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Road less travelled: tracing the path of first-generation students from rural areas to college

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, CO

The Graduate School

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: TRACING THE PATH OF
FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS FROM
RURAL AREAS TO COLLEGE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education
School Psychology

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This Dissertation by: Michelle Caron Hodsdon

Entitled: *The Road Less Travelled: Tracing the Path of First-generation Students from Rural Areas to College*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavior Sciences in School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of School Psychology

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ABSTRACT

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Narrative inquiry was used to trace the educational journeys of 11 first-generation university students from rural areas of Colorado in an effort to identify the experiences, beliefs, and people that impacted their decision to attend a 4-year institution. Students were asked to convey their experiences growing up within the contexts of their family, social circle, schools, and rural communities identifying seminal experiences and people. Although each path was very unique, several common themes emerged across narratives. The importance of self-determination, parent encouragement, a social circle that shared the value of education, and the common goal of college attainment were noted. Pre-collegiate programs and the development of a high school mentor were deemed pivotal by participants in navigating the college admission process. Participants also noted a sense of connectedness in their rural communities that they sought to replace in their college community by selecting a smaller college with an atmosphere of approachability and friendliness. In tracing the path of these rural first-generation students, this study offered up the elements that could be used to forge a path to college for future first-generation students from rural areas.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

College is a refuge from hasty judgment
Robert Frost

She sat across from me all semester as 17 of us gathered around the long conference table each week to discuss Plato's "Analogy of the Cave," Descartes' theory of "Dualism," pouring over Aristotle's Socratic dialogues, and reviewing Wundt's studies on reaction time. This was our History and Systems of Psychology seminar and Donna (pseudonym) was my classmate. As we sat, waiting for our professor to arrive, we engaged in friendly conversation about our lives, families, and often about the current classes or research which consumed our time. Donna had been a real estate agent and mother of four children when, at the age of 47, she decided to change careers. She resolved to go back to school and complete her Master's degree in psychology. So there she sat, looking much younger than her true age, with lively blue eyes, a sparkling smile, and mid-length blonde hair framing her perfectly defined face. Her voice was diminutive in tone, but the words it imparted were confident, insightful, and full of wisdom.

When I mentioned my dissertation involving first-generation students, I saw Donna's face light up and that familiar engaging smile spread across her face as she identified herself as the first in her family to attend college. She went on to explain she was a rarity among her friends who had stayed at home to help run the family farm. She

shared that the situation had left her feeling privileged, yet isolated and guilty as she separated from her friends and family to forge a new and expanded life for herself.

Statement of the Problem

Donna is a rarity indeed, for although the benefits of a college education are widely known, the college attainment rate of rural high school graduates is lower than for their urban cohorts (Adelman, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Many rural students who may be academically eligible for college are not opting to continue on into postsecondary education (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Lozano, Watt & Huerta, 2009). The most recent graduation and college enrollment rates published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2004) have reported the high school graduation rate in urban and central city areas at 85% as compared to the rural high school graduation rate recorded at a comparatively higher rate of 92%. The college enrollment rate at a 4-year institution of central city area youth immediately after high school was 45.6%, while the enrollment of rural youth at similar institutions was only 38.1%. Upon cursory review, these statistics seem counterintuitive. Although rural youth appear to possess the discipline, motivation, and academic skills to complete high school at higher rates than their more urban peers, they are not choosing to continue their education despite their capability to do so (Zucker, 2007).

The gap between strong high school achievement and low college attainment rates and the effects of rurality on college enrollment are evident in the State of Colorado. Former Governor of Colorado John Ritter called attention to the gap between the high percentage of Colorado residents holding advanced degrees and the relatively lower rate of current high school graduates enrolling in college. He referred to this as the *Colorado*

Paradox recognizing that, while Colorado was ranked second in the nation in the number of college educated adults, it was ranked 47th nationwide in the number of Colorado high school graduates going on to college (Redding, 2008). It would seem that Colorado has attracted a number of college educated adults but has failed to produce college educated adults from the ranks of its native high school population.

Currently, Colorado as a state has a population density of 39.2 persons per square mile, compared to the overall national population density of 77.1. Colorado is comprised of 64 counties, 29 of which are considered rural and 23 of which are considered frontier (fewer than six people per square mile) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.) The rural student population comes into focus within this *Colorado Paradox* when one realizes that one out of every three students in the United States attend a rural school (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

In reviewing the state-by-state data from the Lumina Foundation for Education (2009), an inverse relationship was indicated between rurality and college attainment. Custer County, the least populated county in Colorado, had the lowest percentage (13.8%) of young adults enrolled in 2- and 4- year colleges. In contrast, Boulder County, a suburb of Denver and the location of the largest Colorado university, boasted an enrollment of 63.4%. Exploration of this gap between high school achievement and low college attainment in rural student populations may offer some insight into the discrepancy between rural and suburban/urban student populations.

In exploring some of the factors related to college enrollment, research has identified a strong link between the educational level of parents and the educational attainment of their children. Many students inherit the educational level of their parents.

(Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Gofen, 2009; Solon, 2002). First-generation college students appear to be the exception to this rule. A first-generation college student has been defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2001) as coming from a family in which neither parent has more than a high school education. First-generation students face a myriad of obstacles that do not often plague their college counterparts who have college educated parents. For example, first-generation students are more likely to lack specific knowledge of the steps required in the college preparation and application process. They often are unaware of the financial requirements of college and how to access financial resources (Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2009). They also lack information on the basic admission procedures and fail to make connections between career goals and the educational requirements needed to attain them (Tym, McMillon, Barone, & Webster, 2004; Vargas, 2004).

Despite these numerous barriers, first-generation students have been able to break the educational inheritance cycle and achieve college enrollment when their parents did not hold a degree beyond a high school diploma. An understanding of first-generation students within the context of a rural environment and the path to postsecondary education followed by these students from rural areas may provide the key to increasing the number of qualified rural graduates enrolling in 4-year institutions.

Need for the Study

The individual and societal benefits of higher education have been well-established. Those in the work force with a Bachelor's degree earned 53% more than workers with a high school diploma (Kerachsky, 2010). College graduates are less likely to be unemployed for long periods and experience more career mobility within their jobs.

They also report less work missed due to health problems, as well as being happier and more satisfied with life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition to providing increased contributions to society through the taxation of higher salaries, college graduates are strong contributors to their community in non-monetary ways. Higher education has been correlated with higher rates of voting, volunteerism, and civic engagement (Hossler et al., 1999; Payea, & Baum, 2005).

In addition to the benefits of higher education, those studying future trends have suggested that a 4-year degree will become more of a necessity as time goes on. “The days are vanishing where manufacturing jobs with good pay are available for high school graduates” (Hudson, Kainzl, & Diehl, 2007, p. 2). Researchers at the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University (Carnevale, Smith, & Stohl, 2010) have found that attainment of a postsecondary degree will be crucial in the next decade. Their research indicates that the current percentage of jobs in the United States requiring a Bachelor’s degree or higher will rise from 28% to 63% by 2018, suggesting that we will need 22 million new college graduates by 2018. However, current trends indicate that we will fall short of that number by three million. This could mean a loss of economic opportunity for millions of people within the U.S. economy. Carnevale et al. (2010) contend that:

This shortage is the latest indication of how crucial postsecondary education and training has become to the American economy. The shortfall--which amounts to a deficit of 300,000 college graduates every year between 2008 and 2018--results from burgeoning demand by employers for workers with high levels of education and training. Our calculations show that America’s colleges and universities would need to increase the number of degrees they confer by 10% annually, a tall order. (p. 12)

This increase in college graduates might need to come from students not traditionally enrolling in college, namely first-generation students. The Obama administration has recently recognized the importance of increasing the rate of postsecondary enrollment and completion and, in 2009, set up the College Access and Completion Fund (CACF) which will provide an additional 36 billion dollars over 5 years to expand Pell Grants, federal loans, college outreach programs, and the dissemination of information encouraging college enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Obama was not alone in endorsing of college enrollment; the high school students also acknowledged the value of a postsecondary education. In a nationwide survey conducted by Parsad and Lewis (2008), 90% of high school sophomores expressed a desire to attend a 4-year college. However, in subsequent research, only 68% of sophomores and a mere 38% of rural high school graduates continued on to enroll at a postsecondary institution. (NCES, 2010).

For those first-generation students enrolled in higher education, more will attend 2-year rather than 4-year institutions. According to nationwide statistics gathered by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (Engle & Tinto, 2008), 33% of entering freshman in combined 2- and 4-year institutions were first-generation students. Horn, Peter, and Rooney (2002) found that 54% of those first-generation students attended a 2-year institution or vocational program. In their multi-state study of 3,331 first-generation students, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that, although first-generation students possessed the qualifications for admission into a 4-year college, they often chose to enroll in a 2-year certificate program or to earn an Associate degree via community college instead of a Bachelor's degree.

First-generation students often made this choice based on the lower cost of a community college or certificate program (Bui, 2007; Drozd, 2008), the desire to be closer to home and parents (Bui, 2007; Drozd, 2008), and because they felt more comfortable at a local community college where they found a higher percentage of students with a similar background to their own. Some first-generation students indicated they did not possess the confidence in their academic abilities to apply to a 4-year college (Bui, 2007). Community college and certificate programs may offer first-generation students an opportunity to enter postsecondary education within a local and more scaffolded venue. Unfortunately, many students did not venture beyond these 2-year institutions. In reviewing the NCES data, Bui (2007) noted that first-generation students were more likely to go on to earn a B.A. degree if they started their postsecondary education at a 4-year rather than a 2-year institution. Given these findings and the increasing necessity for a B.A. degree or higher in future job markets, preparing and encouraging first-generation students to enter a 4-year institution directly from high school might increase their chances to earn a B.A. degree and allow them the benefits offered by a more advanced degree.

Significance of the Study

Illuminating the path taken by first-generation students who have successfully enrolled in a 4-year college could help inform the development of policies and programming for successive first-generation students. Numerous studies have provided an extensive description of the characteristics of first-generation students and their reasons for attending college (Bergerson, 2007; Choy, 2001; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Gullatt & Jan, 2004; Reid, & Moore, 2008; Sacks, 2007; Stieha, 2010). Much of this

work has also focused on under-represented groups such as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority youth (Freeman, 2005; Howard, 2003; Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009; Martinez & Klopott, 2003; Perna, 2002). However, McLendon, Heller, and Lee (2009) suggested that one of the populations of high-risk youth that has been overlooked by much of the research in college expectations and attainment were students residing in rural areas.

In her survey of prospective college students, Klug (2009) cited limited information and guidance concerning the college preparation process as contributing factors in the under-representation of rural students on college campuses. These factors might help us to understand what may have prevented students from enrolling but not the supports they need to successfully attend a 4-year institution. Furthermore, in the discreet response style of a survey, the essence of process could be lost.

Gofen (2009), in an attempt to capture process, conducted a qualitative study with first-generation students and their families in Israel and was able to glean some insight into the people, events, emotions, and thought processes that led students to enroll in a 4-year institution. The emergent and less structured nature of the qualitative methodology allowed first-generation students to share their typical day-to-day life, and identify the significant people, and significant choices that they had made early and continually along their path. A qualitative approach offered the flexibility needed to explore with these first-generation students their individual paths to college.

Although Gofen (2009) has illuminated the path of first-generation students in Israel, the process by which first-generation students from rural regions of the United States to pursue a 4-year degree continues to elude us. The use of qualitative method

with rural first-generation students provides the rich detail and description needed in order to trace the paths of these students into postsecondary education. Exploring with these students the process and experiences that led to their decision to apply to a 4-year college and what experiences provided inspiration and motivation for them to act on that decision may inform the planning and development of programs focused on increasing enrollment rates in this population. College enrollment holds the key to upward social mobility for this population and the chance for an improved quality of life for them (Vargas, 2004).

Theoretical Lens

The Sociological model is considered an umbrella term which includes the factors of human, cultural, and social capital. The concepts of human, cultural, and social capital were developed by Bourdieu in 1977. He stated, “Capital which takes time to accumulate, is a potential capacity to produce profits, and reproduce in an expanded form” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 46). Human capital is the capacity or potential within an individual through education, knowledge, and self-efficacy to produce desired outcomes such as employment and economic or social gain. In addition to acquired skills and knowledge, human capital also includes aspects such as beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts formed through interactions and experiences, including internalization of comments, attitudes, and values of the significant others.

Cultural capital is made up of individuals’ beliefs and perceptions, combined with other environmental resources such as their socio-economic and educational level. For example, increasing a person’s level of education can increase socio-economic status and create experiences and exposure that, in turn, lead to a greater degree of access to

additional resources needed to achieve subsequent goals. The other element in the formula for achievement is social capital. Social capital consists of an individual's valuable social network and connections. Bourdieu (1986) recognized that membership in a group provides its participants with a collective capital. Social capital is the ability to mobilize a network of connections that can provide resources and information needed to accomplish a desired goal.

Social capital and a fair amount of human capital can be inherited from one's family. Bourdieu (1986) maintained that people often use their human, cultural, and social capital to determine available choices and plan future paths. As a result, people do not often see choices outside of what they perceive to be available to their social group. This phenomenon can have a direct effect on students who lack the resources and connections and their ability to visualize college as an option for their future. This notion of capital, as it relates to first-generation students, is the potential generated through family, academic achievement, and events and life experiences that projected these students out of a culture of limited educational exposure into college enrollment. It is the capacity built through these students' lives that enabled them to step onto the unfamiliar path toward college attainment that was the focus of this study.

Purpose of the Study

Qualitative research is often more exploratory and used when the contributing variables of a situation are not available (Creswell, 2007). The emergent nature of qualitative methods allows the research question to be explored from the participants' perspective and minimizes the researcher's pre-conceived notions (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of this study was to use the flexible and in-depth exploration provided by the

Narrative Inquiry method in order to provide more insight into the factors that positively influenced first-generation students to successfully enroll in a 4-year institution. This study focused on, but was not limited to, the following central research question:

Q1: How do first-generation students from rural areas of Colorado define and describe their path to college enrollment?

Through the chronological nature of Narrative Inquiry, the participant's educational journey through life and the events, experiences, people, thoughts, and feelings along the way that they had identified as contributing factors in their decision to attend a 4-year college was explored. Their unique stories may offer a more detailed glimpse into the process of college choice for first-generation that can inform practices that may impact and increase enrollment for this population.

Limitations

Narrative inquiry is often retrospective in nature and, when re-telling a story, some of the elements may have been forgotten or transformed through time. Respondents' memory of life events are recounted from their perspective which may not agree with the realities formed by others around them. Even when the realities are very similar, memory is not perfect and some events that have shaped an individual's path to college may be forgotten. Furthermore, it is assumed by many qualitative researchers conducting interviews and narrative inquiry that participants may not feel comfortable disclosing all that they remember (Bell, 2002). Therefore, the narratives of each respondent should be considered as an accurate account of their path as perspective and memory allowed at the time.

In addition, it should be noted that the number of Latino students in the sample made up 54% of the participants interviewed. Although the Latino population is the

fastest growing population of first-generation students (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009), the present sample contained more Latinos than were representative of some rural populations.

Within qualitative research, it is also important to clarify the researcher's stance. The questions asked, the themes that are developed, and interpretations made are filtered through the lens of the researcher. Therefore, I have presented the following brief narrative of my own educational background and journey.

Researcher's Perspective

I have been blessed, through no fault or merit of my own, to be born into a well-educated family. My father went to school on the G.I. bill and received his B.S. in Forestry from Penn State and went on to earn his Master's degree in horticulture. My mother earned her B.A. in French from a small women's college in Ohio and, although she did not continue her formal education, she has remained well-read, politically active, and involved in the arts. I grew up in an atmosphere in which Shakespeare was read alongside Dr. Seuss as a bedtime story with frequent family trips to museums, ballets, and theater. I entered the educational system with a love of learning which was fueled by parent and teacher encouragement and recognition for academic achievement. I loved school and viewed it as a place of exploration and success.

As I entered high school, I was surrounded by students like myself whose primary goal was getting into the best college with the maximum scholarships (and they often succeeded). The enriched environment that I was raised in and the early awareness, exposure to and preparation for college left me well-equipped to consider my place in college. All of this guidance and support from my parents, family, and peers created a

huge amount of social capital, self-efficacy, and familiarity with college that enabled me to easily visualize myself in a 4-year institution. As expected, I attended a 4-year institution, and I was able to enroll in the college of my choice with almost full financial support from my parents. I got my B.A. in psychology from a small private women's college and, after marriage, went on to earn a Master's in school psychology.

My experience has built in me a strong respect and value of higher education. Although I concede that college is not for everyone, I still recognize the overwhelming benefits of a college education and would advocate college enrollment for any capable student. Originating from a more traditional student background with parents who had college experience may have limited my understanding of what it was like to be a first-generation student growing up in an environment in which the path to college was not as well-paved and clearly defined. As a result, I might have missed some of the subtleties of what it was like to be a first-generation student or to come from a low SES background.

Due to my own personal history and my review of the research on college choice, I maintained a strong belief in the impact of parent level of education on a student's choice to enroll in college. I also believe, however, that parents with no college experience can be educated and guided through the college preparation and application process in order to provide the support needed for their sons or daughters to achieve successful college enrollment. I also have faith that students without parent support can use their own human capital to access the social capital of others around them, such as teachers, school counselors, and mentors, to help them attain their goal of university enrollment. It is in understanding the source of resiliency in these first-generation college

students that we can begin to build programs to strengthen and support future first-generation students in their quest for higher education.

I came from a larger town in the Central Valley of California that was surrounded by peach, walnut, and almond orchards and large dairy and cattle ranches. Although the city was one of the largest in the valley, it still had a large agricultural base. Future Farmers of America and 4H were strong organizations in my high school and farmers sat alongside lawyers and businessmen on most of the political boards and councils. Although rural areas can have unique features in different areas of the country, my personal exposure to rural areas has been more agricultural in nature. The rural areas in Colorado are bifurcated in nature. There is the agricultural setting of the eastern plains and western slope of Colorado, in contrast to the mountain communities of the Rockies that range from the affluent towns of Breckenridge and Vail, to the modest towns of Leadville and Salida.

