The middle of somewhere:
An exploration of rural women, communities of place, and college-going

by

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DEDICATION

In memory of my dad, Charlie.

While our time together was short, your love and support sustains.

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ABSTRACT

It has been well documented that rural students attend college at a rate lower than urban students as well as below the national average, despite the fact that rural students tend to graduate from high school at a higher rate than students in urban schools. Previous scholarship has attributed this post-secondary educational pattern to individual factors such as student aspirations and attainment as well as cultural and social capital at the familial level. Less attention has been given to the role of community context and the capital present at the community level in shaping rural student's college-going practices and behaviors.

This study utilized life history methodology to explore how two White women from rural areas understood how their home communities shaped their college-going practices and behaviors. Findings suggest that rural women's college-going is heavily influenced by rural community capital and its interaction with larger systems and structures such as gender/patriarchy and urbanormativity. Implications for research recommend further exploration of the roles of natural and built capital in understanding college-going, especially for rural students. Implications for policy focus on the role of dual enrollment programs and broadband internet access in shaping college-going practices and behaviors in rural communities.

CHAPTER ONE
PROBLEM, PURPOSE & SIGNIFICANCE

In this chapter, I provide an introduction to my study. I begin with a summation of my statement of inquiry. I then provide an overview of the purpose of the study and conclude with discussion of the significance of the study.

Statement of Inquiry

Access to higher education in the United States has been restricted and limited to various populations since the creation of the first universities in the mid to late 1600s (Thelin, 2004). Admission policies have historically prohibited people of Color, women, and students from low socioeconomic status from participating in and earning a higher education (Thelin, 2004; Rudolph, 1991). Although these restrictive policies are no longer legal, higher education scholarship has shown that structural challenges still exist that prevent students from equitably accessing higher education because of race/racism, gender/sexism, and socioeconomic status/poverty (Bergerson, 2009) as well as citizenship status (Gildersleeve, 2010; Hernandez, 2013).

Less attention, though, has been given to the role of *place* as a challenge to accessing higher education and the ways in which place informs social systems and identities as they relate to post-secondary educational opportunity. In critically discussing the role of geography, Reynolds (2004) posited:

> While race, class, and gender have long been viewed as the most significant markers of identity, geographic identity is often ignored or taken for granted. However, identities take root from particular sociogeographical intersections, reflecting where a person comes from and, to some extent, directing where she is allowed to go. (p.11)

When scholarship has considered place, specifically in relation to educational inequities, it has typically been within an urban context (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). However, rural students are attending college at a rate lower than urban students as well as below the national average, despite the fact that rural students are graduating from high school at a higher rate than students in urban schools (Flora & Flora, 2013; McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010). The *Status of Education in Rural America* publication (US Department of Education, 2007), unveiled that college enrollment rates for both traditional age (18 to 24 years old) as well as nontraditional age students (age 25 or older) from rural areas were lower than students in urban or suburban areas. Given the fact that rural students are enrolling in higher education at rates lower than urban students as well as the national average, it seems both timely and important to empirically study the relationship between rurality and college access.

Previous scholarship has suggested that a lack of group presence in higher education is typically related to issues of access (Bergerson, 2009). However, some scholars (McDonough et al., 2010) have begun to theorize that, for rural students, the challenges related to enrolling in college do not just lie in access but also in opportunity. In other words, the problem for rural students may not be just about specific barriers preventing them from accessing college but also whether they even consider post-secondary education a possibility. Most research on rural students and college access has focused on students' post-secondary aspirations and attainment and the social and cultural capital of their families; in other words, what students aspire to be and what individual factors help or hinder them in obtaining that goal (Bickel, Banks, & Spatig, 1991; Burnell, 2003; Chenowith & Gallaher, 2004; McCracken & Barcinas, 1999; Rojewski, 1999). Additionally, the literature has focused

primarily on rural students as a singular group, with little attention paid to the experiences of specific populations within rural areas, such as women. When studies have considered gender (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004), the focus has been on gender differences between students in regard to their aspirations rather than on the gendered ways in which rural communities, and subsequently the capital present in those communities, shape post-secondary educational opportunity.

With the emphasis on individual student aspirations and attainment, less attention has been given to the role of rural communities – defined in relation to place – in shaping post-secondary educational opportunity for women. Previous research on K-12 education has suggested that a comprehension of community context could be important to understanding educational success as well as the barriers that prevent some from experiencing educational success (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). Studying post-secondary educational opportunity from a community of place perspective allowed for a multi-faceted examination of the role of location, social systems, and identity in shaping college-going. Simultaneously, it does not discount familial roles and social and cultural capital in navigating post-secondary education. Rather, it includes and expands to explore additional forms of capital relevant to rural communities, such as natural and built capital.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of college-going for women in rural communities. As a higher education scholar, I qualitatively explored via life history methodology the college-going practices of two women who grew up and were educated in rural communities in Iowa. At the time, they were enrolled in four-year public institutions of higher education. College-going, can "be understood as pedagogically produced – a learned

social practice co-constructed by multiple agencies that interact with various social structures" (Gildersleeve, 2010, p. 2).

This study specifically explored community of place, defined by Flora and Flora (2013) to include the following elements: location, social systems, and identity. Community, as a topic of inquiry, can be defined in different ways – most commonly as either a community of place or community of interest (Flora & Flora, 2013). Location serves as a distinguishing factor between these two notions of community in that communities of place revolve around a shared sense of place whereas communities of interest typically do not. For example, some people may belong to a scholarly community related to their area of research. However, members of a scholarly community may not share a common place or location. Rather, they may be dispersed throughout the world but identify as part of the community because of their shared interest in a specific area of inquiry. On the other hand, communities of place are interested in the physical location in addition to social systems and identity.

I chose to study these elements of community and their influence on college-going for rural women through the notion of capital, specifically the Community Capitals Framework (Flora & Flora, 2013). Higher education scholars (Beasley, 2011; Gildersleeve, 2010, Hernandéz, 2013) have drawn on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) work on social, cultural, and economic capital to explore college-going, specifically for marginalized populations. However, when capital is examined within a rural setting, it is important to consider specific forms of capital that address the uniqueness of the community. Although social, cultural, and economic capital are integral components to this study, they alone do not allow for the interrogation of geographical location. The Community Capitals Framework includes capital

that addresses the geographic, environmental, and technological components of an area and how these attributes interact with other forms of capital such as cultural, social, and economic capital.

The Community Capitals Framework (Flora & Flora, 2013) is a sociological framework that was originally created to analyze the sustainability of rural communities. Flora and Flora (2013) proposed seven different types of capital that are integral to rural communities, including social capital, cultural capital, natural capital, human capital, political capital, financial capital and built capital. Although I was not specifically studying sustainability, the comprehensiveness of capital and the centering of rurality in the Community Capitals Framework, lent itself to studying opportunity within rural communities. My use of this framework is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Ultimately, this study explored the following three research questions:

1. How do undergraduate women from rural areas understand the role of their home communities in their college-going practices and behaviors?
2. How does rural community capital inform the college-going practices and behaviors of rural women?
3. How do undergraduate women describe a gendered rurality as it relates to college-going?

I intentionally centered women[1] in my study as a response to the marginalization they have encountered historically and continue to experience today both in society as well as in research. Additionally, although the United States as a whole operates as a patriarchal

[1] For the purpose of this study, I defined women as a socially constructed identity, most often aligned with notions of femininity (hooks, 1984; Johnson, 2005; Tong, 2009). I understand this socially constructed identity to be fluid depending on other identities held by various groups of women.

society, this barrier is often magnified in rural communities where gendered ways of being are typically a part of everyday life (Brown & Schafft, 2011). The findings from this study will enable educators, scholars, and practitioners to understand the role that rural communities play in shaping rural women's college-going.

Significance of Study

Today, twenty percent of elementary and secondary students in the United States live in and are educated in rural communities. Statistics tell us that they are enrolling in higher education at rates lower than the national average as well as those of urban students (Flora & Flora, 2013). Yet, rural students remain in the periphery of educational research. This study sought to intentionally center a population and place that is under researched and underrepresented in higher education. Howley (1997) explained that "too often, researchers overlook what is most particularly rural as a fit object of inquiry in educational research. Instead, objects of national - or perhaps, cosmopolitan - practice absorb their attention and thereby obscure rural issues and dilemmas" (p. 131).

Howley (1997) further argued that improvement in rural education requires a logic quite different from the prevailing logic of school improvement because that logic is rooted in national and cosmopolitan issues that are often different from those faced by rural communities. Howley's argument might also be applied to the way in which we think about college-going for rural students. Currently, the research and conversations around college access are predominantly rooted in national and urban issues. As evidenced in the review of literature presented in Chapter Two, issues experienced in rural communities differ from those in urban areas suggesting that how we consider college-going for rural people and communities may need to be different than the current way of thinking. "What is needed is

thoughtful research that attends to the particularities (and not generalities) of the places of which schools are or ought to be" (Howley, 1997, pg. 132). Rural communities should not be relegated to college access models and frameworks that do not acknowledge the complexity of rurality or the capital that is specific to rural communities. The findings from this study serve to improve post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students by helping those involved and committed to college-going (i.e. educators, practitioners, scholars, and community members) understand how rural location, social systems and identity and the capital present in rural areas shape college-going for students in such communities.

CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter, I provide an overview and synthesis of the literature relevant to this study – namely, scholarship related to rurality, educational participation of women in the United States, and rural students and post-secondary education. I begin by framing the study within the context of women through a brief overview of the historical participation of women in higher education in the US. I argue that women's experiences situated within a patriarchal society illustrate that post-secondary education has presented and continues to present itself differently to women making a strong argument for the continued exploration of women and educational opportunity in the present day.

I then focus on a more detailed review of literature related to higher education and rurality. I begin with a discussion of rural definitions and the process of defining rural, both in an attempt to provide context for this specific study as well as to highlight the oppositional and deficit ways in which rural people and places have been and continue to be defined in the United States. I then synthesize the scholarship around rural students and college-going, focusing primarily on the relationship between rural people and spaces and post-secondary educational opportunities.

Women and Higher Education in the United States

In this section, I provide a broad and brief overview of women's participation in higher education in the United States. This synopsis is not meant to be inclusive of every event but to provide an understanding of how a patriarchal society has shaped women's access to higher education.

It is not possible to write or speak of the college-going practices of any group of women in the United States without acknowledging the fact that almost all women, because of their gender, have been limited and at times legally prohibited from accessing higher education. Documentation of the progression of women's education[2] suggests that these limitations as well as eventual access to certain forms of education were heavily related to the construction of family and women's roles – as daughter, wife, and mother – within that institution. In other words, women's ability to access education has historically been dependent upon who would benefit from women being educated.

For Colonial women, the limitations on formal education were a reflection of a patriarchal society's view of women's subordinate placement; thus, women only acquired knowledge as it pertained to their particular duties as mothers, wives, and caretakers (Solomon, 1986). For example, the religious ethos of early Puritan settlers in New England embodied a strong belief in understanding and adhering to the Biblical scriptures; thus, an emphasis on being able to read was expected of all members of the colony (McClelland, 1992; Solomon, 1985). As a result, women were trained to read (but not write) not only for their own salvation but also to teach children to read Biblical scriptures. This theme continued into the post-Revolutionary War era as White men, and subsequently White women, worked to create an identity different than that of their British counterparts. Women married earlier and subsequently began having children very early in their marriage. It was in such acts as child rearing that access to education continued to become more open for certain women – not for their benefit but rather for their children's benefit, and particularly

[2] The scholarship on the history of women's education in the United States, although not always explicit in stating so, heavily favors the experiences of White women. As a result, much of the literature synthesized in this section is reflective of that population and subsequently the participants in my study.

their sons' benefit. As men became free to take part in public and government affairs, it was seen as the woman's responsibility to prepare her sons for citizenship (Orr, 1930). This last example helps to illustrate that mothering, in many ways, was equated to teaching and the knowledge shared with her children, a form of capital.

Although the formalization of women's education may not have been predicted at the end of the eighteenth century, the first half of the nineteenth century proved to be extremely important to institutionalizing women's education. In addition to social and economic factors, political and religious conditions also contributed to the advancement of women and education. Historians such as Solomon, Woody, and Rudolph posit that the profession of teaching was instrumental to the advancement of women's education, especially in the early 1800s. As the United States moved westward, the race to "Christianize" the new frontier began, which prompted a demand for not only new schools but also new teachers (Solomon, 1985). For religious mission, teaching became embedded within the female sphere. As the number of women attending schools increased, so did the demand for (elementary) school teachers. In some schools, female students also served as teachers. The money earned by these young women was often used for further study at academies (Solomon, 1985).

Although some academies were chartered by colonies and later by states in as early as the late 1700s, the first female academy – the Troy Seminary in Troy, New York – was not founded until 1821. Building on the idea that the republic needed educated mothers, Emma Hart Willard constructed an academic plan that consisted of a liberal arts education curriculum taught exclusively by women. Following suit, Catherine Beecher founded the Hartford Female Seminary in 1828 and Mary Lyon founded the Mount Holyoke Seminary (today known as Mount Holyoke College) in 1836 (Rudolph, 1990; Solomon, 1985).

Rudolph (1990) stated that these three institutions "set precedents for the education of women; the woman's college movement was an extension upward of the female-seminary idea" (p. 310-311). Although academies and seminaries continued to appear in different places, Catherine Beecher posited that these institutions were nothing more than glorified high schools. In response to this, The American Women's Education Association was formed in 1852 for the purpose of creating standards for the women's college movement (Rudolph, 1990).

Attempts to limit the formal education of women did not cease once institutions of higher education began enrolling women. In 1873, Dr. Edward Clarke published a document entitled *Sex in Education.* At this point in time, women made up over 20 percent of the total college population (Solomon, 1985). Dr. Clarke, a retired Harvard Medical School professor, was disturbed by the increasing presence of women in various educational institutions (i.e. normal schools, academies, and colleges). Even more so, he was dismayed with the fact that women were also demanding entrance to university medical and divinity schools which he viewed as masculine professions. Attempting to use scientific proof to dispel the notion that women should be formally educated at the collegiate or professional level, Clarke conducted a study of seven female Vassar students. Clarke concluded that women could study and learn but at the detriment of their female bodies. In other words, women who used up all of their energy on studying would be endangering their "female apparatus." And since women's primary biological function was perceived as that of child bearer, Clarke argued that educating women could have serious repercussions on society. Clarke's idea was eventually disproven. However, his document was widely read and discussed and captured the attention of the general public.

By 1890, there were more girls than boys graduating from high school. Women recognized that high school attendance yielded better jobs, notably in school teaching which led to an expansion in normal schools (Solomon, 1985). Between 1870 and 1910, the number of women within the total college population increased from 21 percent to 39.6 percent. Ten years later in 1920, that number was 47.3 percent (Solomon, 1985). This "explosion" of women into higher education, which many attribute to the passage of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 (Allan, 2011), gained quite a bit of attention, especially by men who felt they were being discriminated against when places in entering classes were given to women instead of men (Solomon, 1985). Although it may have seemed to these men that women were invading college campuses, in actuality they were not. In 1870, when a fifth of college students identified as female, these women only constituted 0.7% of the total female population between the ages of 18 and 22 years old. In other words, less than one percent of the female population in that particular age group was actually going to college (Solomon, 1985).

These traditional aged women were primarily White women among the emerging and expanding middle class – families headed by men who worked professionally as doctors, lawyers, ministers or in business or agriculture. Family, specifically parents, played an important role in formal education for women – particularly that of gatekeeper. Many families felt ambivalently about educating their daughters. There were rarely expectations among this class that women would continue their education beyond what was needed to be a good wife and mother. The White patriarchal society often discouraged White women from seeking higher education because it provided them with an identity that conflicted with their traditional role of mother, wife, and caretaker. Thus, there was fear that an educated woman

might be less desirable as a wife should the opportunity present itself (Solomon, 1985). Yet if a daughter did not marry, an education might assist her in finding work as a single person and more importantly in not placing a financial burden on the family.

Higher education in the 20th century continued to support the traditional role of woman as wife, mother, homemaker, and caregiver through its curriculum. Academic programs such as home economics and family and consumer science suggested that women could participate in higher education as long as that education coincided with their role within the family (Fink, 1985). This was especially true for women from rural, farming communities. Rural holism at the turn of the 20th century saw the home as part of the farm and women as part of the social organization of rural life (Zimmerman & Larson, 2010). Around the same time came the formalization of home economics as a discipline with the creation of the American Home Economics Association followed by the publication of the first professional journal the following year. Home economics was a way to professionalize women's work and women's roles on farms within a patriarchal society where men were viewed as agricultural specialists and women were perceived as contributors to farm life.

The 1970s saw the creation of the first Women Studies programs and Women's Centers on college campuses suggesting that a different woman was now present in higher education (Council, 2008). Although these programs and centers and the women serve as a counter story to the traditional narratives discussed in this literature review, Women Studies programs and centers continue to remain marginalized within the academy – often underfunded and understaffed.

Most recently, a new narrative has emerged – one that states that women are now enrolling in higher education at higher rates than men. Since the mid-1980s, women in the

United States have enrolled in higher education in larger percentages than their male counterparts. This quantification of gender has been used to suggest parity among men and women in higher education. What these numbers do not illustrate is the pervasive stratification between men and women in regard to academic majors, type of institution, and enrollment status. Women continue to be concentrated in specific majors, such as teaching, nursing, and other helping professions while enrolling part-time at institutions close to home (Allan, 2011; King, 2010; Sax, 2008). Furthermore, this notion of parity is based upon women as a homogenous group and therefore does not consider the differences that exist between White women and Women of Color in regard to post-secondary education. So, although statistics have led us to believe that women and men are now “equal” in regard to access to higher education, the history of women situated within a patriarchal society suggests that post-secondary education has presented and continues to present itself differently to women, making a strong argument for the continued exploration of women and educational opportunity in the present day.

Defining Rural

While the previous section provided an understanding of gender within higher education, this section serves to provide a context for rural. Defining rurality is often one of the greatest challenges for scholars studying this subject area as the current literature not only lacks a common definition but is also narrowly focused in the way it defines rural. In reviewing scholarship around rurality, the most commonly used definitions of rural tend to be quantitative in nature, framed in opposition to urban spaces, and/or characterized in a deficit manner. Understanding how rural people and places are defined provides insight into rural identity.

Quantitative Definitions

Historically, definitions of rural have been crafted by governmental agencies as a way to count people and space, resulting in an almost purely quantitative idea of rural in the United States. This trend continues today as current definitions focus on population density and/or land size instead of highlighting the characteristics that make a community/place rural (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). The most commonly used definitions of rural are those crafted and adopted by organizations such as the US Census Bureau, the US Department of Agriculture, the White House's Office of Management and Budget, and the National Center for Educational Statistics. These definitions suggest a place is rural if it has a certain number of people residing in the area and/or if it is a specific number of miles from an urbanized area. For example, the US Census Bureau stated on their website (http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/pdfs/GARM/Ch12GARM.pdf, Retrieved 3/9/14) that a place can be identified as rural only if it has fewer than 2,500 people residing in the area. A town or community that has more than 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000 people is considered an urban place, not to be confused with an urban area which has more than 50,000 people residing in such a space.

Flora and Flora (2013) discussed the problem of researchers utilizing government definitions for the purpose of guiding empirical research related to rurality.

> Giving a place a particular characteristic, thus "naming" it, suggests how people and institutions act toward it. When governments establish labels for places, they are generally for administrative purposes, to determine which places are eligible for specific government programs. When scholars establish labels, it is generally for

> analytical purposes, but because governments collect data, scholars often fall back on government labels. (p. 4)

In other words, researchers have relied on and utilized definitions that were never intended for scholarly purposes.

This is not to say that government definitions are useless, as they provide one way to think about rural. However, this one dimensional portrayal of rurality can be harmful to places and communities as the numerical parameters often dictate which rural areas receive specific services (Flora & Flora, 2013). By using definitions that are almost completely reliant on quantifiable characteristics, places that are very similar in their location, social systems, and identity may actually be defined differently simply because one rural area has 2,450 people while the other has 2,510 residents. As suggested by Khattri, Riley, and Kane (1997), in order to understand the complexity of rurality, definitions of rural should include qualitative characteristics that capture the essence of rural spaces, people, and communities. Unfortunately, as discussed in the next section, even when definitions have attempted to qualify rural, they tend to center urban characteristics and as a result, focus on what does not constitute as rural. In other words, instead of defining what rural is, these definitions focus on what rural is not.

Non-urban Definitions

In addition to a reliance on numbers in defining rural places, definitions of rural also tend to be framed in opposition to urban and suburban spaces (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007). In other words, instead of qualifying what rural is, definitions have focused on what rural is not. For example, in defining urban and rural for the purpose of demographics, the U.S. Census in both 2000 (Donehower et al., 2007) and 2010 intricately qualified what

constituted an urban area, outlining the numerical requirements as well as describing the different types of urban areas. The definition for rural places began by stating that rural places are "territory, population, and housing units that the Census Bureau does not classify as urban" (http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/pdfs/GARM/Ch12GARM.pdf, Retrieved 3/9/14).

There are many problems with defining rural in opposition to or in exclusion of urban. One of the main problems is that it creates a rural-urban binary that ultimately privileges urban spaces. By situating the definition of rural as anything that is *not* urban, rural is moved to the margins while urban is centered and privileged as the normative space. Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), critical feminist theory (Tong, 2009) and most recently, critical rural theory, all speak to the harm of binaries – blackness defined in opposition to whiteness (CRT), feminine defined in reference to masculine (femcrit), and rural defined in opposition to urban (ruralcrit). Collectively, these critical theories posit that by defining a marginalized population primarily in reference to the dominant group, that (dominant) group continues to be privileged which serves to (re)produce and maintain power for the dominant group within that binary.

Critical rural theory suggests that one way we see this binary actualized is through the narrative around dependency (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson & Smith, 2011). A typical spatial narrative states that rural areas are dependent upon urban areas for such things as manufactured goods and access to various forms of capital. In reality, many rural areas are sites of resource production which are extracted and marketed for urban products (Thomas et al., 2011). In other words, urban areas are just as dependent upon rural areas as rural areas

are on urban areas. However, because of our urban-centric society, the dependency narrative continues to be framed as an urban-rural relationship rather than a rural-urban relationship.

It is also important to remember that the United States has not always been an urban-centric society. During the 1800s, the majority of people in the United States lived on farms or in small cities (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). However, an emphasis on industrialization shifted work and people to metropolitan areas, and by the time the Great Depression arrived, a large percentage of the US population had moved to more urban areas (Thomas et al., 2011). With this shift came an emphasis on urban problems. Thomas et al., (2011) posit that "rural areas and the people who inhabit them are frequently marginalized within a predominantly urban society" (p. 2). These critical rural scholars further argue "that this basic fact is rooted in the very structure of our urban society and that this structure is experienced both in the physical space that we construct and in the culture that we learn and reproduce" (p. 2).

A second problem with defining rural in opposition to urban is that it produces a monolithic idea of rural. By not defining the complexities associated with rural, an assumed universal definition of rural is instead presented. For example, in the United States, rural is often defined or perceived as agrarian. However, Flora and Flora (2013) explain that "family farms and small farming communities dominate popular images of rural areas in part because politicians, lobbyists, and the media cultivate those icons, supporting the myths that agricultural policy is rural policy" (p. 3). Additionally, a monolithic notion of rural erases the complex histories of rural people, places, and communities. Donehower, Hogg, and Shell (2007) argued that the traditions of many racial and ethnic groups are rooted in rural communities. Although, rural America is often thought of as largely white, racial diversity

does exist in rural areas and is historically tied to specific regions of the United States, primarily due to migration patterns[3].

Deficit Definitions

In thinking broadly of discourse to include not only academic texts but also popular discourse such as magazines and newspapers as well as visual representations on television and in motion pictures, the dominant literacies related to rural perpetuate an idea of deficiency. Illiterate, unintelligent, and lack of culture are just a few of the ideas often associated with rural communities and people. Donehower (2007), a rhetoric scholar who focuses on rural literacies, explained that the dominant rural literacies perpetuated by both academics as well as popular media suggests that "rural people lack literate skills and value education less than their urban and suburban counterparts do" (p. 28). This narrative is often told and retold in education scholarship as researchers share findings about lower educational aspirations, achievement and attainment of rural youth (Burnell, 2003; Rojewski, 1999). These findings are explored in further detail later in this chapter.

The problem with such research is not only does deficiency become the master narrative, but people, places and communities are subsequently labeled as deficient. Little attention is given to structures and systems that have created environments in which rural people, places, and communities attempt to exist in an urban-centric society. In a recent book chapter on rural college access, McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) explained the problems associated with utilizing a deficit framework in relation to rural people and places. They draw on the work of several Latino scholars who have challenged deficit

[3] I am not insinuating that the migration patterns of racially minoritized populations were of their own free will. However, it is important to acknowledge the existence of racial diversity as well as the historical complexities of rural America in order to move away from a homogenous idea of "rural."

ideology in relation to cultural groups, pointing out that “deficit orientations ignore larger systemic conditions that perpetuate inequality” (McDonough et al., 2010, p. 193). They expanded this argument by explaining that much of the problem lies in capital. Underrepresentation of college students from rural areas is often attributed to the depressed economies present in these communities. While McDonough et al., (2010) acknowledged that some of these communities are economically marginalized, they argued that it is inequitable to expect these communities to possess a certain kind of capital simply because that is the capital valued by higher education.

Complex Definitions

As discussed, three of the most common and dominant ways to define rural are 1) quantitatively; 2) in opposition to urban and 3) from a deficit standpoint. Conversely, other scholars have suggested that if one is going to study rurality, a more complex and multi-faceted definition must be employed. For example, in their book, *Rural Literacies,* Donehower, Hogg, and Shell (2007) defined rural in three ways: quantitatively, geographically, and culturally. They support the use of the US Census Bureau’s definition of rural but suggest that it not be used in isolation. Rather, they propose that definitions of rural also include geographic attributes such as US region, landscape, and space. They also maintain the importance of defining rural within a cultural context. They suggest that rural, as a cultural term, involves the interaction of people in groups and communities. Flora and Flora (2013) speak similarly of this interaction but instead refer to it as *locality.*

Rural scholars, Brown and Schafft (2011), also posit that rurality is a multidimensional concept and entails a combination of social, demographic, economic, and/or cultural aspects. However, they take a broader approach to their definition. Instead of

subscribing to specific numeric parameters, they produced a more qualitative definition positing that rural places are natural environments, typically small and not very dense in population and geographically situated away from urban. They also give credence to the economic and institutional characteristics of rural places, explaining that economic activities in rural areas are typically focused around a specific industry. Institutionally, rural areas may be limited in their access to religious denominations, clubs, associations, and service organizations. Socio-culturally, rural communities have been characterized by their close personal relationships and their conservative voting patterns. However, Brown and Schafft (2011) posit that "many of the popular socio-cultural attributes that comprise popular images of rurality have now diminished if they ever existed" (p. 7). For example, rural areas have typically been characterized as White homogenous communities. However, recent (im)migration of People of Color to the United States has diversified many rural communities calling for a contextualization of community that considers race and ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation instead of assuming that dominant identities reside.

Rural Students and Post-Secondary Educational Opportunity

Rural people and places have remained in the periphery of scholarly inquiry in education studies in the United States. Topper Sherwood (2000) explained that "time and again, rural areas have been declared the orphaned 'stepchild' of the national education research program, which has largely failed to adequately identify and address conditions specific to them" (p. 159). Of the educational research that does focus on rurality, the majority has been situated within the K-12 system and not within higher education. In fact, a review of the previous 11 years (2003 to current date) of *The Journal of College Student Development*, a top tier journal in higher education and student affairs, revealed only one

published article that focused specifically on rural students and higher education (Bryan & Simmson, 2009). Consequently, much of the literature reviewed for this study came from outside of higher education, including K-12 education, geography, and sociology. Although it can be argued that these disciplines add depth by providing a more interdisciplinary understanding of educational opportunity and college-going, it is also a call to higher education, as a field of study, to contribute to this inquiry. In other words, rather than be the object of inquiry in other disciplines, higher education scholars need to participate and critically lead the study of rural students and college-going.

My own journey to studying rural students has been one of shame, resistance, and reconciliation. I grew up in Martin, Tennessee – a town of roughly 10,000 people in a small house on the very edge of "town," geographically isolated from metropolitan areas, interstates, and masses of people. I fled to the "city" as quickly as I could just days after my 18th birthday– in this case, Memphis, Tennessee. Four years later, I moved to another city – Nashville, Tennessee – and then a couple of years later, I moved to "The City," also known as New York. When asked the question, "Where are you from?" I never hesitated to tell people that I was born and raised in a small town called Martin, located in the northwest corner of Tennessee. However, I always led with that response and then focused more on my experiences in the various urban environments in which I lived. The truth was I was ashamed of my rural background. Not only was I from a rural area, but I was from the rural South. I knew the discourse surrounding the rural South, and regardless of whether it was representative of who I was or of my experiences, I felt I had to center my urban experiences in order to legitimize who I was as a person and as an academic.

As I engage in studying rurality within higher education, I have reviewed literature related to rural students and post-secondary education. The literature related to rural students and post-secondary opportunity tends to be organized around two primary ideas: 1) the educational and vocational *aspirations* and *attainment* of rural students beyond high school and 2) the contextual factors/capital that either helped students succeed or prevented them from attaining their goals. As revealed in the review, much of this literature has focused on rural students as a monolithic group, revealing very little about the specific experiences of rural women.

Aspirations, Attainment, and College-Going

Much of the research on rural students and post-secondary life has focused on either students' aspirations – what they hope to achieve – beyond high school or what students are able to attain or are predicted to attain after graduating from high school. For example, Chenoweth and Gallaher (2004) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to quantitatively study direct and indirect influences on the academic aspirations of rural Appalachian youth. Burnell (2003) also studied rural students' post-high school aspirations, employing a qualitative approach to understand how students who were college-able made the decision to go directly to work instead of pursuing some form of higher education.

Although these studies provide important findings, they are limiting in their understanding of how opportunities for post-secondary education operate and present themselves within rural communities. Research that explores aspirations provides insight into what rural students want to achieve and/or think they are able to achieve once they finish high school. What these studies do not tend to focus on is how these aspirations are formed. In other words, there is a lack of attention to the structures that shape and inform students'

college-going. For example, Burnell's (2003) article suggested that students who choose to go to work rather than pursue a higher education should not be viewed as deficient, or less than, because of their choice. Although an important conclusion, her study does not address how the various parts of a rural community such as geographic location or schools or even a rural identity may inform how rural students conceive and construct post-secondary aspirations.

Similar to the ways in which rural has been defined in opposition to urban, some educational research has studied rural student aspirations in opposition to urban student aspirations (McCracken & Barcinas, 1999; Rojewski, 1999). In other words, instead of focusing specifically on rurality, scholars explored differences between rural and urban people and places. Both McCracken and Barcinas' (1999) study on the differences between urban and rural students, schools, and aspirations in Ohio and Rojewski's (1999) quantitative study exploring work-bound and college bound rural and non-rural students using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, 1988-1994 included urban people and places. The challenge with comparing two groups is that one group becomes the default "normal" group. Given our urban-centric society, these studies often position urban as normal or real and rural as abnormal or unreal. Critical rural scholars, Taylor, Lowe, Fulkerson, and Smith (2011), refer to this as urbanormativity. This idea is central to my conceptual framework and is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Another way the current scholarship constructs and reinforces a destructive binary is through the structuring of post-secondary education rural student outcomes. Studies that focus on the aspirations and attainment of rural students are crafted in such a way that uncritically suggest there are only two options for rural students after high school – continue

to go to school or go to work, typically placing more emphasis on the latter (Burnell, 2003). For example, Rojewski's (1999)'s study, referenced above, found that rural youth were more likely to be work-bound and that work-bound youth also reported greater involvement in vocational education. What studies such as this do not critically discuss are the ways in which rural youth are often tracked into vocational or collegiate education at the beginning of their secondary education, if not before. So, although there is truth in finding a relationship between work-bound rural youth and vocational secondary education, these studies only minimally acknowledge educational systems that 1) force rural students, many who may be the first in their families to attend college, to make decisions about their future aspirations at an early time in their life and/or 2) place students into a specific track of studies based on attributes such as perceived ability, familial college-going culture, and socioeconomic status.

Rurality, Community, and Capital

As evidenced in the previous section, much of the scholarship on rural students and higher education focuses on individuals' aspirations and attainment beyond high school. Little attention is given to the relationship between the rural context and the capital relevant to rural people and communities. Considering the current state of college-going for rural students, it may be time to shift the way we study rural students, communities, and post-secondary education. Instead of focusing mostly on individual aspirations and attainment of individual students, we need to also study the ways in which specific elements relevant to rurality shape college-going for rural students. Howley (1997) argued that improvement in rural education requires a logic quite different from the prevailing logic of school improvement because that logic is rooted in national and cosmopolitan issues that are often different from those faced by rural communities. That argument might also be applied to the

way in which we think about college-going for rural students. The current research and conversations around college access appear to be rooted in national and urban issues (Ahn, 2010; Jun, 2001; Richardson, Jr. & Bender, 1987; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). As evidenced by previous literature (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Rojewski, 1999), issues experienced in rural communities differ from those in other geographical areas, suggesting that how we consider college access for rural people and communities may need to be different than the current way of thinking. "What is needed is thoughtful research that attends to the particularities (and not generalities) of the places of which schools are or ought to be" (Howley, 1997, pg. 132). Rural communities should not be relegated to college access models and frameworks that do not acknowledge the complexity of rurality or the capital that is specific to rural communities.

