. (2021). *Carnegie classifications of institutions of higher education: Basic classifications.* ACE. https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/carnegie-classification/classification-methodology/basic-classification/

Aries, E., & Seider, M. (2007). The role of social class in the formation of identity: A study of public and elite private college students. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *147*(2), 137–157. https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.147.2.137-157

Bailey, T. R. & Alfonso, M. (2005). Paths to Persistence: An Analysis of Research on Program Effectiveness at Community Colleges. *Lumina Foundation for Education: New Agenda Series, 6*(1), 1-39.

Baime, D.S. & Mullin, C.M. (2011). *Promoting educational opportunity: The Pell Grant program at community colleges* (Policy Brief 2011-03PBL). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

Baskarada, S. (2014). Qualitative case study guidelines. *The Qualitative Report, 19*(40), 1-18. https://ssrn.com/abstract=2559424

Baxter Magolda, M.B. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Stylus Publishing.

Baxter Magolda, M.B. (2002). Helping students make their way to adulthood: Good company for the journey. *About Campus, 6*(6), 2-9. https://doi.org/10.1177/108648220200600602

Bean, J., & Eaton, S.B. (2001). The psychology underlying successful retention practices. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, *3*(1), 73-89. https://doi.org/10.2190/6R55-4B30-28XG-L8U0

Becker, K.A., Krodel, K.M., & Tucker, B.H. (2009). *Understanding and engaging under- resourced college students: A fresh look at the influence of economic class on teaching and learning in higher education.* aha!Process, Inc.

Bloomberg, L.D. & Volpe, M. (2012). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end.* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). Forms of capital. In Richardson, J., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (pp.241-258).* Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. (2006). Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste. In Gruskey, D.B.& Szelenyi, S., *Inequality: Classic Readings in Race, Class, & Gender (pp.287-318).* Perseus Books.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture* (Rev. ed.). Sage Publications.

Bragg, D. D. (2019). What works for adult learners: Lessons from career pathway evaluations. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

Carnevale, A.P., Strohl, J., Ridley, N., & Gulish, A. (2018). *Three educational pathways to good jobs: High school, middle skills, and bachelor's degrees.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Center for Community College Engagement. (2017). Making ends meet: The role of community colleges in student financial health. University of Texas at Austin, College of Education. https://www.ccsse.org/docs/Making_Ends_Meet.pdf

Center on Society and Health (2015, February). *Why education matters to health: Exploring the causes.* Richmond, VA: Virginia Commonwealth University. www.societyheatlh.vcu.edu

Community College Research Center. (2020). *Community College FAQs: Community College Enrollment and Completion.* Retrieved from https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community- college-faqs.html

Complete College America. (2014). Ohio 2011-Complete College America. Retrieved February 7, 2016, from http://completecollege.org/docs/Ohio.pdf

Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches.* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Crozier, G., & Reay, D. (2011). Capital accumulation: Working-class students learning how to learn in HE. *Teaching in Higher Education, 16*(2), 145-155. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.515021

Curl, H., Lareau, A. & Wu, T. (2018). Cultural conflict: The implications of changing dispositions among the upwardly mobile. *Sociological Forum, 33*(4), 877-899. https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12461

Deil-Amen, R. (2011). Socio-academic integrative moments: Rethinking academic and social integration among two-year college students in career related programs. *Journal of Higher Education, 82*(1), 54-91. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2011.11779085

Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students. *Pell Institue for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*. http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED504448.pdf

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass.

Furstenberg, F.F. (2008). The intersections of social class and the transition to adulthood. In J.T. Mortimer (Ed.), *Social class and transitions to adulthood. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 119,* 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.205

Halbert, H. (2014). *Blocking the college door: Cuts to financial aid lock Ohio students out.* Policy Matters Ohio. http://policymattersohio.org

hooks, b. (2000). *Where we stand: Class matters*. Routledge.

Jones, S. J. (1998). Subjectivity and class consciousness: The development of class identity. *Journal of Adult Development*, *5*(3), 145–162.

Jones, S. R., & Abes, E. S. (2013). *Identity development of college students: Advancing frameworks for multiple dimensions of identity*. Jossey-Bass.

Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, *41*(4), 405–414.

Jones, S.R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2006). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues.* Taylor & Francis Group.

Karp, M. M., & Bork, R. H. (2014). "They never told me what to expect, so I didn't know what to do": Defining and clarifying the role of a community college student. *Teachers College Record*, *116*(5), 1–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811411600403

Kaufman, P. (2003). Learning not to labor: How working-class individuals construct middle-class identities. *The Sociological Quarterly, 44*(3), 481-504. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2003.tb00542.x

Kelly, A. (2015). *High costs, uncertain benefits: What do Americans without a college degree think about postsecondary education?* Center on Higher Education Reform, American Enterprise Institute. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED557611.pdf

Kentli, F.D. (2009). Comparison of hidden curriculum theories. *European Journal of Educational Studies, 1*(2), 83-88.

Kunjufu, J. (2006). *An African centered response to Ruby Payne's poverty theory*. African American Images.

Langhout, R. D., Rosselli, F., & Feinstein, J. (2007). Assessing classism in academic settings. *Review of Higher Education, 30*(2), 145–184. http://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2006.0073

League for Innovation (2015). Opportunity for all: How can we increase community college completion? http://www.publicagenda.org/media/expanding-opportunity-for-all

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Sage Publications, Inc.

Lunenburg, F.C., & Irby, B.J. (2008). *Writing a successful thesis or dissertation: Tips and strategies for students in the social and behavioral sciences*. Corwin Press.

Ma, J., & Baum, S. (2016). *Trends in community colleges: Enrollment, prices, student debt, and completion* (Research Brief). The College Board.

Mallman, M. (2017). Not entirely at home: Upward social mobility and early family life. *Journal of Sociology, 53*(1), 18-31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783315601294

Malveaux, J. (2003). *What's at stake: The social and economic benefits of higher education* (Research Report). College Entrance Examination Board.

Marcus, J., & Krupnick, M. (2017, September). *The rural higher-education crisis*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/09/the-rural-higher-education-crisis/541188/

Martin, G.L. (2012). *Getting out, missing out, and surviving: the social class experiences of White, low-income, first-generation college students*. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Iowa. https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.w3h6s5wl

Mayer, A. K., Cerna, O., Cullinan, D., Fong, K., Rutschow, E. Z., & Jenkins, D. (2014). Moving ahead with institutional change: Lessons from the first round of Achieving the Dream community colleges. MDRC.

Merriam, S.B., & Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Morton, J.M. (2019). *Moving up without losing your way: The ethical costs of upward mobility.* Princeton University Press.

Murray, J. (2009). The wider social benefits of higher education: What do we know about them? *Australian Journal of Education, 53*(3), 230-244. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494410905300303

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (Spring 2015). *Contribution of two-year institutions to four-year completions.* NSC Research Center. https://nscresearchcenter.org

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2016, October). *High School Benchmarks- 2016.* NSC Research Center. https://nscresearchcenter.org/hsbenchmarks2016/

Nelson, M. L., Englar-Carlson, M., Tierney, S. C., & Hau, J. M. (2006). Class jumping into academia: Multiple identities for counseling academics. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *53*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.53.1.1

Nielsen, K. (2015). "Fake it 'til you make it": Why community college students' aspirations "hold steady". *Sociology of Education, 88*(4), 265-283. https://doi.org/10.1177/003804071560

Nilep, C. (2006). "Code switching" in sociocultural linguistics. *Colorado Research in Linguistics, 19*, 1-22. https://doi.org/10.25810/hnq4-jv62

Ohio Board of Regents. (2012). *Complete College Ohio: Taskforce Report & Recommendations*. https://www.ohiohighered.org/completion

Ohio Department of Higher Education. (2021, June). *Attainment goal 2025.* OhioHigherEd. www.ohiohighered.org/attainment

O'Neill, S. & Thomson, M.M. (2013). Supporting academic persistence in low-skilled adult learners. *Support for Learning, 28*(4), 162-172. https://doi.org.10.1111/1467-9604.12038

O'Shea, S. (2016). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': First-in-family students, cultural capital and the higher education environment. *Higher Education, 72,* 59-78. https://doi.org.10.1007/s10734-015-9938-y