I became interested in rural students after reviewing the research on college enrollment when I discovered that far fewer rural students attend college than their urban and suburban counterparts, despite having higher high school graduation rates. I wanted to understand what factors in a rural student's academic and personal development might have influenced the decision to attend college or might limit a consideration of college in future planning. In an effort to focus on increasing college enrollment for this population, I turned to those students from rural areas who had successfully achieved enrollment in a 4-year institution to provide information on what factors could have positively influenced potential first-generation rural students to consider and prepare for college.

Definition of Terms

First-generation student. The term first-generation has been defined in several different ways by various agencies and studies. Some consider first-generation students as those whose parents highest level of education was a high school diploma or less (e.g., Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Payne, 2007).

The government Trio Programs that offer support and assistance to help prepare high-risk students for college enrollment define first-generation students as those whose parents may have had some college experience but have not earned a B.A. degree. Choy (2001) noted that having a parent with some college experience (not resulting in a degree) did not increase a student's propensity to enroll in college beyond those students with parent who had no college experience. Recognizing the fact that parents with some college experience, not culminating in the earning of a Bachelor's degree, had no positive impact beyond those parents with a high school diploma, the definition adopted by the Federal Trio programs was used in this study. Therefore, participants who had parents or family members who had some junior college or vocational training beyond high school were considered.

Non-first-generation student. Non-first-generation students have been referred to in various literature as second-generation students, non-first-generation students, and traditional students. These terms have sometimes included students whose parents may have had some college (Choy, 2001), and sometimes included only those students who had a parent with a degree from a 4-year institution (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). This study considered a non-first-generation student any student whose parent had experience in a 4-year institution.

College. For the purposes of the current study, the term college referred to a 4-year institution that was able to confer the minimum of a Bachelor's degree and met the accreditation standards of the United States Regional Accrediting Association. This definition was chosen because these accredited institutions usually had more stringent admission requirements than 2-year programs or technical schools and, as a result, required earlier and more extensive planning to apply effectively.

Rural Area. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defined rural areas as areas with populations of less than 2,500 people that were outside urban areas and urban clusters. A rural area could not be tied to a metropolitan area economically in that it must have less than 25% of the population commuting to a metropolitan area for work.

Urban Area. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defined an urban area as having a population density of 1,000 people per mile.

Urban Cluster. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defined an urban cluster as an area with a population between 2,500 and 50,000. The Office of Management and Budget (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2011) recognized that much research referred to rural America as any area outside a metropolitan or urban area.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*Learning is not attained by chance it must be sought for
with ardor and attended to with diligence
Abigail Adams*

The benefits of a college education were clear, college graduates not only earned almost twice as much as workers with a high school diploma, they were more engaged and healthier citizens in their communities (Adelman, 2002; Freeman, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Kerachsky, 2010; Perna, 2000). Many high school youth in the United States also recognize the benefits of a college degree. In a review of the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 following a nationally representative sample of 10th-grade students as they progressed into postsecondary plans, 90% of those surveyed expressed a desire to attend a 4-year college and acknowledged that a college diploma could provide expanded employment opportunities and a higher quality of life (NCES, 2004). A report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2010) indicated that 69% of high school graduates realized their dream and continued immediately onto a 2-year or 4-year college after they graduated from high school. Students who continued on to a 4-year institution were more likely to complete their Bachelor's degree than those who started at a 2-year college with the intention of transferring to a 4-year college to complete their degree (Bui, 2007).

Although 69% of students considered continuing their education beyond high school, there were some groups of students who were under-represented in this

percentage. Students whose parents had little or no college experience were less likely to attend college than their peers whose parents attended college. College students whose parents did not hold a college degree were often referred to as *first-generation* students because they were the first generation in their respective families to attend college. In reviewing the NCES (2010) data for 2007, there was a 28% gap in the college enrollment rates of students whose parents held a B.A. degree or higher and those students whose parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma (82% vs. 54%, respectively).

In addition to students whose parents had no college experience, students from rural areas were also under-represented in college attainment rates. Many rural students were first-generation students and, as will be discussed later, had more limited access to college preparation supports than their more urban counterparts. Although students in rural areas had higher high school graduation rates than their urban peers, the college enrollment rate of rural students was 27% compared to the overall college entry rate of 69% (NCES, 2010). Rural students appeared to have had academic focus and skills that allowed them to be successful in college, however, they were not making the choice to enroll in college at a similar rate as their urban counterparts.

Although there was an abundance of research available on diverse and urban populations in relation to the college choice process, (e.g., Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Cabrera, Prabhu, Deil-Amen, Terenzini, Lee, & Franklin, 2006; Ceja, 2001; Fiebig, Braid, Ross, Tom, & Prinzo, 2010; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2005; Hamrick & Stage, 2004), relatively little research focused on the college choice process of rural students (Bunnage, 2003; Esveld, 2004; Klug, 2009; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, &

Congler, 2001). In order to investigate these gaps in rural and urban enrollment rates, an exploration of factors contributing to a student's decision to attend college and a model of the college choice process is necessary to help understand the path to college.

Models of College Choice

The Three Models of College Choice

College choice has been used to describe two different decision-making processes in which students engage before enrolling in a postsecondary institution: (a) the decision to continue their education past high school graduation and (b) the selection of a specific institution in which to apply and enroll. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) surveyed Indiana high school students enrolled and identified three different types of college choice models that helped explain the factors that contributed to this two-step decision-making process. Each model specifies a set of factors that determine a student's choice to attend college and then help the student to decide which college to attend.

The Economic model presumes that a student would enroll in college if he or she perceives that the benefits of attending college outweighed the benefits of not attending college. The factors contributing to this model include the expected costs of college, including money and time, weighed against expected future earnings, students' academic and personal characteristics (such as, gender and ethnicity, parent educational level, peer support, and academic skills), the high school characteristics (such as, post-graduate planning resources, accessibility to Advanced Placement Classes, percentage of students considering college), and the characteristics of the college.

The second model identified by Hossler et al. (1989) was labeled the Consumer model. This model was developed from a marketing perspective and is often used by

universities in order to increase their enrollment. The Consumer model suggests that a student considers the risks and costs of college enrollment and often takes the path of minimal risk. Kotler and Fox (1985) noted that students often weighed their perceived need for college against perceived costs and risks. Rather than monetary cost, risks such as parent and peer expectations had more impact on a student's choice (Young & Reyes, 1987) than monetary costs.

The third model proposed by Hossler et al. (1989) was the Sociological model which was derived from the social capital and status attainment research conducted by Bourdieu (1986). This model presumes that students decide to go to college in order to increase their social capital or their social status, prestige, and social connections. Adelman (1999) found that factors such as parent expectations and influences of significant others in combination with the human capital of academic achievement and self-confidence were primary factors in a student's decision to go to college.

Although the Sociological model was viewed as separate from the Economic and Consumer models, elements of these other two models may have contributed to the Sociological model. Oftentimes, students see the increased earning power of a college degree exemplified in the Economic model as a vehicle for acquiring a job and material possessions that would increase their social status (i.e., social capital). The elements of parent and peer expectations that are components of the Consumer model help determine the choices an individual views as available to them (Watt, Huerta, & Lozano, 2007). The costs of college in relation to Socio-economic Status (e.g., the Consumer and Economic models) were not as malleable. Therefore, in order to focus on those elements

in college choice that could be changed, this study was conducted within the framework of the Sociological model of college choice.

The Sociological Model

The Sociological model of college choice incorporates the concepts of cultural, social, and human capital. Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1977), is comprised of an individual's *habitus* or the accumulated thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and values that were formed through an individual's interaction with the environment and other people. Habitus is combined with other cultural factors such as SES, ethnicity, and gender. Bourdieu (1977) defined social capital as accumulated social status and social connections, both personally and within family, that allow one access to the resources or information needed to achieve a desired goal. Membership in a group or family can provide collective capital that a student can draw on to access resources and information. Finally, human capital is made up of those individual aspects of people, such as education, skills, and knowledge, and self-efficacy that allow them to achieve a desired goal (Bourdieu, 1977). Increases in human capital, such as knowledge, education, and information, can result in increased social capital (Watt et al., 2007). As an individual attains a higher level of education, he is exposed to situations that allow for connections to develop with others who may have stronger social status and capital and, thus, these new connections create stronger social capital for the individual.

Bourdieu (1986) recognized that there was a “domestic transmission of capital” (p. 48) between parents and children, as well as older and younger siblings. He also noted that “scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family” (p. 48). Being born into a family with resources and

connections to provide a strong educational foundation and an enriching environment can produce both human and social capital for a potential first-generation student. As such, Bourdieu (1986) surmised that both human and social capital have their roots in economic capital or socio-economic status, but that institutionalized capital, or capital earned through academic credentials or qualifications, can off-set a lack of inherited cultural and social capital.

In his application of Bourdieu's theory to educational experience and college choice, Chapman (1981) explained that students' human capital, or innate abilities and acquired skills, interact with their social capital, or network of family, friends, and educators, to promote their social and cultural capital in college choice. This process begins early as students receive feedback on their academic performance from parents, teachers, and friends (e.g., "You are such a good student," "You're so smart," and "You are a great writer"). According to Chapman, these comments become internalized and part of the student's habitus. In turn, students use their habitus to expand or contract their views of future possibilities. Next, if encouraged, students increase and focus their effort and investment in the direction of expanding possibilities, which further elicits encouragement and support from their social network. At this point, they also receive direct advice concerning college enrollment from surrounding family, friends, and educators. In the third step, students compare their performance against that of peers, along with the encouragement and advice received from their social network to determine viable postsecondary options of interest. In this way, students develop their identities as related to college attendance.

Knowers, Seekers, and Dreamers

In their description of the college choice process, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identified three different types of students: (a) *Whiches*, (b) *Whethers*, and (c) *Nots*. Freeman (2005), who also applied Hossler and Gallagher's stages of college choice to understanding college choice in African American students, described similar categories which she labeled; (a) *Knowers*, (b) *Seekers*, and (c) *Dreamers*. The descriptors used in these two studies are different, but the groups under each respective label appear to be the same.

Both *Whiches* (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) and *Knowers* (Freeman, 2005), identified a group of students who were certain in their expectations to attend college. The students in this category knew they would attend college and it was just a matter of choosing which college to attend. According to Freeman (2005), students in this group reported that the decision to attend college was so natural that it was "like breathing." Conklin and Dailey (1981) called this perspective the "taken for granted" factor to indicate the level of certainty. These students have typically come from a higher socio-economic status with parents who had attended college (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Perna, 2000; Stieha, 2010). These students usually had the advantage over the other two groups because they had access to college information earlier and usually had more information at their disposal to make better choices and focused on the academic skills and curriculum that would put them in good stead when applying for college (Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Freeman, 2005; Hamrick & Stage, 1998; Ojeda & Flores, 2008).

The second group of students in Hossler and Gallagher's model was the *Whethers*. These were the students who were not certain of their intentions to attend postsecondary education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). They may have applied to one or two local colleges but may not have attended at all. Freeman (2005) labeled this group of students as *Seekers* and described them as "students who come to believe 'I can do this' and begin to prepare and seek information about higher education" (p. 24). She noted in her study that these students could usually pinpoint a time between first and fifth grade when they realized that college was an attainable dream. She suggested that this was a critical time for educators and parents to influence these students who "do not know by birthright or environment that higher education is an option" (p. 26). Freeman advocated that encouraging these students to consider college earlier gave these children, who were more receptive to possibilities, a chance to develop good study habits and self-esteem. Students in the *Seeker* category often required some outside inspiration from a family member, teacher, or counselor in order to consider college (Freeman, 2005). Students who started out in the *Seeker* group who eventually attended college reported that someone in their lives showed faith in them and extended experiences to them that influenced their belief that college was an attainable goal.

The third group of students were termed *Nots* by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and *Dreamers* by Freeman (2005). The students in this group did not usually consider college until they entered high school and, as pointed out by Hamrick and Stage (1998), found it difficult to turn around poor study habits and fill holes in academic skills and knowledge within the 3-year period before the college application process began. The students in this group may have dreamt of going to college but often lacked the

information and direction needed to overcome the psychological and environmental barriers that they might have faced when considering college. As a result, Freeman (2005) noted they lost hope, became disenchanted with school, and disengaged in classroom and extra-curricular activities that would have prepared them for college. In her interviews with students from low SES and highly impacted environments, Freeman (2005) discovered that the primary difference between students in the *Seeker* group and the *Dreamer* group was the age at which they began to consider college. *Dreamers* lacked the information and encouragement needed in order to take the early steps required to prepare for college.

Early decisions to attend college gives students increased motivation to engage in school and time to develop the study habits and academic skills necessary for college enrollment. Early college preparation is important and those who had not prepared for college by seventh grade were at high risk for not going (Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Bergerson, 2007; Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; Chapman, 1981; Freeman, 1997; Hamrick & Stage, 1998). Hossler et al. (1999) suggested that the most damage to a student's college opportunity (such as, failure to develop study and organizational skills, poor academic skills, and high rates of absence) had largely occurred before eighth grade and could not be made up during the 4 years of high school. Without the foundation of basic study skills and academic readiness, the advanced courses and curriculum necessary for college admission may be inaccessible to students.

McDonough (1997) found that students with long-standing goals for postsecondary education increased their likelihood of enrolling in college by 21%, compared to those who developed aspirations in the last 2 years of high school. Several

researchers (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al. 1989; McGrath et al., 2001) have observed that early college plans seemed to play the role of a trigger mechanism for securing critical social and cultural capital early in the form of taking more advanced classes in middle school and high school, extra-curricular activities, maintaining good academic performance, and securing information about ways to finance college. If supports are available to students early on in their educational careers, they may be more likely to incorporate a view of themselves as future college students, regardless of their financial standing (Watt et al., 2007). This ability to see themselves as a potential college student early meant the difference between being a *Knower* and a *Dreamer*. Exploring the different variables that have been identified as contributing to the preliminary stage of college choice may provide insight into these factors and how they impacted the path of first-generation students from rural communities.

Factors Associated with College Choice

The factors contributing to college choice are multi-faceted and occur on several levels. Bronfenbrenner (1979) offered an ecological model that provided a clear structure for organizing these factors (Figure 1). The model is comprised of a series of concentric circles that represent the various spheres or contexts that influence an individual's behavior. The inner circle includes the characteristics of the individual himself; the next circle of influence encompasses the individual's immediate social circle of friends and family. The circles, or contexts, then radiate out to include, school or work, community, and national environment.

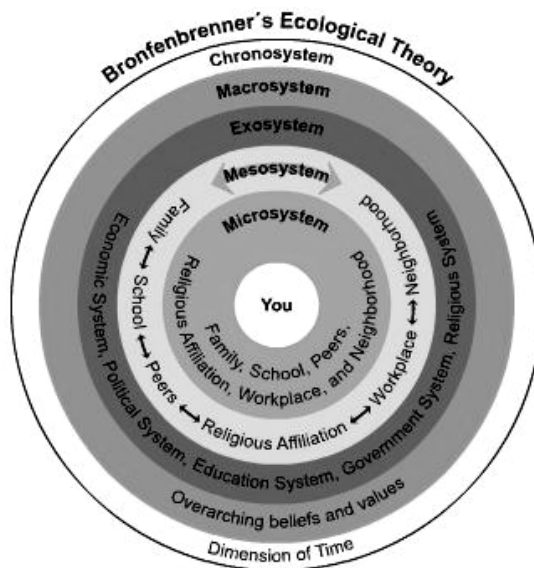


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Spheres of Influence
Adapted from J. M. Nielsen (2011) *The Second Law of Geopolitical Thought*

If we were to apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model to college choice, it might be organized in the following manner. A student is affected by: (a) the student's individual characteristics such as his or her accumulation of academic and study skills and the self-efficacy needed to accomplish his or her goal of higher education, (b) the culture and encouragement of his or her social circle of family and friends to pursue college enrollment, (c) the culture and resources available through his or her school that support his or her preparation for college choice, and (d) the culture and the community in which he or she lives that might provide role models and enrichment opportunities. Within this model, those contexts closest to and including the individual have the most direct impact, while the outer circles have a more indirect effect on the development of the individual. Accordingly, the following discussion examines the factors that impact college choice with a consideration of the individual first.

The Individual First-generation College Student

In reviewing national statistics (NCES, 2004), first-generation college students tended to delay entry into college for at least two years as compared to their non-first-generation peers. They were more likely to enroll part-time, usually in a local 2-year institution, while holding a job. They were also more likely to be Hispanic (14%) and female (53% vs. 48% male) and came from low-income backgrounds (Payne, 2007). Despite the constraints of limited parental knowledge of the college preparation and application process, as well as limited financial support, these students have managed to successfully access postsecondary education. Human capital was one of the elements that have enabled these students to enter the doors of higher education. The acquisition of academic and study skills, combined with self-efficacy as a student, could provide some of this necessary human capital.

Academic and Study Skills

Strong academic skills contribute to one's human capital and enable the student to consider or envision college enrollment. The cultivation of strong academic and study skills is not only essential in preparing for college enrollment but also in the ability of the student to visualize oneself as a college enrollee (Ceja, 2001). As would be expected, nurturing study skills, honing academic abilities such as reading, math, science, and history are necessary to advancement toward higher education (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Freeman, 2005; Sokatch, 2006). A strong correlation has been found between advanced math progress and college enrollment (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Horn and Nunez (2000) also noted that those students taking more advanced classes in other areas also exhibited more college enrollment.

Positive Academic Self-identity and Academic Possible Selves

Another element that is included in the human capital of students is the ability to see themselves as effective college students. This was developed through general self-efficacy, a concept explored by Bandura, which he denoted as the belief in one's ability to achieve a goal or acquire a certain level of skills (Bandura, 1977). Bandura recognized that those with a high level of self-efficacy viewed a challenge or barrier as something to be mastered while those with little or no self-efficacy tended to avoid challenges. Bandura (1977) noted that self-efficacy formed through mastering experiences, witnessing others master a task, especially those similar to us, and by outside encouragement from others.