One way to understand post-secondary education opportunity for rural students is through the notion of community of place. Community, as a topic of inquiry, can be defined in different ways – most commonly as either a community of place or community of interest (Flora and Flora, 2013). Location serves as a distinguishing factor between these two notions of community in that communities of place revolve around a shared sense of place whereas communities of interest typically do not. The following subsections explore the relationship between these three components of community and post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students.

Location. Geographical locations of colleges and universities in proximity to rural communities can greatly affect post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. With more colleges and universities located in (sub)urban areas, the physical ways in which college manifests itself via large buildings, campus signs, athletic facilities, and students

walking to and from class are often absent from rural peoples' everyday lived experiences (Burnell, 2003). In other words, rural students do not typically grow up seeing and experiencing college in their own towns (Wright, 2002). College is something that happens elsewhere, possibly in a place they have never visited.

This introduces a real challenge faced by rural students, one that requires them to consider leaving their community to pursue further education (Wright, 2012). The idea of students "going away" to attend college is a dominant idea that has permeated higher education discourse. Historically, traditional-aged college men in the United States left their family homes to board and attend college in a different location (Rudolph, 1991). As both the geographic and educational patterns in the U.S. have morphed, placing more people and higher education institutions in (sub)urban areas, the idea of attending college has also changed from "going away" to college to "going" to college. The number of students who actually "go away" to college represents a small portion of the total number of students enrolled in post-secondary education (Sax, 2008). However, the geographical challenges placed on rural students suggest this population's only choice may be to go away if they want to pursue a bachelor's degree.

For example, in Iowa, a state with a large rural population, there are only three four-year public institutions - one is located in central Iowa and the other two located in eastern Iowa. If a student from Sioux City, which is located in the northwest corner of the state, wanted to attend a *public* four-year institution in Iowa then that student would have no choice but to physically "go away" in order to pursue a bachelor's degree. Subsequently, the state of Iowa also has an intricate community college system that consists of 15 post-secondary institutions

(http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=241&catid=183&Itemid=1433; Retrieved 6/4/11). Many of the institutions have satellite campuses in addition to their primary campus, making geographical access to a community college much easier than a four-year institution. However, infrastructures play an important role in determining post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. Even if a campus is only 20 miles from a student's home, that student still has to secure transportation to the institution, which in a state without any light rail system would mean by car, which becomes an additional expense inclusive of purchase/payment, gas, maintenance, registration, and insurance. McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) use a similar example regarding rural college students and transportation to explain how competing costs (in this case, transportation) can affect whether a community college student perceives that they can afford to transfer to a four-year institution. So, although some may argue that geographic access to community colleges in rural areas might be easier than four year institutions, these arguments do not address the additional inequity related to college-going such as the stratification that exists between an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree, specifically in regard to economic and social capital (McDonough et al., 2010).

Entangled in this relationship between location and post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students is a connection to place. People from rural areas often feel a connection to the people and the physical environment of their community (Wright, 2012). In her book *The Gender Gap in College,* Linda Sax (2008) found that proximity to family is especially important for women in choosing a college. She also found that women are more likely to select a particular college to live near home. However, this finding suggests that all women have a college or university in proximity to their home. It also explains why many

women attend institutions that will allow them to go part-time, such as community colleges (Buchmann, 2009).

For some, leaving home to pursue a higher education may not mean leaving home for a few years but rather permanently. In Fink's (1986) ethnography entitled *Open Country, Iowa*, she discovered that most women in the rural Iowa community who left for college, never returned, primarily because they could not find work that was representative of their formal education. Christine Wright (2012) qualitatively explored how a commitment to place can shape rural students' decisions around post-secondary education. She found that although some students do associate advanced education with rural outmigration, or leaving their communities, others viewed higher education as a way to improve the quality of life for both their families and their communities. In other words, although some rural college students concluded they would need to seek or wanted to seek employment outside of their community after completing their degree, others intended to return and use their degree for the betterment of their communities. Additionally, in their study titled "Rural Young Voices Project," D'Amico, Matthes, Sankar, Merchant, and Zurita (1996) found that rural students felt ambivalent about their experiences in rural communities. At the same time that they expressed a desire to move elsewhere, they also took joy and value from living in a rural place. Collectively, these findings are important for multiple reasons. First, they challenge the dominant narrative that implies all rural students wish to leave their communities and ultimately do leave their communities. Second, these findings highlight a real tension for some rural students in considering post-secondary educational opportunity – the control that geographic location has on if and where they might pursue an advanced degree as well as future relationships with and in their communities.

Social Systems. In addition to location, social systems are also an important component of rural communities (Flora & Flora, 2013) and can assist with an understanding of post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. Although social systems can be compromised of family, friends, school, jobs and co-workers, civic/social organizations, and/or religious institutions, for the purpose of the dissertation, I am focused primarily on K-12 education as a form of capital that greatly influences college-going for rural students.

Individual college opportunity is predicated on K-12 institutional opportunity, which in part is defined by the quality of the curriculum, preparation of teachers, and availability and quality of high school counseling (Gandara & Bial, 2001; McDonough, 2004). Yet, one of the biggest challenges faced by rural schools is a lack of resources, more specifically teachers, counselors, and curriculum. However, this perception of deficient resources is due in part to an imposed model of urban schooling in rural areas (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). In other words, expectations of how schools operate, including staffing and curriculum, are often driven by urban education theories and policies. This is not to say that some rural schools are indeed underserved. However, as I indicated previously, improvement in rural education requires a logic quite different from the prevailing logic of school improvement because that logic is rooted in national and cosmopolitan issues that are often different from those faced by rural communities (Howley, 1997).

One example of the tension between resources and urbanormative policies is found in the American School Counselor Association's (2003) attempt to develop a comprehensive set of school counseling guidelines. These guidelines were based on research that suggested that "fully integrated, implemented, and functioning school counseling programs may help to enhance student performance and preparation for the future" (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self,

Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006, p. 248). Yet research has also shown that rural schools often do not have the resources, specifically human capital, necessary to create a fully integrated school counseling program as defined by the ASCA. This is primarily due to the fact that rural school counselors are often asked to take on other roles within the schools, including clerical and disciplinary responsibilities (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001). Contradictory to rural school realities, recent studies and policy reports focused on educational reform have suggested that an increase in the number of counselors as well as the amount of time devoted to college counseling is a top priority for improving college access (Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2002; Gandara and Bial, 2001; McDonough, 2004). For rural schools that are already doing a lot with very little, policy suggestions such as this are systemically incongruent.

Teacher preparation has also been shown to be integral in shaping post-secondary educational opportunity. Yet, the American Association of School Administrators has stated that a central problem for rural school districts is recruiting and retaining *quality* teachers (US Department of Education, 1999). Many rural school districts are plagued with teacher shortages resulting in school districts recruiting teachers who are often unfamiliar with rurality, both geographically and socioculturally. Once they arrive, these teachers are often asked to assume a variety of responsibilities - be certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, teach to a wide range of abilities in the classroom, supervise extracurricular activities, and be able to adjust to the community. In other words, they are asked to be many things to many different people. These requests often prove to be challenging for teachers who are recruited to rural areas and can lead to attrition rather than retention.

Teacher shortages in rural areas have also led to recruitment of those who are simply unprepared to teach. Poor, rural districts are popular placements for programs like Teach for America that task college-educated individuals, who typically lack education degrees, with facilitating the teaching and learning of rural students. Armed with a few months of training and no solid theoretical or methodological understanding of education, these individuals often lack the quality preparation necessary to adequately shape post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, Heilig, 2005). Additionally, the void they fill in rural communities is only temporary, as these individuals typically leave the communities after they have fulfilled their two-year commitment.

In addition to school counseling and teacher preparation, curriculum has also been identified as an important part of K-12 educational opportunity which as previously stated is strongly connected to post-secondary educational opportunity. The availability of courses and the actual courses a student takes during their secondary education are both strong predictors of college enrollment (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Pelavin & Kane, 1990). Yet academic resources, specifically courses, are often marginalized in rural areas (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995; Hall & Barker, 1995). Advanced placement and college prep courses are not offered in abundance and sometimes not at all while a larger emphasis may be placed on vocational courses (Greenberg, 1995).

Rural Identity. The construction of rural identity is intimately tied to the ways in which the dominant culture has defined rural people and places. As discussed in an earlier section, rural people and places are commonly defined in reference to urban people and places with urban deemed as normal and rural as abnormal and deficient. As a result, rural people are the recipients of messages that suggest "if they want the best of anything they must go the city to

find it" (Theobald & Woods, 2010, p. 17-18) which they internalize as part of their identity. In other words, their communities are void of anything educated, cultured, or sophisticated. Theobald and Wood explained that this internalized oppression is similar to the kind of identity issues faced by People of Color, women, religion groups, and other marginalized populations. Conversely, some rural people also hold privileged identities at the same time they experience oppression via their rural identity. However, Theobald and Wood argue that despite the privilege held due to dominant class, race or gender, "rural dwellers are nevertheless recipients of the messages from the dominant culture regarding what it means to be rural" (p. 18) – primarily that they are uneducated and unsophisticated and outsiders to the college-going community.

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological perspectives that informed this study. I begin by sharing my own relationship the study. I then explain how a feminist epistemology along with my conceptual framework – college-going, Community Capitals Framework, and critical rural theory – collectively informed my use of life history as a methodology to understand how rural women came to know college-going, both conceptually and in practice.

Researcher's Decision to Study Rural

My decision to study rural students was intimately tied to my own experiences of growing up in a rural community, fleeing to urban spaces, and then returning to an area where places are more natural and populations less dense; where rurality seems to be hiding behind every corner, even if those corners are twenty miles apart.

Yet, my decision was also fraught with resistance. I recalled working on my applications to various doctoral programs and sitting down the first time to work on my personal statement. My research interests were still broadly defined at that point but primarily focused on college student access and academic success. However, I was reminded of a moment when I considered stating that I was interested in rural student access/success. I did not know much about rurality as a research topic, but I did know that having grown up in Martin, Tennessee and then living in Memphis, Nashville, and metro New York, my rural experiences were substantially different from my urban experiences.

As quickly as that thought entered my mind, I pushed it aside. My professional experience had been within an urban environment, and my intention was to return to metro New York after finishing my doctoral degree. Additionally, many of the graduate programs

that I had applied to to were in urban places. "No urban institution of higher education will accept someone who wants to study rural students," I thought to myself. This was followed by, "you'll never get a job in a city if you study rural students." So, I left out the part about studying rural students and focused on my experiences working with sub(urban) New Yorkers.

Yet, after all that – denying my own rural identity and scholarly interest in rural students – I actually did not end up in a city. I found myself moving to a place that was six times larger than my hometown but also vaguely familiar with vast amounts of cropland, highways that stretched for miles, and people that racially looked like me. Most of my classmates were Students of Color from urban cities, and while they struggled to navigate an environment that was vastly different from the urban places they had lived, I found myself struggling to connect with them. We were not just racially different, but our lived experiences – racialized, gendered, and classed – were shaped by our place-based contexts.

This became most apparent to me at the end of my second year of studies when my advanced qualitative methodology class was assigned an article by Elizabeth St. Pierre (1999) called *The work of response in ethnography.* In this article, St. Pierre described her experience of returning to her small home town after 20 years to study the environment that she had resisted for so long. I remember reading this article and feeling connected to the scholarship in a way that I had not previously experienced and, at the same time, observing my classmates react oppositely. After almost 20 consecutive months of classes, this was the first piece of scholarship I had read that centered the experiences of both researcher and participants from a rural setting.

As a White person, I was expected to see myself in most of the mainstream scholarship. And as a White woman, the critical discourse posited that all mainstream feminist scholarship reflected my experiences. However, the reality is that my experiences were only partially reflected because I am not just a White woman. I am a White woman whose experiences are grounded in a rural environment, something that is not often written about outside of rural studies and rarely in higher education (Pini, Brandth, & Little, 2014).

It was that experience, coupled with my own experiences in rural and sub(urban) spaces that led me to consider studying rurality. It is also those collective experiences coupled with my course work in higher education, social justice, and women's studies that shaped the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological frameworks informing this study.

Epistemology: Feminist

This study is informed broadly by constructionism (Crottey, 1998) and more specifically by feminist epistemology (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Duran, 1991; Nelson, 1993). Feminist epistemology is concerned with the ways in which gender influences our conceptions of knowledge (Koertge, 2012). Situated in postmodernism, feminist epistemology posits that women come to know what they know in various ways. In acknowledging the multiplicity of womanhood and resisting the essentialism of womanhood, feminist scholars do not subscribe to one single referent of feminist epistemology (Alcoff & Potter, 1993). Yet, there are tenets that are more common to feminist epistemology. Those tenets, in addition to others, informed the way knowledge is situated and constructed in this study.

First, feminist epistemology posits that knowledge cannot be divorced from context or the conditions in which is it produced (Duran, 1991). Given that the United States is a gendered, place-based society, feminist epistemology suggests that we must, in turn, consider the ways that gender and place shape knowledge. Alcott and Potter (1993) posited that when researchers make claims that experience is gender-specific, they are essentially implying that gender is a constitutive element of experience. In other words, feminist epistemology suggests that gender is a significant aspect of experience and one to be studied.

This connects to a second tenet which suggests that while knowledge has and continues to be gendered, women's experiences have not always been centered in scholarship. In chronicling the history of feminist epistemology, Alcoff and Potter (1993) recall that

> The history of feminist epistemology itself is the history of the clash between the feminist commitment to the struggles of women to have their understandings of the world legitimated and the commitment of traditional philosophy to various accounts of knowledge – positivist, postpositivist, and others – that have consistently undermined women's claims to know. (p. 8)

As a result, feminist epistemology calls for the centering of women's experiences in scholarship as well as the interrogation of gender as it intersects with other identities. For this study, that also includes rural identity. Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2011) stated that "if feminism is to liberate women, it must address all forms of domination (i.e. intersectionality)" (p. 4).

Third, feminist epistemology acknowledges the relationship between power and knowledge. Within research, power is not just a topic to be studied but is intricately

connected to the research design. Feminist epistemology posits that power is part of knowledge production and is always present between the researcher and the participants. Researchers who ground their studies in feminist epistemology may try to mitigate power dynamics between themselves and participants via the methodology used and methods employed, but ultimately they must acknowledge the way in which power can and does shape knowledge.

The fourth tenet – epistemological communities – is not specific to all scholarship assuming a feminist epistemology but is relevant to this specific study. In the edited book *Feminist Epistemologies*, Nelson (1993) called attention to epistemological communities. Her position on feminist epistemologies is that knowledge creation is not done in isolation. Rather, she suggested that communities construct and acquire knowledge and subsequently are "the primary generators, repositories, holders and acquires of knowledge" (p. 124). Given the centrality of community to this study, this tenet is specifically useful to understanding my conceptual framework and the notion that knowledge can be communally constructed, not just individually constructed.

Conceptual Framework: College-Going, Community Capital and Critical Rural Theory

This study utilized three theoretical ideas/frameworks - college-going (Gildersleeve, 2010), community capital (Flora & Flora, 2013), and critical rural theory (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith 2011) – to explore how rural women understand how their home communities shape their practices and behaviors related to higher education. The overarching idea of college-going served as the foundational basis for the theoretical underpinnings of this study. Gildersleeve stated that college-going can "be understood as pedagogically produced – a learned social practice co-constructed by multiple agencies that

interact with various social structures" (p. 2). Thus, this study was designed with the understanding that college-going involves a process of learning about post-secondary education, both in terms of opportunity as well as the behaviors and practices necessary to enter into and engage with institutions of higher learning. Central to this social practice, as defined by Gildersleeve, is the interaction between multiple agencies and social structures. For the context of this study, multiple agencies were operationalized as community capital and social structures as urbanormativity, a central tenet of critical rural theory. These theories/frameworks are described in detail below. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the conceptual framework.

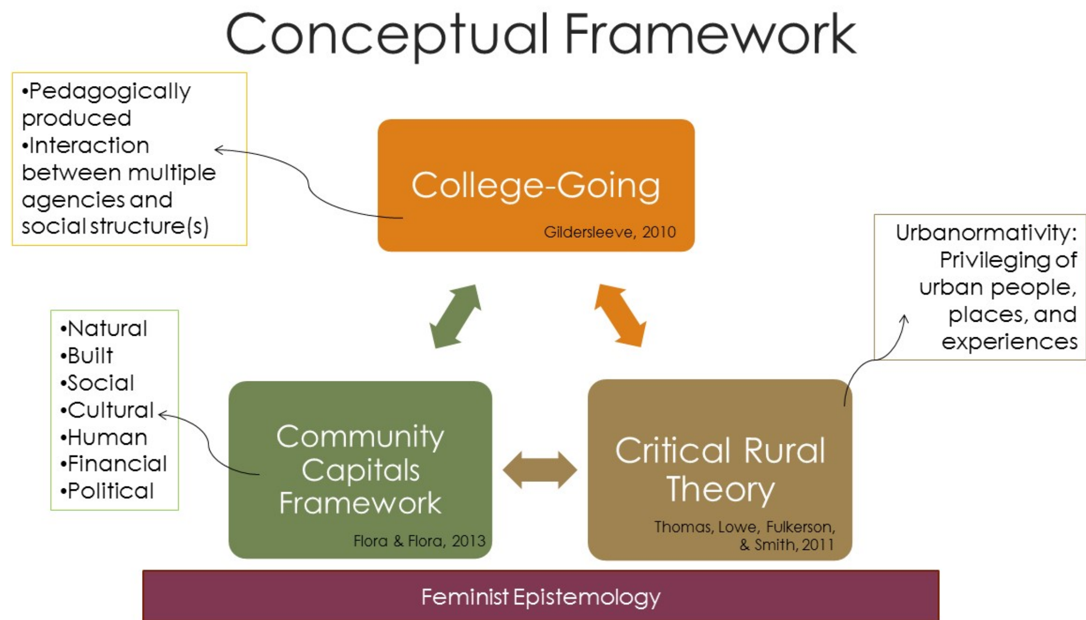

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: College-Going, Community Capitals and Critical Rural Theory

Community Capitals Framework

One way to define "opportunity" within the context of college-going is via "capital." Previous higher education scholars (Beasley, 2011; Gildersleeve, 2010) have drawn on Pierre

Bourdieu's (1986) work on social, cultural, and economic capital to explore college-going, specifically for marginalized populations. Although these three forms of capital are integral components to this study, they alone do not allow for the interrogation of geographical location or rurality.

Given the essence of rurality to this study, I utilized the Community Capitals Framework (Flora and Flora, 2008) to operationalize Gildersleeve's notion of "multiple agencies." The Community Capitals Framework is a sociological framework that was originally created to analyze the sustainability of rural communities. Building on the work of scholars such as Bourdieu, Flora and Flora (2013) suggested there are seven different types of capital that are integral to rural communities. Although I was not specifically studying sustainability, the comprehensiveness of the Community Capitals Framework and the centering of rurality, lended itself to studying capital within rural communities. The seven capitals of the Community Capitals Framework include social capital, cultural capital, natural capital, human capital, political capital, financial capital and built capital. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of each capital and explanation of its relation to rurality.

Pierre Bourdeieu is most often credited with the scholarship related to capital, specifically cultural, social, and economic/financial capital. These forms of capital have been helpful in understanding inequity at an individual level but they can also assist in understanding capital within a community setting. Flora and Flora (2013) posited that capital is important at an individual level but also within a community setting, especially in rural communities. However, when capital is examined within a rural setting, it is important to consider additional forms of capital that address the uniqueness of the community. Thus, the Community Capitals Framework includes capital that addresses the geographic,

environmental, and technological components of an area and how these attributes interact with other forms of capital such as cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital.

Natural capital. Natural capital includes the environmental attributes of the community, such as land, air, and water. Another way to think about natural capital is that it encompasses the actual geographic location of the community as well as the environmental quality of that physical space. Flora and Flora (2013) posited that natural capital is greatly influenced by human activity which means that depending on the community, natural capital may either aid or hinder opportunities for the community as a whole, as well as various individuals within the community.

Built capital. If natural capital is considered the geographic location, then built capital can be viewed as the ability to access that location. Built capital includes such infrastructures as roads, bridges, as well as technologies such as cable television and broadband internet. Built capital also consists of economic opportunities that bring employment and revenue to the community such as factories, tourist attractions, and prisons. Flora and Flora (2013) stated that although "built capital can support the life of the community…it can also exclude certain people" (p. 212). An example of this within a rural context is the existence of railroad tracks. Although a railroad might serve to both import and export resources to and from a rural community, the physical tracks can create both a physical and cultural division within a community, culminating in racial and economic segregation.

Cultural capital. Cultural capital encompasses the values and ideas that are passed down generationally through families as well as larger communities, often shaping how one sees the world. In the United States, there are many forms of cultural capital but specific forms are privileged over others (Flora & Flora, 2008), such as pursuing higher education,

sophisticated knowledge of art and politics, and living and comfortably navigating an urban space. Individuals who possess this cultural capital are positioned to not only define what is important but also maintain its importance. Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith (2011) posit that this hegemonic cultural capital is heavily influenced by urbanormativity. In other words, "the knowledge, skills, and education that are valued, revolve around an assumption of an urban field. Conversely, the traits associated with being rural translate into negative cultural capital, leading not to advantages but rather to various forms of discrimination" (pp. 5-6).

Human capital. Related to cultural capital, human capital includes the various assets that a person possesses such as formal education, health, vocation, skills, and talents (Flora & Flora, 2013). An individual's human capital is often greatly influenced by their cultural capital. For example, if a person grows up in a family or community where going to college is highly valued, they are more likely to pursue higher education and attain a post-secondary degree. That degree, in turn, becomes part of that individual's human capital. Ultimately, human capital can include the various attributes that individuals use to earn a living, contribute to their family and/or community, and strengthen and sustain their own self (Flora & Flora, 2013).

Social capital. Social capital is perceived as the profits a person reaps from membership in a specific group or multiple groups (Bourdieu, 1986). Although not limited, groups may be bound by race, ethnicity, gender, or even kinship. One example of social capital could include possessing a specific family name. This is especially common in rural communities where generations of the same family may reside, ultimately providing credence to those who carry that name. Although social capital is frequently explored within an individual context, Flora and Flora (2008) posit that it can also be explored at the group-level or within a

community. Further, they suggest that social capital can be divided into two categories – bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital are the connections within a community based on similar social characteristics such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, or kinship. Membership in groups and networks with high levels of bonding social capital may reap certain opportunities. However, these groups also reinforce social stratification ensuring that other groups do not receive the same opportunities. This suggests that cross-cutting ties are necessary for addressing issues in the community related to power, inequity, and access (Flora & Flora, 2013).

Political capital. Political capital is intimately connected to both cultural and social capital. Often the political capital exercised in a community is a reflection of the dominant cultural capital. The norms and values of the dominant group are turned into standards which are then codified, both formally and informally, into rules and regulations (Flora & Flora, 2013). Those with political capital may not necessarily hold a formally elected position within a community. However, they may be consulted by elected officials when making decisions that affect the community or provide unsolicited input into a manner or situation (Flora and Flora, 2008). It is common for those with long standing membership in a community (i.e. social capital) to possess a certain amount of political capital. Although power is woven throughout many of the different forms of capital, it is within the context of political capital that power becomes clearly defined and exercised as cultural and social norms are turned into policy.

Financial capital. Financial capital is most often equated to money, including liquid cash, investments, or assets with financial worth. Financial capital is often framed as being highly transferrable to other forms of capital. For example, a rural student who must travel

by car to attend the nearest college or university, will need a certain amount of financial capital in order to purchase and/or regularly service a vehicle. However, that car becomes a means in which that student is able to acquire a degree (human capital). That degree can, in turn, generate new employment opportunities which can transfer back into financial capital as well as other forms of capital including social capital and cultural capital.

Critical rural theory

Critical rural theory was utilized as a way to conceptualize social structures as they relate to rural people and communities. Critical rural theory seeks to expose the ways in which urbanormativity has become a dominant paradigm in the United States, resulting in the silencing of rural people and places (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson & Smith, 2011). As a result, critical rural theory calls for the centering of rural experience.

A central tenet of critical rural theory is that of urbanormativity – the assumption of the dominance and superiority of urban communities and patterns of life. Urbanormativity functions to define the experiences of urban people and communities as real or normal, thus defining rural people and places as deficient or abnormal. Within the context of higher education, urbanormativity, as a social structure, functions in very a specific way. While it has been documented that rural students enroll in post-secondary education at rates lower than their urban counterparts, urbanormativity as a social structure has allowed not only college access and equity to be framed primarily as an urban matter, but participation in higher education to be framed as a practice reserved for urban people and communities. This framing has resulted in the silencing or the complete absence of rural students and communities from higher education scholarship and practice. Ultimately, critical rural theory in conjunction with college-going and community capital allows researchers, such as myself,

to confront the urbanormative nature of higher education which is often ignored but may have real effects on rural students.

Methodology: Life History

Building on my feminist epistemology and conceptual framework of college-going, rurality and capital, I chose to employ life history as the methodology for this study. In this section, I provide an overview of life history as a methodology, explaining what life history is, how it connects to my epistemology and theoretical perspective, and how it helped me answer my research questions. I also provide examples of other education scholars who have used life history to explore and understand educational inequities.

Overview

Life history is a qualitative inquiry that focuses on "gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11). More specifically, it is about "understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place" (p. 11). Life history is closely related to narrative research which focuses on the individual and suggests that life might be understood through retelling and reconstructing one's life story. The difference between narrative research and life history research is that the latter moves beyond the life story, focusing on making broader contextual meaning of time and space/place by focusing on the social histories and social geographies in which life stories are embedded (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Goodson and Sikes (2001) argue that without theorizing and analyzing issues of time and space, "life stories remain uncoupled from the conditions of their social construction" (p. 17). Thus, the focus on time and space and the ways in which it is experienced by individuals is a distinct attribute of life history research.

Connection to epistemology and theoretical perspectives

Given that I was qualitatively interested in understanding rural women's college-going, it was essential that I utilized a methodology that aligns with both my epistemology and theoretical perspective. Goodson and Sikes (2001) posited that scholars "use life history because they take a particular epistemological position which values the subjective, emic, and idiographic" (p. 23). Additionally, they stated that "feminist researchers have been particularly vociferous in their support of the approach, owing mainly to the way in which it can be used to give expression to, and celebration of, hidden or 'silenced' lives" (p. 10). Thus, life history was a natural choice for studying rural students and bringing forward the hidden or unwritten experiences of a population that has historically participated in higher education at very low rates and that has been under researched in higher education scholarship.

Furthermore, life historians tend to agree that there is no one particular way to conduct a life history (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Tierney, 2010). Similar to the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of this study, life history acknowledges the multiplicity of truth and subsequently the diverse ways one might go about seeking those truths. At the same time, life historians have found that there are methods for gathering and analyzing data that may better assist the researcher in answering their research question via a life history approach. The proposed methods for this study are discussed later in this chapter.

Answering my research question

In constructing my research design, it was essential that I consider how the methodology will help answer my overarching research question: "How do rural women

understand the role of their home communities in their college-going practices and behaviors?" The primary reason I view life history as an appropriate methodology to answer my research question is because of its use of narratives to understand broader contextual meaning, specifically within the framework of time and space. My study, which explored the experiences of women in rural places prior to and leading up to matriculation at a four-year university, was specifically interested in the relationship between self and place. Given the focus on time and space, life history was an especially helpful methodology in understanding the complexity of rural communities (place) in shaping college-going for rural women (self).

Life history also helped me make connections between individuals and community, which is central to the proposed study. Qualitative research studies are typically interested in the particular, rather than the general (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Maxwell, 2013). In other words, the purpose of qualitative studies, including life histories, is not to produce generalizable knowledge but rather to "understand in depth the rich lives of human beings and the world in which we live" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 2). Yet, at the same time that qualitative research is not crafted for generalizable purposes, Cole and Knowles (2001) remind us that qualitative research can and often does provide a window into understanding collectives and communities.

> Clusters of individual lives make up communities, societies, and cultures. To understand some of the complexities, complications and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective. In saying this, we are not invoking an essentialist claim that to understand one is to understand all. Rather, we are suggesting that every in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-

> context brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities. (p. 11)

In other words, life history allows for the deep exploration of a few individuals as a starting point for understanding broader communities.

A final way I understand life history to be integral to answering my research question is the way in which it allows me, as the researcher, to be present in the question itself as well as design, process, and data. My research question is very much a product of my own life experiences as a woman in a rural community. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) posited that "compelling interests that lead to unsettled questions are typically related to our life experiences" (p. 2). They further suggested that this insight into the research question can be viewed as a strength of the study. However, I was cautious in understanding that this insight was only as beneficial to the study as I was reflective about my relationship to the study. Cole and Knowles (2001) stated that, in contemporary life history research, a reflexive stance is expected. Critical and thoughtful reflexivity allow me as the researcher to be "visible in the research text…and every bit as vulnerable, as present, and those who participate in the research" (p. 14).

Life history in the field of education

Life history is used methodologically across social and human sciences – sociology, psychology, anthropology. Although many methodologists trace the first life histories back to almost a century ago, life history has become more prevalent in educational research in the past two decades (Cole & Knowles, 2001: Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Education scholars, Goodson and Sikes, have both used life history to explore the lives of teachers within various contexts. Their expertise in this methodology led them to co-author a text entitled *Life*

History Research in Educational Settings which was used to conceptualize this proposed study.

Life history has also been used in higher education scholarship, specifically to explore college access. William Tierney, a senior scholar in the field, has published widely using life history methodology, most recently in *Qualitative Inquiry* and the *Review of Higher Education*, to understand college access and preparation. A major reason for using life history as the methodology for this proposed study was to (hopefully) expose other educational scholars to its methodological purposes and strengths and to encourage its use in exploring the complexity of time and space in higher education.

Methods

In this section, I present an overview of the site selection, participant recruitment and selection, data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

Site

My data collection took place locally in the state of Iowa. This was a change from my initial conceptualization of my dissertation when I intended to go "home" to west Tennessee to collect my data. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, my desire to study rural students re-emerged after reading Elizabeth St. Pierre's (1999) article *The Work of Response in Ethnography* in which, after twenty years of being away, she returned home to her rural town for the purpose of a research study. St. Pierre's article compelled me to originally consider situating my dissertation in the rural South, so that I too could go "home" to collect data. However, much changed from that initial conceptualization, namely that my relationship to home(s) shifted. I realized that as much as Martin will always be home for me, I am not considered a part of the community in the same way as when I was growing up

and living there. In order to gain access to the community for data collection, I would have needed to spend a length of time there reconnecting and reestablishing my relationships with gatekeepers in the community.

Conversely, my current network in Iowa is much stronger which allowed for easier access to potential participants as well as a strong contextual understanding of place. Additionally, during the last half of my doctoral career, I came to see Iowa as a place in which I live, rather than one in which I just go to school. I became active in a local church, I got married, my partner received tenure at a local university, and most recently we purchased a house in Des Moines. Professionally, I was also employed in an assistantship where I spent the majority of my time working on a state-level education evaluation project, which helped me to become intimately familiar with the 300-plus school districts in Iowa and afforded new relationships with faculty and scholars at all three Iowa Regents institutions. Simply said, I became acquainted with Iowa in a way that I was not when I first considered studying rural students for my dissertation. Additionally, given that Iowa is a rural state – roughly 95% of the towns have populations less than 8,000 people – this study has implications for this particular state as well as other rural states in the Midwest and throughout the country.

Participants

Typically, life histories involve a small number of participants. In fact, some scholars have employed life histories that involved only one participant (Behar, 1993; Tierney, 2014). As discussed previously, scholars who employ life history research typically use this methodology because of their epistemological stance on knowledge construction – the valuing of individual and communal knowledge and acknowledgement of the multiplicity of truth in various contexts. Large samples of hundred/thousands of participants are

traditionally equated with objectivity and generalizability which do not align with the purpose or research design of this study.

Additionally, qualitative data collection and analysis is very time intensive. Because of the focus on the particular, most qualitative studies require researchers to meet with their participants multiple times to collect the data necessary to answer their research question(s). With the focus on depth rather than breadth, life historians benefit from a small participant population (Cole & Knowles, 2001). In considering my epistemological stance, as well as my desire to engage fully in life history methodology, I initially proposed to include three to four participants in my study. However, after solidifying and meeting two of the participants, I realized their life histories were extremely rich and strikingly different from one another. After consulting with my major professor, my methodologist (Dr. Croom), and the rest of my committee, it was decided that I would go forward with two participants, referred to as Hannah and Sara (pseudonyms).

The term traditionally used in discussing identification, recruitment and selection of participants for a research study is sampling. Cole and Knowles (2001) posit that "sampling is a holdover from positivism and statistically based studies" (p. 66). Given that my study is grounded in feminist epistemology and informed by critical rural theory, the term sampling does not align with my theory or epistemology. Consequently, I referred to this process as participant recruitment and selection. It is important that I clarify that, in utilizing these specific terms, I am not abandoning the processes that have historically been referred to as "sampling" (i.e. purposive, snowball, etc). These processes are still indicative of how a researcher might go about identifying, recruiting, and selecting participants for a study.

Rather, I am advocating and practicing the use of a term that better aligns with my epistemology and methodology.