Ostrove, J.M. (2003). Belonging and wanting: Meanings of social class background for women's constructions of their college experiences. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(4), 771-784. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0022-4537.2003.00089.x

Ostrove, J. M., & Cole, E. R. (2003). Privileging Class: Toward a critical psychology of social class in the context of education. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(4), 677-692. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0022-4537.2003.00084.x

Ostrove, J. M., & Long, S. M. (2007). Social class and belonging: Implications for college adjustment. *The Review of Higher Education*, 30(4), 363–389. http://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2007.0028

Payne, R.; DeVol, P. & Dreussi, T. (2001). Bridges out of poverty: Strategies for professionals and communities. aha!Process, Inc.

Pew Research Center. (2016). *America's shrinking middle class: A close look at changes within metropolitan areas.* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/05/11/americas-shrinking-middle-class-a-close-look-at- changes-within-metropolitan-areas/

Phillippe, K. & Tekle, R. (2017, May). More education =better jobs. *Data Points.* American Association of Community Colleges. https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/DataPointsV5N9.pdf

Reay, D. (2018). Working class educational transitions to university: The limits of success. *European Journal of Education, 0*, 1-13. http://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12298

Redford, J. & Hoyer, K.M. (2017, September). First-generation and continuing-generation college students: A comparison of high school and post-secondary experiences. *Stats in Brief.* U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018009.pdf

Roska, J. & Kinsley, P. (2017). The role of family support in facilitating academic success of low-income students. *Research in Higher Education,0,* 1-24. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9517-z.

Romano, R.M. & Eddy, P. L. (2017). Community colleges and social mobility. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 49*(6), 55-62. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2017.1399041

Rubin, M., Denson, N., Kilpatrick, S., Matthews, K.E., Stehlik, T. & Zyngier, D. (2014). "I am working class": Subjective self-definition as a missing measure of social class and socioeconomic status in higher education research. *Educational Researcher, 43*(4), 196-200. http://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X145283373

Saldana, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Schwartz, J. L., Donovan, J., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (2009). Stories of social class: Self-identified Mexican male college students crack the silence. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(1), 50–66. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0051

Scott, S., Miller, M.T., & Morris, A.A. (2019). Rural community college student perceptions of barriers to college enrollment. *Academic Leadership Journal in Student Research,4,*1-11.

Sennett, R. & Cobb, J. (1972). The hidden injuries of class. W.W. Norton & Co.

Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A. & Bhimdiwali, A. (2017, December). *Completing College: A National View of Student Completion Rates-Fall 2011 Cohort* (Signature Report No. 14).National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. http://hdl.handle.net/10919/84035

Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A. & Hwang, Y. (2016, September). *Time to Degree: A National View of the Time Enrolled and Elapsed for Associate and Bachelor's Degree Earners* (Signature Report No. 11). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Soria, K.M. (2012). Creating a successful transition for working-class first-year students. *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition, 20*(1), 44-55. https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v20i1.2820

Soria, K.M. (2018). Counting class: Assessing social class identity using quantitative measures. *New Directions for Student Services, 162,* 49-61. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20261

Soria, K.M., Stebleton, M.J., & Huesman, R.L. (2013). Class counts: Exploring differences in academic and social integration between working-class and middle/upper-class students at large, public research universities. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 15*(2), 215-242. https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.15.2.e

Stephens, N.M. & Townsend, S.S. (2013). How can incentives improve the success of disadvantaged college students? Insights from the social sciences. (Policy brief). George Washington University.

Stewart, A.J. & Ostrove, J.M. (1993). Social class, social change, and gender: Working-class women at Radcliffe and after. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 17*(4), 475-497. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1993.tb00657.x

Stuart, G.R., Rios-Aguilar, C., & Deil-Amen, R. (2014). "How much economic value does my credential have?": Reformulating Tinto's model to study students' persistence in community college. *Community College Review, 42*(4), 327-341. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552114532519

Swartz, T.T. (2008). Family capital and the invisible transfer of privilege: Intergenerational support and social class in early adulthood. In J.T. Mortimer (Ed.), *Social class and transitions to adulthood. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 119,* 11-24. https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.206

Thelin, J.R. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. John Hopkins University Press.