The establishment of a positive self-identity as a student has been identified as a pre-cursor to being able to visualize oneself as a college freshman. Anctil, Ishikawa, and Scott (2008) offered a glimpse into the process of developing an academic identity through their study of successful college students with learning disabilities. They noted that the prime element in success for these students was self-determination. Self-determination was typically a component in any learning endeavor, especially when a challenge was presented.

Deci and Ryan (1985) were able to break down self-determination into the interaction between three innate needs which drove and motivated any endeavor; autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy, as defined by Deci and Ryan, was the need to feel that one had some control over life circumstances. Competence was the second element in the model and was described as the need to feel successful in one's environment. Anctil et al. (2008) recognized that the combined needs for autonomy and

competence cultivated persistence for students. Persistence enhanced competence and the experience of success which, in turn, reinforced continued persistent behavior (Anctil et al., 2008). The third component in Deci and Ryan's model of self-determination, *relatedness*, perpetuated persistence. Relatedness was defined as the need to feel connected to and cared for by others. This need was usually fulfilled by the praise and encouragement that the individual received from others that helped to motivate the continuation of challenging pursuits.

As competence and self-efficacy are built through persistence and outside encouragement, a positive self-identity as a student is developed. Once students establish a positive academic identity, they begin to create a future image of themselves as a college student. Markus and Nurius (1986) labeled the images that we hold of ourselves in future states as *possible selves*. Possible selves were the "manifestations of enduring aspirations and motives and the interface between motivation and self-concept" (Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998, p. 219). When one visualizes oneself in a possible future state, it coalesces a clear goal in visual form and creates motivation to reach that goal.

Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006) contended that possible selves become *plausible selves* with a greater likelihood of becoming reality with the implementation of active strategies. Students must not only hold the image of themselves as a college student but begin to establish a path to achieving that possible self through accessing resources, developing skills, and establishing self-advocacy. Anctil et al. (2008) found that competence was brought about through persistence and led to creation of possible selves. They found that, with increased competence, students began selecting a career

and employed self-determination, self-advocacy, and creativity in developing a path toward that career or possible self.

In her qualitative research with low-income African American females, Matthews-Armstead (2002) applied the concept of self-determination to first-generation students considering college enrollment. She found that the factors distinguishing between those students who were able to realize their aspirations for college enrollment and those who were not involved a self-perception of confidence, control, and accountability. She observed that the students who demonstrated an attitude of self-reliance (e.g., “I need to do it myself” p. 45) combined with a confidence in their abilities (e.g., “I want it and I’m heading towards it and I’m not stopping . . . I’m going to college” p. 49) were ready to take advantage of the college information, support, and opportunities that were offered to them. Students who adopted a more passive perception of themselves in the world (e.g., “I guess I’m waiting for all these things to happen to me” p. 50) and did not see self-reliance as a necessary trait were less likely to enroll in college under the same circumstances. The students in this passive group did not feel empowered enough to take advantage of college information and opportunities when they were presented with them.

Freeman (2005) acknowledged the relatedness component (Deci & Ryan, 1985) of self-determination in her study of the college choice process in marginalized students. Freeman (2005) recognized that one of the primary barriers to college enrollment for low-income, first-generation students was more “psycho/social” in nature and included factors such as the lack of desire to enter college, a general loss of hope, and what Freeman called “the intimidation factor” (p. 32). Aside from the lack of desire to attend

college, students in marginalized populations indicated that they were not encouraged by teachers or parents to put full effort into school and, as a result, became disenchanted and disengaged in school. When they finally started considering college as a possibility, they had little or no social and human capital built up and they lost hope in their ability to obtain college admittance. Without outside support, they gave up. These students described college as a “foreign place that would only admit them by mistake” (Freeman, 2005, p.101). They had not developed the academic self-efficacy needed in order to see themselves as college students. Students in this population usually reported having a lack of exposure to anyone in their social circles that had attended college and could not see themselves as college students.

Outside support and encouragement can be crucial for low-income, first-generation students. It is with a positive self-image that is built through successful experiences, combined with outside encouragement, that resilience is developed. Resilience springs out of a hope in the future and was what allowed a student to persist through barriers and situations that thwart the attainment of a goal. Resilience requires strong communication and problem-solving skills and the ability to maintain emotional control. It is built through experiences of success and supported through outside encouragement (Hall & West, 2012). The first line of outside support can occur within Brofenbrenner’s next sphere of influence, a student’s social circle of friends and family.

Parent and Family Influence

Parents can have a very strong impact on a student’s decision to go to college in various ways and on several levels through emphasizing the importance of education, encouraging aspirations, and providing strong role models. There has been an established

link between the educational level of parents and the college attainment of their child. Exploring the possible factors that may contribute to this correlation may provide added understanding of the path of first-generation students to college. Several researchers have found that many parents have aspirations or desires for their child to attend college but not all parents expected their child to go to college.

Parental aspirations and expectations. Adelman (1999) conducted a famous 11-year study of over 10,000 students from 10th grade to age 27, which focused on the factors that contributed to long-term completion of a Bachelor's degree. In his resulting work, *Answers in the Tool Box*, he distinguished between parental aspirations and anticipations. Adelman defined aspirations by asking parents how much education they wanted their child to complete. He delineated their aspirations from their expectations by asking parents how much education that they anticipated or expected their child would complete. The results of his study indicated that parents' aspirations for their child were the same across socio-economic and racial lines. Most of the parents indicated that they wanted their child to attend and successfully complete college, however, many parents did not anticipate or expect that their child would attain a Bachelor's degree.

In her in-depth qualitative research with seven low-income African American families, Freeman (2005) also observed this gap between aspiration and expectations in her participants. She found that, although many of the parents in her study indicated that they would like their child to attend college, they felt that it was out of reach. Many other educational researchers have noted that the gap between aspirations and expectations often occurred in more marginalized populations (Bergerson, 2007; Hamrick & Stage,

2004; Mickelson 1990; Perna, 2000; Sacks, 2007; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000; Watt et al., 2007). The primary difference between parental aspirations and parental expectations for college is that of action. Those parents who expect their child to attend college engaged in active preparation and planning with their child and initiated the process at an earlier age (Cunningham, Erisman, & Looney, 2007). Less than half (47%) of those who had not completed high school and slightly over half (53%) of those with a high school diploma had initiated preparatory steps (such as starting a college savings, reviewing preparatory curriculum, and other college admission requirements) by the time their child had entered eighth grade. In comparison, 74% of parents with a B.A. degree and 82% of those with a graduate degree had developed savings and had reviewed curriculum and admission requirements with their child and the school counselor (Cunningham et al., 2007; Knighton, 2002).

Parent level of education and college attainment. The status as a first-generation student was defined by the educational level of the parents. A strong link has been demonstrated between a parent's level of education and the level of educational attainment in their children (Crosnoe et al., 2002; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Solon, 2002). In fact, Gofen (2009) noted that "to a large extent, children inherit their parents' educational level" (p. 104). In reviewing national college enrollment statistics, Choy (2001) recognized a direct correlation between student enrollment and the level of parent education. In fact, 84% of students with a parent who earned at least a Bachelor's degree went on to college directly from high school, compared to 54% of student whose parents attained a high school degree and 36% of students whose parents had not completed high school. As they had not travelled the path to college, the elements of parental college

expectation might not have come naturally for these parents of first-generation students (Crosnoe et al., 2002; Cunningham et al., 2007).

Parent encouragement. The importance of parent encouragement has been identified as one of the strongest predicting factors in a student's choice to attend college, accounting for at least one-third of the variance (Bergerson, 2007; Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; Cabrera & La Nasa 2000; Freeman, 2005; Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler et al., 1999). Flint (2005) determined that the development and maintenance of postsecondary aspirations among high school students was proportionately related to the fluency and consistency with which parents provided encouragement. Freeman (2005) found that students who received parental encouragement started thinking about college earlier and parental encouragement also helped to fortify students psychologically enough to overcome periods of self-doubt.

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) identified two factors in parental encouragement. The first factor, motivation, was the ability of parents to maintain high academic expectations and provide encouragement and emotional support to their children as they worked to reach their parents' high academic standards. The second factor was how proactive the parents were in encouraging their child's path to college. Actively participating in their child's schooling, frequently and interactively discussing college plans at an early age, setting up savings and financial plans early, and acquiring information on college requirements were concrete ways identified by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) that a parent could express expectations.

Parent involvement in child's education process. A parent's involvement in a child's education by setting high expectations for school achievement not only aids

the student in developing strong academic and study skills but communicates the importance and value of education. Jun and Colyar (2002) noted that high achieving students had parents who had high expectations and supported their children in those expectations with close supervision of homework, active involvement in school, and a respect and admiration for their children's academic achievements.

As a student matriculates into high school, the type of parent involvement shifts to more home-based activity which Hill and Tyson (2009) labeled *academic socialization*. This term is defined as the parental communication of "expectations for education and its value, linking school lessons to personal experiences or current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future" (Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 742). Fan, Williams, and Wolters (2012) found that home-based encouragement and academic support was the most common type of parent involvement provided by minority and low-income parents. Academic socialization was also the most prevalent form of parent involvement in high school (Downer & Myers, 2010) and may have had the most impact on high school academic outcomes. Hill and Tyson (2009), in their meta-analysis of parent involvement, found that helping a student select courses as well as communicating college and career aspirations and the value of education were key factors in students' academic success. Attendance at school events was also identified as having a positive but less significant impact (Jeynes, 2007).

Jeynes (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 41 studies concerning the effects of parent academic socialization on the academic performance of secondary students. He found that parent involvement in schooling was associated with higher GPAs, more

positive teacher ratings of students, and elevated scores on standardized tests of achievement across the subjects. Parent involvement has also been linked to heightened college aspirations and enrollment in a more rigorous course load (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007; McCarron & Inkelas 2006) and could provide the student with a large part of the human and cultural capital needed to attain college enrollment (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Wahlberg, 2005).

Parent knowledge of the college process. Parents who have not attended college cannot utilize their own college application experience as a knowledge base to identify and acquire the additional resources needed in order to support their child's college choice. Despite having high aspirations for college enrollment, parents who did not attend college did not have the details about required courses and admissions tests, application forms and deadlines, scholarship possibilities, and procedures (Gibbons & Schnoffer, 2004). As a result, low SES and first-generation students usually relied on high school counselors as the single source of information about college (Cabrera et al., 2006).

Many low-income students whose parents did not attend college are less likely to have participated in college visits, spoken with college representatives, leafed through college catalogs, or engaged in other activities that create college readiness (Nora, 2002). In contrast, parents who have gone to college are more likely to get their children coaching for admissions exams and were more proactive in preparing their children for college (Hamrick & Stage, 2004). In addition, upper-income students have reported relying on a variety of sources, including their parents, for information on the college application process.

Although the parents who have not attended college understand their child's need to attend college, the unfamiliarity with the college experience often causes some ambivalence about their child leaving home (Freeman, 2005; Perna, 2002). In this way, the limited knowledge of parents who lack college experience serves to diminish their encouragement of their child toward college enrollment.

It was noted that parents of first-generation students did not often have the expendable income to contribute to long-term college saving (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossmn, & Gallaghr, 2003) or pay for initial college application costs, such as entrance exam preparation and test fees, college application fees, and transportation for college interviews. As a result, they may have regarded college an option that was beyond their reach financially (Ojeda & Flores, 2008). Although cost may have been viewed as a primary barrier, (Freeman, 2005; Isreal, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Kenny et al., 2003; Martinez & Klopott, 2003; Ojeda & Flores, 2008; Perna, 2000), a lack of knowledge about college costs could have created perceived barriers to college that may not have existed.

Freeman (2005) noted that students cited a lack of funds as their number one reason for not applying to college. Students indicated that they had discounted college as a future option early when they realized, either because of parental comments or environmental cues, that college was not affordable. Families and students saw college as out of reach financially; however, Grodsky and Jones (2004) found that first-generation parents, when asked to estimate the cost of a college education, gave amounts that were two to three times the actual average cost. This misperception had caused many to dismiss college as an attainable option for their child.

In addition to over-estimating college costs, first-generation parents were often unaware of financial aid available to them to off-set the financial burden (Cunningham et al., 2007). In a nationwide study conducted through the Pell Foundation, only 17% of those parents with a high school diploma or less knew about Pell Grants, as opposed to 36% of parents with a B.A. degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Once parents determine that college is a viable option for their child, they were more apt to actively encourage and plan for college enrollment. A first-generation parent does not come by this knowledge naturally through personal experience and might have to go to great lengths to acquire such knowledge. Watt et al. (2007) discovered that students and parents who were exposed to information about college opportunities raised their college aspirations over time and their aspirations for college became more stable.

In her needs assessment survey with parents, Epstein (2008) found that parents wanted more information on graduation requirements, college and career planning, and community programs for teens in order to support their child's academic development. She noted that, when high schools conducted workshops on postsecondary planning, parents responded with increased discussions of postsecondary plans at home. Early information may have helped circumvent problems with college application, high school course selection, and finding the best college fit. Students and their parents may have been supported in their path toward college through the provision of information on effective college preparation early enough to allow them time to impact a student's trajectory toward college enrollment.

Resiliency as a characteristic in students and in the family as a whole can provide the flexible mindset for effective strategizing and creative problem-solving needed to

tackle the financial and logistical hardships that low-income and first-generation families face. Resiliency can also offer the endurance required to persist in the midst of challenge and the motivation to persevere.

Family resiliency among low-income, first-generation students. First-generation students face the myriad of obstacles enumerated above, yet they find their way through the college application process successfully and enrolled in college. Gofen (2009) conducted in-depth interviews with first-generation Israeli students and their families in order to find out how these students were able to “break the intergenerational cycle of educational disadvantage” (p. 106). Gofen (2009) attributed this successful college attainment to what she called *family capital*. She described bonding, social, and cultural capital as working together within the context of the family and identified this unique relationship as family capital.

According to Gofen (2009), “Family capital attempts to capture all aspects of investment made by the family for the benefit of the child’s future” (p. 107). This special form of social capital could have provided the student with the self-confidence to explore opportunities outside their familiar repertoire and provided the student with the encouragement and support needed to persist through challenge. This type of support was the essence of resiliency. Family resiliency worked along with the student’s individual resiliency and human capital to lift the child out of the cycle of limited educational attainment. Simon, Murphy, and Smith (2005) distinguished the identifying feature of family resilience as the ability of a family to overcome obstacles through the use of behavioral, emotional, and relational assets. They noted that resilient families

emerged from adversity stronger. They were able to “mobilize” resources in order to elevate themselves out of circumstances and cycles that were limiting.

In reviewing the college choice influences within the student’s ecological sphere of family, it appeared that knowledge and resiliency may have held the key to increasing college enrollment in low-income, first-generation students. This sphere held a powerful influence on a student and providing families with increased knowledge of the college preparation and application process and the availability and accessibility of financial aid may have alleviated perceived barriers that had prevented friends and family members from advocating college enrollment as a viable option. Increasing resiliency in students and those immediately surrounding them may have increased the motivation, resourcefulness, and persistence needed to face the challenges encountered by low-income, first-generation students.

The Student’s Social Circle

Peer attitudes toward school and higher education have been identified as a factor in students’ choice to attend college. Associating with peers who are driven and focused academically has been shown to have a positive influence on a student’s motivation and involvement in school (Johnson, 2000; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Ryan, 2000). Affiliating with other students who valued good grades and had clearly defined plans for college enrollment increased college enrollment in first-generation students from migrant families (McHatton, Zalaquett, & Cranson-Gingras, 2006). Friends who support academic achievement have been especially influential in raising the academic outcomes for low-income and Hispanic populations (Gibson et al., 2005; Sokatch, 2006). Those students in urban, low SES populations whose friends expressed a desire to go to college

and encouraged them to pursue higher education tended to enroll in college at 10 times the rate of those students with similar demographics whose friends did not show an interest in college (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Sokatch, 2006).

In addition to providing motivation and support, peers have also been identified as a source of college information. Many studies have indicated that urban and low-income students, as well as rural students, have limited access to college information through the school and parents (Cabrera et al., 2006; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Lareau, 2005; Perna, 2006). In fact, many low-income Latinos received college information from peers and older siblings as opposed to their high school counselors (Kim, 2004; Perez & McDonough, 2008).

School Resources

The ability to take more advanced classes and the availability of college information and support can be mediated by the context of the school itself. Schools with a higher income population base often have the ability to offer more Advanced Placement classes and employ more post-graduation counselors to provide college information and support in the application process (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Khattab, 2005).

McDonough (1997) found significant discrepancies between high schools in the structure and organization of post-graduation counseling services and time allotted for college counseling. He noted that private and middle income public schools in suburban areas had a smaller student-to-counselor ratio in post-graduate planning and the smaller ratio allowed for more individual support during the exploration of postsecondary plans.

Schools that were found to provide the greatest support for students in their college pursuits encouraged college visits and had college fairs, provided individual

assistance with college and financial aid application, contacted college representatives on behalf of students, offered a wide array of Advanced Placement classes, and contacted and involved parents regarding the students' college selection process (Hill & Tyson, 2009). High schools that provided a focus on higher education attainment and nurtured relationships with local colleges had a significant effect on a student's choice to attend college (Engberg & Wolniak; 2009). School counselors have been viewed as an integral part of guiding a student through the college choice process and providing connections between the student and college representative.

School Counselors

School counselors can play an important role with families who have no college experience. They can provide the encouragement and support needed to bolster a student's self-efficacy enough to consider college as an attainable goal. School counselors could also be a source of information on the college application and preparation process for first-generation students and their families (Taylor & Karcher, 2009). Cabrera et al. (2006) observed that some first-generation students seeking college information identified school counselors as their primary source of information. School counselors can sometimes provide the social capital that a student lacks through their history of connections with college recruiters and representatives (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Middle school counselors can help students become more intentional in their planning for high school and help the student determine the proper college preparatory curriculum in high school (Taylor & Karcher, 2009).