Goodson and Sikes (2001) described several forms of sampling, or what I refer to as participant recruitment/selection, that can lead to identifying potential participants for a life history study, including purposive, opportunistic, convenience, and snowball. This study utilized both purposive and snowball forms of participant recruitment and selection. Researchers who engage in purposive recruitment and selection are seeking participants with specific characteristics and experiences. As a result, specific criteria are crafted and individuals are invited to participate in the research study based on the criteria. In order to participate in this study, individuals had to meet the following three criteria: 1) undergraduate, bachelor's degree-seeking student enrolled in a four-year public university in Iowa; 2) self-identify as a woman; 3) self-identify as having grown up and been educated in a rural place. To help contextualize rural, I used Brown and Schafft's (2010) qualitative definition that states that rural places are natural environments, typically small, not very dense in population and geographically situated away from urban.

I also used the snowball method of participant recruitment/selection. My network in Iowa was instrumental to identifying and recruiting participants to this study. I relied on other graduate students to serve as informal gatekeepers – people who were able to connect me to potential participants and vouch for the legitimacy of my study (Seidman, 2006). Due to my primary employment in a research center, I had limited contact with undergraduate students and thus felt that utilizing informal gatekeepers would assist in gaining participants for the study. The gatekeepers were familiar with my dissertation study, and I met with them

individually to discuss their involvement as informal gatekeepers and answer any questions they had about the study.

Given that this study was grounded in feminist epistemology and critical theory, it was important that I address the power dynamic between myself and the participants as early as the recruitment and selection stage (Alcott & Potter, 1993; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Participating in any research study requires time and effort on the part of participants. However, because life histories attempt to capture experiences across time, numerous meetings between researcher and participants are typically required in order to build rapport and capture data necessary to answer the research question. In other words, life histories require a great amount of time and energy of the participants as they provide researchers with rich data. Thus, it was essential that I conveyed this expectation to the participants before they consented to the study. At the same time, I initiated and continued to have a dialogue with the participants about what they wanted/expected from participating in this study. Goodson and Sikes (2001) discussed the importance of researcher and participants having a mutual understanding of the nature of the relationship created from and during the study. More information related to this topic can be found in Chapter Six: Methodological Epilogue.

Data Collection

The data collection for this study consisted primarily of multiple interviews, or what I called guided conversations (Cole & Knowles, 2001). I also utilized the particpants' town websites, school district websites and school handbooks as a way to triangulate the data.

Guided conversations. The most utilized method of data collection for life history research is interviews, or what I referred to as guided conversations (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The notion of a conversation epistemologically and methodologically aligned with my

framework for this study. Conversations suggest a more relational approach to data collection and that those involved in the dialogic exchange both have something to contribute. In other words, the data was not just collected; it was built (Gildersleeve, 2010).

I engaged in a total of six guided conversations with each participant during the summer 2015. These conversations were developed based on my use of the placed-based community framework of location, social systems, and identity. The actual prompts I used to guide these conversations can be found in the Appendix. All conversations took place in person at a location of the participant's choosing. More information about the timing and location of the guided conversations can be found at the beginning of each participant's life history in Chapter Four. Each conversation lasted approximately 90 minutes to two hours. As a researcher, I was cognizant of my own limits to capturing qualitative data via a dialogic method and therefore set a time frame that I knew I could adequately work within.

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim by a transcription company. My decision to hire a transcriptionist was due primarily to limitations around time and the copious amount of data I collected via the guided conversations (over 20 hours). Once I received the transcriptions, they, along with the audio recordings, were saved to the hard drive of my personal laptop as well as an external hard drive. Paper copies of the data were kept in a folder stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office.

Process/Mapping. Life history places great emphasis on the way in which the data is collected. Cole and Knowles (2001) have advocated for a more equitable data collection process that includes the participants weighing in on how to explore the topic of study. The scholars posited that by including participants in the decision-making process, researchers "are deliberately challenging notions of hierarchy and power that place researchers

exclusively in charge of the information-gathering phase of researching" (p. 71). Epistemologically and theoretically, this notion resonated greatly with me as a researcher. However, I was also cognizant that I was working within the confines of a university setting, where research is vetted by an Institutional Review Board that requires structure and protocols led by a researcher. So, how did I reconcile this?

One suggestion offered by Goodson and Sikes (2001) was to begin life history research "by inviting participants to construct a time-line of key events in their life with an emphasis on those experiences which relate to any focus the project may have" (p. 30). I chose to utilize this life history timeline approach during my first guided conversation. However, instead of just crafting a timeline, I asked each participant to first draw a map of their rural community. We then used their map to construct a time-line of pivotal experiences that shaped their college-going. Given that life histories are specifically interested in context, engaging in a time-line activity that utilized a map assisted in understanding the relationship between participant, time, and place. In other words, while a time-line can assist in understanding a series of events, the timeline and map collectively assisted in both understanding the events and contextualizing the role of place in shaping the events. This activity is referenced in both life histories as the "mapping activity" or "mapping exercise." The prompts for the activity were part of the first guided conversation and are included in the Appendix.

Document review. A primary challenge with document analysis in life history research is that researchers are often not aware of documents that could be useful data until they arise in conversation with the participants (Cole & Knowles, 2001). This was the case for my study. The primary documents that I reviewed as part of this study were all public

documents – the participants' town websites, school district websites, and high school student handbooks. These documents/websites were reviewed in order to contextualize data that was built during a guided conversation or to gain more insight into a topic that a participant referenced during a conversation. Examples of how I utilized these additional documents can be found in the participants' life histories.

Data analysis and representation

When engaging in life history research, researchers must be concerned not only with data analysis but also data representation. In other words, great detail is given to both understanding the data within the context of specific research questions and to how the researcher chooses to re-present the data. In this section, I explain how I analyzed the data as well as my decision-making process for creatively displaying the data.

Data analysis took place not just at the completion of data collection but throughout the data collection process. Guided conversations were sent to the transcription company within 24 hours of the completion of the conversation. This process allowed me to review the data throughout the data collection and use the data to inform future guided conversations. I also wrote extensive research memos immediately after each guided conversation. Given the relevance of the researcher to life history, these memos were also integral pieces of data to be analyzed. They also helped me participate in a form of member checking (Merriam, 2014) with my participants. During the initial guided conversations, I shared the process and purpose of traditional member checking with each of the participants. I explained that a typical form of member checking involves providing participants with a transcription of each of the interviews/guided conversations. While the participants appreciated the offer, given the amount of time they were already committing to each

conversation, they did not feel they had additional time each week to review each transcript. Instead, after the first guided conversation, I began each subsequent conversation by sharing my research memo related to the previous interview. During the final guided conversation, we reviewed all of the research memos collectively. These exercises provided the participants with an opportunity to see how I was interpreting their lived experiences, to correct any congruencies, and to add to their narratives.

As I stated at the beginning of this section, life history research is concerned with understanding and re-presenting a participant's specific life story through both description and analysis. In other words, the story is central to life history research. Rather than code each line of transcribed data, I read the data for stories and utilized my conceptual framework of college-going, community capital, and critical rural theory/urbanormativity to guide my understanding or analysis of the participant's lived experiences as they related to post-secondary educational opportunity. I relied heavily on concept mapping, which in many ways mirrored the mapping exercise I conducted with the participants during our initial guided conversations. Concept mapping allowed me to visualize the data within my conceptual framework, specifically how the interaction of community capital and urbanormativity influenced the participants' learned social practice around higher education.

I spent a great deal of time thinking about how I would represent the data in the life histories. Two things were important to me in the representation. First, I wanted to write life histories that people in my home community and possibly other rural communities could read, understand, and hopefully enjoy. In other words, while I understood that writing a dissertation was a requirement of my academic community, I also wanted my dissertation to be something enjoyed by members of other communities. Secondly, I did not want to have to

write myself outside of the participants' life histories (Gildersleeve, 2010). The initial impetus for studying rural students and communities was because I, myself, identified as a rural person. I had grown up in a rural community and understood my own community as playing a specific role in my own college-going. I wanted to be able to share my own experiences as the participants shared their experiences. In other words, I wanted to engage in authentic conversation/dialogue and relationship building with the participants. Additionally, I understood my role as the researcher to be integral to the building of the data. Often in qualitative research, a block of text narrated by a participant, is extracted from a larger piece text to illustrate a specific finding. While I have written in this format previously, it does not lend itself well to life history research. The stories that the participants shared were prompted by questions and comments that I made as the researcher. In other words, the stories were contextualized on two levels – 1) their lived experiences in their communities and 2) within our guided conversation. Thus, I chose to represent the data in the life histories similarly to how they were built – through dialogue between me and the participants. The dialogue is intertwined with my own reflections, descriptive understanding and initial analysis.

Goodness and Trustworthiness

As a researcher, I am responsible to my participants, the academic community, and the general public to produce research of high quality. In qualitative studies, two ways to measure the quality of research are through goodness and trustworthiness. Goodness refers more to the overarching study while trustworthiness refers more specifically to the findings, including my interpretation and representation of the findings (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). I addressed trustworthiness in three specific ways: 1) prolonged engagement with the

participants which should lead to rich, descriptive data (Glesne, 1999); 2) reflexive stance, acknowledging my own relationship to the study and how it shapes my interpretation (Lather, 2003); 3) maintaining an audit trail that documents how I arrived at my findings (Lather, 2003).

While prolonged engagement is not defined as a measurable number, I can say that I engaged in continuous data collection throughout an entire summer. My engagement with one participant, Sara, continued well beyond the formal data collection and was still developing at the time of my defense. The amount of time I spent building relationships with these participants, sharing my own lived experiences, and being authentically invested in understanding their lives, communities, and college-going led to the collection of rich data that allowed for a deep understanding of rurality and higher education.

Throughout this study, I have attempted to be both transparent and reflective in my understanding of how rurality shaped my own college-going practices and behaviors and how this understanding might shape my understanding and analysis of the participants' college-going practice. I view my own experiences as an important contribution to the overarching study. At the same time, I utilized informal member checking practices with my participants to ensure that I was not placing my own experience on theirs but rather allowing their experiences to be presented authentically and uniquely.

The final component of trustworthiness is that of an audit trail. I kept copious notes, memos, and concept maps that indicate not only how I arrived at my analysis but specific to life history methodology, how the participants' narratives and stories shaped my understanding.

CHAPTER FOUR
LIFE HISTORIES

Introduction

The narratives collected, analyzed, and subsequently shared via this dissertation are those of Hannah and Sara, two women from two different rural Iowa communities of place. As illustrated in the following life histories, their experiences growing up in their respective rural places shaped their understanding of post-secondary education as well as their college-going practices and behaviors in very real and different ways. Though I did not set out to conduct a comparative study, a narrative and a counter narrative emerged from the data. While Sara's life history aligned with much of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, Hannah's life history challenged much of what is known about college-going in rural communities. Thus, while both critical rural theory and the Community Capitals Framework helped to conceptualize this study, I relied heavily on critical rural theory to understand Sara's life history and primarily utilized the Community Capitals Framework to analyze Hannah's life history. Hannah's life history lent itself to utilizing the Community Capitals Framework because of the various ways in which the capital present in her community shaped her understanding of higher education as well as her ability to successfully access higher education. Sara, on the other hand, described her community of being absent or void of the many forms of capital described within the Community Capitals Framework. As a self-identified critical scholar, this became a point of tension for me throughout my data collection and analysis: How would I present Sara's life history in a way that did not reproduce the deficit narrative that so often surrounds rural people and places? Critical rural theory provided a means to understand the various ways in which urbanormativity shaped Sara's rural identity as well as her experiences embedded in geography, family, and her K-12

education. Previous scholarship on rural identity, geography, family and education, which I discussed in Chapter Two, has documented the influence these entities can have on post-secondary educational opportunity for rural people.

In addition to the different analytical framework applied to these life histories, I also constructed and presented these life histories in different manners. Hannah's life history was written in a very structured manner while Sara's was constructed in a more fluid manner. I perceive these different presentations to be a reflection of the unique relationships I developed with each of the participants. Hannah and I had a very structured relationship. We met every week at the same time in the same place where we conversed in a rather formal manner. Sara and I, on the other hand, had a much more fluid relationship. We met in various places - her home, her community's public library, outside on her patio – on a variety of days and at different times. I had an opportunity to meet some of her family members and spend time with the animals on her farm. Our meetings were very conversational and also vulnerable at times, leading to a different kind of researcher-participant relationship which I discuss in Chapter Six: Methodological Epilogue.

Participant Profiles

While I strived to introduce the participants throughout their life histories, I recognize that having a basic understanding of each participant could be helpful to better comprehending the life histories I present in this chapter. Thus, I have created a brief introduction for each participant to assist readers in better understanding Hannah's and Sara's life histories.

Hannah, a first-generation baccalaureate college student, grew up on a farm in the Atwood-River Town community, which is also home to a local community college.

Approximately five horizontal miles, consisting mostly of undeveloped land, farmland, and a flowing river, separate the centers of Atwood and River Town. Hannah is the second youngest of four children. Her parents operate their family's farm as a full-time business. Hannah's life history demonstrated how the physical presence of an institution of higher learning can shape rural students' understanding of and practices related to post-secondary education. Using the Community Capitals Framework, I described and analyzed the ways in which the various forms of capital present in this rural community assisted Hannah with developing an understanding of higher education and shaping her education.

Sara also identified as a first-generation baccalaureate college student from Whately, Iowa. Like Hannah, she grew up on a farm but in a different part of the state. She is the oldest of two children and is extremely close to her younger brother. Her parents, neither of whom attended any post-secondary institution, are still married and both work full-time jobs in addition to taking care of their family farm. Unlike Hannah's life history that explores community capital, Sara's life history examines how both a gendered rurality and the forces of urbanormativity shaped her understanding of post-secondary education and her college-going practices and behaviors.

Hannah's Life History

Hannah had just finished her first year at Public University when I received my first email from her in early June. Her salutation was warm, – *Hi Kathleen!* – and I appreciated that she addressed me informally by using my first name. Establishing strong relationships with participants is an important part of capturing a life history (Cole & Knowles, 2001), and her initial greeting made me feel like we were off to a good start. In the email, Hannah shared that she had heard about my dissertation study from one of my gatekeepers. She went

on to say that she had grown up on a farm outside of a rural town called Atwood, Iowa (pseudonym), identified as a rural woman, and that she was willing to help with my study in any way possible. After a few email exchanges to confirm participation, we set up our first meeting.

A declared finance major, Hannah had secured an internship for the summer with a company located relatively close to campus, so she remained in the close vicinity of Public University instead of going home. As a result, all of my conversations with Hannah took place in a small conference room on her college campus. We met almost every Wednesday evening throughout the months of July and August, conversing about her experiences growing up in a rural community in Iowa and the ways in which these experiences and the spaces in which they took place shaped her college-going behaviors and practices.

Two Towns, One Community

Central to this study was the notion of place and space and the ways in which it facilitates rural women's college-going practices and behaviors. As discussed in Chapter One, I used a community of place framework (Flora & Flora, 2013) as a way to think about rural space. One of the first things I learned is that community, although singular in vernacular is not always singular in reality. While Hannah introduced herself as someone who grew up outside of Atwood, I quickly learned that she considers River Town, a town adjacent to Atwood, to also be her community. In other words, although Atwood and River Town may geographically be different towns with their own zip codes, Hannah viewed these two towns as one community – her community. The data suggest there are several reasons for this – access to resources and entertainment, school consolidation, and a shared natural resource.

During our first guided conversation, I asked Hannah to draw a map of her rural community. Since I did not have immediate access to her community, this activity was especially important to me as a way to visually understand the places she shared with me throughout the study.

“When I first come into Atwood, I cross over a set of railroad tracks. That’s a sign that I am almost home. Well, that and my friend Didi’s house,” shared Hannah, as she traced the black marker over the white paper, mapping the tracks and her friend’s house. “Then up ahead on the right is the Casey’s (general store/gas station) and on the left is the bank.”

“What’s the name of the bank?” I inquired.

“Gosh, I don’t even know, replied Hannah. “I don’t bank there. We bank in River Town. Maybe it’s The Community Bank? It’s the only one in town, so I should really know, but everyone just calls it ‘The Bank’.”

“How about grocery shopping? Where did you do that?” I asked.

“Usually Casey’s, or we’d go into River Town. Casey’s for everything we could get, and then if we had to, we’d go to River Town.”

“How often would you shop in River Town for groceries or anything like that?”

“We’d go once a week, maybe, or once every 2 weeks, depending on what we needed,” responded Hannah. “In River Town, there’s a Wal-Mart, and there’s a couple of clothing stores - little boutiques that people try and start, but they often close as quickly as they open. For clothes, we’d typically have to drive about 45 minutes to get to a large clothing store or a mall.”

Hannah returned to the map, placing her marker between the squares she had drawn to signify Casey's and 'The Bank,' and drew a thick black line straight north. She picked up the marker and proceeded to draw another line perpendicular.

"This is the four-way stop, and the one hair salon in town is over here," Hannah said, as she drew another square northwest of the intersection. "Mainly, we go by names of who owns it, so the salon is called 'Janie's.' There are a few restaurants and a liquor store over here," she continued as she drew more squares west of the hair salon. 'They're all owned by the same guy. For a small town, it's kind of shocking that there are three restaurants."

"Did you frequent the restaurants in town?"

"We got carry-out pizza from Casey's more than anything, but my parents often go to 'Danny's' with their friends. It's one of the restaurants, but really it functions more as the town bar."

"Do people from River Town ever come over to eat at any of the restaurants in Atwood?"

"Yeah, Thursday nights are a big night for the two towns. Every Thursday night, even when it starts to get cold, there are a group of people from Atwood and River Town that go on evening bike rides."

"Like motorcycles?" I asked.

Hannah laughed, "No, not motorcycles. Bicycles! On Thursday nights, the group from River Town rides over to Atwood. They meet up with the group from Atwood at Danny's and then they all ride back over to River Town and have dinner, typically at Foster's Family Restaurant. The Atwood group then rides back home after dinner. My family has

been riding with the group for years. I haven't been able to ride this summer, but I'm hoping to get home at least one Thursday night to ride with them."

"How many people ride with the group?"

"On a nice summer night, probably a hundred people. My parents stop riding once it gets cold. But in the summer, you know to watch out for riders between say 5 pm and 7 pm because they are a presence on the road."

As I pictured this pack of riders trekking down a state road that connects these two towns, Hannah picked up the marker and began drawing again.

"So, right past the restaurants is the town park," shared Hannah.

"What's the park like?" I asked.

"It's nice, I guess," she responded. "It's right on the river, and you can see the dam which is actually kind of pretty."

"Do people hang out at the park?" I asked.

"Hmm, I don't know if I would say 'hang out.' All the events in Atwood, not that there are that many, they are usually held at the park. Every summer we have a town celebration and that's held in the park. There's a big pavilion with lots of picnic tables. There's also a playground there, so sometimes you might see a family playing there. I think the draw to the park is that it's by the water."

"Why is that?" I probed.

"Well, when you come into town, you can't help but notice the river. It's right there. And the park is the easiest place to access the river in Atwood. A lot of people will sit on the banks of the park and fish. There's also a boat ramp at the park, but the water is pretty shallow, so you don't really see too many boats in the river in Atwood. You never really see

anyone swimming in the water – probably because we're so close to the dam – but in the summer you'll see people get on tubes in Atwood and go tubing down the river to River Town. I've never actually done that because the water kind of scares me. The most I would ever do is walk down the boat ramp and put my feet in the water."

Hannah described two important forms of natural and built capital that helped to connect Atwood and River Town – the river and the state road. Although the river flows through much of the state of Iowa, dams in both Atwood and River Town create a unique passage of water that links these two towns. This natural capital serves primarily as a form of recreation for this community, but it is also a physical marker of something that they share in common. So, although the two towns are unique in size and design, the river remains a constant through both Atwood and River Town.

Additionally, roads physically link these towns, allowing residents to travel back and forth between the two or as Hannah understands, within one community. There are two state roads that link Atwood and River Town – a northern and a southern route. And although there are billboard signs letting you know you are entering one town and leaving the other, the roads provide a way for residents to easily travel within the community, especially for leisure and recreation. However, this form of built capital also provides residents with access to a variety of shared resources, including food, medicine, and other necessities. I also came to understand that these roads were especially important to linking education and providing educational access in the community.

"Where is your house in relation to what you have shown me so far?" I asked, as we continued discussing her community.

Hannah returned to the map, extending the thick black horizontal line past the park and almost off the paper. “After you pass the park, this road turns into a gravel road and then splits into a ‘Y’. You veer left at the ‘Y’ and then my house is down that way a bit, on the right. We’re about a mile and a half from town.”

“And school? Where is the school in relation to your home?”

“The school would be over this way,” Hannah replied, returning her attention to the center of the map and stretching the same horizontal black line in the opposite direction, past the bar, the restaurants and the hair salon. She drew a few short lines off of the main road, connecting them in a grid, marking various side streets. “The church I attended when I was growing up is right here, but now we go to a church in River Town. And then the school is right here,” Hannah indicated as she drew another square across from the church and wrote “school’ above it.

“Was it one building for kindergarten through twelfth grade?” I inquired.

“It used to be, but not anymore,” shared Hannah as she began explaining the relationship between Atwood and River Town school districts. “When I was in third grade, Atwood merged with River Town, so now Atwood just has an elementary school – kindergarten through sixth grade.”

“So where did you go after sixth grade?”

“To Waterview Middle School in River Town. The middle school is seventh and eighth grade.”

“Can you draw that for me?”

“Sure, but I probably need another piece of paper,” joked Hannah as she ran out of room on the map. I grabbed another sheet of paper and watched as Hannah began to physically extend her rural community to the east.

“So in seventh grade, you began going to school with students from River Town?”

“Not exactly. The elementary schools in River Town only go to fifth grade. So, in sixth grade all of the elementary students from River Town come over to Atwood for one year. It’s kind of a weird situation. There were only like twelve students in my grade from kindergarten through fifth grade. Then, in sixth grade, when all of the River Town kids got there, we had like 100 students. There were more students in sixth grade then there were total students in kindergarten through fifth grade. But, it was nice because it gave us Atwood kids a year to get used to having a larger class in place that we felt comfortable before we moved over to school in River Town.”

“So, then in seventh grade, all 100 students went back to River Town to start middle school?”

“That’s right. I always rode the bus to the elementary school and when I started middle school the bus dropped off the elementary school kids in Atwood and then we just continued on to River Town to the middle school and the high school.”

“Tell me about the high school. Where did you graduate from?

“River Town-Atwood High School in River Town. When we merged, they added “Atwood” to the name of the high school which was nice because it meant something to have our town be part of the name. It wasn’t like we were just going to school in River Town. Atwood was part of the school.”

The school merger is yet another way in which Hannah understood these two towns as having manifested into one community. Although Atwood transitioned from a K-12 school to an elementary school, the building itself remained intact and never closed, providing a physical presence of education in Atwood. Additionally, instead of the Atwood students bearing the responsibility of joining the River Town schools, the River Town students came to Atwood for their last year of elementary school. However, the name change of the high school was possibly the most important aspect of this merger. As Hannah shared in our conversation, including Atwood as part of the name of the high school was a marker that these two towns were now connected.

Hannah continued to share other parts of Atwood and River Town throughout our conversations – the new hospital that had been built on the outskirts of River Town, the new sign welcoming visitors to Atwood, the coffee shop she frequented in River Town and the public library in Atwood. Whenever she mentioned a place or building, I found myself repeatedly asking, "Is this in Atwood or River Town?" However, she rarely distinguished between the two, conversing as if Atwood and River Town, although individual towns, were actually just one rural community. But exactly how does a rural undergraduate student define rurality?

Defining Rural

As discussed in Chapter Two, the United States Census Bureau and other governing bodies rely heavily on population data to define rural places. However, Hannah minimally acknowledged population when defining her community as rural. She did mention proximity to larger town and cities, but she focused primarily on relationships among people and

between people and the land, similar to the way in which Brown and Schafft (2011) qualitatively defined rurality.

"So, in order to participate in this study, you had to self-identify as a rural woman. What exactly does rural mean to you?" I asked at the beginning of our second guided conversation.

"That you have to actually travel an hour or so to get to any big mall or any area identified as an urban area. A lot of people, especially in River Town, actually drive forty-five minutes to an hour to get to work." Hannah paused and thought for a minute. "I'm not sure that really answers your question, though." She sat silent for a few more seconds and then responded, "I guess, for me, I identify rural as farming."

Hannah grew up on a family farm passed down on her father's side. Her grandfather still helped out with the farm from time to time, but her father owned approximately seventy-five percent of the land and his brother the other twenty-five percent. Her older brother by four years was now working full-time on the farm directly under her dad.

"In my community, there are tractors going down the street and you have to be okay with it. I think it's funny when if I bring one of my friends from college home. They always seem a little shocked and then make some obvious comment like, 'That's a tractor going through town.' And, I'm like, 'Yes it is.' When you pass them (the farmers) you wave at them and then you go on your way."

Hannah also mentioned the significance of walking and talking in rural places. In other words, it is important to be present, to be seen, but to also be engaged – to know what is going on in the community.

“You might also see people walking around town,” Hannah shared. “Sometimes people walk in groups, you know, for exercise but also to socialize. They’ll walk up and down the streets, maybe stop in at the bar. It’s expected that you will acknowledge people when you walk or drive past them in town – always a wave and probably a hello if you don’t really know them or a chat with those you do. Even though it’s a small town, I don’t know everyone that lives here. But, people do know what’s going on in the town and they actually care about it, I think.”

In Brown and Schafft’s (2011) qualitative definition they posited that rurality is a multidimensional concept and entails a combination of social, demographic, economic, and/or cultural aspects. As the daughter of a farmer, Hannah was well attuned to the relationship between rurality and the economy as it related to agriculture. Given that our conversations were held over the summer, during the height of growing season, we talked weekly about the condition of the crops on her family’s land. Hannah never identified her community as rural simply because of the number of people that reside there. She did mention that the population was small but also shared that she did not know everyone that lived there, an assumption often made of rural people and places. Hannah’s discussion of rurality focused largely on the social and cultural aspects, highlighting the ways in which residents engage with one another and discussing the social norms of her community, such as waving and greeting one another, membership at a local Christian church, and attending town celebrations. However, there was another social norm in Hannah’s community that she discussed throughout our conversations, one that countered much of the literature reviewed for this study – going to college.

Rural College Community

Throughout our guided conversations, Hannah shared the importance of college-going within her community. "No one ever asks, 'Are you going to college?' It's always, '*Where* are you going to college?'" Hannah stated during our fifth guided conversation.

After meeting for almost two months and talking in depth about her experiences of growing up in Atwood and River Town, I was not surprised to hear Hannah say this about her community. I had listened to her share her experiences with elementary and secondary education in a rural setting, her relationships with family members, and her understanding of community residents' support of higher education. We also talked at length about her pre-collegiate interactions with higher education, many of which took place in her own back yard at Egan Community College, located in River Town.

"Why do you think this is?" I probed. "What is it about your community that creates this college-going culture? Is it the teachers? Is it the residents? Is it the fact that Egan Community College is there?"

"I think Egan plays a big role," she responded.

"Why?" I continued to probe.

"I mean it's a college town. We know that there's a college there and that there are students out there doing something after high school so the community just kind of expects you to do that as well. Other kids are coming here from all over the place to go to Egan, so you'd better be able to go to Egan or go somewhere too."

And there it was. For the past five weeks, I had sat across from Hannah, in a sterile conference room on her college campus, trying to capture all of the different components of her community that had informed her college-going behaviors. By this point, I knew that her

community was different; Hannah's description of her experiences challenged much of what I had found in the literature on rural students and college-going. I also knew that this was partly due to the presence of the community college, especially since Hannah took almost all of her classes her senior year at Egan through a dual enrollment program. Yet, at no point had I actually thought of Hannah's community as a "college town."

Part of this was because, during initial data collection, I thought of Atwood and River Town as two separate towns and thus two separate communities. Consequently, since Hannah did not live in River Town, I did not understand it to be part of her community. However, once I was able to understand these two towns as one larger community, for the reasons described above, I was able to think about the role of River Town in facilitating Hannah's college-going behaviors and practices.

The other reason was because I had never thought of a town with a community college in it as a "college town." I knew college towns, or at least I thought I did. I spent the first 18 years of my life in one and then proceeded to live in two more college towns during the past decade. If you asked me what a college town was, I would say it was a town that revolved around a college or university – but specifically, a *four-year* college or university. Prior to this conversation with Hannah, I had never heard anyone refer to a town with a community college in it as a "college town."

While my own experiences heavily influenced my understanding and construction of a college town, research and scholarship from various disciplines have also assisted in this normative framing of college towns. Scholarship regarding the relationship between colleges and the towns in which they reside has typically focused on four-year institutions (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006). Conversely, research on community colleges has primarily

focused on the organization of the institution, the faculty who serve as instructors, and the students who attend, and rarely on the actual communities that host these colleges or the relationship between the college and the community.

Hannah's life history assists us in understanding that the space in which she grew up was instrumental in shaping her college-going practices and behaviors. This place, which I refer to as a rural college community, and its various forms of capital facilitated support for college-going behaviors and practices in four distinct ways 1) the physical presence of a higher education institution; 2) the relationship between Atwood-River Town High School and Egan Community College; 3) familial relationships and support; 4) business/community support.

Physical presence of a community college. With a population between one and five thousand people, River Town looks similar to other rural towns, complete with a downtown area consisting of a few blocks of bricked store fronts that line a main street. However, situated less than a mile north of this downtown area is an institution of higher education – Egan Community College.

I had a chance to visit both River Town and Egan Community College in mid-August, toward the end of my data collection with Hannah. As I drove into River Town, on a hot, sunny, summer day, I was greeted by a digital sign owned by a local company flashing, "Welcome Back Lions!" By the time I arrived, it was after one o'clock in the afternoon, and I was starving! Remembering Hannah's story of the Thursday night bike rights and Foster's Family Restaurant, I decided to grab lunch there.

As soon as I walked in, I immediately felt like I was back in my hometown of Martin, Tennessee at one of the local restaurants called "The Hearth." The décor was outdated but

comfortable in a familiar way. Being well after one o'clock, the restaurant was fairly empty of customers – one large table of people who appeared to be co-workers and a couple of older couples, all enjoying a late lunch. The hostess showed me to a booth, handed me a menu, and told me that Marty, the waitress, would be with me in just a minute. Before I had a chance to even open the menu, Marty appeared.

"What can I get you today?" she asked, politely.

"Umm, I think I need a minute to look over the menu. But, may I have an iced tea for now?" I asked.

"No problem," replied Marty with a friendly smile, as she whisked away to get my drink and check on the other customers.

I opened the menu, quickly glanced over the items and decided on a B.L.T sandwich and a side salad. After I placed my order, another older couple came in and was seated at the booth directly in front of me. Marty came over to greet them.

"Hey, Marty! We're a little late today. I had a doctor's appointment next door that took longer than usual," casually shared the older woman.

"So, what's good today?" asked the gentleman without even opening his menu.

"What's good today?" I thought to myself, puzzled by the question. Marty proceeded to talk about a few different dishes, none of which I saw on the menu but all of which made my mouth water. What are these dishes she's talking about? As I glanced back toward the front door, I saw a chalkboard proudly displaying the lunch specials for the week.

I lowered my head and chuckled quietly to myself. I felt like I had a big sign around my neck shouting, "I'm not from around here!" Of course there are daily specials. I cannot even remember the last time I actually opened the menu at The Hearth during one of my

visits back home. At that point, I silently wished Hannah and I had chatted about the social norms of eating at restaurants in her community, just to jog my memory.

After I finished my sandwich and paid my bill, I headed back to my car to drive over to the community college. Feeling a bit full from lunch, I decided to take a quick walk around downtown. I passed another restaurant, a coffee shop, a small movie theater, a bank, and a couple of shops that seemed to sell a little of this and a little of that. As I walked back to my car, I noticed another restaurant around the corner from Foster's. I walked over to check it out and noticed that it appeared to be more of a bar than a restaurant, advertising that they were open until 2 am and promoting various drink specials Wednesday through Saturday. Perhaps this was a college hangout for Egan students?

I decided to skip the afternoon cocktail and instead got in my car and drove north to finally explore the institution that, according to Hannah, played a large role in shaping this community, specifically in regard to college-going behaviors and practices. Although I knew the campus was north and not far away, I honestly did not know exactly how to get there from the restaurant. A bit embarrassed, I pulled up the GPS on my smart phone and quickly identified a route to the college. Less than three-quarters of a mile and a couple of turns later, I found myself next to a set of brick and mortar buildings that suggested I had found Egan Community College. As I drove down the street searching for a parking lot, I noticed there were several cars parked along the street, right next to the college. Having spent the past 13 years on campuses that are geographically sprawling, I had not parked in front of an actual building since I graduated from my tiny liberal arts college in Memphis. The idea of being able to park my car and walk into a building in less than 60 seconds was something so

foreign to me. So much so, that I double checked to make sure that I could actually park in the spot I had found, right next to the Student Center.

I spent the next hour walking around and exploring the campus. School was not yet in session, but there were many signs that the start was not too far away. Dozens of six foot tables sat outside the Student Center while a large white tent waited to be staked in the lawn, reminding me of my days working with orientation programs. I passed several small groups of students walking across campus, casually chatting with one another while a student in a red shirt pointed out various buildings. In the library, a group of students sat in a large open space, the lights dimmed and a computer image displayed on a large white screen. Students were scattered on couches and chairs as an older woman stood in front of them and explained how to search for periodicals in the library. Another group of students sat in a small computer lab on the other side of the library, listening to instructions on how to access the college's web portal.

The library at Egan is not a standalone building – rather it is a large room inside a building that houses several other academic departments and administrative offices. As I walked into the building that housed the library, I noticed a bulletin board with a few different flyers advertising the three public state universities. I looked around for the entrance to the library and finally noticed two wooden doors to my left with a sign that said "Library." When I walked in, I was immediately greeted by an older woman sitting at a desk by the front door.