Thomas, V., & Azmitia, M. (2014). Does class matter? The centrality and meaning of social class identity in emerging adulthood. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, *14*(3), 195–213. http://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2014. 921171

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice, 8*(1), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W

Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, *19*(3), 254-269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020, May). *Learn more, earn more: Education leads to higher wages, lower unemployment.* Career Outlook. www.bls.gov/careeroutlook

U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2021, June). *Overview of Ohio.* Natural Resources Conservation Service. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/oh/about/outreach/nrcs144p2_029664/

U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2020, May). *Rural Education.* www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/ employment-education/rural-education

U.S. Department of Education. (2013, May). *The status of rural education.* National Center for Educational Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/Indicator _tla.asp

U.S. Department of Education. (2021, February). *Federal Pell Grant Program.* U.S. Department of Education. https://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2023, March 27). *Federal TRIO programs-Home page*. U.S. Department of Education. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/ trio/index.html

Wentworth, P. A., & Peterson, B. E. (2001). Crossing the line: Case studies of identity development in first-generation college women. *Journal of Adult Development, 8*(1), 9-21. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026493620218

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 8*(1), 69-91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

Appendix A

Recruitment Email

<Date>

Dear Student,

As a doctoral candidate with the University of Toledo Department of Higher Education, I am seeking current community college students who are at least 18 years old to participate in a research study. Your email was identified as a participant who potentially meets our study criteria in that you have earned 30 credit hours or more, may be of first-generation status, and eligible for the Pell grant.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of rural community college students from low-income backgrounds as they navigate higher education and move between home, school, peer group, and work environments on a daily basis. Our research is most interested in the ways in which students, such as yourselves, successfully manage the integration of new knowledge, skills and behaviors into your self-identity and social relationships.

Participation in this study involves:

• Completion of a brief demographic survey (approximately 5 minutes)
• Participation in a focus group with 5-6 other participants (approximately 90 minutes)
• A light meal of pizza and a $20 gas gift card for participation
• Optional individual follow-up interviews may occur for clarification and further detail (approximately 60 minutes) $10 Amazon card for participation.

For more information about this study, please contact me directly by phone at 419-783-1545 or email at Lori.Robison@rockets.utoledo.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lori Robison
Doctoral Candidate
Higher Education Program
University of Toledo

Study Title: Navigating a Shifting Sense of Self and Relationships: Experiences of Low-Income Rural Community College Students

Study Number: 301227-UT
Approval Date: 03/22/2022

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

NAME: _____
Please PRINT

ZIP CODE OF RESIDENCE_____**AGE:**_____

PREFERRED CONTACT:

EMAIL _____

PHONE_____

TEXT MESSAGE _____

RACE/ETHNICITY: Which of the following best describes you? **CIRCLE all that apply.**

- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Other_____

GENDER: How would you best describe your gender? **CIRCLE**

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Other _____
- Prefer not to answer

EMPLOYMENT STATUS: Which of the following best describes your employment status? **CIRCLE all that apply.**

- Employed full-time, Job Title_____
- Employed part-time, Job Title _____
- Student
- Disabled
- Retired
- Unemployed

HOUSEHOLD INCOME: Which of the following best describes your total annual household income? **Circle one.**

- Under $20,000
- $20,000 to $29,999
- $30,000 to $39,999
- $40,000 to $49,999
- $50,000 or more

HOUSEHOLD: Including yourself, how many people live in your household? _____

What is their relationship to you? (i.e., spouse, partner, roommate, child, parent, grandparent, etc.) **NO NAMES, PLEASE.**

_____Self_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

FIRST-GENERATION STATUS: You are a college student whose parents do not have any post- secondary/college experience.

_____YES

_____NO

Other (explain) _____

ACADEMIC STANDING:

How many college credits have you COMPLETED to date? _____

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS: Would you be willing to be contacted for additional information or clarification about your responses? (Approximately 45-60 minutes)
Circle one.

- No, I prefer not to be contacted
- Yes, I would be willing to discuss my responses or experiences further.