Although counselors can be helpful resources in a student's pre-college planning, not all students may have equal access to school counselors. School counselors in lower-

income schools and smaller school districts may have large caseloads of students and may not be able to spend much time with each student. In addition, students and parents may not access the counseling services that were available to them (Bunnage, 2003). Chapman (1981) found that parents and students had a lack of faith in their school counselors to provide them with the support and information needed to successfully navigate the college choice process and found them to be only moderately useful.

Although this study did not explore the true extent of counselors' knowledge or abilities, it was clear that parents lacked confidence in their school counselor to provide them with needed information concerning the college choice process. If parents lack faith in their child's school counselor, they may not encourage their child to seek the help of their school counselor in the college choice process. Although other studies have noted the support that a school counselor could provide (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Taylor & Karcher, 2009), if parents did not see school counselors as a viable resource, students may have been more hesitant to access their services.

Pre-collegiate Programs that Connect High Schools to College

Many schools with a large percentage of first-generation and low-income students are eligible to participate in pre-collegiate programs designed to help nurture the academic skills, self-efficacy, and information needed for first-generation students to engage in college choice (Bergerson, 2009). The federal government started the first pre-collegiate programs in the 1960s in order to make college accessible to more disadvantaged students. Upward Bound was the first federal program to be established and was joined by the Talent Search program and the Student Support Services program. These organizations made up the first three government programs under the auspices of

the TRIO programs. Although the three programs have been expanded to six, the TRIO name is still used to identify government pre-collegiate programs.

Since the 1960s, other non-government programs have been developed and include the Math, Engineering, and Science Achievement program (MESA), which focus on increasing math and science achievement across low-income and first-generation students. Other programs have been designed to specifically target first-generation high school students within certain demographic groups. For example, the High School Puente program was developed in California to serve high-risk Hispanic students and to increase enrollment in 4-year institutions and the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program was developed to improve study and academic readiness skills in low-income and Hispanic students. These are just a few of the pre-collegiate programs that have been developed to help prepare under-represented students for college enrollment (Bergerson, 2009).

Most programs designed to increase college choice provide tutoring, workshops on study skills, preparation for admission tests, and support through the college admission process. Many programs provide a summer residence program on a college campus to offer first-generation students a glimpse into college life. The majority of these programs also require parent participation of some kind, usually in the form of informational meetings and homework support (Bergerson, 2009; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). In their review of a variety of pre-collegiate programs, Corwin, Coylar, and Tierney (2005) identified several important elements that were common to successful programs including: (a) family engagement to produce buy-in and encouragement and as well as support for the student; (b) early intervention no later than ninth grade in order to give

time for the student to build the skills necessary for successful college enrollment; and (c) access to college preparation curriculum, especially in the sciences and math.

Currently, there are over 2,700 TRIO programs throughout the U.S. serving about 10% of under-represented minorities and first-generation students (NCES, 2010). These programs are usually housed in postsecondary institutions and operate in conjunction with local high schools. Many of them have been able to demonstrate positive outcomes. For example, students who participated in the Talent Search Program, which begin when a student enters sixth grade, enrolled in more science and math classes and prepared for exams in those classes earlier than a similar control group of students not enrolled in the program (McLure & Child, 1998). These students were also more knowledgeable about opportunities for scholarships and financial aid (McLure & Child, 1998) and showed higher rates of college enrollment than their cohorts outside the Talent Search program (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Programs that included a component involving a residential session or class on a college campus had a higher rate of college enrollment among the attendees than similar programs without this element (York & Thomas, 2003).

On the other hand, not all programs have demonstrated such strong outcomes. Students in the Upward Bound program were not any more likely to enter college as those who were not enrolled in the program (Mathematica Policy Research Inc., 1999). Although parents reported that their children had a more positive attitude toward school, appeared more motivated and goal-oriented in school, and exhibited increased self-confidence in academics (Zulli, 1998), these changes in attitude did not result in higher levels of college attendance. Outcome studies of the AVID and GEAR-UP programs have also been mixed. Students in the AVID and GEAR-UP programs tended to take

more college preparation courses, and those in the GEAR-UP program developed stronger math skills than those who were not in the program. However, reading skills did not differ by program involvement and students in both programs were not any more knowledgeable about available financial aid and scholarships than those who were not enrolled in one of these programs (Cabrera et al., 2006).

Two of the limiting factors in these programs seem to include whether they were available to rural first-generation students and whether they existed in close proximity to a postsecondary institution. Many of these programs are highly selective and may exclude some students who had the potential to succeed in college. In addition, the lack of a local postsecondary institution in rural areas may limit the access of first-generation students to these programs (Adelman, 2002). In this way, the community in which a student resides could impact the availability of pre-collegiate supports.

Community

A community provides role models and job opportunities that may inspire a student to consider college. Community resources can offer enrichment and opportunities to accumulate skills and knowledge that could add to a student's human capital and connections to expand their social capital. Unfortunately, some of the components associated with building social capital for first-generation students are not as accessible in rural settings. Limited resources and a community culture rooted in the land could impact the path of rural first-generation students. The next section will review some of the unique obstacles that rural students considering college might face.

Rural Contexts

First-generation students in the rural areas of the United States face many of the perceived barriers, attitudes, and dearth of college information of their urban cohorts, but they are faced with additional barriers and limitations that were unique to their rural location. Sociologists and psychologists concur that an individual lives and operates within the context of his or her community and environment (Bourdieu, 1977; Brofenbrenner, 1979). It is not unusual, as pointed out earlier by Bourdieu (1977) in his discussion of cultural and social capital, that an individual internalizes the perspectives and values of those around him in the formation of habitus. Students growing up within a rural culture may internalize local views on education, community, family, and occupation and incorporate these views into their aspirations and decision process in considering college enrollment.

The college aspirations of rural parents in regard to postsecondary attendance are lower than those of urban and suburban parents (Courrege, 2011), even when income was taken into account. Similar findings have been reported by Van Hook (1993) in his study of rural populations in the United States and Canada. Some of the reasons behind lower college aspirations among rural youth may be accounted for by limited resources and opportunities in the school and community.

The relatively lower rate of college attainment in rural communities may be linked to the limited number of job opportunities requiring a college degree within the rural community, most requiring a vocational or Associate's degree at most (Isreal et al., 2001). Rural youth and parents may find little reason to pursue high levels of education if the student plans to seek employment opportunities close to home (Isreal et al., 2001).

Advanced job opportunities and higher socio-economic status are not seen as important to rural parents (Courrege, 2011). When interviewing rural parents and youth, Lozano et al. (2009) found that rural students and parents did not value high status careers as much as they valued solid, stable incomes and remaining close to family and friends.

The phenomenon of cultural close family ties in rural families and the reality that most youth must move out of the area in order to obtain a higher education was studied by Hecktner (1995). She found that by considering higher education, many youth were also considering a big change in their relationships with family and friends which were highly valued in the rural culture. Hecktner (1995) noted that some youth were able to attend community or vocational colleges nearby, but many youth and parents questioned the wisdom of a 4-year degree. In order to better understand these comments, one must review the nature of the rural culture.

Although there are a variety of rural and frontier environments in the United States, American rural culture is based primarily on its agrarian economy (Esveld, 2004). Rural communities that originate in farming are deeply rooted in the land. A family's farm is their major investment and source of income which is tied to the land on which they live. As a result, rural families do not tend to move from their prime investment and source of income. Rural communities, as a consequence, remain stable for generations with few moving out of the area (Courrege, 2011; Hecktner, 1995).

The Place of Schools in the Rural Community

Schools remain the nucleus of tradition and culture for many rural communities. DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) found that schools had more to do with providing a sense of community than developing educational skills and aspirations. Rural residents

viewed school as a social center for community interaction in a region where neighbors could be far distances apart. Rural school personnel reported that school functions were usually attended by the whole community, even by residents who did not have any students enrolled in the school. Due to limited opportunities for outside entertainment, rural school sports, fund raisers, and productions were well-attended by the entire community (Lutz, Lutz, & Tweeddale, 1992). Kollie (2011) found that teachers in rural schools had more personal relationships with their students and provided more individual attention than teachers in urban schools. McGrath et al. (2001) noted that rural parents often adopted the mentality that education was the job of the school and they relied on the school staff to provide educational guidance for their children.

Rural Resources and Role Models

Rural students do not always have the academic supports and resources that are available to urban youth who are disadvantaged. For example, Adelman (2002) noted that students in urban settings had more access to the government TRIO programs than rural youth. As noted, the TRIO programs are often offered in partnership with a local postsecondary institution and may include on-campus activities and other interactions between college staff and program participants. Rural areas that are not situated near a participating college may not have access to these programs. Rural parents and students may not be able to benefit from the information and support that these programs provide, supports that have been shown to increase college attendance in high-risk urban populations (Hubbard, 1999; Lozano et al., 2009). Furthermore, rural students may not have access to as many educational resources that are often associated with college preparation. Van Hook (1993) observed that rural schools often were not able to offer the

same amount of advanced placement courses as their urban counterparts. He also noted that, on the whole, rural school libraries and science laboratories facilities were not as developed as those found in urban areas.

Online learning can fill some of the gaps created by limited resources in rural schools. Half of rural school districts are utilizing distance learning in some form to augment their curriculum at the elementary and secondary levels (Emeagwali, 2004). More rural schools are using the Internet to provide their students with advanced placement classes and extent classes in specialized areas (Fioriello, 2010). Rural school districts are utilizing distance learning as an opportunity to offer their students the expanded curriculum and specialized instruction that may have been limited due to their restricted staffing and resources.

In addition to more limited facilities and supports within the schools, students in rural areas appear to have fewer role models of higher education attainment. According to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2003), 16% of rural adults over the age of 25 years old held a college degree as compared to 36% of urban adults over the age of 25 years old. The overall educational attainment in rural communities was lower than in urban areas (Bergerson, 2007; Esveld, 2004). Statistics from the most recent Colorado Census statistics contributed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2009) indicated that 19.2% of the Colorado rural population has not completed high school, 33.7% have completed high school only, 20.5% have had some college experience, and 26.3% held a college degree.

Due to the documented limitations of job opportunities requiring a college degree, rural communities do not tend to attract college graduates unless they commute out of the

area for work. Consequently, many students desiring a college education and commensurate job opportunities have had to move into more metropolitan areas where college campuses are more accessible and the job market is more expansive to college graduates (Courrege, 2011). Others may have chosen not to go to college in the first place because they did not want to have to choose between college and their family and friends. As a consequence, prospective first-generation students in rural areas may place a limited value on a college education due to the limited job opportunities within the rural context in relation to the cost of leaving behind family and friends.

Online or distance learning might be viewed as an opportunity to earn a college degree without having to choose between college and family and friends. Distance learning is currently being offered by some traditional colleges and universities (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Unfortunately, class offerings are currently limited and may mean that rural students who are working to get their degree online through a traditional college or university may have difficulty meeting graduation requirements (NCES, 2008).

Traditional 4-year colleges and universities have appeared hesitant to offer full online degrees. When university administrators were surveyed as to the factors involved in their reluctance to expand online services, they identified costs and the fact that distance learning did not fit with the mission of the school (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Another limitation for students in remotely rural areas has been the lack of broadband access. The USDA (2011), in a recent report on telecommunication systems in rural areas of the United States, found that some remote rural areas did not have the telecommunications infrastructure to support broadband access. Despite accessibility,

nationwide, students preferred traditional classes to online when they were accessible (Pontes, Hasit, Pontes, Lewis, & Seifring, 2010).

The culture that is grounded in the land, the value of close family ties, and limited job opportunities within rural communities create barriers that are unique to the rural context. There have been several studies on the effect of cultural and family capital on the college preparation and attainment of first-generation students within urban areas (Ashburn, 2007; Dumais & Ward, 2010 ;Gofen, 2009; Olive, 2008; Reid & Moore, 2008). However, the research on the accumulation of human, social, and cultural capital by first-generation students within the rural context is dated and lacking.

Summary

Human, cultural, and social capital are important factors to consider for first-generation students as they prepare for a postsecondary education. The accumulation of capital by first-generation students can be hindered by their limited self-determination, self-advocacy, and academic self-efficacy. Students' capital can also be limited by parents' lack of college experience, association with friends who do not support college attainment, a shortage of school supports, and the general context of their rural community.

The opportunity to acquire these forms of capital may be even more restricted for first-generation students living in rural areas due to limited role models, reduced job opportunities, restricted community and school resources, and the land-based culture. McLendon et al. (2009) suggested that the rural population has been overlooked in the research on college expectations and attainment. There is a need for updated research on rural communities and college choice as these communities move into a changing context

of increasing industrialization (Esveld, 2004). Information gleaned from first-generation students from rural areas who have successfully enrolled in a 4-year postsecondary institution may aid in the development of programs and policies aimed at increasing college attainment in this population.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

*Townfolk know pleasures, country people joys
Minna Thomas Antrim*

Qualitative methodology is used when the focus of study is to understand the feelings, values, and perceptions that underly and influence behavior and discover unspecified contextual variables (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It is the methodology of choice when one desires to answer the question “why?” about a phenomenon. The focus of the current study explored the influences and internal processes behind first-generation students’ decision and actuation to enroll in a 4-year college. The path to college from rural areas is not clearly understood and includes a variety of influences and factors. The emergent character of qualitative research allowed for the exploration of students’ unique experiences, feelings, and perspectives from within their individual family and community cultural contexts. It was through qualitative methodology that the results of this study shed more light on why first-generation students from rural areas have chosen to attend a 4-year college.

Epistemology

This narrative inquiry was conducted within the framework of a social constructivist epistemology. A constructivist viewpoint assumed that there is no knowledge or meaning that is inherent in the world. Meaning is constructed

uniquely by an individual's interaction with their environment. In discussing constructivism, Crotty (1998) wrote, "There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world . . . Meaning is not discovered but constructed" (p. 8). In essence, humans engage with reality and make sense of it (Crotty, 1998).

Social constructivism recognizes that reality is not only constructed through our interaction with the environment but is also embedded within the conventions and systems in which we live. We inherit from the culture in which we live, meaningful symbols which allow us to organize our experience and to direct our behavior in response (Schwandt, 2007). The goal of this narrative inquiry was to understand and describe the life experiences of rural first-generation students as they progressed toward their current status and place as students enrolled in a 4-year institution. The participants of this study were asked to relay the narrative of their life-long path to college, infused with the perspective and culture of their family and community.

Theoretical Framework

In addition to the Constructivist perspective, the process of college choice was viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of social, cultural, and human capital and within the framework of Hossler's and Gallagher's and Freeman's stages of college choice. As mentioned in Chapter I, Bourdieu's concept of capital is accumulated through the investment of family, friends, education, and social connections that enable an individual to achieve a desired goal such as enrollment in college. The different contexts within which this capital was acquired were viewed through the ecological organization

offered by Bronfenbrenner, who viewed these contexts as surrounding the individual in a series of concentric circles and included family, friends, school, and community.

Narrative Inquiry

This study was conducted within the framework of the Narrative Inquiry methodology of qualitative research. Bell (2002) observed that “we as human beings make sense of random experiences by the imposition of story structures” (p. 208). Riessman (2008) described Narrative Inquiry as a collaborative effort between participant and researcher to construct a meaningful story from the participant’s life events. The participants in this study were asked to tell the story of their path to college enrollment. The narrative process allowed them to select, organize, connect, and evaluate the events in the story in a fashion that was meaningful to them (Riessman, 2008). By allowing the participants to tell their story in their own way, letting them determine the emphasis, sequence, and pace, the researcher was given the privilege of bearing witness to and collaborating in the meaning-making process of the participant.

Each story was preserved as much as possible in order to allow the reader to view each unique perspective and interpret for themselves the significant elements of each. The narrative method allowed us to understand the impact of experiences and the temporal notion of the experiences without focusing on the outcome (Bell, 2002). As the stories of the participants were analyzed, the specific factors and moments that built capital within these students’ lives became clearer.

Procedures

Setting

The university town in which the study was situated was located in the high plains area of Colorado. Although it has been afforded a beautiful view of the snow-capped Rocky Mountains, it was relatively flat under an expansive and ever changing sky. The town was founded in the late 1800s and was set up as an experiment in *communiarian living*, or a coop combining farming and industry. People were actually imported for this experiment and, as a result, the founding community was better educated than the typical frontier people. They were trained in state-of-the-art farming techniques of the time and were well-versed in the philosophy of the project. The town was home to roughly 90,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) with a population density of 3,097 people per square mile, but it retained a small-town feel. It has maintained the synergistic combination of agriculture and industry that was intended by its founders. On some days, when the wind was right and the air was moist, the pungent odor of the stockyard supplying the large meat-packing plant assailed the nostrils. The cheese plant in town was also supplied by surrounding dairy farms that necessitated a wealth of feed stores, grain elevators, and farm equipment dealerships. At intermittent intervals, one could spot oil pumps and derricks amongst the cows and corn, evidence of the expanding local energy economy. In contrast, the town was home to the fourth largest university in the state (U.S. News & World Report, 2011).

As with any town, there were both modest and affluent sections, with 26% of the population living below the poverty level. The combination of the town's size, presence of a large university, expanding oil industry, and agricultural base lent itself to diverse

job opportunities, ranging from migrant farm worker to college professor and chemical engineer. The ethnic diversity of the population was not as varied, with 59% of the population identified as Caucasian, 37.8% identified as Hispanic, 0.7% African American, and 0.2% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although there was no lack of strip malls, fast-food restaurants, Starbucks, and traffic, whether it be the oil industry or the agri-business, the essence of the town was still very much grounded in the land.

The Colorado Plains University (CPU) (pseudonym) was located at the southern, more industrial end of town. (CPU was the pseudonym chosen to refer to the university of enrollment for the participant). Once on the CPU campus, the environment changed slightly and took on the typical topography common to many mid-sized universities. CPU was a Carnegie Classified Doctoral Research University with a student population of about 13,000 according to the university's 2009 census. It was a participant in Title IV and also a partner in the Federal Trio programs which were set up, in conjunction with local high schools, to help prepare high-risk and low-income students to achieve college enrollment. These programs served a total of about 150 local students and provided intensive math and language arts tutoring, as well as college advising and pre-collegiate preparation for low-income and first-generation students through on-campus classes and a 6-week summer intensive.