"May I help you?" she asked as I soon as I walked through the door.

Concerned that I wasn't allowed to be there, I responded, "Is it okay if I just look around?"

"Of course," she responded. "Let me know if you need anything."

After wandering around the library for a few minutes, I exited the building and continued to walk the grounds of the campus. Measuring a few blocks long and wide, I was able to walk the entire campus with ease. I passed several academic buildings with signs in front displaying the various academic and technical departments housed inside. I also walked by a recreation center as well as two residence halls. I knew that residence halls were becoming more popular on some community college campuses, but the structure and condition of these buildings suggested they were not brand new.

As I walked back to my car, I decided to stop and take a quick look inside the Student Center. Again, as I entered the building, I was greeted by an older woman who was sitting at a desk, fielding phone calls. As I stood just inside the front doors, I was met with long hallways to my left and right and a large dining room in front of me. As I ventured down the hallways, I came upon a few different student life offices and was asked a couple of times if I needed help finding something. Overall, the building itself, with its white cement blocked walls, long hallways, and rows of offices, felt more administrative and institutional than a place for students to congregate. As I exited the building and walked toward my car, I passed two older White men who were engaged in a conversation.

"How are you today?" they asked, warmly, as they paused their conversation to acknowledge me.

"Doing just fine, thanks," I responded.

During our next guided conversation, I shared the details of my visit to River Town with Hannah. I watched her eyes light up as I told her about driving and walking around town, lunching at Foster's, and exploring Egan Community College.

"It's small, right?"

"River Town or Egan?" I asked, for clarification.

Hannah laughed. "Both, I guess, but I was referring to Egan."

"Yeah, it was much smaller than I expected. But my experience with community colleges is probably a bit skewed from my time living and working in New York. I mean, the two community colleges on Long Island have almost as many students as Public University," I shared with Hannah.

"Oh wow. Yeah, Egan is a really small school – not that many students and the campus isn't very big at all, which is kind of nice. I mean River Town is not very big, so I think it would feel kind of weird if the campus was huge and there were tons of students that attended. It feels like Egan is part of the town rather than *the town.*"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, here at Public University, everything about the university appears big – the campus is huge, there are tons of really big buildings, and there are tons of students. It kind of takes over the town. That's just not the case in River Town. When you drive by Egan, it's just a little section of land with a few buildings scattered around. Technically, you could drive through town and never see the campus. If you live here, you obviously know it's here. Once I started middle school, I drove past Egan almost every day until I graduated from high school.

"What was that like?" I asked.

"It was just normal. Egan is located in between the middle school and the high school so we always passed it on our way to and from when school. You'd see the buildings

and the students walking across campus. We always joke that the only time there's traffic in River Town is when classes are letting out at Egan."

I laughed recalling University Street in my own hometown and how traffic would slow down at five o'clock as those leaving the campus would cross the street to the various parking lots.

"Egan was also part of our running route when my high school volleyball team would condition in the summer," Hannah continued to share. "We would run from the high school down to Egan, through the campus and then back up. We always knew once we got to Egan that we were about halfway through our run, so it was always a bit of relief, especially on hot days, when we turned the corner and saw the campus."

"What was it like running on campus?" I asked.

"It was kind of cool. For those couple of minutes, we'd kind of pretend that we were college students going for a run on campus – at least if we weren't wearing our practice gear that obviously said we were high school students."

For Hannah, Egan Community College, as built capital, provided an almost daily opportunity for her to observe college-going practices and behaviors. While many rural students do not grow up seeing and experiencing college in their own communities, Hannah did. The physical ways in which college manifests itself via buildings, campus signs, athletic facilities, and students walking to and from class were present in her everyday life.

Additionally, there was no main entrance to the campus, nor were there gates or fences around the campus. In other words, there were no physical barriers separating the college from the community or preventing community members such as Hannah from entering the campus space and viewing college-going practices. At the same time, the size

and appearance of Egan seemed to match that of River Town. The actual campus, geographically, covered a small portion of the actual town. The buildings were neither large in size nor ostentatious in appearance and the streets of River Town seemed to merge seamlessly with the pathways of the campus.

Collectively, this built capital played an important role in normalizing college-going for Hannah and this rural community. The physical presence of an institution of higher education in River Town aided in suggesting to Hannah that higher education is an activity in which she should participate. But while the built capital helped to normalize college-going for Hannah, it was a relationship between the community college and the local high school that helped to shape her actual college-going practices and behaviors.

High school – community college partnerships. Through our guided conversations, I learned that Hannah's relationship with Egan Community College was not just one of observation but also participation, much of which was facilitated through academic and co-curricular activities at River Town-Atwood High School. During our very first guided conversation, Hannah shared that she took most of her classes during her senior year of high school at Egan Community College through a dual enrollment program which allowed her to simultaneously complete the requirements for her high school diploma and earn college credits. However, her personal interactions with Egan really began through her participation in organized high school athletics.

"I know you took classes during your senior year at Egan," I recalled during our third guided conversation. "But, did you ever go to Egan for any other reasons?"

"What do you mean?" Hannah inquired.

"Well, when I was in elementary school, sometimes we took "field trips" to the university. Growing up in Martin, the university was kind of the hub for activity in town. So, if the theater majors were putting on a play or a musical that was kid-friendly, our elementary school would bus us the couple of miles to the theater on campus so that we could see the show.

"Oh wow, that's neat," responded Hannah.

"Yeah, I remember when I was in kindergarten, the college students performed the musical "Annie." And I don't know if it was because there weren't enough seats in the little theater or because they wanted to make sure that we could see, but the kindergarten students all sat on the floor in front of the first row. I remember thinking it was so great because I could see everything!"

"No, we never went to see any plays at Egan, but I did go quite a bit in high school to watch volleyball and basketball games."

I found myself pausing in response to Hannah's comment, unsure of what to say. As someone who had only attended, worked at, and studied four-year institutions, I had never thought about collegiate athletics at community colleges.

"There are sports teams at Egan?" I asked, a bit shocked by Hannah's comment.

"Oh yeah, lots of sports – just like here at Public University. Our high school and Egan are really closely aligned through sports."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We're not a powerhouse in athletics, but our high school was decent at sports, and we've had students that went on to play college sports. Typically that's the only reason

someone from River Town-Atwood would ever leave the state to go to college – to play college ball."

"Hmm," I pondered out loud. "Hold on to that thought because I want to come back to it. But, for now, tell me more about going to the ballgames at Egan."

"Well, typically the whole team would meet up to go and watch a game, and we got in free which was definitely nice. I went to volleyball matches and basketball games because those were the sports that I played. They were fun, I guess, but really, we went because they wanted us to see what the next level of sports would be like if we went that route.

"When you say 'they wanted you to see the next level of sports,' who are you referring to? Who is 'they'?"

"Coaches – our high school coaches and the Egan coaches. The high school coaches were typically friends with the college coaches. My high school girls' basketball coach was friends with a lot of the Egan staff, and the women's basketball coach at Egan was actually the father of two girls that played sports with me. I remember, he would come to watch our high school games, and he would always wear his Egan gear. Now that I think about it, we had a lot of connections from the high school to Egan, and it wasn't just the coaches. It was the teachers, too, which was super helpful."

"Tell me about that. How were the teachers helpful?"

"Well, I've mentioned how senior year we actually went to Egan for most of our classes. Leading up to that year, I felt like my high school teachers really tried to prepare us for college classes. I can remember them saying all the time, 'it's not going to be the same in college,' and they knew this because a lot of them were friends with the professors that taught us our senior year at Egan. Actually, we kind of heard that message throughout school.

In elementary, it was always, 'you're going to need to understand this for when you get to middle school.' And in middle school, it was 'things are going to be different when you get to high school.' But, in high school, there was definitely an emphasis on making sure we were ready to take classes at Egan our senior year."

"So, how did the teachers prepare you for that?" I asked.

Hannah responded. "Well, one thing I remember is that instead of taking little tests after we studied a certain unit or section, we would take big tests at the end of each semester – sort of like final exams in college.

"Did you find it helpful?" I asked.

"At first, it was hard getting used to taking this one major test in each subject, but when I got to Egan I realized that the way my teachers at River Town-Atwood had laid out their tests was similar to the way the professors at Egan laid out their tests. So, it wasn't a huge shock to me when I got to Egan and had to take final exams there.

"What else did your high school teachers do to prepare you for classes at Egan?" I asked.

"I remember this one teacher – Mr. Arnold – he was really big on preparation. I actually really liked him as a teacher. He used PowerPoint for pretty much every class, and he would set up the PowerPoint presentations exactly like they would in college. So, he would have background information on the PowerPoint slides and then he would lecture. He taught us how to outline and take notes while he was lecturing. That was actually really helpful."

"When did you have Mr. Arnold for a teacher?" I asked.

“I took him junior year, and that was really helpful because when I went to Egan the next year, my college classes ended up being taught similarly to the way Mr. Arnold taught his classes. There were a lot of lectures, and I already knew how to take notes on lectures. I was definitely able to ease into college classes because of the preparation I got in high school.”

“Were all of your teachers this invested in preparing you for college?” I asked.

“No, not all,” Hannah shared openly. As she started to rattle of the names of other teachers that she felt had really helped her prepare for senior year at Egan, I quickly noticed that they were all women.

“So, I’m sitting here listening to you talk about these teachers and the courses they taught and the ways in which their teaching was instrumental to your learning and your ability to be successful at Egan. And I can’t help but notice that all of these teachers, with the exception of Mr. Arnold, are women. Does this surprise you?” I asked.

Hannah raised her eyebrows and smiled slightly at the mention of this finding. “I don’t know that I have ever really thought about it. But, now that you mention it, there were some differences between the male and female teachers at my high school.” Hannah paused for a second to collect her thoughts. “In some ways, I think the women were more interested in preparing us academically and the men were more interesting in preparing us athletically, at least those of us that played sports.”

“Can you tell me about that?” I asked encouragingly.

“Well, the teachers I had in high school that were women, they were definitely interested in sports. They would go to the games and sit in the same section together and cheer on the teams. Some of them had kids, so they would bring their kids with them, and the

students would stop by and visit. It wasn't required of the teacher, but they all seemed to want to be there. but most of the coaches were men. In fact, I think there was only one male teacher in high school that didn't coach a sport."

"I had a similar experience in high school. All of our male teachers, even our principal and assistant principal coached some sport, and they all went by "Coach," not "Mister."

Hannah laughed quietly. "Yeah, that sounds familiar, except we didn't even call them 'Coach.' They just went by their last name. It was kind of weird when you needed to ask them a question or get their attention and you would say, 'Hey, Conroy.'"

"That's really interesting. So, what were the coaches like as classroom teachers?"

"Not great, to be honest. Most of them were there because they wanted to coach a sport not because they wanted to teach, and they told us that. The business teacher was my basketball coach, and he blatantly told us that he became a teacher so he could coach a sport. The track coach was definitely the same. He taught world history, and he just wasn't a good teacher. He was very passionate about track, but not so passionate about teaching or about world history. He would actually work on track stuff during class. And then if you brought up track while he was covering material, he'd get totally sidetracked and go off on a tangent and the lesson would be over for the day."

"I'm pretty sure I had that same teacher except he coached football and taught geography," I shared with Hannah, recalling my own high school education in a rural community. "He would literally give us worksheets to keep us busy, and then he would call the football players up to his desk and proceed to review different plays with them for the game that Friday night."

"Yeah, I mean it's nice, I guess, if you're an athlete, which I was. My coaches really helped me become a better athlete. They also helped me understand what it would be like to play sports in college and having access to Egan's athletics was a big part of that. So, in that way, if I had decided to play college ball, I think I would have been fairly prepared. But, I chose not to play college sports. And in that case, I was lucky that many of my non-coaching teachers were really good teachers that prepared me for classes at Egan and here at Public, as well."

"So, let's talk about those classes at Egan. What classes did you take there?" I asked.

"Oh goodness, what classes didn't I take there?" Hannah responded. "Senior year, I pretty much took every class at Egan except for P.E. and Spanish. Almost everyone took Composition at Egan. Some, like me, took more classes, but at the minimum, almost every River Town-Atwood senior took at least one class at the college."

"So what else did you take?" I asked.

"I took two semesters of comp, two semesters of accounting, psychology, sociology, speech, and Modern East Asian Cultures. I also took a couple of classes online the summer before senior year. I ended up transferring 34 credits into Public University."

"Thirty-four credits?" I responded in astonishment. "Okay, I want to talk about these thirty-four credits, but first, I'm interested in knowing what your school week was like and the transition back and forth between Egan and your high school."

"Well, we made my schedule so that I took the bulk of my classes at Egan in the morning and then I went back to the high school in the afternoon. I typically had a little break in between classes at Egan and River Town-Atwood, so a lot of times I would just go

to the coffee shop downtown and have a muffin and read for the next day or do my homework."

"So how many classes did you take at Egan?"

"Four each semester – two classes on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and two classes on Tuesday and Thursdays. So, eight over the course of the year."

As I sat and listened to Hannah talk about her class schedule, the former academic advisor in me kicked in. Questions began to flood my head. How did she know which classes and how many classes to take? Who advised her on course selection? How did she make these decisions?

"I think I shared in one of our first conversations that before I entered my doctoral program, I worked in academic advising at a university," I said.

"Yeah, at a school in New York, right?" Hannah replied.

"Yeah, that's right – Stony Brook University on Long Island. I was primarily an academic advisor for first-year students, so, to hear you talk about choosing classes and creating a schedule definitely brings back memories of my first job in higher education. But, when I think about my work as an advisor, I never engaged with high school students who were taking college classes; that job was primarily done by our admissions office.

"Yeah, I never met with an advisor at Egan to discuss my schedule." Hannah responded.

"Really?" I responded. "But, you mentioned just now that there was a 'we' involved in making your schedule, so I'm wondering who that 'we' was?"

"Oh my guidance counselor, Mr. Kelly. He knew which classes would transfer to the different universities, so he made sure that we took the right classes. Actually, he was

involved in planning my schedule every year that I was in high school. All of the students would have appointments with him in the spring to go over their schedule for the next year."

"So what kind of advice or planning did he offer?"

"We kind of started mapping things out at the end of 8th grade – you know, setting up my math and science and English classes and other required courses. Then we would pick electives." Hannah began to rattle off the names of different history, foreign language, and business classes that she took. "Oh, and I also took a class called Foods."

I began to smile at this mention of a course I had not thought about in almost twenty years, remembering my older brother bringing home random meals he had made in a class called "Foods."

"Was this a course where you spent the majority of the time cooking and then eating whatever you made?" I asked.

Hannah chuckled. "Yep! All of my friends were taking it, so I wanted to take it with them. My parents weren't really sure why I was taking that class, so it took a little bit of convincing on their part, but eventually they came around. Did you ever take the class?" Hannah asked.

"No, I never took it, but most of my friends did and my older brother did as well. In fact, in my high school, you could actually take two semesters – Foods I and Foods II."

"Oh wow, we only had one which was good because I don't think I could have convinced my parents to let me take another semester of the course," Hannah responded. "I had things pretty well mapped out from the beginning. It was easy to make changes to your plan, so you never felt like you were trapped into this long-term plan, but it was helpful for

thinking long-term. We also used this online program called ihaveaplaniowa.com. Have you heard of it?"

"No, I haven't. What is it?" I asked.

"It's just this online program that helps you track your high school classes and also learn about the different colleges in Iowa. It kind of helped keep things organized."

"That's really interesting. Do you know if that something specific to your school or if it's used throughout Iowa?

"I have no idea, to be honest. I just know what we used it, and it was helpful keeping track of classes, especially when I started taking college classes at Egan."

"So speaking of classes at Egan, you mentioned that your guidance counselor, Mr. Kelly, helped you choose which classes to take based on what would transfer. Did you know that you were going to Public by the start of your senior year?"

"Yeah, I had. Originally, I thought I might go to a different state university, but I decided it was too far from home. Plus, my boyfriend had decided to go to Public and my older sister was there already, so I decided to go to Public, too. So, since my counselor knew I wanted to go to Public, he made sure I took classes that would transfer over without any problem."

"So, here's something I have been thinking about," I shared aloud. "I think I've mentioned to you that in creating this study I had to read a lot of books and articles to try and understand what I'm studying. So, one of the things that is often mentioned in the literature is the importance of Advanced Placement courses as preparation for going to colleges and how these courses are often absent from rural schools. So, I'm wondering, were there any AP courses offered at River Town-Atwood?

Hannah shook her head. “Not really. You could take AP classes online but there weren't any offered in-person except AP Statistics.”

“Online?” I asked quizzically. “What does it mean to take an AP class online?

“I’m not exactly sure because I didn’t take any, but a couple of my classmates did and it seemed to be more self-taught – like you really had to do a lot of work on your own. I guess similar to an online college class. My friends said it was really challenging, just trying to keep up with the work. It’s interesting though because the students who took the AP classes were all pretty smart and seemed to think, ‘Oh, I can take all these AP courses,’ but they said they had more trouble with the courses than they thought they would.’

“So, it wasn’t very common for River Town-Atwood students to take AP classes online?”

Hannah shook her head again. “No…primarily because we all took college classes at Egan. With AP, you have to take the class and then pass the exam with a certain score in order to get college credit. With the classes at Egan, I just had to take the classes and pass them, and then I got the college credit. Like I said, Mr. Kelly knew which classes transferred to Public, so he made sure I took the right ones. I guess you have to look at it this way. Why would I take a chance in earning college credit through AP when I could pretty much guarantee that I would earn college credit through classes at Egan?”

Captivated by this rural woman’s collegiate academic experiences during her senior year of high school, I probed further. “That’s really interesting, Hannah. So, you’ve told me about the classes you took at Egan and the process for choosing those classes. I’m curious what it was like taking the majority of your final high school classes on a college campus.”

"As much as I've sat here and told you that I felt prepared, I still felt a bit lost – like, literally lost. You'd think that I would have known where all the buildings were. It's such a small campus, and I grew up in the town, but I didn't know where anything was." Hannah laughed and shook her head as she recalled those first weeks at Egan. "That first week of classes, I was walking around trying to find the different buildings where my classes were located. Of course, then once I found the building, I had to find the classroom. One of my classes was in this room that was kind of hidden behind a wall, so of course I couldn't find it right away. I was walking up and down and up and down the hallway searching for this room. And of course, there were students hanging out in the hallway waiting for their next class, and I felt like they were just watching me and thinking, 'What is this girl doing?'"

Hannah and I laughed as she recalled her first week of classes at Egan. "I'm guessing you eventually found the classroom?" I asked.

"Yeah, on like my third trip down the hallway, I finally asked a student, and they pointed out the classroom to me." Hannah shook her head. "I was pretty uncomfortable at first. I mean, here was this place that I drove by every day. We even took a class trip to Egan during our junior year to tour the campus and learn about the college, but I was so lost. It took me a couple of weeks to really find my way around."

"So did you become more comfortable as the year went on?"

"I did. There were still really small classes so you still got to know all the students, and the professors were really interactive during their lectures, more than they are here at Public. We were expected to answer questions and participate in discussion. The first semester I kind of felt like everyone knew I was still in high school – whether they did or not, I don't know – but that's how I felt. But eventually I became less concerned with the fact

that I was still in high school and became more comfortable with taking classes with college students."

"So, you didn't identify as a college student?"

Hannah laughed. "No, I mean I was still seventeen and in high school. I was playing high school sports. I was hanging out with my high school friends. I was just taking classes at Egan. But, spending a lot of my senior year at Egan really kind of helped me get into a college state of mind early, you know? I know that some students will take online classes to get college credits but physically going into classes with professors and on a campus was very helpful. I don't think I would have had that opportunity if I had lived in a different town or gone to a different school."

Once again, Hannah reminded me of the uniqueness of growing up in a rural place that is also home to an institution of higher education. As I learned from my many conversations with Hannah, the relationships between the college and the high school in this rural college community shaped Hannah's college-going practices and behavior in several ways – one of the first being via athletic participation. This was an important finding considering that high school sports participation is typically not a focus on research on rural education. When athletics has been included in studies regarding rural education, it has typically been positioned as a deficit (i.e. lack of sports opportunities in rural schools or in relation to a rural community's identity). Although not centered on geographical location, research has broadly shown that participation in high school team sports is significantly related to college attendance at a four-year college or university (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004). In other words, high school students who participate in organized team sports are more likely to enroll in a four-year institution of higher education. Why would this be the case?

Kaufman & Gabler theorized two possibilities. First, they suggested that participation in high school team sports can lead to higher self-esteem which in turn could lead students to feel more confident in their ability to pursue a higher education. Second, they suggested that high school athletic participation could cultivate a commitment or identification with one's school which could lead to an increased desire to pursue further education. While Hannah's life history might support both of these theories, her participation in high school team sports went beyond self-esteem and commitment to place. Hannah's participation in basketball and other team sports gave her an opportunity to actually visit, observe, and engage with higher education which in turn led to her enrollment at an institution of higher education. Moreover, this opportunity was heavily facilitated through Hannah's high school athletic coach's cultural and social capital. One way cultural capital is defined is via knowledge production and dissemination. In this case, Hannah's coach knew it was important for high school students who were considering playing sports in college to become acquainted with college athletics before they actually committed to playing. The coach's social capital, specifically his relationships with coaches at Egan Community College, helped him actualize this knowledge. In other words, he had the relationships necessary to assist these rural high school athletes with access to observe and begin to understand college via athletic participation. Collectively, the coach's social and cultural capital provided Hannah with opportunities to actually visit a college campus and observe a component of higher education that resonated with her – collegiate athletics.

Hannah described similar forms of social and cultural capital exercised by her high school teachers in preparing students for their senior year at Egan Community College. Hannah explained that her teachers knew that teaching styles and educational expectations

would be different at the collegiate level, so some of her teachers tried to prepare students for this by teaching high school courses in a manner that was similar to what they would experience their senior year at Egan. But, how did the teachers gain this knowledge? As individuals who had all participated in higher education themselves, more than likely, the teachers possessed a general cultural capital related to collegiate learning that they were able to share with their students. However, Hannah also explained that many of the high school teachers were friends with the professors at Egan. In other words, the teachers had relationships with those ultimately responsible for facilitating the collegiate learning of River Town-Atwood students during their senior year. As a result of these relationships, the high school teachers were able to garner a specific understanding of academic expectations – such as note taking, lectures, and semester exams – in order to adequately prepare students for coursework at the college level.

The relationships between coaches and teachers/professors at River Town-Atwood High School and Egan Community College are an important form of community capital in this rural college community, specifically in relation to students' college-going practices and behaviors. Previous scholarship has suggested that one of the challenges that rural communities face is retaining teachers, often because they are unable to connect with the broader community (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, Heilig, 2005; US Department of Education, 1999). However, this did not seem to be the case in River Town-Atwood. From my conversations with Hannah, I learned that once teachers are employed in River Town-Atwood, they typically do not leave, unless it is to advance their career by taking an administrative leadership position. Many of the teachers are originally from River Town-Atwood or a surrounding rural community, suggesting that they intentionally decided to

pursue a teaching college in the area after earning their teaching license. Additionally, many of the teachers have taught generations of students (parents and children) as well as numerous siblings from the same family. During our conversations, Hannah shared stories of her friends who had the same high school teachers as their parents as well as her own brother and younger sister, twelve years apart in age, who had the same elementary school teachers.

Since River Town-Atwood teachers typically remain in the community, their affiliation with the community extends beyond just that of employment. They, themselves, are members of the rural community and are able to build both personal and professional relationships with other members of the community, including faculty and staff at Egan Community College. These relationships, an important form of social capital, consequently, allowed for an exchange of information that was central to preparing high school students, such as Hannah, to be academically successful at the college level. Thus, the social and cultural capital of Hannah's high school teachers and coaches were instrumental in shaping both her pre-collegiate preparation and her access to higher education.

Nonetheless, while these forms of capital contributed significantly to Hannah's understanding of and experiences with higher education, at the same time, they served as a pivotal example of a distinct gendered difference in the way in which college was presented to Hannah via her high school teachers and coaches. As a student-athlete, higher education was presented to Hannah via both athletics and academics: as a prospective college athlete, Hannah spent time at Egan observing college sports; as a high school student at River Town-Atwood, she also spent time at Egan taking college courses. However, the opportunity to understand and experience higher education via athletics was facilitated by her male coaches

while academic preparation for higher education, specifically her senior year at Egan Community College, was facilitated primarily by her female teachers.

This gendered division of labor suggests that female teachers in this rural community experienced much of the responsibility of preparing students academically for higher education. While male coaches were also employed as teachers at the high school, Hannah's secondary educational experiences implied that the male teachers/coaches were allowed to focus primarily on athletic preparation, escaping academic responsibilities for postsecondary preparation. This finding is important given that all students at River Town-Atwood went on to take at least one course at the community college while only a fraction of the student population participated in organized athletics. This division ultimately placed a larger responsibility for college preparation on female teachers, while allowing male teachers to focus on those few students who were considering college athletics. It is also an important finding because it focuses on the gendered ways in which rural students are introduced to higher education rather than the gender differences between male and female students as much of the previous research on rural students has focused (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004).

Through my various conversations with Hannah, I learned that college counseling at River Town-Atwood High School, facilitated primarily by Mr. Kelly (the high school guidance counselor), also played an integral role in shaping her college-going behaviors. While previous literature has positioned college advising in rural schools as subpar at best (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001), Hannah consistently credited Mr. Kelly and his counseling skills with helping her navigate the college-going process. Mr. Kelly's knowledge of curriculum, comprehension of transfer credit articulations,

administrative support, and access to and understanding of college advising tools were all instrumental in guiding Hannah toward a higher education, specifically in the state of Iowa.

Mr. Kelly's knowledge of college preparatory high school curriculum was integral to Hannah's selection of the appropriate high school courses to prepare her for senior year at Egan Community College and her subsequent college years at Public University. While Mr. Kelly made sure that Hannah took the appropriate high school math, science, and English courses, he did not advise her to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses. In fact, AP classes were not readily offered at River Town-Atwood High School.

The absence of AP course offerings in rural schools is not a new finding (Greenberg, 1995). Previous research has cited Advanced Placement courses as a marker of college readiness (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Pelavin & Kane, 1990) and subsequently framed rural schools as "marginalized" because of their lack of AP course offerings (Greenberg, 1995). This construction of marginalized framing has historically been built upon the notion that rural schools are unable to offer AP courses, due to a lack of human and/or financial capital. While this may be true for some rural schools, the absence of AP courses at River Town-Atwood was connected to the perceived utility (or lack thereof) of the Advanced Placement program. While AP courses are often touted as more academically rigorous than traditional high school courses, the overarching purpose of AP courses is to provide students with college credit prior to matriculating into an institution of higher education, possibly decreasing their time to graduation and/or giving them the opportunity to choose multiple courses of study. For students at River Town-Atwood High School, that need was fulfilled by their ability to take college courses at Egan Community College during their senior year.

This finding is important because it suggests a shift in the relationship between Advanced Placement courses and rural communities. While previous scholarship has touted rural schools as deficient because of the absence of AP courses, my research suggests that AP courses may not be the most appropriate academic offering for rural communities who are able to provide their high school students with opportunities to take actual college courses. This may be especially true for rural communities such as River Town-Atwood that support a culture of attending college in-state rather than migrating out of state. Hannah mentioned throughout our meetings that students from her community rarely left the state of Iowa to attend college. She positioned this decision not as a deficit in that students could not leave or did not want to leave but rather that students had a desire to remain. Since Hannah had chosen Public University by the beginning of her senior year, Mr. Kelly's careful guidance ensured that the classes Hannah took at Egan would transfer to Public, culminating in Hannah starting her first year at the university with sophomore standing.

While Mr. Kelly's solid understanding of transfer articulation agreements is most easily understood as a form of cultural capital, it could also be inferred as a form of political capital. In trying to make sense of Hannah's secondary educational experiences, I perused the River Town-Atwood High School website, and more specifically the guidance program's website. The entire website was primarily dedicated to college advising, filled with links to other websites with information about college admissions testing, financial aid, and scholarships. The guidance website also provided direct links to the websites of specific colleges and universities – all of which were located in the state of Iowa. Thus, it can be inferred that the person Hannah credited with helping her navigate the college-going process the most, Mr. Kelly, also supported the college-going practice of remaining in state to pursue

higher education. Therefore, Mr. Kelly's advice to pursue college credits via Egan Community College could be perceived as an exercise of power to encourage students to remain in Iowa for college.

One of the critiques of high school guidance programs in rural communities is the amount of responsibilities placed on guidance counselors and as a result the lack of time they are often able to devote to practices such as college counseling. However, both human and built capitals at River Town-Atwood High School appeared to contribute to Mr. Kelly's ability to focus on his guidance responsibilities. In regard to human capital, Mr. Kelly had a small support staff that assisted him with running the guidance program. When Hannah shared stories of meeting with Mr. Kelly each spring to plan out her schedule of classes for the next academic year, she often mentioned this other individual and spoke of her as part of the guidance office. While this individual was not a formal counselor, Hannah shared that the woman was helpful in answering basic curriculum questions and serving as a resource to both students as well as Mr. Kelly. Thus, it is perceived that the placement of an administrative assistant within the guidance office allowed Mr. Kelly to focus on activities such as college counseling rather than other administrative duties.

In addition to human capital, Mr. Kelly was also able to facilitate college-going practices for students such as Hannah via built capital, specifically technology. As shared in the narrative above, Hannah's guidance counselor utilized the online advising program called *IhaveaplanIowa.gov* to assist with course and college planning. Having worked in higher education, I assumed the program resembled collegiate online portals and thus would require a special login in order to access the site. However, when I went to explore the website, I found that anyone could join for free – so I did. What I found was a comprehensive site

devoted to college and career planning in the state of Iowa. While Mr. Kelly was encouraging River Town-Atwood students to use the program to prepare for college, students already enrolled in a college or university could also use the site to navigate financial planning and career planning, and secondary and post-secondary educators could use the program to help advise students in their future plans.

There are two important considerations regarding the use of this specific form of built capital in assisting Hannah with her college planning. First, the utilization of an online advising program suggested that the school had adequate broadband internet access in order to connect to the website. Though broadband internet access is more prevalent in rural areas than in the past, there are still parts of rural Iowa that are both underserved and unserved in respect to internet access (www.connectiowa.org; Retrieved 11/3/14). Ultimately, River Town-Atwood's guidance program was able to rely on an advanced online portal to assist with course and college planning because they had access to sufficient broadband internet. Second, as Hannah accessed this portal and subsequently the plethora of information tucked away in various digital links and windows, this built capital was transformed into cultural capital. Much of the information that Mr. Kelly had verbally communicated to Hannah regarding college-going was reiterated in this online advising program, including information on in-state community college, private colleges, and public universities. Thus, while Hannah shared having ready access to her guidance counselor, this online program ensured that students such as Hannah could access important information digitally both in addition to and/or in absence of their guidance counselor.

Having grown up in a rural college community like Hannah, I continuously found myself amazed at how similar and yet how different our educational experiences were to one

another. While we both experienced male coaches who focused on athletics more than academics, Hannah, as a student-athlete, benefited from the coaches' social and cultural capital relevant to higher education and collegiate sports. Hannah also benefited from the social and cultural capital of her female teachers, most of whom had developed relationships with the faculty and staff at Egan Community College and thus were able to adequately prepare her for her senior year of college coursework. Individually, I benefited from my parents' social and cultural capital, steeped in their employment at the university in my rural hometown. However, my high school, as an educational institution, lacked a formal relationship with the local university and as a result the students in my high school were not exposed to higher education in the same way as Hannah and her classmates. Thus, the close relationship between the community college and the high school in this rural community is an important finding. While much research has focused on familial capital in regard to college-going and access to higher education (Gildersleeve, 2010; Kiyama, 2010; Nora, 2004), Hannah's life history helps us to understand the importance of capital within institutional settings, such as elementary and secondary schools, in shaping college-going practices and behaviors, especially for first-generation students. As discussed in the next section, Hannah's parents were extremely supportive of her pursuit of higher education but had a specific understanding of higher education, shaped primarily by their interactions with the local community college.

Family and community college. Hannah's family was something we talked about at great length throughout our guided conversations, but it was never something I observed. When I conceptualized my study, meeting the participants' family members was not a requirement; yet, I was hopeful that I would get to spend some time with the participants in

their rural communities. While this proved to be the case with Sara, it was not so for Hannah. I did eventually visit Hannah's hometown as part of my data collection, but I did so by myself.

As I mentioned previously, I felt it was important to actually see the various places that Hannah talked about in order to spatially contextualize her life history. At the end of our first guided conversation, as I rolled up the newly drawn map of her rural home community, I casually mentioned my interest in visiting her hometown.

"It's completely up to you, but at some point, if possible, I'd like to visit your town. Would you be okay with that?" I inquired.

Hannah's eyes widened a bit with concern, yet she nodded her head affirmatively. "You can definitely go see it if you want. I'm just not sure when I would have time to take you, though."

I immediately sensed Hannah's reluctance to be publicly affiliated with me and as a result this study. I recalled a conversation with one of my committee members during my research proposal when we discussed this very circumstance. For rural students, there is little anonymity in their rural communities. It would be next to impossible for a participant to go home and not encounter someone they might know. If Hannah were to take me to her rural community, she would be placed in a situation where she might have to disclose her participation in the study to her family and friends at home.

Recognizing her apprehension, I responded, "Oh, that's completely fine. I don't need you to take me. I really just want to drive around and get a sense of the geography, maybe visit the community college. Does that sound okay to you?"