If yes, please circle your preferred interview format(s):

Phone Video Conference In-Person

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Primary Research Question: How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate their experiences of entering higher education and a differing class culture?

RQ 1: How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate a *shifting sense of self* in an among their varied social and academic contexts?

RQ 2: How do rural community college students of low socioeconomic status navigate *shifting interpersonal relationships* in and among their varied social and academic contexts?

RQ 3: How do rural community college student of low socioeconomic status, entering higher education, *integrate and make use of personal and cultural capital* to manage their differing social class environments?

Interview Questions

1. Do you see yourself differently now than prior to attending college? Or, since attending college, in what ways have you changed?

2. Since attending college, have you found yourself thinking about things in new or different ways? Please give an example.

3. Tell me about your relationships with your family. Has anything changed since you have begun attending college? If so, what?

4. What about your relationships with close friends? Has anything changed since you have begun attending college? If so, what?
   Possible follow-up, if applicable: What about your co-workers?

5. Do you see yourself dealing with tensions or conflicts in your relationships with others because you've gone to college?

6. Looking back, is there anything you can think of that would have helped you feel better prepared for college?

7. What has been most challenging? How have you met this challenge?

8. From what personal or internal resources do you draw to help you?

9. From where else do you draw support?

Appendix D

Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions

Primary Research Question:

How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status talk about their experiences of entering into higher education and a differing class culture?

RQ 1 How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status describe a *shifting sense of self* in and among their varied social and academic contexts?	**RQ 2 How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status describe *shifting interpersonal relationships* in and among their varied social and academic contexts?**	**RQ 3 How do rural community college students of low socio-economic status, entering into higher education, integrate and *make use of personal and cultural capital* to manage their differing social class environments?**
Concepts: growth; change; differing attitudes, beliefs, behaviors	*Concepts: changes in relationships with family members, close friends, coworkers; tension points; new relationships*	*Concepts: internal resources; social supports; challenges and responses*
1. Do you see yourself differently now than prior to attending college?	3. Tell me about your relationships with your family. Has anything changed since you have begun attending college?	6. Looking back, is there anything you can think of that would have helped you feel better prepared for college?
1.a. Or, since attending college, in what ways have you changed?	4. What about your relationships with close friends? Has anything changed since you have begun attending college? If so, what? (If applicable, your co-workers?)	7. What has been most challenging? How have you met this challenge?
2. Since attending college, have you found yourself thinking about things in new or different ways? Give an example.	5. Do you see yourself dealing with any tension or conflict in your relationships with others because you've gone to college?	8. From what personal or internal resources do you draw to help you?
		9. From where else do you draw support?

Appendix E

Member Check Email

Dear Research Participant,

I hope this email finds you well. Thank you again for your participation in my research study, *Navigating a Shifting Sense of Self and Relationships: Experiences of Low-Income Rural Community College Students.* I have transcribed the interview and wanted to provide an opportunity for you to review the interview transcript for accuracy and to correct any inaccuracies.

Please note:

1) ***The transcript is verbatim***. That is, it includes "ums" and "uhs" and other fillers often used in conversation. Please ignore them when reading through the transcript. If I select a quote to use as an example in my final research document, I will omit such "fillers" when I include the quote.

2) ***This is not an opportunity to add to or change your response***. I must use the research as it is. However, please ensure the transcription is accurate in capturing what you said at the time of the interview. If you have information you would like to add or clarify, please contact me for a follow-up interview. I may also be reaching out to you for more information as I begin further coding and summarizing the data. However, feel free to comment and make suggestions for corrections, where you see errors.

3) ***You may not download or print copies of the transcript.*** In order to maintain confidentiality and respect the privacy of others, limit access to this document to your eyes only.

4) ***You will have two weeks to make the suggested changes***. After two weeks, your access to the transcript will be revoked. Should you need more time, please email me to request an extension.

I sincerely appreciate your time and support in this endeavor. Do not hesitate to reach out to me with any questions or concerns.

Warm regards,

Lori Robison
Doctoral Candidate
University of Toledo
419-7##-####
Lori.Robison@rockets.utoledo.edu

Appendix F

Copyright Permission