According to a university press release, CPU has shown a strong commitment to first-generation students through the Diversity Recruitment Initiative which provided a \$4,000 renewable scholarship to in-state, first-generation students. The initiative also provided funds to send admissions representatives statewide to educate potential first-

generation students on the benefits of college and provided first-generation families with information on financial aid and planning.

Once enrolled, CPU provided a myriad of academic, social, and personal supports to first-generation students and their families through the federally sponsored Student Support Services program aimed at increasing the retention rates of these students. CPU also supported the advancement of high achieving first-generation students toward Master's and Doctoral degrees through the McNair Scholars. Participants in this program received undergraduate research opportunities through a two-semester research class, a summer research internship, and preparation for graduate admissions (J. Trujillo, personal communication, April 6, 2010).

As a result of these efforts, 34% of incoming freshman at CPU were considered first-generation students. Eight percent of these first-generation students also self-identified as an ethnic minority. Of the entire student population, 15.6% of the students had minority status, with 8% identified as Hispanic and 71% receiving financial aid. According to the university's website, CPU prided itself on its commitment to expanding college access, providing extensive resources to retain first-generation students and creating a strong sense of community. For these reasons, CPU offered an excellent environment in which to conduct this study.

Participants

Eleven rural first-generation college students were interviewed for this study, ranging in age from 18-25 years old. The participants made up a sample of convenience and were recruited from several different sources within the university campus. Firstly, recruitment flyers were posted on the bulletin boards in all residential dorms, the student

center, recreation center, library, and outside classrooms in the psychology and sociology departments, as well as the math and science departments (see Appendix A). Secondly, the study was registered with the participant pool within the School of Psychological Sciences that provided opportunities for students in many psychology classes to participate in approved university research for class credit.

Thirdly, participants were recruited through a support program for the first-generation and high-risk students enrolled in the university. Participation in this program was voluntary and students were provided with academic and social/emotional support, as well as extra-curricular activities that allowed for connection with other first-generation students. Finally, participants were recruited from the Latin Cultural Center (LCC) (pseudonym). The LCC was established in 1985 to support Latino students at CPU through social and cultural events, academic support, and referral services. Once participants were recruited, a snowball technique was utilized as an additional aid in the search for students who met the study criteria. Through this recruitment process, 2 participants were recruited from the campus first-generation student support program, 5 students were recruited from an introductory psychology class, and 4 students were recruited from the LCC (pseudonym).

Once recruited, the participants were screened to determine if they met study requirements. The parameters of the study required that participants be first-generation students between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, using the Trio program definition. First-generation students were those whose parents may have had some college experience but had not earned a 4-year degree. Participants in the study must have been enrolled in a 4-year institution after high school without first attending community

college. They also needed to have graduated from a high school within an area that fit the U.S. Census Bureau's rural designation. The participant requirements were included in all recruitment material and were reviewed with each participant during initial contact by phone or email and then again during the first part of the interview when demographics were collected.

The participants were in their first or second year at CPU and had entered CPU directly after graduating from high school. Jayden, though a non-traditional student, completed her high school requirements several months prior to enrolling in CPU. Participants came from rural areas in the Rocky Mountain region and the Eastern plains of northern Colorado. All participants lived in their respective rural areas for a minimum of 7 years prior to enrolling in CPU and many had parents who were still living in those areas. The highest level of education earned by the parents of participants ranged from 6th grade to 2 years of college. Seven females and 4 males participated in the study, with majors that included, psychology, nursing, Spanish, music education, elementary education, graphic design, political science, and business. Six of the participants were self-identified Latino and the remaining 5 identified as Caucasian. Three of the participants were born in Mexico, 1 was born in Guatemala, and another in Arizona with the remaining participants born in the rural towns in Colorado. A chart of the general demographics of the participants has been provided in Appendix B.

Data Collection

Individuals expressing interest in the study were contacted face-to-face, through email or by phone, and questioned briefly in order to determine whether or not they met the criteria set to be considered a first-generation student from a rural area. Students

meeting the criteria were scheduled for an interview. The format of the interviews included obtaining general demographics through a brief structured interview (see Appendix C). This provided an additional check that participation criteria had been met and information could be used to describe the sample.

Following the initial demographic survey, participants were then provided with the general narrative prompt: “Thinking back to the very first time you can remember being introduced to the concept of college, tell me about the journey that led you to apply to this 4-year institution?” An interview guide was used as a tool to clarify interview responses and increased the richness of the participants’ stories (Appendix D). The interview guide was developed using Atkinson’s (1998) narrative life story method, *The Life Story Interview*.

The interview guide was reviewed by a faculty member with expertise in Narrative Inquiry to determine if the question guide fit within the methodology of Narrative Inquiry. The guide was also reviewed by a staff member of the first-generation student support program on campus in order to assess its applicability to first-generation students and identified any gaps in the line of questioning. This process was piloted on two first-generation students in order to evaluate its effectiveness in providing rich, detailed narrative.

Process

Following approval by the university Institutional Review Board (Appendix E), participants were recruited through the outlined procedures and were interviewed separately at their convenience. The interviewees were given a choice to meet in their dorms or in a more neutral venue provided by a reserved study room at the university

main library. Prior to the start of the interview, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix F) that explained the purpose, risks, and benefits of participating in the study. Included was permission to record any interviews with the participant. Before recording started, each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym to be used during the interview and reporting of results in order to provide as much confidentiality as possible. The interview time ranged in length from 90 minutes to 2 hours and followed the pace of the participant, allowing for breaks if needed.

Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and recordings were emailed to a transcribing service that provided an email transcript copy. The digital recordings were transferred to a flash drive that was stored, with the signed informed consent forms, in a locked file cabinet when not in use. As each transcript was received, it was reviewed while listening to the interview recording to insure the accuracy of the transcription. Once the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy, they were emailed to the respective interviewees to review the transcripts for clarity. Each participant was contacted by phone within a week of receiving the transcript to complete a member check. A member check is a common validation procedure in qualitative research to address *confirmability*. During the member check, participants were asked if they wanted to add any information or clarify any statements. This also gave me an opportunity to ask additional questions in order to clarify their stories.

Field notes were composed immediately after each interview and included a description of the participant as well as any impressions that emerged during the interview. These field notes were added to the bank of evidence during the interpretative stage of the study. Field notes were also stored in a locked cabinet with the digital

recordings and transcripts when not in use. As data were collected and analyzed, a log of analytic procedures and personal thoughts regarding tentative interpretations and decision points in constructing this emergent research was kept in order to allow for a documented path of the research process and as an added validity and reliability measure.

Upon completion of the initial interview, participants were compensated with a \$10.00 gift card redeemable at a local chain coffee shop and their name was put into a drawing for a \$75.00 gift certificate redeemable on a popular online shopping website. At the completion of the interviewing process, the online shopping certificate was awarded to the participant whose name was drawn from a bowl.

Data Analysis

The emergent nature of qualitative research demanded that data analysis be conducted throughout data collection. Although 10 participants were originally scheduled for this study, after reviewing the interview results, an 11th participant was added to ensure saturation. Interview transcripts and field notes were reviewed for themes and formation of follow-up questions as data were collected from new participants. Potential themes were reviewed with participants for their perspective and input during follow-up contact.

Each component of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological model to be considered was assigned a color (self/blue, family/yellow, friends/pink, school/orange, and community/green). The transcripts were then reviewed and each element was highlighted with the color corresponding to the sphere to which it belonged (e.g., comments about friends were highlighted in pink). The content of each interview was then organized chronologically within each of the relevant spheres of influence to create a chart. The

charts were then reviewed in order to identify themes, turning points, and epiphanies of each story. The analyses of each narrative were then compared with those in the stories of the other participants in order to identify common elements. The charts were then reviewed by a colleague who was asked to identify themes and common elements to provide a peer check of the thematic analysis.

Trustworthiness

The strategies put into place to increase the trustworthiness of this study were based on criteria put forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was maximized through the use of several procedures. Member checks were conducted in which participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy and follow-up interviews with the participants were conducted in order to optimize clarity of the thoughts and perspectives put forth in the narratives. In addition, the charts formed from content were reviewed by a colleague to provide a peer check of thematic analysis. My theoretical and experiential perspectives have also been developed within the first chapter to allow the reader to understand the perspective that I brought to the research, including my assumptions, experiences, and biases concerning postsecondary education. The researcher's perspective described the lens through which the research was conducted and attempted to make clear to the reader what expectations I brought to the study (Merriam, 2009). The use of member checks, peer review, and reflexivity in this study served to increase its overall credibility.

Descriptions of the setting, participants, and narratives were relayed in as much detail as possible to allow the reader to determine the level of transferability.

Dependability and credibility was addressed within this study through the maintenance of

detailed field notes and an ongoing log to document the procedures and emergent decision points along the research progression.

CHAPTER IV

THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

*No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings
William Blake*

One of the advantages of qualitative research was that it provided an opportunity to explore the unique stories of each participant and deepen our understanding of a topic of interest. Collectively, these stories led to emergent common themes that created a more holistic picture across participants. Each of the participants in this study experienced a unique path to college enrollment. In order to honor the life story of each of the participants and provide a more in-depth view of first-generation students from rural areas of Colorado as they moved toward college enrollment, a brief summary of each participant's educational journey is presented followed by a discussion of the common themes found amongst the narratives. These summaries allowed for a glimpse into how the respective areas of Bronfenbrenner's spheres of influence integrated differently within each person's life as they moved toward college enrollment. The elements unique to each participant were emphasized in the individual summaries. Elements that were common amongst several participants are discussed in the next chapter.

Elaine

“Mom and I are planners”

Elaine approached me as I sat in the front of the library waiting for our interview and, with a friendly and confident air, asked if I were Michelle. She was a sophomore, majoring in pre-nursing, and had heard about my study from her introduction psychology class. There was an underlying drive and energy in her mannerism and speech as we engaged in casual conversation on our way to the interview room. As the interview progressed, her passion for education became evident. She took pride in being a successful student and mentioned several times her 3.9 GPA in high school. Elaine shared that she “always liked school and learning new things.” The drive and energy immediately evident at our introduction was thematic throughout her narrative as she admitted that she liked to learn new things and challenged herself academically. She sought out advanced academic opportunities and honors classes, self-initiated the completion of her homework, and established a strong work ethic and time management skill in order to actively participate in academic clubs such as Mathletes and the National Honor Society while working and maintaining her high GPA. Her hard work was rewarded in her senior year of high school when she received financial support through a scholarship established by the local farmers’ association to help fund a promising local student entering a four-institution.

Elaine lived her entire life in an agricultural community of about 2,500 residents situated in the northern part of Colorado, about 15 minutes from the Wyoming border. Her parents and extended family grew up in an area adjacent to her town and have continued to reside in close proximity. Elaine was an only child and lived at home with

her parents who were realtors. Both of her parents had earned their high school diploma before marrying and entering the work force. Elaine mentioned that her father had been working since the age of 16 to support family, but he felt it was important to complete high school.

Elaine grew up in a house surrounded by neighboring farms with the nearest house almost one mile away and several miles from the central town. Elaine described the town as consisting of a main street with no grocery store or chain restaurant and the nearest shopping and entertainment was at least 20 miles away. Growing up, play dates with friends were infrequent due to the distance between her home and town, and the majority of her socializing took place at school. Her social life expanded at age 10 when her mother introduced her to the game of tennis. She fell in love with it and joined a competitive tennis league. She recalled going to tennis tournaments all over the region, including larger cities like Denver and Fort Collins. According to Elaine, these tournaments gave her exposure to more urban areas and experiences outside her local community.

Elaine shared that her parents instilled a strong work ethic in her which included goal-setting and long-range planning. They always supported academic achievement and working toward good grades in elementary and started endorsing college in earnest when Elaine was in eighth grade. Although her parents always encouraged education and her father was involved in Back-to-School nights and field trips, Elaine identified her grandfather as a role model of life-time learning. “He had just a high school diploma, but he was the type that would go to the library and check out a manual or something and just read it.” She relayed stories of her grandfather’s continual support through elementary

and middle school and his encouragement to further her education. “I knew I wanted to go to school because my grandpa really talked about it a lot!”

Even from preschool, Elaine’s teachers identified her as a hard working, bright, and inquisitive student. She told me that her third grade teacher used fun voices and dramatic reading during storytime to instill a love of reading that has never left her. She identified her seventh grade year as a peak year in her journey toward college. She shared that math became her favorite subject in middle school when she encountered an excellent math teacher. She has continued to enjoy math despite inconsistent instruction. Seventh grade was also when a school counselor entered her classroom and asked each student to consider what career they wanted to pursue when they grew up and if college was in their plans, what kind of college they might want to attend. Elaine said that the project and subsequent class discussions spurred concentrated thought and planning for her future. Being a planner and a goal setter, she gave a lot of thought to her future. At the time, she identified a core desire to help people. She entertained becoming a lawyer and researched Harvard University. When she discovered the yearly tuition, Elaine abandoned her pursuit of a law degree and explored other avenues in which to offer help to others. True to her forward-thinking and planning nature, when she did not have a clear direction, Elaine panicked, “Ever since the project I was like ‘Oh my gosh, I’ve got to figure out what I want to do, so when I graduate I know where to go!’ So that was the start of my panic of, ‘What am I going to do?’”

In eighth grade, Elaine’s grades qualified her to join the Talent Search program, the pre-collegiate program offered to high achieving students in the school. She reported that the Talent Search program was run by the counseling department of her middle

school and was not very active. There was only one meeting in her freshman year of high school in which they discussed scholarships. She was disappointed when she found out later that she could have applied for some scholarships in her eighth grade year but was not informed of them. She began to use the Internet to investigate specific schools in her junior year when she decided to go into nursing. Elaine earned her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) license by attending classes at a local community college and worked as a CNA the last 2 years of high school. During this time, she began narrowing her college search to focus on schools with good nursing programs. Her next guidance and support with college preparation and planning did not occur until the first semester of her senior year in the form of Senior Seminar.

Elaine's description of Senior Seminar included services such as: help developing personal statements and resumes, guidance and support in filling out college applications, help in discerning what characteristics they wanted in a college, discussions on the difference between 2- and 4-year college experiences, and preparation for the first year of college. Elaine also mentioned that she had weekly advisement throughout her high school years in which she met with an advisor in a small group to discuss concerns and clarify plans for the future. Elaine identified the Senior Seminar as the most important influence on her choice to attend CPU. She advocated for a class like Senior Seminar to be offered to all high school students, especially for students in rural areas. When asked why she thought that a Senior Seminar program was especially critical for rural students, Elaine explained:

I graduated with a couple of kids who, they didn't even care if they graduated or not, because they knew they were going to work on the farm. . . . Just to, you know, give them a different idea. Say, "maybe you do want to try to go to

college, even if it's just community college.” They should take a couple of classes; see if there is something else that sparks their interest.

She also mentioned that her Advanced Placement (AP) English teacher, who attended CPU, was a seminal role model for her and mentor, whose guidance she sought out throughout her college decision process. She indicated that he was a great source of information about college and that she frequently asked his opinion about the programs at CPU.

In the end, Elaine indicated that she chose a 4-year college because she always knew that she wanted at least a 4-year degree. She also cited the college life and chance to meet different people and the diverse opportunities and sports spectatorship afforded by 4-year institutions as part of her decision to apply to a 4-year college. She had experienced a community college campus while earning her CNA certificate and she knew that she wanted to expand her experience beyond that of high school. She chose CPU because it was local and allowed her to live with or remain within close proximity to her parents and retain in-state tuition. Elaine also liked the smaller size of CPU compared to the other state schools. This was the journey that led Elaine to the CPU campus in pursuit of the 4-year degree.

Elle

“There is a lot of unfairness in the world. Some people are just not given these chances or opportunities that we are given and you should just fulfill your dreams.”

Elle had arrived early and was waiting for me in front of the library. As I approached, our eyes met, both with that inquiring look that often appears between two people who were meeting for the first time without the benefit of a third party introduction. She was tall and slender with the warm dark eyes and long stylish black

hair. This was her freshman year at CPU as a business major. Initially, her speech was clipped with an intensity that cut through the small talk, seemingly impatient to get down to business. As we began talking about childhood and family, her demeanor softened but retained the fervor of a passionate young woman.

Elle was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, and moved to an agricultural town in northern Colorado when she was 2. She has lived in the rural Colorado town with a population of about 2,300 for the last 16 years. Her parents immigrated to the United States with the promise of a better life. Elle explained to me that public school terminated in sixth or eighth grade in Mexico and that her parents' formal education stopped at the end of eighth grade. Her father worked on an organic farm in the area and her mother provided occasional day care for family friends out of her home. The responsibilities of adulthood came early for both of her parents. Elle conveyed stories of her father staying back alone to manage the family cattle ranch at age 10, while the rest of the family spent much of their time in the city with his grandparents. Her mother gave birth to Elle's older brother when she was 15 and has made a home for her family ever since. Spanish was the primary language spoken in Elle's home and the only language spoken by her mother. Elle explained that her father spoke a little English and she and her brother were bilingual.

Elle described herself as a shy, quiet student in elementary school. She entered a bi-lingual preschool speaking only Spanish and participated in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at school until she was in second grade. Elle said she learned English from interactions with other children, but her limited English skills made her hesitant in social situations when she was young. Although her reading achievement

lagged in elementary school (mostly likely due to her second language status), she showed advanced skills in math and frequently tutored other classmates in math. At the time, she thought of being an astronaut when she grew up.

But that was just really when I didn't know any better . . . When we grow up we realize that we are good at certain stuff and certain stuff we're not and then we set our sights on things we are good at.

By the end of fifth grade, Elle had decided to be a math teacher. She was introduced to the concept of college early in her educational career when her teacher described elementary school as being, “the foundation that we needed to build up to have our own career and go to college.” Through this discussion, Elle was able to make the link between her efforts in elementary school and the long-term effects on her career and future choices.