“Oh yeah, that sounds fine,” Hannah answered. “You should be able to find everything pretty easily,” she added with a slight smile.

I discerned from both her verbal response and her body language that she truly was okay with me visiting as long as she did not have to take me there. While I was initially disappointed to know I would have to make the trip on my own, I also found myself becoming increasingly hesitant to make the trip at all. Over our next couple of meetings, I learned that the only person Hannah had told about the study was her boyfriend and that was only because he wanted to know where she was disappearing to for two hours every Wednesday night. In other words, Hannah had chosen not to tell her family about her participation in the study. Although Hannah would not physically be with me on the trip, I was worried about drawing attention to myself during my community visit and inadvertently to her. As the weeks went on, I found myself putting off the trip to visit her rural community. However, as the end of our scheduled guided conversations began to draw near, I reminded myself of the methodological importance of seeing the places that Hannah had referenced in our various conversations and also that she had given me her consent to visit her community.

So, as I mentioned previously, on a hot summer day, I got into my car and drove to Hannah’s rural home community. In addition to spending time in River Town and touring Egan Community College (described previously), I also spent time driving around and taking note of Atwood. As I recalled my visit during our next guided conversation, Hannah asked, “Did you happen to drive by my house?”

Knowing that she had not disclosed her participation to her family, Hannah's question surprised me as it did not appear to be accompanied by fear or concern but rather genuine interest.

I paused for a second before shaking my head and responding. "No, I didn't think it would be appropriate. I know your parents don't know about the study, and I didn't want to do anything that would jeopardize that, you know? "

"Oh, it would have been fine for you to just drive by, but I understand," Hannah replied.

"I'm wondering if it would be okay if we talked about that for a minute – your decision not to tell your family about participating in the study."

"Sure," said Hannah. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, is there a specific reason you decided not to tell them?" I asked quietly.

Hannah sat back in her chair. "Basically, they just wouldn't understand. You know, my dad didn't go to college and my mom went to Egan for a couple of years; they don't really understand a school like Public. In their minds, I'm here to get a degree so I can get a good job. Participating in a research study – for free – just wouldn't make sense to them. They would be like, 'Why are you telling this woman all this stuff about your life?'"

Hannah's decision not to disclose her participation in this study to her family was closely related to her family's understanding of higher education, primarily that higher education is vocational. In other words, an individual pursues a postsecondary education in order to gain skills or a credential that will in turn help them secure a job. This makes sense given Hannah's family's own college-going-practices which were shaped by growing up in a rural college community.

“My mom went to Egan Community College,” Hannah shared during our very first guided conversation. As we mapped out her town during that initial meeting and talked about the various people and places in her rural community that shaped her college-going practices, Hannah was quick to mention her mom’s experience with postsecondary education.

“When did she go to Egan?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, actually. It was before I was born.”

“Do you know what she studied?

“I’m guessing she went to school for some type of business or accounting since that’s what she’s always seemed to do. She’s always had jobs where she’s kept the books or worked in an office. When I was younger, she worked for some research company where she basically wrote out reports. She didn’t do any of the research, more of the clerical work. And now, she manages the business side of the farm for my dad. So, it’s always been something related to business or an office in some way.

“So did your mom talk about her time at Egan when you were growing up?”

“Not really. I do remember my mom talking about going to Egan, but I don’t know that I ever really had a conversation with her about her experiences there – like what she studied or the classes she took. I just always knew that she went there. I’m guessing she knew she needed some skills so she could get a job and Egan is right here in our backyard, so it made sense for her to go there for school.”

As we continued with our conversations, I learned that Hannah’s mother was not the only person in her family who attended Egan. Hannah’s older brother enrolled in Egan

Community College after high school and graduated a couple of years later with an associate's degree.

"My brother never really wanted to go to college," Hannah shared. "He would have been happy just going right to work, but my dad was adamant that my brother at least go to community college."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Why didn't my brother want to go to college or why did my dad make him?" asked Hannah.

"Both," I responded.

"I don't know that my brother thought he needed to go to college," Hannah shared. "You didn't grow up on a farm, did you?"

I shook my head. "No, I grew up in a farming community, but not on a farm."

"Well, when you grow up on a family farm, there seems to be this expectation that at least one of the kids will join the business and then eventually take over the family farm. In my family, that was my brother, Luke. He was expected to follow in my father's footsteps. But, my dad never went to college. He went to work with my grandpa on the farm right after he graduated from high school. So, I think it was hard for my brother to understand why my dad would tell him go to college when my dad never did. Plus, Luke grew up learning the business, so I think he felt he already knew everything.

"So why do you think your dad wanted Luke to go to college?"

"I think for a couple of reasons," Hannah began. "I've told you that people in our town go to college. You don't have to go to a big state school, but you need to go somewhere. I don't know if I've mentioned this, but my dad is on the school board; so, he's

a pretty visible person. I think it's important to him that the people in the community see his kids go on to school. I also think my dad knows that farming is different now than when he started out; it's more complicated. He wants the business to continue to be successful, so it was like, 'You are going to school and you are going to learn Ag Business'."

As Hannah shared the story of her family's educational and career expectations for her brother, I wondered about Hannah's family's expectations for her.

"Is there a reason why your brother was expected to go into farming? Would it be okay if you or your sisters wanted to farm as well or instead of your brother?"

"Oh yeah, it would definitely be okay, but I think the reason Luke was expected to farm was because he grew up doing it. My older sister and I would help out on the farm when needed, but we didn't grow up with regular farm chores like my brother did. In fact, my dad didn't allow me or my older sister to have an after-school or weekend job during the school year. He really felt that school should be our main priority. Even now that I'm in college, my dad's ideas about work and school haven't really changed. He's thrilled that I have an internship this summer, but he really doesn't want me to work during the school year."

"So what does your family expect you to do after you graduate from college?" I asked.

"They expect me to be successful…get a job out of college, stay in Iowa, have a family, have kids and stay close so they can see them and everything."

"Did your family ever suggest that you just continue going to Egan after high school and get an associate's degree like your mother and brother?"

"I think what my parents want for me is stability. I think that's what being successful means to them. And I think they realize that in today's society, you really need a bachelor's degree to get a good job. You know, my mom just went to Egan, which was good for back then. But, my dad didn't go at all. He was still very successful, so they both turned out all right. You know that they were both kind of lucky."

As I walked back to my office after that conversation, I thought about my own family and their understanding of higher education and how it shaped my own college-going behaviors. While I am the first person in my family to pursue a PhD, my parents (who were both college-educated) possessed a general understanding of research and its importance, primarily due to their employment at the local university in our rural community as well as their network of friends, many of whom were professors with doctoral degrees. I attended the university nursery school where education and social science students performed observations. When my father was diagnosed with cancer when I was a young teenager, he sought treatment at the state teaching hospital, 120 miles away from our rural community. While my family members were never the individuals conducting or leading research studies, it was demonstrated to me early on that participating in research studies, specifically led by universities, was an important contribution to society, and it was something our family supported.

Hannah's family's understanding of post-secondary education was influenced by their multi-generational experiences embedded in a rural college community. They understood higher education, both through the presence of the community college as well as family members' experiences at that specific community college, to be something that provided you with a credential that then allowed you to get a job and lead a stable life. In other words,

higher education was framed as vocational or having a market value (Koricich, 2014). This is an important finding because it helps to explain why Hannah believed her family would not have understood her participation in this study. While undergraduate student participation in research activities is often common practice at research universities, it is not commonplace at community colleges. Additionally, although a portion of students who enroll in community colleges eventually transfer to four-year institutions, the majority of students seek a degree that will enable them to go directly to work upon graduation (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Because Hannah's family was most familiar with higher education at the community college level, their understanding of higher education, as market value, suggested to Hannah that her college-going behaviors and practices should also reflect this understanding. In other words, Hannah should engage in collegiate activities that will ensure she receives a credential so that she can go on to find a stable job.

Hannah's family understanding of higher education as a market value was also influenced by their gendered understanding of their natural capital. In other words, Hannah's college-going practices and behaviors were shaped by the family farm and the various roles the different individuals assumed in relation to the farming operation. Hannah's family viewed farming as a patrilineal practice – ownership of the land and the responsibility of farming the land was passed down from father to son (Danbom, 2006). Her father's educational experiences related to farming were similar to that of a trade that relied more on apprenticeship and hands-on training than formal in-class education. However, Hannah's father understood that farming practices had changed drastically since he entered the profession and that it would benefit the farm, and subsequently the family, for his son to receive some formal training. Thus, Luke was encouraged to enroll in the local community

college. Once again, this narrative illustrated the way in which Hannah's family understood work to be an outcome of participating in post-secondary education.

At the same time, Hannah's relationship to the farm was different than what has traditionally been defined as women's roles on the family farm – specifically taking care of the home (Fink, 1986). While Hannah helped out on the farm when needed, her relationship to farming and subsequently to the land (i.e. natural capital) was almost non-existent. Farming was primarily the job of the men in her family, and the land was simply where she lived. She was not allowed to have a job during the school year, and she also did not mention responsibilities inside the home. As a result, her college-going practices and behaviors were shaped differently by the natural capital in her community. While her brother was encouraged to go to the community college in order to gain the education necessary to remain on the farm, Hannah was encouraged to consider and participate in higher education at both the two-year and baccalaureate levels. Similar to her father's understanding that her brother needed post-secondary education in order to continue to farm competitively, Hannah's father also knew that a bachelor's degree would provide his daughter with more opportunities for work – especially since she would not be participating in the family farm operation for her career.

College-going as a community endeavor. Up to this point, I have discussed the physical presence of the local community college, the relationship between the K-12 school system and the community college, and the familial understanding of higher education, influenced by interactions with the local community college. Yet, Hannah acknowledged early on in our data collection that it was not just her family or her school but rather her entire community that expected its students to go to college. Since Hannah's community

seemed counter to the literature related to rural college-going, I chose to explore this idea of community college-going with her.

"So, you've mentioned numerous times that the community has high expectations for students to go to college," I stated as Hannah and I talked about her college-going practices and behaviors. "Why do you think that your community expects you to go to college? Why is it a community expectation?" I asked, during one of our last guided conversations.

Hannah responded, "I think they want…" She paused for a moment as she formulated her response. "Right now, they're [the community] in the process of trying to make things bigger. The community just wants to be bigger than what it has been. It's not that a lot of the parents went to college or that they want to carry on a legacy or that sort of thing. They just want people to be successful coming out of Atwood-River Town. I think they want to have a reputation that people from here are successful."

"Okay, so I have two questions related to what you just said. First, we've talked about your own idea of what it means to be successful – get a job, have a stable income, buy a house, etc. Do you think your community would define success similarly or in a different way?"

"Oh, definitely similar to the way my family and I define success," responded Hannah. "My ideas about success did not just come from my parents…I feel like it's a community definition of success. Success is stability and stability is a good job with a steady income. But like I've said before, we know that getting a good job nowadays often requires at least a bachelor's degree."

"So, second question…why do you think your community wants to be known as successful or having successful residents? Why is that important?" I asked.

"I think they really want to grow…you can just tell by the businesses that they're trying to bring in. We have a McDonalds and a Wal-mart now and they just want more I think. I know from my own business courses that if you're trying to recruit a new business into an area you have to be able to show why it would be good for the company. I guess Atwood-River Town thinks that a community that takes education seriously would be a good place for companies to invest."

"Do you think the presence of the community college helps in defining your community as successful?"

"I'm not sure," Hannah responded. "I think…maybe… that it provides us with some economic stability. The school's been here forever, although not always as Egan…from what I understand, it's had a few different names. But, there's been some type of college in our town for well over a century. Because we have Egan, we also have more people coming in and out of community for school, so maybe we have more businesses than other rural communities?"

"What about the current businesses in Atwood-River Town?" I asked. "Are they supportive of students going to college?

"Oh, definitely," Hannah responded.

"Can you give me an example? I asked.

Hannah raised her eyes to the ceiling as she searched for a story to share. "My senior year of high school, we all went over to Egan for a luncheon. The superintendent came and talked. Then the president of the bank spoke just because he's closely tied with Egan. Some of the faculty from Egan were there as well."

"Was this like an honors luncheon?" I asked.

"Kind of…It was to recognize those of us that had taken a lot of classes at Egan while we were in high school. I remember the superintendent asking all of us to stand up. Then he said, 'Anyone who has ten or fewer credits transferring to college, please sit down.' And, almost no one sat down. He just kept going and going…'who has fifteen credits?…Twenty credits?...More than twenty-five credits?' He really wanted to demonstrate to the members of the community that we were successful students… 'go-getters' is what I think the [the superintendent] called us," said Hannah.

"So, it was kind of a community celebration for the students who had earned a lot of credits at Egan?"

"Yeah, I guess it was," responded Hannah. "The local businesses also provide a lot of college scholarships," Hannah continued as we discussed.

"Oh, really?" I asked.

"Yeah, I got a scholarship from [name of business retracted to preserve anonymity] and then a couple of memorial scholarships, and then I also got this other scholarship that is paid for by a professional sports player that graduated from my high school."

"How did you find out about the scholarships?" I asked.

"Oh, from Mr. Kelly [the high school guidance counselor]. He was really good about making sure we knew about the scholarships. He was constantly sending emails to our entire class and pulling us into his office to help us fill out scholarships. College is expensive, and he never wanted to make it not an option for someone."

As I left our conversation that day, I thought about my own college-going experiences related to scholarship money. While we didn't have our own email accounts when I was in high school, I vividly remember the guidance counselor making announcements over the

intercom about the various local scholarships we could apply for and encouraging us to come see her in her office. As part of my analysis, I visited the school counselor's website to try and better understand the role of the community in financially investing in its students. Directly linked from the main counseling website was a list of almost 50 college scholarships provided by the local community, ranging in value from $100 to $3,000. They all had various stipulations: one-third of the scholarships were specifically for students attending Egan Community College. Some of the scholarships required that students major in a certain discipline or that they had participated in certain co-curricular activities during their secondary education. At the same time, about 20 percent of the scholarships explicitly stated financial need as their first requirement suggesting that some community members/businesses understood the importance of need-based funding.

Ultimately, Egan Community College provided Atwood-River Town with a sense of financial/economic stability. Brown and Schafft (2011) explained that economic activities in rural areas are typically focused around a specific industry or organization. In the Atwood-River Town community, that organization was Egan Community College. Having been in the local community as an institution of higher learning for over a century, Egan not only had the capacity to draw new students to the rural area, but it also served as an employer to hundreds of faculty and staff members. Subsequently, Egan's presence in the community provided a unique opportunity to support and engage with local businesses (i.e., the bank president that Hannah described as having close ties to Egan). Those local businesses and individuals were, in turn, able to financially invest in the post-secondary education of its local graduates, providing students such as Hannah with a unique form of financial capital to support her college-going practice.

Conclusion

Hannah's life history as re-presented in this chapter was counter to the majority of literature I reviewed and presented in Chapter Two of this study. Her life history demonstrated a very important understanding related to post-secondary education and community of place – that being, the presence of an institution of higher education and the ability of that institution to connect with the larger community can transform a rural community into what I refer to as a rural college community. Hannah's life history also documented specific ways in which an institution of higher education through various forms of capital supported the development of a learned social practice of college-going including, 1) the physical presence of a college manifested through natural and built capital, 2) relationships between a K-12 education system and the community college as well as family members and the community college, and 3) local investment in students manifested through financial capital.

Sara's Life History

Sara was enrolled in the spring semester of her second year at Public University when I first learned about her. A colleague of mine had facilitated a focus group at Public University, and Sara was one of the participants. Always early to arrive, Sara and my colleagues casually chatted while they waited for the other participants to arrive. It was during this brief conversation that my colleague learned that Sara was from rural Iowa and had grown up in a community rather close to her own rural Iowa town. As they talked, their conversation turned to college and their experiences leaving their rural communities in order to participate in higher education. Always a supportive friend, my colleague took the

opportunity to mention my dissertation study to Sara. Sara indicated interest and gave my colleague her name and email address to pass along to me. At the time of this interaction, I was still in the proposal stage of my dissertation and had not yet received approval from my committee or from Iowa State University's Institutional Review Board. So, I tucked Sara's contact information into a safe place and waited to contact her.

At the end of June, after receiving approval from both my committee and IRB, I sat down at my computer and nervously typed an email to Sara. More than three months had passed since my friend had met Sara and taken her contact information, so I was unsure if Sara would still be interested in participating or even remember my study. Additionally, it was now summer, and I had no idea where Sara was residing. Was she at her university? Was she at home? Was she out of the state or perhaps even out of the country?

A day after I hit the "send" button, I received a reply from Sara telling me that she was interested in participating, and that she was living at home this summer – in a town called Whately, approximately two and a half hours from where I lived. Similar to Hannah, Sara had also secured an internship for the summer. A first-generation college student and declared Family and Consumer Sciences Education and Studies (FCS) major, she was working with a county extension office located near her rural community. She was also working a few nights a week at an ice cream shop about forty minutes from her home.

A few additional email exchanges assisted in confirming Sara as a participant for the study (i.e. self-identification as a rural woman and current undergraduate student) and negotiating the place in which our guided conversations would ultimately be held – her rural Iowa community. Unlike Hannah, my meetings with Sara were less structured. We met on various days of the week, sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon.

Sometimes we met twice in one week; other times more than a week passed before we saw each another in person. Sara invited me into her home where we conversed at her kitchen table, outside on her patio, and once in a sheep pen. Our conversations continued well past our formal data collection and are documented in Chapter Six: Methodological Epilogue. Convening in her rural community provided occasions to meet and interact with her family members as well as see and experience the physical spaces and places in which her college practices and behaviors were shaped, ultimately contextualizing and analyzing her life history in a rich manner (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

In the following life history, I used Flora and Flora (2013) notion of community of place as an organizing framework through which to explore how rural identity, education (i.e., social system), and geography shaped post-secondary educational opportunity for Sara in her rural community. Specific attention was given to the myriad ways in which community capital, urbanormative structures, and gender influenced Sara's understanding of post-secondary education as an opportunity within her rural community.

A rural farming community

As I indicated in Hannah's life history, space and place and the way they facilitated rural women's college-going was central to this study. The mapping exercise and my self-guided tour of Hannah's rural community provided me with a strong context for understanding the relationship between place and the various forms of community capital that shaped her college-going practices and behaviors. However, my comprehension of Sara's college-going process was different primarily because of the time I spent in the physical spaces that shaped her post-secondary educational opportunity. My interaction with these spaces provided me with an understanding of the ways in which various community

capitals as well as urbanormative structures facilitated her college-going in very different ways than that of Hannah. The time I spent with Sara in Whately also supported the development of a trusting and personal relationship between researcher and participant.

On a bright afternoon in mid July, I left for my first trip to Sara's rural community – Whately, Iowa - a rural community with a population under 1,000 people. Google Maps indicated there were two different routes I could take to get to Sara's home from where I lived. One route followed a major interstate while the other route relied on state roads and highways. In an attempt to immerse myself in rural Iowa, I decided to drive the state roads rather than the interstate. Although the interstate might have reduced my travel time by 15 minutes or so, the state roads allowed me to actually see Iowa – the myriad small towns and communities that had been bypassed, often in the name of convenience.

The route to Whately was rather straightforward, literally – a few turns here and there and then 130 miles on an open road that switched back and forth from two to four lanes of highway. I passed acres of farmland bursting with tall green stalks and fluffy soybean plants, still months from being harvested. There were metal signs inviting me down roads to other small towns and communities. And of course, there was the Iowa staple – the Casey's gas station – dotting the road sides of towns that I had heard of but never seen.

Before our first guided conversation, Sara sent me an email to confirm our meeting time and location and included a description of her house. "I live in an old farm house down a long lane. There will probably be a tractor parked at the end of our lane. We also have one big blue silo. We live on top of a big hill" (Sara, personal communication, July 2014). Almost as soon as I was welcomed into Whately, my navigation system's robotic voice instructed me to turn right off of the blacktop onto a gravel road. My small car shook

violently as it traveled over the small white pebbles, my rearview window clouded by the dust kicked up by the rotation of my tires. After a mile of bumpy terrain, I turned left onto another gravel road and looked closely at the mailboxes that sporadically lined the road until I finally came to the one bearing Sara's address. Just as she had stated, there was a tractor, a blue silo, and an old farmhouse on top of a hill. I steered my car up the lane, acres of green farmland flanking either side. As I pulled my car into a dusty open space in front of an old red barn, a petite woman dressed in a Public University t-shirt, old jeans, and a pair of moccasins opened a screen door on the side of the house and walked out to greet me.

"Well, hello!" she said.

"Hi! You must be Sara!" I responded as I stepped out of my car.

"I am!"

"It's so nice to finally meet you," I said.

"It's nice to meet you too," she replied. "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

"Not at all," I responded.

"Well, come on inside. Do you need help carrying anything?" Sara asked as she watched me struggle to unload all of my supplies from my car.

I laughed nervously. "That would be great," I replied as I threw my backpack over my shoulder and pulled out the larger poster paper for our mapping activity.

We walked into the house and into the family's eat-in kitchen. In the middle of the room was a round wooden table with papers scattered on top of it and a few chairs seated around it. A large mobile dishwasher was parked in front of the kitchen sink. It whirled loudly as the bright green hose connected to the back of the machine moved the water from

the washer into the sink and down the drain. I dropped my backpack to the floor and propped my poster paper up against the table.

“Would you like something to drink?” Sara asked.

“A glass of water would be great,” I responded.

While Sara poured me a glass of water, I unpacked my audio recorder, my notepad and my guided questions.

“Here you go,” she said as she placed the glass in front of me and then sat down in the chair to the right of me.

Similar to my first meeting with Hannah, Sara and I began our initial guided conversation by reviewing the details of the research project. I provided an overview of the various guided conversations I sought to have throughout the summer and also shared some of my own narrative – where I came from, where I went to school, how I got to Iowa, and also my research interest in rural college students. We then moved into the mapping exercise which allowed me to learn some general information about Sara’s rural community. I asked her questions about physical boundaries and she drew lines to designate various roads, railroad tracks, and small bodies of water. I asked her questions about local businesses, and she quickly outlined the location of the town bars, the local gas station, and the tire store. I asked about her schools and she drew boxes and arrows to indicate the distance between her elementary school located east of Whately in the rural town of Carver and her secondary school located just a few miles from her family’s farm. By the end of our first guided conversation, I had a large poster paper filled with black squiggly lines, different shapes and a basic understanding of the geographic layout of Sara’s rural community.

As we wrapped up our initial conversation, Sara walked me out to my car where we were greeted by the family dog.

"Chip! Get down!" yelled Sara as a shaggy black and white animal jumped up and placed his front paws on my chest. "Just push him down."

I gently pushed Chip off of me and leaned down to scratch his head.

"He's cute," I said to Sara.

"Just be careful, he gets a little excited when he sees people," she explained. "And by excited, I mean he pees."

I laughed at this new piece of information and tucked it away for future reference.

As I placed my materials into my car, I decided to bring up the idea of taking a tour of Sara's community. Similar to my first meeting with Hannah, I shared with Sara my interest in seeing and visiting the various spaces that she had just described in her map. I also shared my concern in wanting to protect her identity as a participant in the study.

"Well, I don't have time today…" Sara began to reply.

"Oh, I didn't mean today," I quickly responded. "I was thinking during one of our future conversations."

"Yeah, we can totally do that," said Sara. "It shouldn't take too long, but I'd be happy to show you around. And, by the way, we don't have to always meet here at the house. We could meet at the library in town or we could just walk around on the farm. Just wanted to offer that up."

"That sounds nice," I responded.

A little over a week later, I got back in my car and drove to Whately for my second guided conversation with Sara. Our meeting was scheduled for 10:30 am which meant I

needed to be on the road no later than 7:30 am. Sara had casually mentioned during our first meeting that she always arrives early and hates when people are late, so I figured I should probably do my best to arrive before our scheduled meeting time.

As I drove up the lane, about five minutes early, I was greeted by a small herd of cattle grazing on the left side of the fence and Sara's brother, Dwight, working on his truck. He gave me a quick wave, which I returned, and then went back to working on his truck. I pulled my car into the same dusty spot in front of the old red barn that I had parked in during my first visit to Sara's house.

As I stepped out of the car, I heard a young man's voice.

"Sara's over at Grandma and Grandpa's house, but she should be back soon," said Dwight, as he continued to tinker with his truck. "You can wait inside, if you want."

"Would it be okay if I just walked around the property instead?" I asked.

"Sure. Fine with me," replied Dwight, casually.

It was a beautiful morning for an Iowa summer. The temperature had not yet reached 70 degrees and the farm was quiet and calm, void of humming tractors or any other farm machines. In front of me stood the big blue silo and next to it, a large empty pin with numerous feeding troughs. In the distance, up on a hill, were two striking horses which I later learned were both mustangs. Behind the pastures were rows upon rows of farmland filled with young soybeans and corn. I wandered over to the other side of the old farmhouse where I came upon an area that housed a large herd of sheep. As I leaned against the fence watching the sheep enjoy their late breakfast, I was joined by Chip, the family dog. Remembering his tendency to get excited around people, I sidestepped his attempt to jump

on me and tried to distract him by scratching behind his floppy ears. A few minutes later, I heard a vehicle racing up the lane.

I walked back to the other side of the house just in time to see Sara climb out of her big green Chevy 4x4 truck.

"Hey!" she said as she climbed out of the truck.

"Hey!" I replied.

"Sorry I'm a little late. Grandma and Grandpa needed some help this morning, so I had to run over there before our meeting," Sara explained.

"Totally fine," I responded. "Where do your grandparents live?"

"You see that house on the other side of the field?" asked Sara as she pointed to an area south of her family's home. "That's their house."

"Oh wow, that's pretty close," I responded.

"Yeah, Dwight and I created a walking path through the fields that connects our houses. I took the road today because I drove over but sometimes I like to walk over there. So you want to go see the town?" Sara asked.

I was excited that Sara had remembered my request to tour Whately, and that she was still willing to show me around.

"Yeah, that sounds great. Do you want me to drive?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter to me. I'm happy to drive since I know where I am going," responded Sara.

I opened the passenger door to Sara's large green truck, placed my right foot on the floor board of the cab and hoisted the rest of my 4'10" frame into the 18 year old truck. As I landed inside, memories of my first experience driving a truck immediately washed over me

– the soft, vinyl-covered bench that stretched the length of the cab, the antiquated gear shift on the steering wheel column, the feel of the large cabin.

During the summer between my junior and senior years of college, I worked as a staff member at a local Girl Scout camp. One of my daily responsibilities was to deliver supplies to the different campsites. The camp was geographically large and relied on an old, rusted gray truck, built the same year I was born, to make the daily deliveries. Driving a truck was a completely new experience for me; my family had relied on a 1985 Nissan Sentra hatchback to get around Martin. I remember how nervous I was the first time I pulled myself into the truck. I reached under my seat and found the lever that moved the long bench forward. I stretched my right leg until my foot rested comfortably on the brake pedal and then turned the key in the ignition. As the engine roared to life, I pulled down on the gear shift that sat on the side of the steering wheel and took my foot off the brake. I held my breath as the truck rolled forward a few feet. I moved my foot over to the gas pedal and pushed down on it slightly, and the old truck began moving slowly over the dirt road toward the first campsite. It took a few trips, but the nervousness I felt driving the truck that first time eventually went away, and I found that I actually looked forward to my daily drives in the old, rusted truck. But, after that summer, I never really had a reason to drive or even ride in a truck until that day Sara took me for a tour of her town.

"So, are there specific places you want to visit?" Sara asked, as she pulled her own petite frame into the cabin of the truck and settled in behind the steering wheel, bringing me back to reality.

“I’m going to leave it up to you…wherever you feel comfortable taking me and showing me around,” I said. “Is it okay if I turn the audio recorder on while we drive…just to capture our conversation?” I inquired.

“Sure,” replied Sara.

I turned the audio recorder on and then reached around and buckled my seat belt. Sara wrapped her hand around the gear shift, lowered it into the drive position, and began to steer her truck down the lane toward the gravel road. At the end of the lane, she made a left hand turn, navigating the truck with ease as we traveled over the small gravel rocks.

As we approached the stop sign, Sara gently pressed down on the brake pedal and brought the truck to a stop.

“So, you see that blacktop up that way,” said Sara pointing to a paved road that ran perpendicular and to the north of where we sat.

“Yeah,” I responded.

“That road is kind of the county line. Whately is in Carter County, and on the other side of that road is Tulip County. Most of my family actually lives up in that direction…in Tulip County, not Carter. So, in some ways I guess I feel a close connection to Tulip County too because my family is there.

“When you say family, who are you referring to?” I asked.

“My dad’s family. They’re pretty much all in this area. My grandparents that live behind us are my dad’s parents. And then his siblings and their families are the ones over in Tulip County.”

Sara moved her foot from the brake pedal back to the gas pedal and then turned the steering wheel to the right on to another gravel road.

"So, I know your family farms, but do other members of your family farm as well?" I asked Sara.

"Nope, we're pretty much it," replied Sara. "Mom grew up on a farm about an hour from here, but none of the kids wanted to farm, so they sold the land…just a few years ago, actually."

"So, what do people in Whately and this part of Iowa do for work?" I asked.

"Well, there are still a lot of people who farm in the area," said Sara. "But, a lot of people that farm here also have other jobs. It's hard to make a living just farming anymore because we just don't have as much land as we used to have. So, for example, my family farms, but my mom works full-time as the town librarian and my dad drives a truck five days a week. My brother, Dwight, helps out on other farms for extra pay and I've been working in some capacity since I was fifteen years old."

"Wow," I responded.

"Yeah, Dad's up and out of the house by like three in the morning and then he comes home around five or six in the evening…really just depends on his load for the day and where he needs to go."

"So what do other people do for work?" I asked.

"There are some that also drive trucks. Then, there are people that work at the different businesses down on Main Street, but those people pretty much own their businesses. Others travel to a nearby metropolitan area [name of city extracted for purpose of anonymity] or other towns for work," shared Sara. "But, farming is a pretty big part of our community. I think I mentioned this during our first conversation, but for me, rural is agriculture. There are lots of small towns in Iowa, like Whately, that are not close to any city or bigger town.

But, not all of those towns are agricultural-based. I think rural is really a combination of both – geography and agriculture."

"So what makes Whately rural?" I asked.

"I think a bit part of it is the land. We're a farming community; it's all about agriculture. Everywhere you drive in town, you see the farmland. Even if someone doesn't farm or work at a seed plant or a grain elevator, it's still very much a part of who we are as a community. People talk about crops and planting and harvesting even if they don't farm."

Sara's definition of rural was a bit different from Hannah's definition. While Hannah included agriculture as part of her definition of rurality, it was by no means central to her definition. Sara, on the hand, defined rurality heavily in relation to agriculture, land, and space. Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith (2011) explained that individuals in rural communities often perceive the entire town as his/her community because the entire space is accessible in everyday experience. This notion helps to explain how agriculture can serve as a defining element within a community even when some community members are not involved in farming or agriculture work.

"So, those tracks in front of us…" Sara said, as she continued with the tour, pointing to the railroad tracks that ran parallel to the highway in front of us. "Those same tracks run all the way to Public University. And then on the other side of the tracks is part of the Washington Highway. Again, it's the same Washington Highway that runs right by Public."

"That's neat," I responded to Sara.

"Yeah, I mean it might sound a little weird, but I kind of like knowing that when I see a train at school that it more than likely came through or its on its way through Whately. Kind of makes me feel connected," Sara shared.

While the beginning of my tour of Whately provided an opportunity for Sara and I to continue to build our relationship and connect around our rural upbringings, it also provided me with an introduction to the natural and built capital present in her rural community – the rows of cropland and the ways in which state highways, gravel roads, and railroad lines intersect with the land as well as connect the community with other parts of the state (Flora & Flora, 2013). Having grown up on a farm herself and having strong familial ties to the community, Sara was attuned to and able to articulate the importance of agriculture to Whately. She helped me to understand the historical relationship between the natural capital and built capital, highlighting the ways in which the roads and railroad tracks were originally built in order to carry crops to market. And yet, today, those same roads and railroad tracks were responsible for physically linking Sara to her university.

Our discussion of agriculture as employment also provided insight into the relationship between the natural capital and economic capital in her rural community, illustrating how most farmers in Whately must now supplement their full-time farming operations with other full-time jobs. Danbom (2006) explained that this is typical for most rural farmers in the 21st century citing that "those who still farm derive more than four-fifths of their income from off-farm sources, more than half of farm operators now work off the farm, and 80 percent of them have full time jobs" (p. 258). Much of this is attributed to the lower returns on farming as well as the need for benefits such as health insurance that off-farm employment may provide (Danbom, 2006). My understanding of Whately's economic capital was further expanded as our tour moved to Whately's downtown area.

"So, I thought I would take you downtown, next, if that's okay," said Sara.

"Sure," I replied. "Where's downtown?"

“So, downtown sits north of the highway. It used to run east-west like a lot of the other towns around here which was good because when you drove on the highway, you’d pass through it. But, the town burned down…twice.

“Twice?” I responded, rather surprised.

“Twice,” Sara confirmed as she made a right hand turn on to the paved highway. “So, now it runs north-south which means you don’t really see the town when you pass through.”

“Hey, I recognize that place,” I said, pointing to a large white sign that read ‘Charlie’s Farm Equipment.’

“You do?” said Sara, surprisingly.

“Yeah, when I was looking up directions on Google maps, ‘Charlie’s Farm Equipment’ showed up front and center when I zoomed in on Whately,” I said.

“That’s hysterical,” Sara replied. “So, yeah, we have a farm store in town…they sell tires and stuff.”

“So, who shops there? Local people here in Whately?” I asked.

“Locals definitely, but also people from other towns nearby. Down there,” said Sara as she pointed to the right, “that’s our gas station.”

I looked over at a sign with a name I did not recognize. “Is it locally owned?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. It’s definitely not a Casey’s or whatever,” Sara responded.

“What do they sell there?”

Sara glanced over at me, a quizzical expression on her face. “Um, gas,” she responded sarcastically.

I laughed. “I mean, besides gas.”

“Not much,” replied Sara. “We have a grocery store on Main Street that we’ll drive by in a second.”

“Is that where you do most of your shopping?” I asked.

“Shopping depends on the day and what we need. This summer, I’m working in a town over to the east, and they have a pretty decent sized grocery store. So, I’ll pick up some stuff there. But for really big things, we usually go to a nearby metropolitan area [name of city extracted for purpose of anonymity].

“How far of a drive is that?” I asked.

“About 45 minutes,” Sara replied. “But my mom banks in that city, so if she needs to go to the bank then we’ll just make a trip and get stuff. There’s a pretty big Wal-Mart north of here that we used to go to. For some reason we just don’t really go to Wal-Mart anymore. I guess we found our way around it. There’s a big grocery store north of us and west of us, so we can go to either of those places for groceries and stuff for the house.

“How far of a drive are those places?” I asked.

“It’s at least 25-30 minutes to any grocery store from here. If we just need something little, we can probably get it here in town. But, we don’t really do our major shopping in Whately.”

Sara rounded the corner on to the main road through downtown Whately. “So this is our Main Street. It's not quite as picturesque as some small towns, but it's whatever.”

As I quickly glanced around, I noticed a mix of old and new buildings, lined with sidewalks on both sides of the street.

Sara continued. “That's the fire station and the ambulance place.”

“Do you have a hospital nearby?” I asked.

Sara laughed. “Nearby is always relative, Kathleen. The nearest hospital is probably about the same distance as the grocery store.”

I paused for a moment as I thought about the privilege of growing up in Martin – a rural town that had both a hospital and a grocery store. While residents in my rural community were often transferred to larger medical centers that were one to three hours away and/or had to travel an hour to the closest shopping mall or big box stores, our basic food, clothing, and medical needs could be met within our physical space.

“And the ambulance company? Is it run by paid employees or volunteers?” I asked.

“Volunteers,” Sara responded. “Some of the guys I dated and were friends with growing up are now firefighters here.”

“Have most of the people you’ve grown up with stayed in the area?”

“I think so…I mean, that’s the hard part of going away to college. I feel like I don’t really know anyone here anymore or know what’s going on. I mean, I know it’s only been two years, but I feel disconnected.

“Can you say more about that?” I inquired, gently.

Sara slowed her truck, almost to a complete stop. “Well, there are those in Whately who have been here or at least in the general vicinity forever. But, people are getting older and not to sound morbid, but people are dying, and new people aren’t moving to Whately, at least not permanently. We always joke, ‘Don’t put your house on the market because it will never sell.’ That’s one of the reasons there are so many rental properties in Whately. People can’t sell their homes, so if they move away or if someone dies, the house typically turns into a rental property. There are lots of rentals in the area, so people do move in because there’s

cheap housing, but no one really moves here. They come for the housing, stay as long as they need, and then often move to the next place."

"There's bar number one in town, C.J.'s," Sara said as she pointed to an old brick building on the corner of the first block of Main Street. "A lot of the old men in town will meet up there in the morning for coffee. Bar number two, Renegade's, is up ahead on the left, next to the library…which is right there," Sara explained as the truck slowly rolled by a brick storefront. "There's a little room next door to the library that is going to be turned into a history room."

"Like the history of Whately?" I asked.

"Yep," replied Sara. "I mentioned in our first meeting that my mom is the town librarian, right?"

"Yeah, you did," I responded, recalling our first guided conversation.

Sara continued our tour of Whately, pointing out the various forms of financial and human capital that lined the storefronts of Main Street. "There's the bank and one of the insurance companies," she said. "There are actually three insurance companies in town. And then there's the post office and the grocery store that I mentioned earlier. And that right there," said Sara as she pointed to another brick storefront, "That's the telecommunications company I mentioned during our first meeting. They have been in town forever…pretty much run the town."

"What do you mean when you say 'they run the town'?" I asked.

"Well, they provide the telephone, cable, and internet access for the town. Basically, they control all of the technology…and over there, on the right, that's the funeral home. It'll be pretty busy later today."

“Someone died?” I asked.

“Yeah, the daughter of one the school teachers passed away…brain tumor. It’ll be a big event. The teacher is retired now, but a lot of people in town had her in school, so a lot of connections,” said Sara. “I didn’t actually know about the funeral until today when I went to visit Grandma; she told me about it. See, you can see the cars lining up already,” said Sara as she pointed to a paved lot between the funeral home and what appeared to be a church.

My eyes moved from the small white building that served as the local funeral home to an older brick building with a cross on top.

“That’s the church that my grandparents go to and technically my dad belongs to as well. If we went to church that’s where we would go,” Sara explained.

“What denomination is it?” I asked.

“UCC [United Church of Christ],” responded Sara.

“So you didn’t grow up going to church?” I asked

“No, not really…every once in awhile like on Easter or something we would go, but other than that, we just didn’t go to church,” Sara shared. “There were some summers that Dwight and I went to Vacation Bible School, but I think that was more about my parents having a week to themselves than us kids learning about the Bible,” Sara said, jokingly.

“So what do you think about your downtown? If you had to tell other people about it, what would you say?” I asked.

“I don’t know that there’s much to say. It exists. It just is. I know there are some rural communities where the downtown might have a business association and really try and appeal to the people and support the people who live there. I just don’t think that’s Whately. I think my mom tries to connect with the community through the library and offering

summer reading programs and things like that. But, most of the businesses are just here to make money.

Sara's description of Main Street highlighted two important ideas unique to rural space – the distribution of financial capital and the idea that rural areas, specifically downtowns, are supposed to look a specific way – simple, pastoral and to use Sara's word "picturesque." At first read, it may appear that Whately is void of what most consider necessary financial and human capital such as hospitals or grocery stores. However, critical rural theory explains that rural economies are often spread out across multiple communities (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). In other words, it is not uncommon for one rural town to have the grocery store, another town to have a hospital or doctor's offices, and yet another town to have a store related to the local economy, such as Charlie's Tire Store in Whately. This kind of economy supports collaboration rather than duplication or competition.

Additionally, the economy provides a snapshot of the financial, human, and built capital present in Whately, Iowa – all of which are integral forms of capital within the Community Capitals Framework (Flora & Flora, 2013). Thus, in order to contextualize how rural community capital might influence post-secondary educational opportunity and college-going practices and behaviors, it is essential to understand what the rural economy looks like, how it operates in Whately, and how it shapes rural identity. Sara's account of downtown highlighted many of the same forms of financial, human, and built capital that were present in Hannah's rural college community – a bank, post office, library, bars, churches. Yet, a major difference between Hannah and Sara's life histories was the role of public financial capital in their individual rural communities. Public capital refers to the financial resources

invested by the community (Flora & Flora, 2013). In the final section of Hannah's life history, I discussed how the broader community, specifically the economic community, invested in its community members' pursuit of higher education through scholarships to the local community college and other public institutions of higher learning in the state. This public investment contributed to Hannah's identification as a rural college-going person. Sara's rural community actually had many of the same economic resources that were present in Hannah's rural community. However, Sara did not perceive her community as being invested in people or human capital.

Sara's description of Main Street also illustrated the way in which urbanormativity influences the physical appearance of rural communities today. As we turned on to Main Street, one of the first comments Sara made was that Whately's downtown was not as picturesque as other rural downtowns. While the built environments in urban and metropolitan areas have been expected to advance and grow, rural communities have been expected to retain a simple appearance – one that exhibits a quaintness associated with decades and centuries before. Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, and Smith (2011) explained that the association of rural as simple serves to "maintain a symbolic past that serves important ideological purposes" (p. 68). For Sara, the standard of the idyllic rural community influenced the way she saw her own community – primarily as being less than other rural communities. Sara once again shared feelings of comparison and inadequacy, specifically in relation to her education, as our tour continued toward her high school and the new activity center.

Sara and I continued north on Main Street another block until the road morphed into an open parking lot. In front of us was a large aluminum sided building. Sara pulled her truck into a parking space and jumped out of the truck.

"C'mon," she yelled to me as she walked up to the front doors of the building.

"What is this place?" I asked as I carefully stepped down from the cabin of the truck.

Sara pulled on the glass door only to find it locked. "Bummer, I really wanted to show you this place. This is our activity center. It's fairly new…they built it the summer before my junior year of high school."

Sara pressed her face against the glass and peered into the large building.

"If you look closely, you can kind of see some of the things inside," she said.

I followed Sara's direction and leaned into the glass door.

"There are a bunch of trophies and then there's the workout room where people can lift weights and then over there are some bathrooms," Sara said as she described some of the more visible parts of the activity center.

"So, who does the activity center belong to?" I asked.

"Technically, it belongs to the school. See that building over there," said Sara, pointing to a brick building that sat 500 feet to the left of the activity center. "That's our school." Sara explained.

"So, is this where your school plays basketball games and such?" I asked.

"Yup, basketball games, volleyball…it's just like a regular gym except the community can also use it."

"Really?" I responded.

"Yeah, not for free, but people in the community can buy these special cards and then they can access the building from the door on the side over there.

"Wow, that's really nice," I responded.

"Well, it's no YMCA, but it's a pretty big deal for us. It's got the facilities and people can just come and work out when they want. I'm not sure how much the cards cost, but I know that's how Whately can afford to have it," Sara explained.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The only way they could pay for a new building like this was to make it accessible to the community…and by accessible to the community, I mean charge people to use it. Our school definitely didn't pay for the building. We don't have that kind of money," said Sara.

"So, I remember we talked briefly about your schools when we did the mapping exercise during our first meeting, but can you remind me which school that is?" I asked, pointing to the building in the distance.

"That's the high school," Sara replied.

"Whately High School?" I asked.

"No, Car-Whately. Well, it's actually Carver-Whately, but we call it Car-Whately for short."

"So, kids from Carver, Iowa and Whately, Iowa go to school here?" I asked.

"Primarily, but there are also kids from a couple of other small towns, like really small, that go to school at Car-Whately too."

"So, if this is the high school, where are the elementary and middle schools?"

Sara laughed. "Well, you're looking at the middle school. Seventh and eighth grades are in the same building as the high school.

“So does that mean the elementary school is in Carver? I asked.

“Yep, that’s right,” said. “We’re a consolidated school district…have been for as long as I can remember.”

“So, how far is the elementary school from here?”

“Oh, about a 10 or 15 minute drive. But, Dwight and I rode the bus to school, so it took a bit longer…maybe a half hour or so.” said Sara. “You ready to go? There are a couple more places I’d like to show you.”

“Sure,” I responded as we walked back toward the large green truck. As we pulled out of the parking lot and made a right, Sara pointed out the town baseball field that the local FFA chapter had helped to restore, and the houses where some of her childhood classmates used to live. We made a left onto Washington Highway, and Sara continued to drive slowly through the town, ensuring that I had time to take in the surroundings.

“That right there…” Sara said, as she pointed to a metal building, “that’s the body shop that’s supposed to fix my truck Sunday.”

I looked over at Sara as I realized she was referring to the same vehicle we were currently riding in. “Is something wrong with the truck?” I asked, slightly worried.

“It’s fine for riding around town, but there’s something wrong with the engine or something. I don’t think it would make it on a long trip,” Sara explained. “I put my name in over a month ago, though,” Sara shared.

“What?” I responded, my mouth dropping open. “A month ago? They must be really busy.”

Sara laughed. “Apparently, or just slow…They take a break after lunch to play cards every day. When you do that good of work you can take your time I guess, but they need to get it done before I go back to school.”

“Is there anywhere else you could take it if you needed to?” I asked.

“Not really. I mean, Dwight says he could probably fix it enough for me to drive it back to school, but I really want the body shop to take care of it. I know it seems absurd to have to wait that long, but we trust the guys that work there, and we know they’ll do a good job, and we want to support them. So, you just know when something happens to your truck, it’ll be awhile,” Sara explained.

We continued another quarter of a mile down the road until we came upon a sprawling building that sat on a hill on the left side of the old highway.

“This is the nursing home,” said Sara, as she steered her truck up the winding driveway to the top of the hill. “Actually, it’s a nursing home and assisted living. There’s a door that separates the two. I’ve been working here a couple of days a week as part of my internship this summer.”

“It looks really nice,” I said to Sara.

“Yeah, it is pretty nice,” responded Sara. “Hey, that’s my aunt’s car parked over there,” said Sara as she pointed to a silver Buick.

“Does she work here?” I ask.

“She does hair here on Mondays and Thursdays.”

“So, earlier we were talking about places that people work in town,” I said. “The nursing home must be a source of employment, right?”

“Oh sure…there are nurses and aides and activity directors and other people that all

work there," said Sara. "And there's the guy that owns it of course, and he's super rich, at least for this area. But, I think the nursing home is just one more sign that our community is both split and dying, literally."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Well, we're split in terms of money. Whately is a pretty poor town. I'd say we're right about the poverty line, if that. But, there are a few people in town that make a lot of money through their businesses – like the nursing home and the telecommunications company. But, it doesn't feel like they really invest in the town. They're just here to make money while the rest of us work really hard to make ends meet."

I listened intently as Sara described the social stratification in her rural community.

She continued. "And then…it's like I said earlier, it kind of feels like the community is dying. There are a lot of people that have lived in Whately their entire lives and now they're old and they're literally dying. If you look at Whately, we have a nursing home, while next to us in Tulip County, they have a brand new daycare center. New families aren't moving into Whately, people aren't having as many children, and some young people are leaving town for school and work. "

"What about you? Do you think you'll come back to Whately after you finish college?" I asked, as Sara steered the truck back down the drive and turned right onto Washington Highway.

"I'd love to come back to Whately, but it all depends…" Sara's voice trailed off.

"Depends on what?" I asked.

"Mainly on where the opportunities take me…like if there's a job for me here or close by. And there's a lot of the United States that I haven't seen yet; I'm willing to try anything

once. I just know that I want to be in a small town, a rural town, and you know, if it's got its problems, I am okay with that. I don't need a picturesque place.

"So, why a rural town?" I asked.

"I like living in a rural community," Sara said and then paused. "The best way I can explain it is…some people have bucket lists, and I think those are the dumbest things in the world. I have zero desire to go do silly events to complete my life. When I die, I want to be a noted member of the community that made a difference. I'm hoping that wherever I go, that the people know that I want to be a part of the community, and that I'm there not because I have to be, but because I want to be."

While Sara and I started our tour by discussing natural and built capital and their connection to economic capital, our conversation gradually morphed into discussions of economic and human capital and the relationship between the two in Whately, Iowa. Whereas the interaction of human and economic capital allowed for events such as the building of the activity center for the local high school as well as the sustainability of the town's body shop despite the month-long waiting list, the relationship between human and economic capital was also a point of contention for Sara as she reflected on growing up in this rural community. Sara expressed a real sense of loss coupled with feelings of economic division within the community due to the fact that long-term residents were growing old and dying; that residents were unable to successfully sell their homes, leaving empty houses and numerous rental properties; and that people moved in to town for short periods of time but rarely moved into the community permanently.

As Sara and I wrapped up our tour and headed back toward her house that day, she said to me, "You know, Kathleen…I look around at my town, and think about growing up

here, and I have no idea how I ended up in college. I literally have sat in my room at school and thought, 'How the heck did I get here?' Nothing about growing up in Whately suggests that I should be in college."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, we're not exactly encouraged to go to college. My parents were fine with my decision to go, but they would have been fine if I didn't go. My teachers didn't really encourage us, and my guidance counselor was no help at all. I feel like the main messages I received when I was growing up were 'just don't get pregnant or hooked on drugs.'"

I got in my car at the end of our guided conversation that day and realized that I had my work cut out for me. I drove down the gravel road toward the state highway with Sara's question still fresh in my mind – *How did I get to college?* The fact is that Sara did get to college, so there had to be some form of post-secondary educational opportunity present that shaped her college-going practices and behaviors, and I needed to identify and understand that capital. At the same time, Sara understood her community, primarily people and her formal education, to play a very minimal role in getting her to college. Why? From a critical perspective, I knew that blaming the community was the wrong answer. Rather, there had to be systemic forces that were prohibiting Whately from supporting their students' college-going practices and behaviors. But, what where those structures and systems?

As I approached the blacktop road, I saw a utility truck parked on the side of the road. A young man got out of the vehicle, walked over to my car and signaled for me to roll down my window. Slightly nervous, I pushed the electric button on the door and rolled the window down just far enough to converse with him.

"I'm sorry m'am, but you can't go on to the highway right now," he said to me.

“Excuse me?” I replied, extremely confused by his statement.

“We’re doing some road work, and we’re down to one lane, so you can’t just drive on to the highway. What you’re going to need to do is sit here and wait for the pilot car to drive by. Don’t follow the pilot car, right then. It’ll turn around and then drive back by you. When you see the last car, then jump into the line and follow it down to where the highway goes back to two lanes.”

“Do you know how long I’m going to need to wait here?” I asked, politely.

“Might be twenty minutes,” he responded.

“Thank you,” I replied, as I rolled up my window and turned the air conditioner up one notch. The young man walked back to his truck that was parked on the side of the road.

“What the heck is a pilot car?” I thought to myself, as I tried to remember the detailed, yet completely unfamiliar instructions provided to me. “And what I am going to do for twenty minutes?”

Completely confused, I attempted to look up “pilot car and road construction” on my smart phone, finding information related solely to race car driving. Even more confused, I decided to put the phone away and wait for some signal that I could enter the highway. About 10 minutes later, I spotted a line of cars driving east toward me on the highway. The first vehicle, a small gray truck had a large object standing in the bed of the truck. As it drove past me, I saw that the object was actually a metal sign that read, “Pilot Car – Follow Me.”

Relieved to have solved the mystery of the pilot car, I reminded myself to wait until it drove past me again before entering the highway. About five minutes later, the pilot car came speeding down the highway and after the last vehicle drove past me, I pulled my car onto the paved road and followed until the highway returned to two lanes. As I continued

driving home that afternoon, I thought about the symbol of the pilot car and the *Follow Me* sign coupled with Sara's ever pressing question, *"How did I get to college?"*

Recalling from the previous life history, Hannah's college-going had been full of signs (i.e., capital) that said "follow me," confidently directing her toward a post-secondary education. The notion of going to college had been affirmed and supported by the myriad forms of community capital present in her rural college community of Atwood-River Town. On the other hand, Sara's rural college-going, similar to other marginalized populations, was somewhat serendipitous (Gildersleeve, 2010). It was not shaped by numerous pre-collegiate post-secondary educational experiences, by almost daily interactions with an institution of higher learning, nor by clear expectations of college-going by family members, educators, and community members. Yet, there were key experiences embedded in specific time and spaces that I understood to be instrumental to answering Sara's own college-going question of *How did I get here?* – primarily, her gendered experiences of farming, shaped by natural and cultural capital, which were reflected and reproduced in her high school curriculum.

Family, farms, and education: A gendered rurality

While both Hannah and Sara grew up on farms, their experiences with and affinity for farming and agriculture were quite different. Consequently the role of natural and cultural capital in shaping post-secondary educational opportunity for each woman was also different. Farming was an integral part of Sara's life. She did not just participate in farming when her family needed her assistance. Rather, it was a familial and community expectation embedded in her daily life.

During my first visit to Sara's house, we were joined by her younger brother, Dwight, for part of our conversation. At the time, I was slightly concerned about his presence. Not

only had I not received permission to engage with family members in the data collection, but, it also felt like he was taking over the conversation. However, that was the only conversation in which Dwight joined us, helping me to understand that he was probably just vetting me. More specifically, he wanted to know who I was and to make sure that his sister would be okay interacting with me. He stayed for about 30 minutes of my first conversation with Sara, and then quietly got up and left.

"Is he going back out to work in the fields?" I asked Sara, as I heard the side door slam shut.

"Who knows?" Sara said warmly. "He's responsible for a lot of different things. He goes over to Grandma and Grandpa's every day. They call him at least once a day asking him to help with something. He's got sixty head of sheep; they're all his. He's built that up, and he's responsible for them. He's also expected to do hay for quite a few people. People from around town, they have chores for him to do. He's also expected to take care of his own vehicle and his tractor, and everyone else's vehicles and everyone else's tractors, and so on."

"Wow, that's a lot. So, do you work on the farm as well?" I inquired. "I mean, I know you have an internship this summer, but do you also have responsibilities or expectations on the farm?"

"I don't have as much now since I've been away for two years, but definitely in junior high and high school," replied Sara. "I mean, if they're [my family] all working, I better be working alongside them. Just because I have a job doesn't mean anything. My mom's a little more lenient on that because right now I work more hours than she does. But, if Mom's cleaning, then I'm cleaning."

"So was cleaning your main responsibility?" I asked.

“Yeah, basically a lot of the home stuff,” explained Sara. “I did most of the laundry. I had to make dinner, always dinner. Then, if we ever had a calf that didn't take to its mom or lost its mom, I always bottle-fed those calves. Since my brother has sheep, it was kind of like, if I had time, I helped with the cow chores, too, which I'm always more than happy to do. I was also expected to help out with the garden a bit. We home can a lot of stuff, so if we've got stuff to can, I better be helping.”

Sara’s inclusion of the home as part of farming responsibilities is an important finding for two reasons. First, it illustrates a broader understanding of farming and the extension of natural capital (i.e., land) to built capital (i.e., house). Master narratives around agriculture have historically equated farming to taking care of crops and/or animals (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). However, in the early part of the 20th century, a counter narrative emerged. The home began to be seen as part of the farm and thus responsibilities related to the home were included under the larger notion of farming (Zimmerman & Larson, 2010). Second, Sara’s descriptions of farm work also demonstrated the gendered division of labor that often occurs in farming communities and families. While Sara and her mom were primarily responsible for farm chores inside the home, Sara’s dad and brother managed the farming operations outside the home.

As Sara and I continued our conversation around farm work, she was quick to clarify that not all farm families function in the same way as her family, in regard to gender. She also expanded on what it meant to be a rural woman.

“There are farm women that drive tractors and help make hay and stuff like that, and like I said, I help sometimes with the cattle chores. But, I think I’ve probably done a little less with the land than I wish I would have, but that’s probably pretty typical.”

"Can you say more about that?" I asked Sara.

"I mean, I just wish I would have done more with the planting and taking of the crops and stuff, but my dad just didn't lead me to that," Sara continued. "My brother's pretty close in age to me – he's just three years younger. So, my dad taught him how to drive a tractor. Dwight's been driving tractors since he was, probably like, seven…not by himself, obviously, but he's always been exposed to that. I always wished I was around my dad in the tractor too, but I was needed inside."

"So, you've talked about how not all farm women have the same responsibilities – some work in the home, some work with crops and animals, some do a little of both…I'm wondering, though, are there other characteristics that you associate with being a rural woman?

Sara sat back in her chair and thought for a few seconds. "Strong, both physically and emotionally," she responded.

"Okay, physical and emotional strength," I said, confirming Sara's response. "So, how would you describe what it means to be physically strong as a rural woman?" I asked.

"I don't know that there is necessarily a word, but I guess it's halfway between being a southern belle and being…" Sara paused. "I don't want to say *man*, because I'm a woman, but…"

I sat silently as Sara tried to make sense of the relationship between her gender and rurality.

She continued. "I guess, when it comes down to it, I want to look nice, but quite often there's shit all over my boots. I've got work to done, and I need to get it done."

"And what about emotional strength? How would you describe that?" I asked.

“Very few people have seen me cry. I was always taught that you want to keep it together. You put your best face forward because people are going to talk, and you want them to talk about good things. You don’t want them talking about bad things. I've also been taught not to take anything to heart.”

“Who taught you that it was important to be emotionally strong as a rural woman?”

“Probably my dad. You rarely see him get mad. Things just roll off his back. He’s just content with life. He’s also very busy. He would tell me, ‘You can be mad all you want, but we got stuff to do, and we need to do it’.”

As the guided conversation illustrated, Sara’s family not only owned and farmed the land but they also expected her to be an active participant in the daily operation of the farm. At the same time, Sara’s participation was dictated heavily by her parents’ understanding of farming, specifically her father’s understanding – that men were needed to manage the land and animals and women were needed to manage the home. From Sara’s discussion of farming, I also came to understand just how much her lived experiences, especially as an adolescent and teenager, were shaped by a gendered understanding and participation in farming. The natural and built capital of her family’s farm and the gendered division of labor shaped her daily activities. Yet, Sara’s daily experiences with farming were not confined only to her family’s land; they were also reproduced in her high school curriculum, specifically through her family and consumer sciences classes (formerly known as home economics). Zimmerman and Larson (2011) explained that around the time that rurality expanded to include the home, education also experienced the formalization of home economics as a discipline. Home economics was a way to professionalize women’s work and women’s roles on farms within a patriarchal society.

From our guided conversations related to elementary and secondary education, I learned that Sara's formal education was filled with courses that she referred to as "exploratory classes." Sara explained that, beginning as early as seventh grade, she was expected to take courses such as health, physical education, agriculture, and family and consumer science (FCS). Sara also explained that, at the high school level, these classes were more commonly referred to as vocational courses. In trying to better understand the high school curriculum at Carver-Whately, I spent some time perusing the Carver-Whately District website and came across the student handbook. As I skimmed the opening paragraph, I read that, "Students who are members of special populations are encouraged to enroll in the vocational education classes provided by the district" (Carver-Whately Student Handbook, 2014, p.3).

"Special populations?" I thought to myself. "What do they mean by special populations?" I continued to ponder.

At this point, Sara and I had begun to develop a rather open and trusting researcher-participant relationship, so I decided to ask her at our next guided conversation what she thought about the statement in the handbook, and how she understood special populations to be defined.

Sara explained, "Well, you can always tell the kids that they [the school district] don't expect to go to college…the ones that maybe get in trouble more often. They send them to Ag a lot. And then they send a lot of the special needs students to FCS."

"What do you mean when you say special needs?" I asked Sara.

“Primarily students who have a learning disability or perhaps have a physical disability,” replied Sara. “I think a lot of the students with disabilities got pushed toward FCS classes because those were the courses that taught life skills.

“So, did you take vocational courses in high school?”

“Yeah, lots of FCS classes,” responded Sara. “…although I really wanted to take Ag classes – like animal science and plant production and Ag business. But, for some reason my guidance counselor advised me against it. I never really understood why, and I was kind of mad about it, but I was just like ‘whatever,’ and so I registered for FCS. By the time I graduated, I had taken like five FCS classes which is a lot. Most students take one, maybe two FCS classes.”

Having listened to Sara describe her gendered experiences on her family’s farm, I was interested in her experiences of being directed toward Family and Consumer Science courses in high school. “Do you think that the reason you were steered away from Ag class had anything to do with your gender? I asked. “Like, were girls advised to take FCS classes and the guys advised to take Ag classes?”

Sara paused for a moment. “I don’t think it was that clear cut. There were definitely girls who took Ag classes, but you rarely saw guys take FCS classes…maybe the Foods course because you got to eat what you cooked. But, for the most part, FCS classes were filled primarily with girls with the exception of a few guys with special needs who took the classes for the life skills.”

“So, tell me about the FCS classes that you took. What topics were covered in the courses? What did you learn?” I asked.

“Well, there was an intro class and that just provided a broad overview of FCS. And then there were more specialized classes like Foods, Careers, Child Development, Home Décor. I took all of them except Child Development. I don’t really like babies,” said Sara, shaking her head.

I laughed quietly at Sara’s comment about babies. “So, was there a reason you took so many FCS classes?

“Well, I didn’t set out to take lots of FCS classes. I registered for the intro class only because I couldn’t get into Ag classes. Not a great reason, huh?” Sara paused and then began speaking again. “But, it turned out that I did well in the class, so I took another and another, and I ended up really liking them. I mean a lot of what I was learning about in class, I was doing on a daily basis at home. Let’s get real, Foods wasn’t a terribly hard course for me. Remember, cooking dinner was one of my daily chores at home.”

“I think that’s a really interesting point because you mentioned earlier that alot of the students who enrolled in a lot of FCS classes did so because they needed to learn life skills. You seemed to have some of these life skills already from your work on the farm…”

“Oh yeah,” interrupted Sara. “But, I still learned new things. I mean I knew how to cook, but the Foods class helped me understand the science of cooking.

“So, was it unusual for someone at your school to focus so heavily on FCS classes in and then enroll in a four-year university?”

“I’d say so,” Sara answered. “Most of my FCS classmates went on to work, if they were able to.”

“So what made you decide to go to college?” I asked.

Sara laughed. "Well, as much as I liked my FCS classes and did really well in them, the woman who taught the classes was not that great. I shouldn't say she wasn't that great. It's just that there were days I could tell that she didn't enjoy her job. It wasn't her life's passion. It just kind of got dumped on her. On the other hand, the high school just east of us had a great FCS program. They had two teachers, and both of those teachers went to school for FCS and really enjoyed their job. One year, they put on a fashion show, and I went to it, and it was so good. I could tell that the school had better facilities; they're a wealthier school district than Car-Whately. But, they also had two teachers who could actually specialize in what they excelled in."

"So you decided you wanted to become an FCS teacher?" I asked.

Sara nodded her head. "Yeah, with some encouragement from my friends. I think they were tired of hearing me complain about the FCS teacher and the classes. They were like, 'Why don't you stop complaining and go to school to become an FCS teacher so that we have a better one.' At the time, it kind of made sense. By my senior year, I was basically teaching one of the classes, anyway. Now, obviously, I know that I may not end up teaching at Car-Whately – at least not right away. But I know that I will be prepared to be an FCS teacher. I will have a specialty, and I'm passionate about it – like the teachers at the other high school."

It was through these conversations that Sara and I began to answer her college-going question – "*How did I get here?*" which was instrumental in answering my own research questions. Unlike Hannah, Sara did not grow up in a community where college-going was extremely present. There were not a lot of "follow me" signs pointing her toward college. While, her gendered experiences on her farm and in her FCS classes helped shape her interest

and abilities in the area of family and consumer science, most students who enrolled in FCS classes in her school went directly to work or pursued vocational post-secondary education after high school. Ultimately, it was Sara's disenchantment with her own FCS curricular experiences coupled with her classmates encouragement' to pursue a career as an FCS teacher that propelled her to consider post-secondary education at the baccalaureate level.

Sara's career interest was an important component of her college-going process, particularly in that it helped to explain the way in which a gendered rurality influenced her decision to pursue post-secondary education and her specific major. Yet, this was only part of her college-going. During our many guided conversations, Sara continuously stated that she viewed her community as being indifferent toward post-secondary education and rather passive in students' pursuit of higher learning. Yet, Sara did make it to college. So, beyond her academic interest, I needed to understand both the barriers as well as the opportunities that shaped Sara's post-secondary educational opportunity. In other words, I needed to understand the various forms of capital that might have assisted Sara in getting to college as well as the urbanormative practices, policies, and behaviors that may have challenged her college-going process.

Rural Education in an Urbanormative Society

While Hannah's life history demonstrated how various forms of rural community capital were instrumental in shaping her college-going practices and behaviors, Sara's life history primarily illustrated how urbanormative practices and policies can challenge post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. In Whately, Iowa many of these urbanormative practice and policies were embedded in Sara's formal education. As discussed in Chapter 2, elementary and secondary education, as a system, greatly influences

educational opportunity for rural students. More specifically, individual college opportunity is predicated on K-12 institutional opportunity, which in part is defined by the quality of the curriculum, preparation of teachers, and availability and quality of high school counseling (Gandara & Bial, 2001; McDonough, 2004).

While I dedicated one of the guided conversations solely to talking about Sara's educational experiences, school was something that Sara talked about throughout our data collection. Her educational experiences, while not always framed positively, provided great insight into the relationship between rural community capital and urbanormative educational policies and practices.

"So, I know that you took a lot of FCS classes in high school, but I was wondering if you could tell me a little about the other classes you took in school."

"You mean in high school?" asked Sara.

"In high school, middle school, elementary school…I'm interested in all of your education," I replied.

"I guess I took all of the normal classes. You know…math, science, English, social studies…In the sixth grade I started in TAG.

"TAG?" I responded, quizzically. "Is that the Talented and Gifted Program?"

"Yeah, I got brought into that when I was in sixth grade," Sara paused. "But now that I'm thinking back, I was also in Title I[4], so maybe I wasn't that smart in the beginning."

"When were you in Title I?" I asked.

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[4] Title I is a federally funded educated program that broadly serves to assist students, often from low socioeconomic schools, who are assessed as needing additional support in one or more academic areas (Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html, May 16, 2015).

"When I was real little," responded Sara. "For reading. Man, Title I…I totally forgot about that. Maybe I didn't used to be smart."

"Why do you keep saying that…about not being smart when you were little?

"Because Title I is where all the dumb kids go for help," replied Sara.

I winced as I heard Sara refer to students who receive Title I assistance as "dumb."

"Where did you learn that?" I asked. "The idea that students who part of Title I are not smart…"

"At school, I guess. I mean, you just learn that the kids that go to Title I are usually not smart and the kids that go to TAG are smart. Which is why I am having a slight crisis here…I was in both," Sara shared as she laughed nervously.

"Well, why don't we talk a little bit about TAG," I suggested, as I watched Sara struggle to reconcile these two different educational experiences.

"I didn't really care for it, at least not in junior high," said Sara.

"Why was that?" I inquired.