In middle school, Elle was asked to focus more specifically on career and future planning. She mentioned a program in middle school that was a rite of passage for all middle school students. The program asked each student to develop long-term goals for a career and college expectations. She noted that, during this program, students were given lots of encouragement and support to boost their confidence in achieving their dreams and goals. They were told that anything they wanted to do could be achieved with hard work . It was at this time that Elle was inspired to become a lawyer. She had learned about the Holocaust and about the Nazi discrimination against, not only the Jews, but many ethnic groups. She began to focus on the inequities of the world and developed a desire to address them. This has continued to be a life focus for her to this day. Elle's involvement in sports from elementary school through high school had instilled in her a strong sense of fairness and she hoped that in becoming an attorney she could help level

the playing field for all. She mentioned an eighth grade teacher who inspired her and motivated her to fulfill her potential. The teacher was Latina and one day she pulled Elle and some of her Latina friends aside and told them that, as Latinas, they had an obligation to work hard and become accomplished contributors in their respective fields. She insisted that they never use race as an excuse to abandon their dreams.

Although Elle qualified for the Talent Search program in eighth grade through her participation in the National Junior Honor Society, she chose not to join. She continued to push herself academically in high school by taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses in many subjects and signed up for ACT prep during her sophomore year to increase her performance on college entrance exams. She came out of her shell in high school, participated in student council, joined the National Honor Society and the Foreign Language club, played softball, and volunteered in the ESL class at her old elementary school. She noted that, once she started taking AP classes, she split off from her major group of friends who were more interested in boys and parties. Elle shared that she began to associate with other students in her AP class who were also on the course to college. She felt that she had more in common with them as they supported each other through the college decision and application process.

Although Elle felt that she honed her focus on college at this point, she did not feel that she was always given the same support by school staff as some of her classmates who had shown equivalent academic fortitude and college focus. One topic that Elle spent a fair amount of time on when discussing her high school influences was the disappointment that she experienced with the high school counselor. She felt no support from her counselor in the college decision or application process. Elle perceived a great

deal of favoritism on the counselor's part toward a particular group of girls. She reported that the counselor concentrated her support and efforts on those who had parents with college experience and who, from Elle's perspective, the counselor viewed as showing the most promise of attending college.

I always felt like our counselor would just meet with certain people. She would help them more than the rest of our class. She kinda like met and tried to help people that she thought she was sure were going to make it (to college). Other people she wouldn't like take the time to talk to and answer questions.

She went on to share that the counselor did not seem to approach high potential students who came from first-generation families by noting, "So I think she should have approached people that were new to it (college), that don't know the steps. I think she should have approached us sooner than the girls who had parents to help them."

Realizing that she was not going to get the help she needed from the counselors and that her parents could not answer her questions, Elle found another mentor. Her German teacher was her primary source of information and support throughout her college search process. When Elle was considering attendance at the community college for her first 2 years of postsecondary study, her German teacher encouraged her to go straight into a 4-year institution. She advised Elle that attending a university for the entire 4 years would help her build strong connections that could be useful in applying to graduate school or obtaining a job. Elle took her advice and with her guidance and support applied to several 4-year institutions. She decided on CPU because of its proximity to home that allowed her to defray college costs by residing with her parents. She also felt more comfortable with the smaller size of CPU and the "friendly atmosphere" it offered her.

When asked what advice she would give to first-generation students and their parents who were considering college, Elle suggested early preparation. Although she noted that students did not often start thinking of college until eighth grade, early preparation at the elementary level through the development of study skills, note-taking skills, goal setting, and investment in academic achievement can lay the foundation for success in high school and a greater chance for college enrollment. She identified parents as her greatest influence in college attainment and that parents should start talking to their children early about college and what things they can do at all levels of their educational development to help support eventual college attainment.

Gus

“I knew that I didn’t want to mortgage my future.”

I met Gus at the Latin Cultural Center while recruiting participants. He was new to the Center and appeared unassuming and reserved as he sat on a couch, listening to me explain my study to one of the student directors. When the director suggested that Gus was a first-generation student and might be a possible participant, Gus stood up at the mention of his name with a big smile and readily agreed to participate. As we introduced ourselves and made arrangements to meet later, I was stuck by his friendly and good-natured demeanor. He was gracious and accommodating throughout our encounters. He was the kind of person everyone would readily describe as likeable, with an easy-going demeanor, and a contagious smile frequently dominated his face.

Gus was a sophomore majoring in political science with ambitions of going on to become a lawyer. Gus was born in Guatemala and stayed there until he was 8. In Guatemala, he lived in a larger city and attended a private elementary school there. Gus

explained that most city dwellers considered the public schools to provide only a limited education because formal education ended in eighth grade. Families who could afford it sent their children to private schools. Gus' father went past the required eighth-grade level to earn his technical certificate in mechanics after his high school graduation. He ran an auto shop while Gus' mother, who also earned her high school diploma, was a secretary at the corporate offices of Chiquita banana. It was a testimony to the importance that Gus' parents placed on education that they matriculated beyond middle school and managed to send Gus and his two sisters to private school with their limited income.

The schedule in this private Guatemalan school was very different from the school day in the United States. In Guatemala, Gus went to school from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. At 1:00 p.m., the students were dismissed and went home for the big meal of the day and then sat down to study and do homework for about four to five hours. Homework was taken very seriously by the families whose children attended the school. Most of the children in his neighborhood attended the same school and no one was allowed out to play until their homework was completed. Gus shared that he and his friends would usually have one or two hours of free time in the evenings before they had to get ready for bed. He generally spent this time playing outside with his friends. Since the age of 7, Gus remembered his mother constantly urging him to go to college. She encouraged him not to "settle for something easy, you need to have ambitions and life goals that are worthwhile." Gus shared that his older sister was born when his mother was only 18, and she regretted not going on to college. Gus reported that her expectations for college were very clear throughout his upbringing stating, "Go to

college. Don't make the same mistake I did." On the subject of dropping out of school, she was just as adamant, "If you drop out of school, I will kick you out of the house."

When Gus was 8 his parents decided to move to the United States in order to give their children more educational opportunities. They moved to the mountain region of Colorado. The area they moved into had such a sparse population that it had no distinguishing name but was identified as part of Summit County with an address of the town 20 minutes away. His schools were located in this town and the distance from school did not allow for much socializing with friends after school hours.

Gus was promoted one grade level (from 5th grade to 6th) upon entering school in the United States. He could not explain the reason for the advanced placement, especially since he did not speak English at the time. Gus and his family learned English quickly and were able to communicate well enough to navigate daily demands within 4 months. However, it took Gus 2 years to become proficient enough in English to function well in school.

Gus shared that he was placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program upon entering school and was not exited until eighth grade. During the 2 years that Gus was in the ESL class, he admitted that there were very little demands placed on him academically. He reported that many times the teachers completed his general education homework for him and that his assignments were too scaffolded. According to Gus, he continued to excel at math because it was not as language dependent as reading. When Gus was exited from the ESL classes, he noticed that school became much harder. He admitted that it still did not match the demands of his schools in Guatemala as there were only one to two hours of homework per night.

In Guatemala, he received accolades and praise from his teachers for his academic achievement. When he got to the United States, less was expected of him and he became disengaged from school for a brief period of time. Gus reported that most of his friends in middle school and his freshman year of high school were ESL students and were not focused on challenging themselves academically. Gus remarked that most of his Hispanic friends were not involved in school activities and clubs and “didn’t care about school much.” He said that his Hispanic friends got a lot of discipline referrals and seemed to be proud of receiving write ups. Gus remarked that his friends were more interested in girls and partying and frequently ditched class and neglected homework. Gus admitted that he got careless in his freshman year and let his grades slide but “once I got into my sophomore (year) I got serious.”

He said that his Spanish-speaking friends kept mostly to themselves, but Gus described himself as a person who socialized with varying groups of students. His interests and academic focus put him in contact with different groups of students that were focused on college attainment. He shared that he distanced himself from some of the bad influences of his friends and decided that he “wanted to go as far as I could go” academically and started to focus on school again. When asked about his group of Hispanic friends, he commented, “Well, they just got left behind I guess.” Gus mentioned one friend from Guatemala who had moved to the United States with whom he maintained contact. He described his friend as a superior student who was forced to go back to Guatemala to pursue his college education due to an expired visa.

Gus identified the strong college expectations of his family as the driving force in his efforts to fight peer pressure and focus on school. “Because my whole family

expected me to go to college, I always figured if I didn't go that it would look bad on me." Although Gus' parents did not attend college, he had several aunts and uncles with advanced degrees who were college professors in Guatemala. His cousin had just completed her Ph.D. in educational leadership in the United States. The family pressure to attend college outweighed the peer pressure to neglect studies. Gus remembered times when he did not want to write a paper or study for a test and the words, "well, if I want to go to college" spurred him to complete his work. When he tried to convince some of his Hispanic friends to join him in applying to college, they questioned why he would spend all that money when the cost of one year's tuition could buy a nice car. These comments prompted Gus to conduct a research survey during his senior year exploring the reasons that many Hispanic students dropped out of high school. He surveyed his friends and other Latino classmates and found that many Latino's came from families where high school was considered post-graduate education and parents felt that a high school education provided enough formal education to be able to get a job to help support the family. Gus went on to explain that many students concluded that if they were not going on to college then they did not need a high school diploma. Other fellow students indicated that if they did not have the proper documentation to apply to college, then why bother with high school?

As Gus began to investigate scholarships, his own citizenship status was brought to his attention. He realized that he was on a visa and was not eligible for many scholarships. At the time, he had developed a mentoring relationship with his literature teacher, Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown recognized Gus' academic potential and encouraged him to pursue college. When he asked Gus what his life plans were and Gus indicated that he

wanted to be lawyer, he offered to set Gus up in an internship with an immigration attorney that he knew. Gus spent several months over the summer working for the attorney, filing papers and answering phones. During his time in the law office, Gus learned about the application process for citizenship and established himself as a U.S. citizen. Through this experience, Gus decided that he would like to go into immigration law.

Another experience that Gus identified as a builder of his worldview and served to expand his confidence in new situations was his solo backpacking through Italy, Spain, and Greece the summer after graduating high school. He went alone with no real plans and stayed in parks, on beaches, and in train stations along the way. He reported meeting a variety of people and was forced to problem-solve his way through each country. Although he viewed the demands of the trip as “no big deal,” his adventures nurtured independence, problem-solving, self-reliance, and an ability to face new situations.

Gus’ narrative was rich with unique perspectives and experiences that led him to be seated across from me as a second-year student in a 4-year university. Gus credited his family and Mr. Brown as the biggest influences in his decision to pursue college. He also acknowledged his grandmother who enrolled in law school at the age of 72 and completed her law degree. Gus had a number of role models in his family and strong family encouragement to go to college. He had a teacher who believed in his potential and walked him through the college application process and gave him an opportunity to explore potential career options. His overseas travel and immigration to the United States exposed him to new cultures and groups of people that expanded his worldview.

Isabella

*“It was a joke. I was the only blonde in the group but
I was taking all the hard classes”*

Isabella greeted me with a bright smile exemplifying the wholesome college freshman in her hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and Converse sneakers. Her blonde hair was pulled back tightly into a ponytail to keep it out of her way. She presented herself as friendly and approachable and remained open and enthusiastic throughout the interview. Isabella was the first in her family to attend a 4-year institution. Her older brother attempted classes at a community college but dropped out before the semester ended. Her older sister attended cosmetology school and was now working in a salon. Isabella was a psychology major who was living in the dorms. Isabella, like Gus, grew up in the mountain region of Colorado. Her home was situated in a more sparsely populated area farther up the mountain. Isabella reported living 30 minutes from the nearest store or town area. Her family had no television because there was no reception in her area, and pizza delivery, to her dismay, was out of the question. Her nearest neighbor was halfway down the mountain and her father had to drive her all the way down the mountain to catch the bus for school. She woke up at 4:30 a.m. in order to catch the bus for the 2-hour ride to school. She lived in a house that her father built himself with the help of her grandfather. Her father chose a remote area in order to afford more land and to avoid crime. Isabella quoted her father’s favorite saying in that regard, “We have to worry about animals, not people with guns. Animals are a safer bet.” Isabella described her father as a “loner” who liked having a lot of space. He built what Isabella described as a small park on their land, with a basketball court, a trampoline, and a tire swing that

swung out over a small river that ran through their property. Her mother liked animals, so at one point, they had cows, chickens, dogs, cats, and even a peacock because her mother loved the feathers.

Although Isabella lived far from any preschools, her father felt it was important enough to drive her down the mountain three times per week to a preschool. Isabella's father earned his real estate license after his high school diploma and worked as an agent in town. Her mother, who left when Isabella was 8, had taken some accounting courses after receiving her high school diploma and kept the books for a small business in town. Isabella visited her mother four to five times per year when her mother was in the area.

Isabella remembered loving school from that very first preschool experience. She recalled learning to read early which fast became her prime form of entertainment. She described herself as an outgoing child who was very dedicated to school. Her after-school social life was often limited as play dates that had to be scheduled around when her father would be in town on business. But she did mention having two close friends growing up, one lived on the same mountain and the other she saw only at school. Living so far away from school also limited her involvement in after school activities, such as Girl Scouts or sports. Isabella reported taking piano lessons and gymnastics classes when her father's schedule would permit. Isabella remembered her mother being very active in the school, even after the divorce. Although her mother did not live in the immediate area, she drove up to volunteer as a room mother and went on field trips with Isabella's class. She also kept regular tabs on Isabella's grades from kindergarten through high school.

In middle school, Isabella joined a swim team and her social life expanded. Most of her time on the weekends was spent at swim meets, and she developed friendships among her team mates. Isabella also stayed after school more often, tutoring elementary school students and building sets for the plays held at the middle school. As her father began to work in town more often, she was able to get more involved in school activities. Isabella also became interested in psychology in middle school when her brother began sharing stories of serial killers with her. Instead of being frightened by the stories, she became fascinated by them and began reading biographies on serial killers and books on profiling. She has continued her interest in profiling and wanted to develop a career in criminal psychology.

Upon entering high school, Isabella established a goal of graduating with honors. She set up her schedule with challenging classes and dedicated herself to studying. She continued her involvement in building theater sets and even appeared on stage several times. Still, she did not lose sight of her goal of maintaining a high GPA. It was at this time that she recalled standing out from her friends. As she was signing up for AP classes, they were focused on taking easy classes. They even joked that she was the blonde in the group who was taking all the academically challenging courses and spending most of her time in the library. Isabella reported that only one of her friends decided to enroll in college, the rest of her high school friends were either working or married.

Isabella joined the Talent Search program in her sophomore year. She remembered that there were only three students in the program which allowed for lots of individual attention. The Talent Search counselor guided them on what classes to take to

boost their college application. She explained the application process, imparted information on scholarships, and shared facets of the college experience. Isabella received individual help navigating college websites, writing personal statements, and filling out Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms. When Isabella considered starting out at a community college for the first 2 years, her counselor advised that it would be a waste of her talent and that she could probably get enough scholarships to cover the cost of the first 2 years at a 4-year college. Her counselor then set about helping Isabella to obtain the financial help that Isabella needed. Unfortunately, Isabella indicated that her other classmates who were not enrolled in the Talent Search program did not receive as much support. Isabella shared that her school was experiencing a high dropout rate and decided to turn the post-graduate center (set up to guide college and career planning) into a tutoring center for struggling students.

Location was the most important consideration for Isabella when deciding on a college. Isabella wanted to stay in-state to avoid high out-of-state tuition costs. She also knew she wanted to be close to home. She took tours of the top four universities in Colorado and decided upon CPU (pseudonym) because it was a good value for the money and felt more comfortable and friendlier than the other campuses. She shared that she loved living on campus, meeting new people, and enjoying the college experience at CPU. Her advice to future college students was to get involved in high school and college and become part of campus life, especially if you were from a rural area, and take advantage of all the new experiences that are offered on a college campus. She also advised that students considering college needed to go to college for their own growth and not to please others. She shared:

When I first started out in school, it was because I wanted attention from my mother. You gotta make it for yourself, otherwise it's not going to work. That was one of the important decisions that I made, that my education was for myself. It wasn't for anybody else.

Garth

"I feel like this might not be worth it."

Garth caught my gaze as I entered the library. His eyes were darting from person to person trying to catch a hint of which entering person could be his interviewer. He sat with his body reclined in the straight-back library chair, but the constant jiggle of his leg gave away his underlying tension. When it was clear that I was approaching him, he stood up quickly and, with a soft, warm voice, confirmed that he was my interviewee. His speech had a staccato rhythm and a fast pace that sometimes made it hard to understand. Garth was Latino by heritage, his father grew up in Mexico and completed eighth grade in a public school. His Latina mother grew up in the town adjacent to where the family lived and had completed high school there. Garth's father was primarily Spanish speaking and was a cabinet maker for a small cabinet shop. His mother was bilingual and worked as an administrative assistant in a local medical office. Although his father spoke Spanish, Garth indicated that English was the primary language spoken in the home, with only his mother and father using Spanish to converse with each other. Garth shared that, although the relationship he had with his father had been limited by the language barrier, his father was always there for him. He shared stories of his father attending all his sports games and driving 20 miles the week before to fix a flat tire on Garth's car when he was stranded on the side of the road. Garth also reported a strong relationship with his mother and a strong desire to make her proud.

Garth was a sophomore and lived on campus in the dorms. His family lived in a small agricultural community southeast of CPU. Garth's confusion about his future goals became evident early when I asked about his major. "Um . . . I have a major right now but I am thinking about switching it. It is Business Management but I . . . honestly, I honestly I'm so confused on what I want to do." Garth seemed to understand the benefits of a good education and described his view of his boss's job, "I see the doctor and like, I don't know, it seems like a good job, he gets a good salary you know." As the interview progressed, Garth revealed that he was a late decision college student. He always thought he would go into the military after high school until his freshman year when his older cousin started applying to college. After that, he said:

I was kind of "iffy" about it through my freshman and senior years. Then the last part of my senior year I was like, "I'm going to go/" Because a lot of my friends are going to college, I didn't want to be left out and doing at home nothing . . . I don't want to be left in this town alone.