"Because we were taken out of our regular classes to go to TAG," explained Sara. "And in junior high, that was science class, and it was the hardest class. My science teacher was super hard. That class was the first time I remember really being challenged, and I needed to be in science class so I could learn. My grades were suffering. Sometimes I would just pretend that I forgot to go to TAG, but my teacher would come and find me and drag me out of class. I just remember thinking, 'I don't want to be here. I need to learn. Get out of my way.'"

"So, were you in TAG all the way through high school?" I asked.

“No, only through the first two years of high school. I think they finally just gave up on the program and did away with it after my sophomore year.” Sara paused. “I mean, I get it. All these schools have TAG programs. Some kids, who have been labeled smart because they passed some test, are put in this program. But, at a place like Car-Whately, I don’t know that it makes that much sense.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“For lots of reasons. We only had like twenty-five students in our entire class. So, pulling students out for TAG meant an even smaller class. And then there’s the assumption that because the TAG kids are smart that their regular classes aren’t challenging enough. Well, like I said, mine was. Science was hard for me. I didn’t need to be removed to be challenged. And then I just think, what’s the point of TAG? I’ve met people in college that were in TAG in their schools, and being labeled smart and put in TAG was like a road to college for them. That wasn’t the case for me.”

“Can you say more about that? Why wasn’t it the case for you?” I asked Sara.

Because my school just didn’t really prepare us for college. There wasn’t an expectation that we would go,” responded Sara.

As Sara talked about lack of expectations, I thought back to her school district’s student handbook. The introductory paragraph read as a persuasive argument as to why students needed to complete a high school education rather than explaining how their secondary education could prepare them for a post-secondary education.

> …Even if you are not currently planning to attend college…these courses will be helpful to you in your work and in your daily living. If you do not attend

> college or other post-secondary educational institutions, you will have a sound foundation…(Carver-Whately Student Handbook, 2014, p.3)

"Sara, you mentioned previously about the connection between your FCS classes and the expectation of going to work rather than college. Were there other experiences in your school that suggested you shouldn't go to college?"

Sara paused and thought for a minute. "Probably my high school science classes. I didn't know it when I was actually taking them, but after I applied to Public University, the admissions office called me about my high school transcript. They were like, 'we're looking over your classes, and we noticed that you didn't take biology or chemistry. We just wanted to make sure we weren't missing something.'"

"Wait, you didn't take biology or chemistry in high school?" I asked. Realizing that my comment might have sounded judgmental, I quickly apologized. "I'm sorry. That was really rude of me." I said.

Sara smiled. "No, it's okay. It's the truth. In my high school, we take general science classes in both ninth and tenth grade. And then you can choose after that – biology, chemistry, or physics. Well, I took physics.

"You took physics?" I asked.

"Yeah, it fit in my schedule and my guidance counselor signed off on it, so that's what I took. I only needed three science classes to graduate, so those were the three I took."

"Okay, so I have to tell you something. I was a physics dropout," I shared with Sara.

"Really?" she responded with a slight smile.

“Yeah, I took a year of biology and two years of chemistry, but I dropped out of physics about a month into my senior year. I just couldn’t grasp it. So, I totally applaud you for tackling physics.”

Sara’s smile grew slightly bigger. “Yeah, but the reality is I guess I really should have taken biology or chemistry to get into college. I totally would have taken one of those if I had known, but I didn’t. My guidance counselor never said anything to me, so I never took them. I mean, I’m the first person in my family to go to college. No one in my family knew that I should have. Ever since then, I’ve been telling my brother, Dwight, ‘You gotta take Chemistry.’ He’s planning on going to community college next year, and I don’t want him to be in the same situation as me.”

“So did you end up having problems with getting admitted to the university?” I asked.

“No, I didn’t, but that phone call from Public sure did scare me. When I told them that I didn’t take biology or chemistry, they asked me, ‘Are you going to graduate [from high school]? I said, ‘yes,’ and they said ‘okay,’ and that was the end of that conversation. But, I just remember hanging up the phone, my heart beating so fast, and thinking they’re never going to let me in.”

“Wow, I can only imagine how scary that phone call must have been,” I said to Sara.

“Yeah, it was really scary,” Sara confirmed. “But I ended up getting into Public, and now I’m halfway through college. But again, it would have been nice to have avoided that whole ‘You didn’t take the right science classes and now you might not be able to go to college’ situation.”

“You mentioned a few minutes ago that you took physics because it fit in your schedule. Is that how you chose most of your classes?

“There were some things that were planned out for us…well, really only one thing – Physical Education. We had to take P.E. every semester.”

“Of high school?” I asked, recalling the one semester of P.E. I took in the ninth grade.

“Of elementary, junior high, and high school. P.E. was always part of our schedule,” explained Sara.”

“What was the process of choosing your other classes?” I asked. “For example, in ninth grade, did you make out a plan for all four years of high school?

“No, I don’t remember doing that.” responded Sara. “In the student handbook, there was a list of total requirements that I needed to make sure I completed in order to graduate, but it was really up to me to figure things out each year. The guidance counselor really wasn’t very helpful.”

“What about Advanced Placement courses?” I inquired. “Were those offered at your high school?”

“No, we didn't have AP classes. To be honest, I didn't even know what that was until my sophomore year of college,” Sara shared with me. “I think we had one or two college science classes that we could get college credit for at the community college, but that was it. They [the school] would help you sign up to take college classes if you could catch the guidance counselor.”

Throughout our guided conversations, Sara often mentioned the lack of support she felt from the school’s guidance counselor. Recalling the literature on college counseling in rural communities (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001), I wondered if Sara’s counselor’s lack of assistance might be related to time and additional responsibilities. In other words, I wondered if the guidance counselor was tasked with

additional roles that detracted from her primary responsibilities such as course planning and post-secondary advising.

"Sara, did your guidance counselor have other responsibilities besides being the school counselor?" I asked.

Sara raised her eyebrows, puzzled by my question. "I'm not sure what you mean," she responded.

"Well, did she have other roles in the school? For example, did she help with discipline issues or was she expected to serve as a substitute when a teacher was out sick?"

"She coached a couple of sports while I was there, but other than that, I just remember her spending a lot of time reading the newspaper in the main office," Sara responded, sullenly.

This guided conversation with Sara sent me back to her student handbook (Carver-Whately, 2014) to try and better understand curricular options, course planning, and college advising at her high school. Tucked away in the two last pages of the student handbook, was information related to Advanced Placement and college course offerings. It turned out that Sara's school did offer Advanced Placement courses, just not in person. Similar to Hannah's high school, students at Carver-Whately could take AP courses through an online program offered by one of the public universities in the state. However, as Sara indicated in our conversation, not only was she never made aware of or prepared for this option, she did not even know of its existence until well into her undergraduate career. As for college course offerings, the handbook outlined a handful of courses students could take at a "local" community college that was located forty-five minutes away. While the district stated they

would cover the cost of the course, students and their guardians(s) were responsible for transportation to and from the college.

Additionally, just as Sara had described, I found a list of requirements in the beginning of the handbook (Carver-Whately, 2014) indicating how many credits of each subject area were necessary in order to graduate from the school. Confusingly, science was listed twice but with no explanation. Both requirements stated that students should take a total of three years of science but one stated that students should take two years of general science and an elective science, and the other stated that students should take two years of general science and biology. Math was also listed twice, also with different requirements. While there was no specific mention of academic/career tracks in the handbook, my understanding of college access coupled with Sara's narrative around science classes and admittance to Public University helped me to understand that these curricular options led to different outcomes. Given that Sara was advised to complete the first science option, take numerous FCS classes and did not know about Advanced Placement or college credit courses, it appeared she had been tracked into a vocational or non-college curriculum. This is an important finding because it provided an explanation for the lack of assistance Sara felt she received from her guidance counselor/school related to going to college. Sara did not benefit from the human capital her school may have been able to provide in relation to going to college because they did not perceive her as someone who would go to college. In other words, higher education was not framed as an opportunity for Sara. Additionally, no one in Sara's family had gone to college and thus did not have the cultural capital necessary to question the advice Sara received in regard to her secondary education.

In Sara's life history, there was a strong connection between curriculum and high school counseling. While Sara did not have the same opportunity to engage in post-secondary education in high school like Hannah did, her school did offer the appropriate courses required to enroll in post-secondary education after graduating from high school. Education, in the form of human capital (Flora & Flora, 2013), was present in Whately, Iowa. However, the way in which education was framed and subsequently understood and delivered suggested that students, such as Sara, should consider post-secondary work rather than post-secondary education. This is extremely important considering that scholars have shown that individual college opportunity is predicated on K-12 institutional opportunity, which in part is defined by the quality of the curriculum, preparation of teachers, and availability and quality of high school counseling (Gandara & Bial, 2001; McDonough, 2004).

As Sara and I moved through our conversations around education, I also asked about her experiences with teachers and school leaders.

"Was there anyone that really encouraged you or talked to you about going to college? Teachers? Family friends? The school principal, perhaps?

"At school, that person would probably have been my band teacher," replied Sara.

"Can you tell me a little about her and how she encouraged you to go to college?"

"I don't know that she encouraged me so much or just assumed. She would say things, like, 'So, Sara, when you go to college…' She also talked about her own experiences in college which was nice to hear. I mean I didn't really grow up with stories like that since my parents didn't go to college. She also used to take us on band competitions and band trips.

“Can you tell me more about those?” I asked.

“Well, most of them were held at different colleges in the state…like Luther College, for example. So, I guess she [the band teacher] kind of exposed me to college except that we didn’t really spend time on the campus. We would just go to the school and spend the day in some building rehearsing and then competing. We really could have been anywhere because we just stayed inside…we didn’t really see the campus. But, I remember visiting the schools, so it must have had some effect on me, right?”

Sara’s involvement with her school band is an interesting part of her college-going process because it provided her with really the only opportunity to physically be on a college campus given that 1) the nearest institutions of higher learning were at least a 45 minute drive from her home community and 2) she did not participate in a dual enrollment program like Hannah did. At the same time, Sara’s analysis of her time spent on these college campuses was important because it illustrated the importance of not just being on a campus but also interacting or engaging with that campus. When Sara traveled to a college for a band competition it was simply to utilize the facilities. She recalled no campus tours, no interactions with current students or faculty members. In other words, although these events were held on a college campus, they really could have been held anywhere.

“Were there other teachers that you remember talking about their college experiences or encouraging you to go to college?” I asked as we continued to converse about the educators at Sara’s school.

“Hmmm,” said Sara as she thought for a moment. “I know we had a teacher who graduated from Loras and another that went to Wartburg. They would casually talk about

their college experiences – more about their social lives than academics, though. And one of the teachers loved Notre Dame. I'm not sure if he went there or just really liked the school.

"Did you ever have any student teachers in your school?"

"I can remember one, but he didn't stay very long. To be honest, a lot of the new teachers that are hired at Car-Whately, don't stay very long. They come here as a stepping stone to go on to some school that they think is bigger and better. That was one of my biggest beefs... They [the new teachers] come and they leave after two years. It's like, 'Why would you put yourself in a child's life when you know you're only going to be around for a year or two? They look up to you, especially the elementary school kids but older kids as well. Some of these teachers become "the favorite teacher," and students are excited to see them and come to school, and then they leave in two years. I mean, what kind of role model is that? You're not going to be there for us."

Sara's thoughtful account of the transient teachers in her community reminded me of the similar scholarly critiques of education programs such as Teach for America (TFA). While the intent of programs such as TFA is to help fill a void in communities that are in need of K-12 educators, the void they fill is typically only temporary, as these individuals usually leave the communities after they have fulfilled their two-year commitment (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, Heilig, 2005). Federal loan forgiveness plans also entice college graduates to teach in low-income communities, many of which are rural communities, but only require teachers to remain for five years (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/forgiveness-cancellation/teacher; Retrieved May 6, 2015). While Teach for America does not currently operate in Iowa, Carver-Whately was identified as a loan-forgiveness eligible school. Thus, there is a formal system in place that

allows educators to come into a community on a temporary basis which is often not enough time to adequately shape post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students within the community (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, Heilig, 2005).

As our conversation shifted from the teachers to the various principals that worked at Carver-Whately throughout Sara's elementary and secondary education, it appeared the trend of transiency continued.

"The principals…they came and went pretty quick," Sara explained. "The majority of them were men; there was one woman when I was in elementary school. The one I remember clearly was Mr. Cook. No one liked him, and we were so happy when he left."

"Why?" I asked.

"He just wasn't a good fit. He was a city guy, and it felt like he thought he was so much better than the rest of us. He made all of these changes, most of which made no sense to us, and then he just left. We're lucky he didn't destroy our school before he did."

"Wow, what did he do?"

"He moved around all of these teachers which we didn't really understand. It was never explained. And then he started all of these new programs, like an after-school program. But, the program didn't work, and then he just left. Like I said, we were happy when he left, but it's annoying that a principal would come in and start all these things, and then just was like, 'Oh, well, I'm done,' and moved on to somewhere else. He did move on to a bigger school, so maybe that was a better fit for him."

Sara's narrative about the "city" principal highlighted the importance of school leadership (i.e., human capital) possessing a strong understanding of rural education and community needs and opportunities. Howley (1997) explained that the way in which schools

operate, including staffing and programs, are often driven by urban education theories and policies. Yet, improvement in rural education requires logic quite different from the prevailing logic of school improvement because that logic is rooted in national and cosmopolitan issues that are often different from those faced by rural communities (Howley, 1997). Thus, it is possible that the programs Mr. Cook tried to implement in the school were not viewed as successful because they were not congruent with rural education. Sara also perceived Mr. Cook as not being invested in her rural community, specifically when he left and went to a larger school district.

Sara's lived educational experiences, embedded in her rural community, very much mirrored the previous research conducted on rural education. As I listened to Sara discuss her educational experiences in Whately, it was as if my literature review was coming to life. All of the various systems and policies that I had read about that can influence post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students – quality of curriculum, recruitment and retention of teachers and educational leaders, quality of school counseling – seemed to challenge Sara's post-secondary educational opportunity. Yet, Sara did make it to college. As described previously, the relationship between Sara's lived experiences in a farming community (i.e., natural capital) and her curricular experiences, specifically in high school (i.e., cultural and human capital), played an important role in shaping her college-going practices and behaviors – primarily her decision to attend college and subsequently her focus of study. Yet, unlike Hannah, there was not a guidance counselor pulling her into their office to tell her about the latest scholarship opportunities or how to fill out college applications. She was the oldest sibling in her family and therefore had not had an opportunity to observe an older brother or sister navigate college-going. Neither of her parents had attended college

nor had most of the residents of Whately. So, how did Sara move from an interest in going to college to actually getting to college?

"The internet," responded Sara as I posed this question. "I was kind of late to make my decision about going to college…like, well into my senior year. So, I spent a lot of time researching."

"What were you researching?" I asked.

"Everything… taking the ACT, which schools had my major, the actual application process."

"How did you know about the ACT?" I asked, trying to better understand the role of the internet as one of Sara's college-going practices.

"Google…" replied Sara. "I mean, I think I knew there was a test you had to take to get into college. I'm not sure how I knew that. But, when I googled it, the website explained to me what it was, and when I could take it, and where I could take it."

"And you used the internet to find out about your major at Public?" I asked.

"Yeah…when I was researching schools, I came across the University of Arizona and thought about applying there. Again, I have no idea why. I just thought it would be an interesting place to live and go to school for a few years. I brought it up to my guidance counselor one day, and she pretty much nixed the idea right away."

"So you decided to apply to Public instead?"

"Yep," Sara replied. "When I realized Arizona wasn't going to actually be an option, I kind of knew that Public was the only other school I would apply to."

"Why was that?" I asked.

“Well, it’s a state school, and it’s committed to serving the people of the state,” responded Sara.

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“Well, I obviously know much more about the university after spending two years there, but like I said, I did a lot of research.” shared Sara. “I read about the mission of the university…who attends the university. I just felt like it was the best place for me.”

“So the internet played an important role in your college-going,” I said, attempting to correctly synthesize what I had heard Sara tell me. “Is there internet access throughout Whately? Like at school or at home? Is there a place for people who don’t have a computer or internet at home to access that technology in town?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” responded Sara. “Our internet access is pretty decent. Remember when I showed you around town…I showed you the telecommunications company, so that definitely helps. We had computers at school that we could use. My family has a computer here at home…I have my laptop here with me this summer. The internet can be spotty at times [referring to her house], but then we also have the computers at the town library. Remember, my mom’s the town librarian, so if the internet’s not working here at home, I could just go down to the library.”

“So then I’m assuming you applied for admission to Public online…applied for financial aid online…”

Sara interrupted me. “Not financial aid. I haven’t taken out any loans to pay for school.”

Sara’s comment caught me off guard. “You haven’t taken out any loans?” I asked.

"No," replied Sara. "I thought I would have to take out loans, but my mom inherited some money before I went to college, and she said she wanted to use it to pay for my school."

"Inherited money?" I thought silently to myself. My face must have shown that I was surprised by this new information because Sara continued to tell me about her ability to pay for school.

"I think I've mentioned that my mom grew up on a farm, right?" said Sara.

"Yeah, you have," I replied.

"Well, neither my mom nor her siblings really wanted to take on the responsibility of the farm, so they decided to sell the land and split the money. This happened my last semester of high school, so it just kind of worked out," Sara explained.

One of the main reasons that Sara's comments about financial aid surprised me so much was because Sara had framed her family as being indifferent toward her pursuit of higher education. Prior to that conversation, I thought I had a pretty clear understanding of Sara's college-going within the context of my conceptual framework. Her lived experiences on her family's farm were reflected in her high school curriculum which led to an interest in becoming a family and consumer science teacher. At the same time, this interest was formulated toward the end of her secondary education after years of being directed toward a post-secondary vocational career rather than post-secondary education. Simultaneously, Sara had framed her immediately family as being indifferent about higher education. And all of this was taking place within a rural community that existed within an urbanormative society. While Sara's mother's willingness to pay for Sara's post-secondary education seemed to reflect investment and support rather than indifference, it also re-emphasized the role of

natural capital in shaping Sara's college-going practices and the relationship between natural and financial capital. Farming, inclusive of land, home, and activities, was not only foundational to Sara's interest in pursuing a post-secondary degree, but it also provided a means for Sara to finance her education. In summation, the natural capital in this rural farming community brought Sara's college-going full circle.

CHAPTER FIVE
SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

In Chapter Four, I presented and analyzed Hannah's and Sara's lived experiences as individual life histories. In this chapter, I provide a synthesis of the two life histories. By bringing these two life histories together, I explain how college-going manifested differently in these rural communities, primarily due to the interaction between community capital and urbanormativity as well as the influence of gender as a social structure. I conclude this chapter with implications for both research and practice.

Diverse Manifestations of Rural Communities and College-Going

The overarching research question this study served to answer was, "How do undergraduate rural women understand the role of their home communities in shaping their college-going practices and behaviors?" At the most basic level, the answer is simply, "differently." I have stated numerous times throughout this dissertation that I did not design this research study to be comparative. However, it became clear approximately halfway through my data collection that Hannah and Sara had very different understandings of the roles their rural communities played in shaping their college-going practices and behaviors. In many ways, Sara's life history mirrored the research that had been conducted on rurality as it related to identity, education, and geography, prompting her to ponder the question, "How did I get here (to college)"? Hannah's life history, on the other hand, illustrated a rural woman who understood her community to be so supportive of participating in higher education that the question she was faced with answering was not, "Are you going to college?" but "*Where* are you going to college?" As illustrated in her life history, Hannah's experiences embedded in her rural college community were very much counter to the previous literature on rural people, rural communities, and post-secondary education

described in Chapter Two. The difference between Sara's and Hannah's lived experiences is an important understanding that emerged from this study because it qualitatively demonstrates the diversity that exists within rural communities and across rural people's experiences. Brown and Schafft (2010) advocate for the use of qualitative understandings of rurality because of their multiplicity, inclusive of social, demographic, economic, and/or cultural aspects. By focusing on what rural is rather than what rural is not, and allowing participants to build ideas of rurality that reflected their own lived experiences, we begin to understand why Hannah and Sara's experiences were so vastly different.

Community Capital and Urbanormativity

A primary explanation for the differences in Hannah's and Sara's college-going is the diverse manifestation of community capital that existed in their communities as well as the way the capital interacted with various social structures, primarily urbanormativity. As I stated in my conceptual framework, college-going is "pedagogically produced – a learned social practice co-constructed by multiple agencies that interact with various social structures" (Gildersleeve, 2010, p. 2). From a young age, Hannah was engaged in a process of learning about post-secondary education, both in terms of opportunity as well as the behaviors and practices necessary to enter into and engage with institutions of higher learning. Multiple agencies, operationalized in this study as rural community capital, participated in her pedagogical process including her K-12 education system (i.e. curriculum, teachers, counselors), local business, and family and friends. Interacting with these various forms of community capital was that of the local community college. As a form of built capital, the community college provided Hannah with an opportunity to observe higher education. On an almost daily basis, she drove by the institution on her way to and from

middle and high school. She watched her brother matriculate into the institution as a full-time student, and she listened to her mom share stories of her own experiences as an Egan student. Hannah's ability to observe higher education was counter to what previous scholarship had suggested, primarily because the physical ways in which college manifests itself via large buildings, campus signs, athletic facilities, and students walking to and from class are often absent from rural peoples' everyday lived experiences (Burnell, 2003).

Yet, Hannah's interactions with the community college were not just that of observation but also of participation. In other words, the built capital manifested into human, cultural, and social capital that contributed greatly to Hannah's learned social practice of college-going (Flora & Flora, 2013; Gildersleeve, 2010). From an early age, Hannah knew she would have the opportunity to take college courses at the community college. She watched her older brother and sister engage in these courses years before she did. She, herself, was advised at the beginning of her high school career to plan to take college-bearing courses at the community college later on in her junior and senior years. Her guidance counselor assisted Hannah with using an online college planning website and her community had adequate broadband internet access, which allowed her to utilize the college-going tool without any difficulty. Hannah was academically prepared by her high school teachers to engage in such college-level courses. She also attended collegiate athletic events at Egan and interacted with the coaches and players. In other words, much of what Hannah learned about post-secondary education was through her own interactions with the local community college as well as the interactions, or human, social, and cultural capital, of her K-12 education system, friends and family, and her broader community.

The community college also shaped financial capital in the community, providing a sense of economic stability that subsequently allowed businesses to financially invest in students' pursuit of post-secondary education. This financial investment was another form of capital that shaped Hannah's college-going practices and behaviors. As I mentioned in the previous section, Atwood-River Town demonstrated its expectations of college-going in a variety of ways – school counseling, academic preparation, dual enrollment, informal conversations among community members. Yet, a financial investment allowed for those expectations to be actualized.

Uniquely, the community college shaped rural community capital in very specific ways that ultimately allowed Hannah to learn about and engage in post-secondary education throughout her time spent living in Atwood-River Town. At the same time, the community college also challenged the urbanormative nature of higher education by allowing rural students to participate in higher education in their home community. While rural people are often the recipients of messages that suggest "if they want the best of anything they must go the city to find it" (Theobald & Woods, 2010, p. 17-18), Hannah and her classmates were able to engage in higher education right in their own community. The presence of the community college and the opportunities provided for students to participate in college courses through the dual enrollment program normalized higher education as a practice for rural people. While Hannah did eventually leave Atwood-River Town to pursue a bachelor's degree, she did so with the understanding that people from rural communities go to college.

On the other hand, urbanormativity greatly influenced how Sara's community shaped her college-going practices and behaviors and subsequently Sara's own perception of her community. While Sara's feelings for her community were often ambivalent, it is important

to understand that Sara's community was not void of rural community capital. In other words, it was not because the community was lacking capital. Rather, it should be understood that urbanormativity, as a social structure, interacted with existing rural community capital in a way that ultimately did not produce a social practice of college-going. For example, Sara's school offered a college-preparatory curriculum. Yet, Sara was never encouraged or advised to pursue those courses. In fact, when she applied to Public University, she technically did not have the appropriate pre-requisite courses to be admitted. Additionally, her school district's student handbook framed post-secondary education as something that most students would not pursue. In other words, specific college-going practices and behaviors were not taught because post-secondary education was not framed as an opportunity in this rural community? But why?

Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, and Smith (2011) explained that urban hegemony continues to be a force in American society. This social structure works in such a way that while privileging urban people, places, and experiences, it consequently defines rural people and experiences as inferior. In Sara's rural community, this notion of inferiority translated into an ethos that college-going was not something in which rural people participated. In other words, the lack of college-going was not because the community lacked the capital to pedagogically produce this social practice. Rather, Sara's rural community, situated within an urbanormative society, had been made to believe that college-going was not a social practice in which rural people participated.

Yet, Sara did make it to college. However, Sara's life history should not be essentialized as that of the extraordinary rural college student – the person that made it to college despite great obstacles. Rather, Sara's life history of college-going can still be

understood within a framework of capital, specifically natural capital. One of the main reasons I utilized the Community Capitals Framework to conceptualize this study and analyze the data was because it of its inclusion of natural capital. While higher education scholars have previously studied college-going from a capital framework, their scholarship has focused primarily on social and cultural capital (Gildersleeve, 2010; Hernandez, 2013; Kiyama, 2010; Nora, 2004). Given the centrality of geography to this study, I wanted to understand if there was a relationship between natural capital and rural college-going. While natural capital was not central to Hannah's life history, Sara's life history helped me to understand that natural capital played an important role in shaping her college-going practices and behaviors – primarily her decision to attend college and subsequently her focus of study as well as her ability to finance her education. However, as I described in the second section of Sara's life history, this capital also provided an understanding of the unique way that gender, as a social structure, shaped Sara's college-going.

Rurality and Gender

Sara's life history illustrated how her college-going was greatly influenced by growing up in a farming community and participating in daily farming practices. While traditional definitions have historically equated farming to taking care of crops and/or animals, Sara also understood the farm to include the home and responsibilities related to the home as farming (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). In other words, the home, although manifested as built capital, was actually a natural extension of the land. Sara described her daily activities to include taking care of the home alongside her mom (inclusive of cooking, cleaning, and canning). In comparison, her father and brother took care of the farm responsibilities outside of the home such as tending to the crops

and the animals. In other words, Sara's daily experiences were shaped by a gendered understanding of and engagement with natural capital. Although the United States as a whole operates as a patriarchal society, Brown and Schafft (2011) explain that this structure is often magnified in rural communities where gendered ways of being are typically a part of everyday life.

Moreso, this gendered division of labor was something Sara not only participated in on the farm but also engaged with through her high school family and consumer sciences (FCS) curriculum. More specifically, Sara's gendered experiences on the farm were reflected in her FCS curriculum. For example, at the same time that Sara was responsible for cooking dinner for the family at home, she simultaneously was enrolled in a Foods course at her high school. While she was responsible for cleaning and maintaining the appearance of her family's house, she was also enrolled in a Home Décor class.

Yet, it is important to remember that Sara did not voluntarily choose to study FCS, at least not initially. She was tracked into this curriculum, one that typically led to a post-secondary career rather than post-secondary education, by her guidance counselor. Nevertheless, Sara shared that once she began taking the courses she found that she really enjoyed them, primarily because she performed well in them. Part of the reason she did so well in these courses can be attributed to the fact that what she was learning in the classroom was being applied at home and vice versa. In other words, there was a relationship between her academic curriculum and her lived experiences, similar to the way formal internships take place at the collegiate level (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999). Subsequently, while gender dictated, in a rather traditional manner, what Sara was allowed to do on the farm and

encouraged to study in school (Fink, 1986), it also provided her with a sense of congruency that contributed to her desire to go to school to become an FCS teacher.

Some rural and gender scholars argue that curricula such as home economics, which is more commonly referred to now as family and consumer sciences, support a patriarchal society in which women are relegated to the home while men are considered specialists outside of the home (Little, 2014; Zimmerman & Olson, 2010). As a self-identified feminist scholar, I understand this critique. I think Sara would also understand this critique, to some extent. In her life history, she indicated that not all farm families and communities function in the same gendered way as her family – that there are women who assume responsibility for crop production and/or animal care. Sara also shared that she, herself, had wanted to be more involved in the crop production and animal care on her family's farm, but her father gave those responsibilities to her brother. In other words, Sara did not choose to maintain her family's home or go to college to study family and consumer science in order to support a patriarchal society. Rather, patriarchy as a hegemonic structure influenced Sara's daily activities on the farm, resulting in a gendered experience in her rural community. Yet, without this gendered experience coupled with her FCS curriculum, it is difficult to know whether or not Sara would have pursued a bachelor's degree at all. Sara's life history illustrated the complexity of a gendered rurality as it relates to college-going.

Hannah's life history, at first read, appeared to be less impacted by gender. There were parts of her life history related to education that I found to be influenced by gender. For example, Hannah discussed a gendered division of labor between her teachers. More specifically, Hannah found her teachers that identified as women to be more attentive to preparing her academically for college while the men focused more on their coaching

responsibilities and thus spent their time preparing Hannah for the possibility of collegiate athletic participation.

I was also able to understand gender through Hannah's discussion of her family's farm. Similar to Sara's life history, Hannah discussed the patrilineal nature of farming and the central role her brother was expected to serve in the daily farming operations. However, differently than Sara, Hannah had no formal responsibilities related to the actual farmland. She helped out when needed but her dad actually preferred that she did not work while in school. Additionally, Hannah mentioned no formal responsibilities related to taking care of the home. Hannah's main responsibility, defined by her father, was to do well in school so she could go to college, earn a bachelor's degree and secure a stable job. While Sara and Hannah's daily work responsibilities were vastly different, their responsibilities were both defined by their father. In other words, the patriarch of the family defined the daily responsibilities of each of the women (Fink, 1986, Johnson, 2005). However, because these responsibilities were different, they, in turn, influenced the college-going practices and behaviors of the women differently.

Other than these two examples, it was often difficult to get Hannah to talk about gender. I explained at our very first conversation that I was interested in understanding how gender and rurality together may have shaped her specific college-going practices and behaviors. During our first few conversations, I asked overt questions about gender as it related to her community, to which Hannah typically replied, "I know you want me to talk about gender differences, but there honestly weren't any." As we moved through our conversations, I attempted to ask more subversive questions that might lead to the collection of data related to gender.

Yet, as I read through my research memos and transcripts, I realized that Hannah did speak about gender, or rather about the absence of gender. Hannah consistently stated that she did not think gender made a difference in her college-going. In other words, Hannah approached gender from a point of gender blindness (Houston, 1985; Scantlebury, 1995). Similar to colorblindness within the realm of race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), gender blindness asserts that differences in gender do not matter. Thus, Hannah's comprehension of a gendered rurality as it related to college-going was actually that of a gender-blind rurality. Why is this important? First, this study took place within the context of a patriarchal society. From my own epistemological standpoint as well as a documented historical analysis of women and post-secondary education presented in Chapter Two, I approached this study with an understanding that gender, and more so patriarchy, have greatly influenced women's post-secondary educational opportunity, practices, and behaviors. Second, gender blindness, similar to color blindness, masks inequalities that exist within society. Thus, while I approached Hannah's life history as her truth, I was also cognizant that her gender blindness may have obscured the role gender served in shaping college-going practices and behaviors in her rural college community.

Shared Manifestation of Rural College-Going

Hannah's and Sara's life histories differed greatly in regard to their college-going practices, primarily due to differences in community capital and the influence of urbanormativity in their respective home communities. Yet, there was one form of capital that was readily available to both of them in their home communities – broadband internet access. Their lived experiences demonstrated that they utilized this form of built capital in different ways in regard to their college-going – Hannah referenced the use of the internet in

accessing the online college and career planning tool, *ihaveaplaniowa.com* while Sara discussed relying on the internet to help with researching colleges as well as understanding the college admissions process. Yet, access to the internet allowed both of the women to engage in their respective college-going practices and behaviors.

Most research related to rural people, college-going, and the internet has revolved around online/distance education. More specifically, this literature has framed the internet as a way to bring education to rural people (Hetzel, 2012; Sileo & Sileo, 2007). While online education has shown to be useful in bridging the geographic divide between place-based institutions of higher education and rural people/communities, it is often only viewed in this manner. Hannah's and Sara's life histories, on the other hand, illustrate that built capital in the form of dependable broadband internet access can assist in bringing rural people to institutions of higher learning.

Implications for Research and Policy

Together, Hannah's life history and Sara's life history illustrated how community capital, urbanormativity, and gender collectively shaped college-going in different ways. Through exploring Hannah's lived experiences in her rural college community, I was able to understand how rural community capital can work collectively to pedagogically produce a learned social practice of going to college. At the same time, Sara's lived and gendered experiences illustrated how urbanormativity as a social structure can challenge the development of college-going as a learned social practice. In this final section, I move from understanding to application. In other words, how do these life histories inform both future research as well as current practice/policy?

Implications for Research

In this section, I discuss how the findings from my dissertation study can contribute to future research related to rural people/communities and college-going practices and behaviors at both a community level as well as a programmatic level. In considering implications for research, it is important that I discuss how such research attends to the particularities (and not generalities) of rural college-going (Howley, 1997). Specifically, I focus on the significance of studying other rural college communities to better understand the relationship between community capital and urbanormativity, the importance of expanding geographically contextual research to be inclusive of other rural areas in the United States, and the need to better understand how dual enrollment programs might shape post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students.

Rural college communities. Hannah's life history suggested that the presence of the community college, as well as the myriad opportunities for her to engage and interact with this institution of higher learning while she was growing up in her rural community, contributed greatly to the development of a pedagogically produced social practice of college-going. Additionally, Hannah experienced teachers that prepared her academically to enroll in courses at the community college and a guidance counselor who was highly engaged in the college-going process at the state level. She also benefited from local businesses that chose to invest financially in the town's residents' pursuit of higher education. Ultimately, Atwood-River Town was a rural college community that interacted with the local institution of higher education, producing a notion of college-going right in the community.