Unlike Isabella, it appeared that Garth had not made the decision to attend college "his own." In fact, Garth did not actively pursue college until very late and then, only because others were pursuing this path. "I kind of procrastinated, kind of a lot. Because I was unsure." Garth remembered hearing about college in seventh and eighth grade when his counselor came in his class to talk about college and future plans, but he dismissed the information, thinking that he would go into the military. He recalled his mother encouraging him to go to college when he was in middle school, but he dismissed her as well. He also admitted to seeing a Talent Search flyer in his freshman year but was not thinking of college at the time.

Garth remembered being resistant to school from an early age. When he was in kindergarten, he was dropped off at his grandmother's house before and after school. His

parents both worked and his grandmother's house was closer to the school so he was dropped off in his pajamas very early in the morning and would sleep a little more before getting up and ready for school. Garth admitted that many mornings he would fight his grandmother to stay at home with her. "I was lazy. What I loved to do as a kid was stay at my grandma's house and just watch TV. I loved it. I would just sit there and watch TV and have cereal . . . It was the one place I didn't want to leave." At times his grandmother would give in and let him stay home with her. When the school called about his excessive absences, his parents insisted that he be sent to school despite his protests.

Once he began attending school regularly, Garth remembered liking kindergarten because he had a lot of friends. Friends were a big part of Garth's narratives about school. Garth described himself as a very social and energetic person who started flirting with girls as early as elementary school. He saw joining sports teams as a way to impress the girls, so he started playing football in third grade and dreamed of becoming a professional athlete. Garth remarked that academics were never a struggle for him through elementary school and the social aspects of school were always the focus of his attention.

As Garth entered middle school, his scholastic motivation changed. He cited a desire to avoid participation in a newly developed program at the middle school called Extra Learning Opportunity which required students with an "F" in any class to stay after school to work on improving their grade. Garth spent 1 day in the program and vowed to never to be in a position to return. He invested in completing homework and studying to bring up his grades. Garth, who was the youngest of three brothers, remarked that they

were not the best educational role models. Both of his brothers dropped out of high school by their junior year because they got girls pregnant and had to quit school to support their children. Garth noted that he had seen how his brothers had struggled to maintain jobs and earn enough money and he voiced a determination not to follow in their footsteps.

Before dropping out, Garth said that his brothers had a poor reputation as students. Garth entered middle school determined to convince teachers that he was different from his brothers. He began concentrating on his studies in sixth and seventh grades in order to change his teachers' pre-conceived notions of him. "Some teachers, not a lot, but there were some teachers that kind of judged me. They really didn't like me because they knew my brothers and they knew how they were and I'm not actually like them." As Garth became a more diligent student, he earned the respect of several teachers who took an interest in him and gave him encouragement. For a brief period of time, Garth was invested in academics. "I was a good student because I wanted to be a good student." He remarked that he always had his work in on time. He got straight As for the first time in eighth grade which he viewed as a big accomplishment. His effort and his grades declined second semester of eighth grade when he began a relationship with a girl who diverted his attention away from homework and school. He also stopped his involvement in football and track to spend more time with her.

As he entered high school, Garth noted that his friends became another source of distraction from academics. "I always wanted to be a good student but things just held me back . . . I think my friends." Garth reported, "I always wanted to get my work done and, as it went on, I just kind of became lazier and I just stopped caring as much as I used

to about school.” Garth felt that his high school had also let him down due to the lack of high expectations and standards. He recalled that most homework and papers turned in received full credit regardless of quality. When less work and effort was expected of him, he began to disengage. He began drinking regularly and skipping class with his friends. “I never thought about college until senior year, college was the last thing on my mind, so I didn’t do anything to prepare for it.” Garth recalled being so absorbed with his girlfriend and other friends that college, future plans, and academics took a backseat.

Garth struggled with the choices that he made in high school. He was overwhelmed with the academic demands of college and felt that his study and writing skills had faded for lack of use. He expressed regret that he did not keep up his studies in high school and, as a consequence, felt very unprepared for college work. He admitted that his grades that semester were less than adequate and he still questioned whether CPU or college, in general, was a good fit for him. He applied exclusively to CPU his senior year because he missed many of the deadlines for other schools and had limited funds to pay for application fees. Although his mother encouraged college as early as middle school and throughout his high school years, Garth reported that he received no guidance or financial support from her during the application and decision process. Garth’s narrative also suggested that he did not actively seek out support from school staff to help navigate the application process. Garth’s passive approach seemed to reflect an external locus of control, or a perspective that things happened to him and were not the result of any action on his part. He expressed a desire to transfer to another college in southern Colorado in order to make a fresh start. He also questioned the value to continuing in college as a whole.

Jay

“I’m responsible for myself and what happens to me and every thought I have affects who I am and what I’m gonna do.”

Some students rose above the lack of support to become their own champions, taking accountability for their choices and their future. Jay stood out from the moment I saw her. In contrast to the typical college female sporting a ponytail, CPU sweatshirt, and unbridled energy, Jay emitted a calm, serene, and grounded presence of an “old soul.” She sat comfortably at the front of the library facing the door giving herself an unobstructed view of everyone coming through the door. As I approached her, another student, utilizing a walker, approached her first. They exchanged smiles and conversation for a brief period until Jay glanced at me and, recognized that I was waiting for her, ended their conversation with a hug and addressed me with her gaze. As I got closer, I noticed strands of magenta, teal, blue, purple, and red in the under strands of her hair, accompanied by small feathers that had been woven in the hair around her face. Initially, her slight frame and thin blonde hair and pale complexion made her appear vulnerable but, as we began to converse, her voice had a slow, metered strength that quickly convinced me that my presumption of vulnerability was premature. As she shared her story with me, Jay began to emerge as one of the strongest people that I have had the pleasure of knowing. Her diminutive appearance, coupled with a strong jaw and quiet strength, reminded me of Jodie Foster (minus the colorful hair additions). Jay recognized that she was unique from most students her age when she said, “I know that I’m a lot more logical than most people in my generation.”

Jay grew up on the eastern plains of Colorado in an agricultural area 15 miles from the nearest town. Her father left when Jay was 2 years old. He was in the military

and was stationed in Texas. He had also been deployed overseas three times, so Jay had only phone contact with him once a year when he had been in the country. After leaving her mother, her father completed a Bachelor's and Master's degree through the Army, remarried, and started a family with his new wife. Jay has lived with her mother and stepfather who have each earned their high school diploma. Her stepfather was a construction worker and was gone for long periods of time (the most recent project had lasted for 2 years). Her mother had worked as a bill collector but was now staying home to take care of Jay's maternal grandmother. Jay shared that her mother attended a community college for several weeks before dropping out due to a disabling depression. She reported that her mother had been diagnosed with a mood disorder which resulted in much verbal and emotional abuse in Jay's life. Jay stated grievously that she never knew what to expect when she walked through the door at home. She described her mother as very unstable and volatile:

She'll get angry about nothing. So that was really tough growing up . . . She yelled a lot. She never hit us but she was very verbally abusive, calling us names and that sort of thing. I actually was moved to live in my grandma's house when I was 2 until I was 4 when my mom married my step-dad . . . She was very unapproachable most of the time.

When asked about discipline in her home, Jay explained that her mother did not want to take responsibility for disciplining because she "has abandonment issues." Much of the discipline was left for her stepfather who tended to over-discipline, grounding her to her room for 6 months when she was 5 years old for not keeping her room clean. When asked about her relationship with her stepfather, Jay stated, "I never really felt like he cared for me and my brother because we were not his kids." Jay had two younger half-sisters who she felt got the lion's share of support in the home.

Music was an area of brightness in Jay's life. From the moment she received her first instrument; a harmonica at age 4 as a Christmas present from her grandmother, Jay had considered music a defining facet of her identity. She played her harmonica incessantly for several years and then asked for a guitar. After much pleading, her father sent her a guitar at age 7. She taught herself the guitar. At the age of 12, she decided to join the middle school band in order to obtain formal musical training and experience and learned to play the trumpet. In high school, she added the drums to her list of musical accomplishments. Jay has continued her interest in music as she was majoring in music education. She has loved her classes but has been apprehensive about the performance requirements of the major. Although Jay loved music, she had strong performance anxiety and had avoided playing music in front of anyone except close, trusted friends.

Ever since she was 8 years old, she has had a clear vision of what she wanted to do with her life: open a music store and give music lessons. She thought that a college degree would give her the formal musical training and experience to open her own music business. She had witnessed her mother's struggle with money and figured out early, "If you go to college, you're going to have more money." At age 12, she realized that she wanted to have enough to live in her own home and "have enough money to pay for my bills and my food without feeling stressed about it . . . I knew that if I got to college, I would at least be there."

With regard to school, Jay said, "I have always really loved school. I love learning and I love broadening my mind and being smart." Jay identified school as a place of consistency and routine that provided an oasis from the volatile environment at home. At school she received accolades and encouragement for her academic

achievement. She described herself as outgoing and social with lots of friends until fifth grade, when a bully robbed her of her confidence. Jay relayed an appalling story of bullying in which a triangle developed between Jay and two girls. When Jay and one of the girls began developing into good friends, the third girl began attacking Jay publically. She began calling Jay "It" when she passed her in the hall and spread disparaging rumors about her. Jay recalled several times when the girl wrote on the chalk board in a mutual class, "It has AIDS." Daily remarks and subterfuge wore away at Jay's confidence. In reference to the bully, Jay commented:

I was really popular. I would talk to everybody and I would wear stylish clothes. After I met her, she changed me. It was really weird how it happened but I started wearing really baggy clothes and not worrying about my hair. I didn't really talk to anybody else . . . You know, she started out as the only person I trusted.

This situation continued into high school and Jay became very isolated. She mentioned that she did not trust her mother and stepfather as supports in her life and she felt that she did not know her father well enough to discuss personal issues with him. "I could talk to him about money issues but I don't think I can talk to him about anything else." Jay used writing as her vehicle for expressing feelings and gaining perspective around social issues. She reported having multiple volumes of journaling.

High school had other challenges for Jay. During her freshman year, she became sick, throwing up every morning before school. She developed migraines on a weekly basis. There was a time when Jay thought, "I might have to drop out of high school. I just can't continue to do this." Despite her exhausting efforts to keep up, her excessive absences combined with the accelerated curriculum of her honors classes were causing her to fall further and further behind. She could not recall a single day during her junior year when she felt well. She finally reported seeing an osteopath for her symptoms and,

with a restricted diet, began to recover. She was then able to participate more in theater where she assisted in designing sets and directing. In time, she was able to maintain more stable friendships and described the theater group as her family.

Knowing that college was a goal, Jay continued to work hard in school despite her illness. She never failed a class and maintained a “B” average. She speculated that she would have had a 4.0 Grade Point Average (GPA) had she not been sick. It was at this time that she found a mentor, her sociology teacher. “He showed me respect which is something you don’t really see in high school teachers.” He boosted her confidence and encouraged her academic endeavors.

When asked to identify the biggest influence and support in her choice to attend a 4-year institution, Jay replied sheepishly, “Is it wrong to say myself?” Throughout her narrative, Jay relayed examples of how she remained self-motivated despite a lack of support from home. She reported having to beg her mother to attend parent/teacher conferences and, in the end, her mother usually forgot. Jay reported that her mother often asked if she wanted to stay home from school to keep her company; Jay chose school. She noted that her parents never supported extra-curricular activities and she had to do extra chores in order to earn a ride home from after school obligations. Jay reported that her mother made her quit soccer in elementary school because the team was not winning and she viewed driving Jay to practice as a waste of her time. Jay self-initiated homework without prompts or checks. She also admitted that her mother never looked at her report card despite Jay announcing its presence as she put it on the counter. She could not recall any comments on her grades throughout her entire educational career.

Her father, who had shown support of her education throughout childhood, withdrew it when she needed it most. At age 10, when she asked her father if she should go to college, he informed her that he had developed a college fund for her when she was born and was contributing to it yearly. Upon hearing this, Jay believed any financial barriers to college had been lifted and felt an obligation to fulfill her father's desire that she go to college. In her senior year when she contacted her father to access the funds, they had disappeared and she had to scramble to find college funding. Through her own research, she found that she was eligible for college funding as a child of military personnel and that was how she was attending CPU.

Jay's narrative was a testimony to the power of perseverance and self-motivation in the face of adversity. Although this study sat out to explore the influence of various external elements on first-generation students' choice to attend a 4-year institution, the powerful agency of personal character traits such as fortitude, resourcefulness, and positive outlook could not be overlooked as important contributors.

Jayden

"I fit here, even though I'm 25 and a non-traditional student."

Jayden, age 25, was at the top of the age requirements for this study. She was the only non-traditional student who fit the study requirements and inquired about an interview. She was a freshman majoring in psychology and hoped to go on to obtain her Master's degree and open up a low-cost drug rehabilitation center. She expressed concern upon our initial phone call that she might be too old and not fit the profile of the typical first-generation freshman. One of the advantages of qualitative research was that

it allowed one to examine more closely the outliers in a phenomenon, instead of negating them or blending them into the statistical average.

She kindly suggested that the interview take place at her apartment in the university housing complex reserved for graduate students and older undergraduates. Jayden was a freshman who was starting back to school after dropping out of high school 7 years ago. She went back to complete high school 2 years before, earning the two units she needed to graduate.

As I made my way up the outside stairs to the second floor outdoor corridor, she was there leaning against the wrought iron balcony as I rounded the corner. She caught my eye, put out the last of her cigarette in a bucket of sand near her front door, and greeted me with a smile. She had a wholesome look to her, full-bodied with blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, and bright blue eyes. Although she was 25 years old, her youthful face and typical college attire, consisted of a “CPU hoodie and sweatpants which allowed her to blend in with her fellow freshman with little difficulty. The only hint of her rebellious past was the piercing on her upper ear cartilage and her tongue.

Jayden grew up in a small town about 90 minutes northwest of Denver. She was an only child who was raised by her father since her mother left when she was 4 years old. Her mother resided in Kentucky and Jayden has had no contact with her mother until recently. In the last year, she had resumed contact over the phone. Although it was a long-distance relationship, Jayden reported that she talked to her mother almost daily.

Growing up, Jayden spent much of her time in an in-home day care. Her father, who completed 2 years at a 4-year college in Denver before his G.I. bill ran out, was a trucker and spent long hours on the road. He would drop Jayden off at the day care home

and pick her up after dinner, sometimes as late as 10:00 p.m. There were times when Jayden stayed at the day care for several days while her father ran transcontinental drives, or when he arrived home too late to pick her up. When Jayden's father was home, Jayden noted that he went out of his way to spend all of his time with her. She shared that her favorite time with her father was reading time.

No matter how many hours my dad worked. No matter how tired he was, he would sit down, and I would climb up onto the arm of the recliner and we would sit there and we would read . . . when I could he would have me read to him. If I had a word that I didn't know, he'd encourage me to sound it out and he'd help me with it.

She also proudly repeated her father's belief that learning was not limited to the classroom. She recalled trips to the capital on Labor Day and nature trips into the mountains as expanded learning experiences offered by her father. Although he travelled, Jayden's father was active in the local union and community politics. He was on the city council and, for a period of time, mayor *pro tem*. While in these positions, he encouraged Jayden to join him in public meetings and discussed politics with her often. If Jayden expressed an interest in piano lessons, she got piano lessons; if she asked to join gymnastic classes, she was enrolled. "He was always encouraging me to broaden my horizons," Jayden said of her father's support of her educational development. Jayden's father encouraged her pursuit of formal education as well. She heard from him that successful people go to college. She set her sights early on being a cardiac surgeon and her father joked that she was going to be the first doctor in the family.

Jayden described herself as a "blessed" student who could get her homework done in class. School did not present a challenge to her in elementary school and she remembered getting into trouble often for talking during class. As the curriculum became

progressively more challenging during middle school, she was excited by the challenge of homework and was eager to complete it when she got home from school. She remembered her friends making comments that she was “weird” when she got excited about rushing home to start homework. She relied on the structure and routine of elementary school as a constant in her life. As she progressed through school, she began receiving accolades for her academic achievement and she remembered enjoying the positive attention from teachers who had in the past reprimanded her for distracting others.

In addition to the kudos offered by her teachers, Jayden received explicit encouragement to include college in her future plans. She remembered her school counselor coming into her class and discussing college planning for several weeks. She even recalled the words of encouragement from the principal who said, “You know you should probably start thinking about college because you’re talented and you’re smart. You’re going to do well in life.” Jayden recognized that the conversation was a big influence on her life and self-image.

Her first exposure to a college campus came in middle school when she travelled to a university in southern California to compete in a science bowl. She also qualified to spend 6 weeks on the CPU campus in a science program for accelerated students. Although she was receiving support from the staff, Jayden remembered that bullying was a big issue for her as well as the whole middle school. She shared being self-conscious about her weight and frizzy hair and was teased because of her body type and her academic interests throughout middle school.

Jayden described her high school as the “red-headed step-child of the district.” She noted limited resources that left little funding for counseling and guidance in career

planning or college admissions process. She recalled that she visited her school counselor several times during high school but never initiated a discussion about college preparation. She felt that the information that the counselor provided to her class was vague and unclear. She remembered the counselor mentioning the FASFA forms and that they were due in January, but she did not recall her ever mentioning that they were pivotal in receiving scholarships. As a consequence, Jayden never turned in her FASFA form. She did indicate that she asked specific questions and that her school counselors were happy to answer them but were not available for guidance through the process as a whole.

When she entered high school, she was confident as a student and was clearly on the college track. Jayden's strong initiative and self-efficacy took effect in high school when her school colors were changed and she petitioned the school board, with the support of her father, to get her band new uniforms. When the board informed Jayden that there would be no funds available for several years, Jayden took the initiative to raise the funds herself. She approached local businesses, headed up various fund raisers, and succeeded in raising enough money to purchase new uniforms for her band. She also explored her interest in a medical career and took a med-prep course through the school in which she was exposed to a hospital setting by following doctors on rounds and witnessing a surgery.

Jayden also noted that there was not much to do in her town and, as a result, the adolescents tended to drink and become promiscuous. She noted that there were many teenage pregnancies in her town and frequent alcohol and drug abuse. Her town was the first to build legal marijuana dispensaries and there was a documented gang problem.