Thus, the first implication for research is to further study this notion of rural college communities which I define broadly as rural communities in which institutions of higher learning are situated. As I have stated throughout this study, Hannah's life history countered much of the scholarship focused on rural people and post-secondary education. My analysis suggested that this counter narrative could be attributed to the presence of the local community college and the high level of engagement between the community college and other forms of capital in the community. Given that rural students are pursuing post-secondary education at rates lower than the national average and lower than their (sub)urban counterparts, better understanding communities such as Atwood-River Town could illuminate certain policies and practices that could serve other rural communities. A specific implication for further research on rural college communities is to utilize the findings from Hannah's life history to conduct a broader case study of her community. While life history research provided a rich understanding at the individual level, a case study approach could provide an understanding of college-going at the community level.

Rural diversity, natural capital, and college-going. Natural capital and built capital were foundational to the college-going processes of both Sara and Hannah, albeit in different ways. Yet, these forms of capital have not been central to understanding college-going, specifically for rural populations. McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) explained there is often incongruence between the capital present in rural communities and the capital valued by higher education. However, given that natural capital and built capital played such significant roles in shaping Hannah and Sara's college-going, it is important that future research consider these forms of capital when studying rural college-going from a capital perspective.

It is also important to recognize that my dissertation study was geographically situated within the state of Iowa with participants who both grew up on farms. Given the centrality of space/place to this study, the significance of natural and built capital, and the role of gender, it is important to acknowledge that these forms of capital and social structure might manifest differently in various rural parts of the United States and subsequently influence college-going differently. Thus, it would be beneficial to conceptualize studies of rural people, places, and communities that include other rural towns in Iowa as well as other geographical parts of the US. This research implication supports the notion that rural areas, even within the same state, are not monolithic places (Donehower, Hogg, and Shell, 2007) and thus can be diverse in their abilities and approaches to pedagogically produce a learned social practice of college-going.

Dual Enrollment Programs. An integral component of Hannah's college-going was her participation in the dual enrollment program – an educational partnership between her high school and the local community college. During her senior year, Hannah spent half of each school day engaged in college-level courses that were physically taught on Egan's campus by college professors. Hannah's participation in the dual enrollment program not only provided her with enough transfer credits to start her first year at Public University classified as a sophomore, but it also provided her with an understanding of collegiate expectations before she matriculated into Public University as a full-time student.

A recent study examined the relationship between participation in a dual enrollment program in Washington state and subsequent enrollment in a post-secondary institution (Gowan & Goldhaber, 2015). Their findings concluded that students who participate in dual enrollment programs are more likely to enroll in any post-secondary institution but less likely

to enroll in a four-year institution. Post-secondary matriculation is a common way in which the effect of dual enrollment programs are studied, measured, and evaluated (Andrews, 2004; Boswell, 2001; Gowan & Goldhaber, 2015). These educational programs are also understood to have the capability of reducing the financial cost of post-secondary education, most commonly by reducing the time to degree completion. In summation, previous scholarship on dual enrollment programs has indicated that participation in these programs contributes positively to post-secondary enrollment and has the ability to reduce the total cost of a post-secondary education.

However, dual enrollment programs have not been adequately studied as they relate to a learned social practice of college-going. Hannah's life history illustrated the unique way in which dual enrollment functioned in her rural college community. Due to the strong relationships that existed between the high school and the community college, the dual enrollment program was more than a college-credit producing program. It was an opportunity for students to begin to understand collegiate academic expectations and actually see themselves as college students. In other words, it was an important form of community capital that served to pedagogically engage students in college-going as a social practice. The dual enrollment program provided students with the opportunity to engage in post-secondary education while normalizing college-going for students who have not historically participated in post-secondary education. Rather than focus on post-secondary matriculation or degree completion as an outcome of dual enrollment programs, future research could explore the role of dual enrollment in engaging, informing, and introducing students to higher education as an opportunity.

In considering all of these implications for further research, it is also important to acknowledge that Hannah's and Sara's life histories, while gendered, were also steeped in Whiteness. In other words, this study provided insight into how rural communities shape college-going for White women. While rural areas are often classified as racially homogenous, historical and current migration patterns have resulted in the racial diversification of many rural communities (Brown & Schafft, 2011). In going forward with future research, it would be important to explore how race, as a social structure, interacts with various forms of community capital to produce a learned social practice of college-going for rural Students of Color.

Implications for Practice/Policy

In this final section, I discuss how the findings from my study contribute to future practice/policy at both an institutional and state level.

Institutional. At an institutional level, I am specifically committed to explaining how my research might be utilized by state universities, particularly land grant institutions. The main reason for this qualification is that land grant universities were initially created with a mission to serve the people of the state (Rudolph, 1991), providing students with an opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree, which as documented in both Hannah's life history and in the literature review, typically provides a larger economic return for individuals (over the course of a lifetime) than an associate's degree.

Land grant institutions, such as Iowa State University, execute this state-serving mission through an organized division known as Extension and Outreach. This branch of the university employs individuals (often referred to as Extension Officers or Field Specialists) to go into rural communities (and now, some urban communities as well) and work with

people where they live. In other words, these knowledge specialists are situated within a community where they are able to work with the members of the community around issues relevant to the residents.

In states like Iowa, these issues typically revolve around agriculture/food production, community/economic development, and youth development. While education may be embedded in some of this work, Extension and Outreach is not explicitly focused on shaping college-going practices and behaviors. Yet, this division probably has the best understanding of rural communities of anyone in the university.

As evidenced by previous literature (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Rojewski, 1999), issues experienced in rural communities differ from those in other geographical areas, suggesting that how we consider college access for rural people and communities may need to be different than the current way of thinking. Thus, the findings from this study call for a reframing of who serves and works with rural students, and subsequently their communities, prior to their matriculation into a land grant university. Historically, this responsibility has been assumed by an office of admissions. Similar to field specialists in Extension and Outreach, admissions counselors are assigned specific territories or regions and often spend a few intense months visiting high school students in their assigned region or providing information to potential students at regional college fairs. However, admissions counselors typically develop relationships with individual students, high schools, and school guidance counselors, and are not as intimately engaged at a community level.

Both time and geography make engagement at a community level challenging for admissions counselors. Their time in "the field" is often dictated by how many schools or prospective students they need to meet coupled with the distance between these schools and

students. Extension and Outreach specialists, on the other hand, are intimately connected at the community level. They often have work space in their community, and they themselves might be members of the community.

If it takes a community to get a rural student to college (as Hannah's life history specifically demonstrated), then land grant universities and offices of admissions could benefit from utilizing the expertise of Extension and Outreach. Placing specialists who possess 1) an understanding of higher education, 2) a comprehension of the complexity of identity, social systems, and geography as they relate to rural communities, and 3) a grasp of the capital present in a rural community could lead to more communities, such as Hannah's, engaging their local residents in a learned social practice of college-going.

State. Hannah's life history greatly emphasized the unique and important ways that the local community college shaped her college-going practices and behaviors. Thus, it would seem that a way to enhance college-going in rural communities would be to place an institution of higher learning in every rural town. For obvious reasons, that idea is simply not plausible. However, it does raise the idea of whether or not college-going practices, in rural college communities such as Hannah's community, can be be replicated or modified in ways that could benefit rural communities that are not located in close proximity to an institution of higher education, such as Sara's community.

Dual Enrollment. As described in Hannah's life history, her participation in the local dual enrollment program – a partnership between her high school and the local community college – not only provided her with enough transfer credits to start her first year at Public University classified as a sophomore, it also provided her with an understanding of collegiate expectations and normalized college-going as a rural person before she actually matriculated

into Public University as a full-time student. In other words, dual enrollment played a significant role in developing Hannah's learned social practice of college-going.

As I described in her life history, there were several reasons why the dual enrollment program contributed successfully to Hannah's college-going practices. One of the main reasons was the close proximity of the Atwood-River Town schools, specifically the high school, to the community college. Transportation between the high school and community college was not an issue – students could literally walk if necessary. However, in Sara's community, transportation was an issue. Not only was the closest community college that offered dual enrollment at least 45 minutes away, the responsibility to get to and from the community college was placed on the individual student and their family. Thus, I raise the question, "Could the state of Iowa financially support the transportation of rural students who wish to participate in dual enrollment to and from local communities?" I believe the answer is, "Yes." However, from a policy perspective, a better way to frame this question might be, "*Why* would the state of Iowa financially support the transportation of rural students who wish to participate in dual enrollment to and from local community colleges?"

Beyond the obvious reason that it would benefit the people of the state, specifically those students who would be able to participate in such a program, the reality is that the state of Iowa is currently functioning in this manner at the elementary and secondary level. The state of Iowa already supports the sharing of resources at the elementary and secondary level. Formally known as whole grade sharing, this procedure is used by school districts that do not have enough students in their district to necessitate full-time teachers in each grade or subject area required at the secondary level. Thus, districts engage in a formal agreement to share an educational program for all or a substantial portion of the school day. Currently, 35 school

districts in the state of Iowa send their secondary school students to a different school district for at least part or all of the school day. (Iowa Department of Education, 2014). Most of these school districts are anywhere from 10 to 30 miles apart requiring the use of school buses to transport students from one district to another.

Thus, what if the state re-imagined whole grade sharing, specifically at the secondary level? What if, instead of the current practice of school districts sending their students to other school districts, those districts engaged in partnerships with a local community college to create dual enrollment programs, specifically for students in their junior and senior years of high school? This type of partnership would essentially address the same issues (lack of resources) currently addressed by whole grade sharing. However, dual enrollment partnerships would provide rural students with an opportunity to engage in practices that could support and normalize college-going for them.

Dual enrollment as whole grade sharing could serve to address a resource issue as well as prepare rural students for post-secondary education. Yet, as evidenced by Hannah's life history, the success of her dual enrollment program was substantially due to the strong relationships between teacher, counselors, and community college professors as evidenced by Hannah's life history. Thus, the development of relationships among people who are not geographically situated in the same location would be important to the success of whole grade sharing at the community college level.

Broadband. Both Sara and Hannah discussed the importance of having ready access to the internet as part of their college-going practices. Hannah spoke of relying on the internet to access the online college/career planning website while Sara relied heavily on the internet to research the intricate processes related to actually applying to a college or

university. In other words, access to the internet translated into access to college for these two rural women.

Though broadband internet access is more prevalent in rural areas than in the past, there are still parts of rural Iowa that are both underserved and unserved in respect to internet access (www.connectiowa.org; Retrieved 11/3/14). Given the role that internet served in particular to Sara's college-going practices, a lack of broadband internet access in a rural community could serve as a challenge to the development of college-going practices for its residents.

For the past two years, the Iowa State legislature has considered and failed to pass a bill supporting statewide broadband internet access. While the House of Representatives recently passed the bill this year, it is still being considered in the Senate (Petroski, 2015). Additionally, it is important to understand that while the House passed the bill, almost unanimously, they also removed all state-funding from the bill. In other words, the legislature supports the *idea* of broadband internet access in the state but does not necessarily want to financially invest in the idea. As our society becomes increasingly digitized, adequate internet access is becoming less a privilege and more of a necessity. For students like Hannah and Sara, the internet was integral to their ability to come to know post-secondary education as an opportunity as well as the intricacies of the college admissions process and could serve as a crucial component of college-going for other rural students as well.

Conclusion

Sara's and Hannah's life histories illustrated how the interaction between community capital, urbanormativity, and gender manifested in diverse understandings of rural college-

going. While Sara's life history aligned with much of the previous research, it also provided a systemic understanding of the challenges related to college-going in rural communities, primarily due to urban hegemony. Simultaneously, Hannah's life history proved counter to the existing literature, demonstrating how community capital can support the development of a learned social practice of college-going.

By highlighting the diverse manifestations of rural college-going, this study also provided several implications for research. By demonstrating the importance of geographic diversity, natural capital, and gender in regard to college-going, this study called for the expansion of studies on rural college-going to include other rural parts of the United States, acknowledging that gender and rurality can manifest differently in various regions. Additionally, the findings from this study uncovered a specific type of rural community – the rural college community. Given the significance of the local community college to Hannah's college-going, additional research on rural communities that serve as a physical home to institutions of higher education could help to better understand the relationship between rural place and higher education. Last, this study suggests a need to further understand the role of dual enrollment programs as they relate to college-going, not just as a predictor of college matriculation but as a form of capital that contributes to the understanding of post-secondary education as an opportunity as well as the development of learned college-going practices and behaviors.

In addition to research, this study also provided several implications for practice and policy for the state of Iowa, at both the institutional and state level. Collectively, the implications call for a reframing or reimagining of higher education as it pertains to rural people and communities. From pre-collegiate engagement to include divisions of Extension

and Outreach to considering the inclusion of community colleges in whole grade sharing activities to the expansion of broadband internet access, the findings from this study illustrate the potential for the state of Iowa to think differently about how it supports the development of college-going for rural students.

CHAPTER SIX
METHODOLOGICAL EPILOGUE

In Chapter Three: Research Design, I indicated my varied reasons for pursing life history as a methodology, one of which was the opportunity and encouragement to build authentic relationships with participants. Because of this, I felt it was important to document the way in which my relationships developed with the participants, specifically Sara, post-formal data collection.

I completed my last interviews with Hannah and Sara just a few days before the fall semester started. On the first day of classes, I sent them each an email, thanking them again for their participation in my study, wishing them well as they began a new academic year, and leaving the door open for continued communication. I explained that I would be taking the month of September to focus solely on my dissertation, and as a result I might not be very accessible but would enjoy reconnecting in October. I immediately received emails back from both of the women wishing me well as I finished my dissertation.

The email I received on the first day of classes was the last time I heard from Hannah. When I reflect on my time with her, I am not surprised that our relationship ended at the end of formal data collection. While the relational aspect was one of the reasons I chose to engage in life history as a methodology (Cole & Knowles, 2001), I also knew that both the researcher and participant had to be committed to the development of a relationship. While I believe I developed a strong enough relationship with Hannah to engage in a life history study, her decision to not disclose her participation in this study to anyone influenced the way in which our relationship developed. I never visited her community with her. I never met any of her family or friends. I never saw where she lived. Our relationship only existed within the four walls of the conference room where we met each week. And while we used

that time to openly discuss our truths of growing up in rural communities, I had a feeling that once we stopped meeting, our relationship would probably not develop any further.

My relationship with Sara, however, was much different. As described in her life history, Sara provided me with great access to not only her lived experiences but also to the places in which these experiences took place as well as to some of the people who shaped these experiences. She allowed me to get to know her within her own physical environment. The intimacy of our meetings – sitting at the family's kitchen table, meeting her mom and brother, driving through town in her truck, helping to free a sheep that got stuck in a gate – allowed our relationship to develop beyond the formal data collection. So, when I heard from Sara again, just a couple of weeks after the start of the fall semester, I was pleasantly surprised.

I spent the first week of my September sabbatical working in the law library at a local university. I was extremely productive during those first few days as I organized transcripts, revisited my research memos, coded data, and took lots of notes. But things quickly changed. The analysis became more challenging and thus my productivity looked different. Instead of spending hours putting words on paper, I spent most of my time thinking, drawing concept maps, and attempting to answer my research questions. While I know my feeling of being buried under tons of data was not unique, at the time, it was intense and overwhelming, and by day nine, I felt defeated. Needing a break, I closed down my dissertation and opened my email. Staring back at me was a name I had not seen in a couple of weeks but was familiar all the same – *Sara*. As I absorbed the words staring back at me, I could feel the tears begin to well up in my eyes.

> Hey, I thought that after sitting at home and writing all day, you might get a little burned out (there is no way I could do that!) so I thought you might need a little inspiration! Have fun following your dreams! (Sara, Personal Communication, September 2014)

Attached to the email was a quote that read, "The struggle you're in today is developing the strength you need for tomorrow." Sara had no idea how timely her message was, but I made sure she knew. I immediately wrote back thanking her for her thoughtful note. I also included a few casual questions. "How are classes going? Work? How's the fam? Is your brother doing okay with pre-college stuff?"

The next day Sara responded to my email providing me with many updates about her life – initial feelings about her classes, thoughts about her new supervisor at work, her contentment with her new roommate, her recent purchase of a new (used) truck. I felt that Sara's quick and open response to my email suggested that she might be interested in staying in touch with me. A week later, I opened my email to find another note from Sara.

> …just in case you need an extra shot of inspiration: I was reading my adolescence development book, and there was a HUGE section of the effects of growing up in poverty in urban areas, and only 1 SENTENCE AT THE END OF THE SECTION ON RURAL ADOLESCENCE! KEEP WRITING – THE WORLD NEEDS YOU!!! (Sara, Personal Communication, September 2014)

Once again, my emotions poured over me as I attempted to process Sara's affirming message. Here was my participant, not only taking time to let me know that she felt my work mattered but also recognizing why it mattered – that urban experiences are often centered in

academic texts while rural people and places are relegated to the margins or absent entirely. Sara's email reminded me of my own experiences of reading various texts and articles in my doctoral program that were void of the rural student experience, and how I felt as I attempted to make meaning of this absence.

As I reflected on my email from Sara, I realized I was both surprised to receive such a supportive note but also overwhelmed that these words of affirmation were coming from a participant. While establishing a personal relationship with my participants and working to challenge the power dynamic often present between researcher and participants were certainly some of the reasons I chose to engage in life history, I did not anticipate the level of reciprocity that began to develop between Sara and myself. As the researcher, older in age and more advanced in education, I felt it was my role to encourage Sara in her academic pursuits. I never expected to be the recipient of such encouragement from one of my participants. Yet, here it was – unfolding right in front of me. The type of relationship that I had set out to establish with my participants was actually happening.

The remaining weeks of September went by rather quickly, and on October 1st I received another message from Sara.

> Hey! September is over! Time flies too fast!! I was just seeing how it is coming together. Also, I know this is a super long process, but can I know what my alias is so when this bad boy gets published and your famous I can find it and read it?? Have a super duper day! PS- I am going home this weekend for the first time since I got here, and it will be weird not being in the green truck at home. I don't know if I told you, but I bought a different truck.

> Not that that's important. Anyway, write on! I believe in you! (Sara, Personal Communication, October 1, 2014)

I chuckled as I began to read Sara's latest email. The first few sentences reminded me of the emails I used to send to first-year students when I was an academic advisor, checking in with them and seeing how their semesters were going. I also appreciated Sara's inquiry into her pseudonym. During our very first guided conversation, I explained the use and purpose of pseudonyms in qualitative research. I also explained that I always give participants in my studies the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym and asked her to begin thinking about what she might want to be called in the study. As we wrapped up each subsequent guided conversation, I would remind Sara about choosing a pseudonym. I even offered suggestions for choosing a pseudonym – perhaps she might want to honor a family member or a former teacher. By the time our last guided conversation arrived, Sara still had not chosen a pseudonym.

"So, what are you thinking for a pseudonym?" I asked one more time. "Have you thought about the name you would like me to use in the study?"

"You know, I've thought about it, but, honestly, the name really doesn't matter to me," Sara replied. "Can you just go ahead and choose one for me?" she asked.

The muscles in my body tightened a little as I heard Sara ask me to select her pseudonym. This is not how I anticipated this aspect of the research process transpiring. Here I was trying to challenge the power dynamics embedded in the research process, and my participant was deferring to me to name her in the study.

It took me weeks to choose a name. She existed in my transcripts, research memos, and early drafts of the dissertation simply as "Participant 2." Finally, I decided on the name

Sara. It was not a name that held any special meaning for me; it was simply a name I could easily remember. While I found other ways to weave the names of special friends and family members into this study, I intentionally chose not to name my participants after anyone in my life. My scholarly relationships with these women were unique and as such I felt they deserved names that were not already occupied by a family member or close friend.

In my email rely to her, I shared my choice of "Sara" as a pseudonym and explained that I was happy to change it if she did not like it or had thought of a different name she would rather I use. She replied back within a few minutes with a one sentence response, "Sounds good to me!"

What Sara's emails in early October helped me to understand is that what felt like deference at the time actually was not deference at all. From the early conception of this research study, I had placed great emphasis on my participants choosing their own names, primarily because I perceived it to be one way in which the participants could exercise some agency in the research process. What I did not account for was the possibility that choosing their own names was just not important to my participants. Sara's email reminded me that what was significant to her was the life history I was describing and analyzing in my study. In other words, the narratives she shared, the framework I used to analyze the data, and the way in which I chose to present this new knowledge – that was what was important to her, not the pseudonym.

A few weeks later, Sara and I made plans to have lunch together. Although we had kept in touch via email, we had not seen each other since our last guided conversation at the end of August. We greeted each other with a smile. Conversation was comfortable and flowed easily. She updated me on her classes and the new supervisor at her part-time

campus job. I updated her on my return to work and balancing my dissertation and assistantship responsibilities. I casually asked about the various members of her family, a question that I routinely asked after meeting both her brother and mother and hearing so much about her grandparents and her father. She shared details of decorating her apartment for Halloween, Friday nights out with her friends, and a guy she had recently met. As we sat outside enjoying the unusually warm October afternoon, our conversation eventually returned to rurality. While our formal data collection had ended months ago, our shared rural experience seemed to always bring our conversations back to our rural communities.

"So tell me about your first trip home in the new truck" I asked Sara, referencing the comment she made in the email she sent earlier that month.

Sara smiled. "Oh, it was fine. I thought it was going to be this big deal driving home in this new truck, but it really wasn't. I mean, I kind of miss my old truck, but, you know, I really needed a new one."

"Did you enjoy your time at home?" I asked.

"Yeah, it was good…I got to see grandma and grandpa, oh and Dwight has a new girlfriend…who I actually like," she shared with a slight smile.

Sara and I eventually wrapped up our conversation that day, promising to get together again soon. We actually ran into each other a couple of times after that lunch meeting. During one of those encounters, she was with her best friend from college, and she nonchalantly introduced the two of us. Sara had talked about this friend throughout our data collection and from the warm welcome I received from her friend, I assumed Sara had mentioned me to her as well. Sara and I tried to find a time to grab coffee or lunch again before the Thanksgiving break, but our schedules were just too busy. By the time we sat

down to talk again, it was the first week of December, and our outdoor lunch had been replaced with a fireside chat at a local coffee shop. As we swapped stories of how we spent our holiday and chatted about the end of the semester, Sara brought up her recent teaching practicum experience.

"So how was your holiday?" I asked, my hands wrapped tightly around a hot cup of coffee.

"It was good," Sara replied. "I got to spend some time with grandma and grandpa, and I took Dwight's girlfriend shopping to find a homecoming dress. It was good to see my family, but it was also pretty busy because I was getting some of my practicum hours in while I was home."

At the mention of home, Sara's face lit up.

"Oh my goodness, I forgot to tell you about that!" she exclaimed excitedly.

"Forgot to tell me about what?" I asked attentively.

Sara launched in, telling me about her time at her alma mater. "So, I spent part of the week back at Carroll-Weakley. I was there to observe the teacher in the Careers class, but you know, I started talking to the students. And I brought up college with them because, well, I've been thinking a lot about college since you and I first met. Most of them were seniors, maybe a couple of them were younger. But, anyway, I started asking them if they were going to college and where and all about the process of applying. No one knew anything; they were just like me! Some had decided where they were going, but they had no idea why they had chosen that school. And they had so many questions..."

"What kind of questions did they have?"

"Oh, a range. They asked if college students really drank as much as they thought they did. They wanted to know what my classes were like, how to apply for financial aid…really a little bit of everything. I tried to answer the questions the best I could, but what I realized was that the students just don't know a lot about college or how to get there. So, I was thinking about talking to the principal over winter break about putting together a panel of former students that could present to current students and parents about going to college. I have friends that are at community colleges and private colleges, and I'm at Public University. I know I could get them to come together for one night to talk about our experiences and maybe answer some of these questions and help make the process of going to college a little bit easier."

I could not help but smile as I listened to Sara share her experience of not only identifying with but also shaping the college-going practices and behaviors of students in her own community. While I would not consider my study to be action research, I do consider action to be an outcome of Sara's participation in this life history study. Cole & Knowles (2001) stated that "sound and rigorous life history research has both *theoretical* potential and *transformative* potential (p. 127)." Over the past year, I observed Sara shift from answering questions asked during our guided conversations to intentionally and continuously reflecting on her rural identity and experiences. We talked extensively about how, prior to joining this study, she had never really thought about her college-going process or its connection to her rural community. Yet, now she could not stop thinking about rurality or college-going. This deep level of reflection informed her decision to engage students from her community in conversation about college-going and subsequently construct the idea of putting together a

formal activity that could help facilitate the college-going process for others in her community.

Sara and I continued to build a relationship over the course of the spring semester. We met once a month for breakfast to check in with each other. We talked about our challenging semesters – my focus (or lack thereof, sometimes) on finishing my dissertation and her struggle to balance a difficult course load with her work schedule and her new boyfriend. She continued to serve as a sounding board and I worked to understand and subsequently develop her life history.

Sara also continued to email me – usually when one of her class discussions prompted her to think about the class topic in relation to her lived rural experiences. The rich data she continued to provide me, unsolicited, was not only a researcher's dream but could be a study in and of itself.

The relationship I built with Sara during data collection and beyond speaks to the both the opportunity and possibilities of life history research. Because of the way life history encourages researchers to be authentic and relational throughout the research process, I was able to engage in conversation with Sara and, at times, allow myself to be truly vulnerable in sharing my own experiences of growing up in a rural community. A level of trust was slowly built that enabled us to spend a Friday here and there together in the library on her campus, Sara studying for one of her FCS courses and me working on my dissertation. While the power dynamic may never completely disappear – I am 15 years older than Sara with several degrees and years of work experience – we have built a relationship that now conflates researcher and participant.

Life history proved to be a powerful methodology. It allowed me to build data with participants, share my own narratives at times, and re-present the data in a creative way. Yet, it also allowed me to build an authentic and engaging relationship with Sara – something I was truly striving for through my engagement with this methodology.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Dear Student,

Thank you for your time. You are receiving this document because I am interested in your participation in my research study. Please take your time deciding if you want to participate. I am available at any time to answer any question you have regarding this study.

The title of my study is: Rural Women and Post-Secondary Educational Opportunity (IRB 14-306; approved 6/10/14). I am the primary researcher on this project.

The purpose of this study is to understand how undergraduate women from rural areas successfully access public, four-year institutions of higher education. I am inviting you to participate in this study because you have self-identified as a woman from a rural area in Iowa who is currently seeking a bachelor's degree at a public university.
If you agree to to participate in this study, you will participate in six interviews. Each interview will last no more than two hours. The interviews will take place during a time convenient for you and in a location that will not disclose your participation in this study. I will audio record each interview. During the interviews, I will ask questions about the following: 1) location/geography of your community; 2) social systems (family & school); 3) identity.

Participating in this study does not cost you anything. You will not be compensated for participating in this study. If you decide to participate in this study, there may be no direct benefit to you. Additionally, the information gained in this study may benefit future rural students by providing educators, policy makers, and community members with information on how to assist rural women with equitably accessing higher education.
During the interviews, you can skip any questions you do not want to answer as well as end the interview at any time. It is possible that you may experience discomfort during the interview. If this does occur, I will immediately stop the interview and ask if you wish to continue. If you do not, I will end the interview. Since your participation in this study is voluntary, you can choose to leave the study at any time. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences.

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable laws and regulations. Records will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the ISU Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies with human subjects) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and analysis. These records may contain private information.

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. In order to protect your identity, I will do the following things: I will remove any identifying information from the data. When the results are published, I will not use your real name, the name of your rural community, or the name of your current university. Pseudonyms will be used instead. I will not use any community identifiers such as town mottos/slogans, regional location or exact population. I will not disclose the geographic location of your university. Additionally, I will refrain from using identifying information such as names of elementary, middle and high schools; places of employment; family members; teachers and school administrators; employers, and friends.

All of the data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet located in my personal home office. The audio recordings of the interviews will be kept on the hard drive of my personal computer (which is password protected) and on an external hard drive which will be kept in a locked filing cabinet when not in use.

Please ask questions at any time in this study:

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, Office for Responsible Research, (515) 294-3115, 1138 Pearson Hall, Ames, IA 50011.
- If you have any questions or concerns regarding this specific study, please contact Kathleen Gillon (Principal Investigator) at kgillon@iastate.edu or 516-320-5621 or Dr. Robert Reason (Faculty Supervisor) at rreason@iastate.edu.

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PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions (if any) have been satisfactorily answered. Please sign and date this document and keep for your own records. At the beginning of our first interview, I will provide you with another copy of this document for you to sign for my records.

Student's Name (printed) ____

Student's Signature___________________________________ Date _______________

APPENDIX B: GUIDED CONVERSATION PROTOCOL

Guided Conversation #1: **Introductions, Location, Timeline**
First official meeting between researcher and participant following consent to participate. Purpose of meeting is to begin to establish rapport and relationship between research and participant as well as begin to understand the sociogeographic nature of the participant's community. Conversation will focus on reiterating purpose of study, beginning to establish mutual understanding and expectations of participation in the project, initial sharing of our own rural places/communities. I will also engage in a mapping timeline activity to see if the suggested guided conversation protocol aligns with the participant's experience or if I will need to adjust some of the prompts.

Prompts

- Mapping: Tell me about your town
  - *Geographic/social boundaries*: When you're driving into your town, what are some landmarks that say to you, "I've arrived!"?
  - *Infrastructure (i.e. roads, bridges, train tracks)*: Where did you live in your town? What was your home/property like? Where were the schools that you attended located? How did you travel within your town?
  - *Commerce/business/employment:* Where did you shop (food, household, gas)? What was the main source of employment in your town? What do people in your community do for fun/entertainment?
  - *Resources:* What community resources existed in your town? (i.e. hospital, food banks, mental health orgs, etc). If they weren't in your town, where were the closest resources?
  - *Proximity to other places, metropolitan and rural*: Tell me about any trips you took when you were growing up. Where did you go and what was the purpose?
  - *History*: What stories are told about your town?

- Timeline Activity: Tell me about why you decided to go to college. Tell me how you got to your specific college.
  - Prompts: people that helped you, components of college access process, things that you considered (i.e. remaining in or migrating out of community)

Guided Conversation #2: Rural Identity

- **Tell me what it's like to grow up in a rural community.**
  - When did you first realize you were from a rural community? What was that realization like for you?
  - How do you think others perceive your town?
  - What community expectations exist for going to college? How are these expectations (or lack thereof) communicated throughout the community?
  - What expectations exist for after high school? How are these expectations communicated throughout the community?
  - What role does your community play in helping you attain goals after high school?

- How do you feel about your community now that you have spent a year away at college?
- How is being from a rural place a part (or not a part) of your identity?

Guided Conversation #3: Location

Purpose of meeting is to continue to establish rapport and build relationship between research and participant as well as understand the participant's physical relationship to higher education prior to matriculating at their current institution.

Prompts:

- Tell me about the first time you ever stepped foot on a college campus.
    - Why were you there (college visit, high school competition, watch a performance)? How did you get there? How did you feel?
- Tell me about the first time you visited your current institution as a prospective student. *This question is asked only if their first time on a college campus was not to visit their current institution.*
- Tell me about any other campuses you visited prior to enrolling at your current institution.
    - How did you get there? How long did it take? Who came with you? How did you feel during the visit? If your family came with you, how did they feel during the visit?
- Tell me about things you learned during your first year of college that other students knew or experienced in relation to opportunities for education after high school, but you knew nothing about and/or never experienced. Why do you think you did not know about these things or experiences?
    - Prompts: college fairs, high school recruitment visits, Advanced Placement/honors courses, Standardized tests: PSAT (National Merit Scholar qualification), ASVAB, ACT/SAT.

Guided Conversation #4: Social systems: K-12 schooling & Community Involvement

Prompts:

- Tell me about your experiences in school.
    - What were classes like – both those that were offered and those you took – specifically in middle school and high school? Who was involved in deciding which classes you took? Who did you take classes with? Who did you not take classes with?
        - Prompts: Vocational education, tracking, honors courses, college-going programs
    - What were your teachers like? Principal? How did they talk about college?
        - Prompts: Race/gender, relationship to the community, first memories of college discussions
    - What was your guidance counselor like?
        - Prompts: College-going conversations?
    - What were your classmates' thoughts about going to college? How did you know this?

- Tell me about any community activities you were involved in growing up.
    - Prompts: religion, Girl Scouts, sports, dance
    - Through your involvement with these activities, was life after high school ever discussed? What were those conversations like? Ask them to share one or two specific conversations.

Guided Conversation #5: Social systems: Family and Work

- Tell me about your family.
    - Prompts: parents, siblings, generational connection to both place and education, employment
    - Key members of your family
    - Length of time in the town/area?
    - Employment
    - Family members who have participated in post-secondary education
    - What would you say are some of your family's values around work and education and why? Expectations for your life?
    - How was life after high school discussed in your family? What kind of conversations about college took place within your family? When did they start?
- Tell me about any jobs you held prior to coming to college.
    - Prompts: jobs in town vs. out of town, summer jobs, working during the academic year
    - Through your involvement with your job(s), was life after high school ever discussed? What were those conversations like? Ask them to share one or two specific conversations.

Guided Conversation #6: Conclusion

Purpose of this final meeting is to bring closure to the data collection process. Expectations for researcher-participant interaction beyond the data collection can be discussed.

- Tell me your thoughts about participating in this project
    - Prompts: new insights into your identity/experience,
- What questions do you have?