Jayden managed to stay away from these negative influences until her junior year, when she approached her stepfather with the prospect of graduating early. She had enough credits and was at the top 10% of her class, but her father refused stating, “I don’t believe you’re ready. You’re going into the military if you do it,” and he wouldn’t sign off on it. I was like, if he doesn’t believe in me, why should I?” That was the moment that Jayden described the incident as the turning point in her trajectory toward college. She stayed in high school but became apathetic and involved in drugs, although she kept up on her classes.

In her junior year she tried crystal meth for the first time. She started doing drugs during lunch period and, when she was caught, she was suspended. She described this as a time when her faith in herself collapsed. She became pregnant just before her suspension and never went back. Two physical education credits stood between Jayden and her high school diploma. In the 7 years since her senior year, Jayden got married to the father of her child and had another baby. Her drug addiction caused her to lose custody of her children, lose her husband, her job, and her driver’s license. Living in a rural community where individual transportation was essential to a job and daily living, losing her license was the last straw and Jayden decided to turn her life around when she realized that, “I was sick of making excuses of why I couldn’t do anything . . . I finally got to that place where I just felt like I was just a waste of space and I am never going to be successful unless I do something.”

Jayden realized at that point that she was responsible for her life and she took accountability for her choices. “I learned that I can’t always control the circumstances in my life, but I can control my reaction to them.” Jayden enlisted her father’s help and

admitted herself into a drug rehabilitation program and, upon graduation from the program, enrolled in a program to earn her GED. Her driving force had been her desire to gain back full custody of her children. At the time they were taken, she was homeless and living out of her van. She was determined not to repeat her mother's abandonment herself with her own children. She decided to start by reviving her dream of going to college.

She tried an online program, figuring it might fit into her schedule better and allow her to complete her degree from her rural community. Unfortunately, she was gravely disappointed in the program:

I couldn't make it through orientation. I couldn't get a hold of any of my professors. I couldn't get a hold of other students in the classes. I couldn't get a hold of my advisor. I got very frustrated and within the first 2 days I gave up.

She went on to say, "I made the decision that a traditional 4-year university would be somewhere I needed to be . . . I needed to go to a traditional college where I can see people face to face." When a career counselor indicated that the tuition at CPU was less expensive than most online programs, Jayden decided to apply.

Jayden viewed CPU as a horizon of endless opportunity. She took the tour of CPU and saw all the possibilities. She noted the bus that provided transportation around campus for students who did not have cars as an essential support when she entered college without a car. When she arrived at CPU, she was amazed with the support. She mentioned the writing and math centers that provided tutoring as well as the free laundry service that texts a student when laundry was dry. She cited Career Services and the Stryker program that offered financial aid to non-traditional students as sources of ongoing support. "They offer anything that you could want or need to succeed and it's

not as overwhelming as I thought it would be.” She was not aware of the support that would be available to her free of charge when she was considering college costs. She admitted that she had over-estimated the cost of college and had almost given up on it due to financial barriers.

When thinking about what high schools could do to support students like herself, she emphasized the need for school counselors, college websites, and college representatives that could inform prospective students of these free benefits so that they did not eliminate college as a possibility due to financial barriers. She also suggested that teenage mothers needed more of a push to return to school. She felt that many mothers, like her, have convinced themselves that they do not have the time or money to return to school. However, she suggested if they knew about the supports and resources offered by most colleges that they might consider furthering their education. Jayden reported that, in addition to the systemic supports of the university, she had been receiving emotional support from her classmates which has allowed her to “get out of my element and to change my story here at [CPU].”

Ariel

“You see educated people and they get respect. It made me want to go to college and be someone, to be successful, to have people look at you that way.”

Ariel and I sat outside the library waiting for it to open. We sat on benches about 30 feet from each other wondering if the other was the person we were there to meet. She was dressed in a pink t-shirt and jeans with rhinestone flip flops, her attention directed to her phone as she waited. Once inside, we connected and engaged in casual conversation as we walked to the interview room. She was bubbly and animated as we exchanged small talk. Although Ariel was cooperative and congenial throughout the

session, the interview did not seem to progress as naturally or as smoothly as the others. Ariel's responses were short and lacking in the detail that I had come to expect. Although the questions were open-ended, they did not seem to produce longer narratives but rather short, vague responses. I left the interview wondering what I could have done to create more of a connection with Ariel. That said, her educational story was still a valued contribution to the understanding of rural first-generation students.

Ariel was a sophomore at CPU majoring in pre-nursing with a minor in psychology with hopes of becoming a psychiatric nurse. She was currently living at home with her mother, father, 17-year old brother, and 10-year old sister. Her family lived in a small town about 30 minutes away from campus with a population of about 1,100 people. She described it as a small community that was very connected, "If there is anything that goes on, it's the kind of town where everyone knows." Ariel was Latina in heritage, but her parents were both raised in the United States and English was the only language spoken in the home. Both of her parents had their high school diplomas. Her father worked in construction and her mother worked as a billing specialist at the local hospital.

Ariel described herself as very outgoing and social, goal-directed with an affinity for meeting new people and experiencing new things. She reported loving to read and enjoyed school from the first day of preschool. She identified her preschool teacher as her favorite instructor in elementary school. Ariel shared that her preschool teacher was very nurturing and seemed to care about each of her students as individuals. Ariel also mentioned having difficulties in motor development that resulted in her being held back 1 year in preschool. Once the motor issues were addressed, Ariel remembered finding

elementary school fairly easy. She also noted that, at an early age, her parents taught her to advocate for herself. If she did not understand something in the lesson, Ariel was urged to ask the teacher. She was encouraged to seek out the resources she needed in order to navigate school successfully.

Ariel was active in community soccer and volleyball throughout her elementary and middle school years. Ariel noted that there were very few extra-curricular activities offered in her middle school, but she was involved in student council, choir, volleyball, and the Junior National Honor Society. Ariel also mentioned that she worked on the Veteran's Day committee at her school and arranged for a school-wide celebration with guest speakers and assemblies. She considered herself part of the student leadership in high school. Ariel noted that most of the students hung out on school grounds after school because there was nothing else offered in the community.

Ariel remembered first being introduced to college in middle school when the school counselor came into her class and asked the students to define postsecondary plans. Ariel shared that, at the time, she did not pay much attention to the lesson as her focus was on getting to high school. She recalled not considering college seriously until her sophomore year when her brother started to apply to colleges. Ariel's brother attended CPU for 1 year and had taken a leave from school in order to earn more money for tuition. It was also at this time that Ariel noticed her mother's efforts to secure financial support for her brother. Her mother took out loans and investigated alternative financing in order to insure college access for her son. Seeing this assured Ariel that college was within the realm of possibilities despite her family's limited funds, and she began to consider college as an option for herself.

Ariel was a participant in the Talent Search program at her school and received frequent messages from her mentor that college was a possibility if she worked hard. Her mentor enumerated the benefits of college and set up college tours of all the major universities in Colorado. He gave her information on college costs, available scholarships, and a list of things to consider when selecting a college. Ariel also took the initiative to research colleges with nursing programs. She attended the school-sponsored college fair and made contacts with the various college representatives, using her self-advocacy skills to get her questions and concerns answered. Her membership in Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) provided additional college campus experiences in California and Washington, DC. Through these events, Ariel was given an opportunity to visualize herself as a student on a college campus.

Another experience that Ariel identified as a major catalyst that led her to consider college was her volunteer work at the local hospital. Her mother arranged for Ariel to volunteer at the hospital where she worked as a billing agent. While working with the medical staff, Ariel noted the respect that they received as professionals and the way people regarded them. She volunteered at the hospital all 4 years of high school.

Ariel credited her mother as a primary source of encouragement and assistance in her journey toward college. In addition to witnessing the support that her mother gave to her brother, Ariel received first-hand guidance. Her mother was the one who suggested, and arranged the volunteer opportunity at her hospital. Ariel recalled that her mother encouraged college from a very young age, telling Ariel as young as age 12, "College is what we want for you guys. An education is the most important thing." According to Ariel's report, her mother put those words into action on a regular basis. Her mother was

actively involved in her education by attending conferences, monitoring grades, and providing guidance on big projects. Ariel's mother sat up the kitchen table as a homework base where she could monitor and help each child complete their assignments. Ariel remarked that it was this maternal support and consistent encouragement, along with the opportunities afforded her through Talent Search, FCCLA, and her volunteer experiences at the hospital that allowed her to veer off the trajectory chosen by many of friends ending in marriage and family after high school graduation and move toward college attainment.

Max

"You need to use the resources available."

Max and I met at the Latin Cultural Center on the CPU campus. He was a sophomore pursuing a double major in nursing and Spanish. His Latino fraternity on campus had partnered with the Latina sorority to sponsor a welcome fiesta at the Center for new and returning students the weekend before classes started for the year. He had been very active in the Latino community on campus, as well as in several professional and academic associations. Getting connected and maintaining a network was a theme that ran through Max's narrative. He was well aware that establishing a network of support could be an important element in any endeavor, college attainment being no exception.

Max was born on a ranch in Mexico. He commented, "I was raised with farming and cowboy boots, you know, the whole shebang." He described it as a very nice place to grow up with lots of animals, dirt roads, and room to run. Max noted that his school experience in Mexico was very different from the one in the United States. Max

explained that the school day in Mexico ended midday and, like Gus' experience in Guatemala, the students would be assigned 4 to 5 hours of homework each day. He remembered coming home from school and his mother sitting him down at the kitchen table, fix him a nice lunch, and then insist that he start his homework at the table where she could watch him as she did her chores. After homework, he would help his mother with the laundry, "Because in Mexico we didn't have a washer or dryer so we would wash in a tub and hang it outside on a clothesline to dry." After laundry, he would help her clean the house. When they were done, they would play cards or watch movies. Max continued to have a very close relationship with his mother as a result of his days in Mexico.

His family moved to a small town in the Rocky Mountains when Max was 7. His father wanted a better life and expanded opportunities for his family. They still took extended visits to Mexico that lasted for months as the family helped build a new house for Max's grandmother who lived on the other end of their ranch. They have maintained the family ranch in Mexico and have visited every summer. Max shared that his current home was very beautiful, nestled between two mountains with plenty of green with a rushing river running alongside the middle of town. Max's parents both had a sixth grade education. His father worked as a mason and his mother cleaned houses. Max was the oldest in his family with a 14-year-old brother and 7-year-old sister. He was the first in his extended family to go to college and reported, with a wistful smile, that his whole family was very proud of him. He discussed the difficulty that he initially had convincing his father that college was the right choice. "My father is very machismo and I think going to college, for Latino men, it's hard to understand. Because, you know, if

you graduate high school, they expect you to go to work to support your family.” Max explained that, in some Hispanic circles, going to college could be seen as abandoning your family obligations as a man. He also noted that it was “heartbreaking for them [his parents] to see their child leave, especially in a Hispanic family where it is hard for a sibling to leave.” Max remarked that, since his parents’ participation in his Talent Search program, they had changed and had become advocates for college attainment within their community of friends.

Max remembered loving school until he came to the United States. The fact that he did not speak English left him feeling confused and isolated in school. He remembered going home in third grade and crying until his teacher noticed his distress and began to help integrate him into the social system by introducing him to other students during recess. He was also placed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) class and there was able to meet other Spanish speaking students. He remembered impressing teachers with how quickly he picked up English in elementary school, but he stayed in the ESL classes until middle school. Max remarked that he worked hard in elementary school and was very invested in gaining approval from his teachers. He recalled spending many recesses just picking up trash in order to receive an accommodation for good citizenship. “Sometimes during recess I wouldn’t even play. I would just clean. I was always the one that would have the most trash. Sometimes I didn’t even leave trash for my other classmates. I just wanted to make them [his teachers] proud.” This attitude was what made him the target of bullying and teased in middle school. He felt socially isolated in middle school and dealt with it by focusing on his studies, “Because I felt really alone. I felt the only way to keep motivated was school.

While they were playing and while they were socializing, I was doing homework.” Max received much of his support and encouragement from his teachers. Several teachers during middle school recognized his singing talents and encouraged him to join choir. Although he did not like the music selections in choir, he acknowledged that the encouragement boosted his self-esteem.

Max’s social life expanded when he was asked to join the Talent Search program in eighth grade. Although there were only a few students in the program, they shared his focus on academic achievement. When college was initially introduced as a postsecondary option, Max did not believe that college was for him. He recalled thinking that college was for students who had more money and talent. As the program progressed, he began to see college as a more attainable possibility. Although Max was able to relate more with the students in the Talent Search program, he still described feeling that he did not fit in anywhere. Culturally, he did not fit with the Talent Search students who were mostly Caucasian, and his Hispanic friends accused him of becoming “white-washed” because he was so invested in doing well in school.

Throughout his middle and high school years, Max understood the value of utilizing the supports and resources offered in order to increase academic success. He never hesitated to ask for help from his teachers and, in high school when a program was instituted that provided an extra period before school in which teachers were available to provide individual or small group help, Max took advantage of it every day. He has continued to access resources at CPU, such as the writing and math centers in order to increase his academic skills.

The Talent Search program expanded as he progressed through high school and Max became more involved and confident. He was able to access information and encouragement from his Talent Search mentor. He also attended the special accelerated program held at a Colorado university over the summer through the Talent Search program. There he was encouraged by his chemistry professor, who told the class, “You know, you guys have a lot of potential.” Max said that she seemed emotionally invested in the class and was constantly giving encouragement and praise. Max acknowledged that these summer programs piqued his interest and his desire to continue his education.

Max also viewed the director of the Talent Search program as a role model after she shared her difficult journey as a Latina first-generation student. He identified the Talent Search program as a pivotal agent in his successful college attainment. “I don’t think if it wasn’t for them, I would have known how to fill out a scholarship application.” Max described how the program director “held his hand” throughout the whole college application and decision process. Talent Search personnel provided information on college entrance requirements, costs, and campus life. Mentors gave individual guidance on completing college and scholarship applications, monitoring deadlines, and reviewing personal statements and applications before they were sent. Max recognized the importance of this very hands-on approach with students who came from families with no college experience. He said that his parents were lost and overwhelmed with the college admission process. The program also required parent involvement and met with parents to provide information and small-group support in helping their child navigate the college application and admissions process. Max said that the program helped his parents understand the benefits of a college education and how to actively support their child in

attaining college enrollment. As a result of the program, his parents were actively involved in his brother's education and fully expect him to enroll in college. His parents were also strong advocates for college attainment amongst their friends. Max believed so strongly in the impact of the program in his life that he has continued to go back each summer to work as a summer mentor in the program helping students to realize that college can be a reality for them.

Max shared that he had finally found a place where he fit in at CPU. He was initially worried about how he was going to financially afford a 4-year institution but, when scholarships started rolling in, his anxiety abated and he cried tears of relief. His major motivation to attend a 4-year college was to experience college life and he has immersed himself full-force on the CPU campus, joining a fraternity, and taking on leadership positions in several clubs. Max reported that he felt that he had found a home at CPU and he was the happiest that he had ever been in his life.

Drama

"I hated school so bad. I always felt behind."

Drama was a sophomore majoring in graphic arts. He heard from another student at the Latin Cultural Center that I was looking for participants and decided to volunteer. When we were exchanging general physical descriptions so that we would recognize each other, Drama described himself as "Well, I'm a skinny, scrawny dude." When I finally met him, he walked with a swagger and his carriage and demeanor expanded beyond his petite physique, making him appear bigger than he was. His humor preceded him in his "Pepe le Pew" shirt and it showed up at various points in the interview with random jokes.

Although Drama was born in a small town about 20 minutes from the college, he did not grow up speaking English. Drama was the youngest in his family and the only one born in the United States. After the birth of his older siblings, Drama's parents immigrated to the United States in hopes of a better life and expanded opportunity. Spanish has continued to be the only language spoken in the home. Both of his parents had a public education in Mexico that terminated in sixth grade. Drama's father worked at a dairy farm and his mother worked on the line at the local meatpacking plant supplied by nearby cattle ranches. Drama recalled that, when they first moved to the Rocky Mountain town, they lived in a "ghetto shack," but his parents worked hard and soon they were able to rent a modest house. He credited his parents as models of persistence and fortitude for him. "It took them [his parents] three times to get into this country and each time they failed, they were beaten down and stuff."

His parents made him well aware of their desires for a better life for Drama and his siblings. When Drama expressed an interest in pursuing art as a career, he reported that his father was resistant, urging him to seek a career that would provide more financial security. He recalled that his mother just expressed a desire for him to be happy and live his passion. His father went to great lengths to point out to Drama the downfalls of a labor intensive profession. He made Drama work alongside him on the dairy farm for one summer so he could experience first-hand the wear of hard labor. Drama remembered his father's words during this time, "You need to try in school . . . you need to try hard so you don't have the jobs that we have, because my brothers worked on oil rigs. . . . Because they pay decent but they really break you down."

Drama remembered his mother constantly urging him to go to college. She was very involved in his schooling throughout his education. She would ask neighbors to translate the information packets sent home from the school each week and she monitored Drama's homework as best as she could, asking his older brothers and sisters to check the quality of his work when needed. Drama reported being grounded by his mother whenever she saw a low grade during her weekly grade checks. He also remembered her calling the school to request a translator so that she could participate actively in parent conferences and would take time off work to attend. Drama appeared very cognizant of the sacrifices his parents have made in order to provide more opportunities for him and was determined not to let them down.

Although he had decided to continue his education beyond high school, Drama reported hating school at the onset of his educational journey.

I hated school so bad. I remember I didn't learn to read till second grade or so and they would just push us forward and put us in reading classes so it was hard and I just didn't like it. I always felt behind. Lots of times I felt really dumb.

Drama saw his English as a Second Language status as the source of his discontent at school and the way his language difference was handled as a source of low self-esteem during his early school years. He remarked that many times teachers completed work for him or did not expect him to complete work due to his ESL status. He remembered being teased by peers because he was behind the class in reading. The nadir came in fifth grade when he reported that his teacher,

. . . called me stupid to my face and he told me I wasn't going to make anything with my life and he said he was passing me only because he felt that he couldn't do anything for me and he was passing along the problem.

Drama recalled him telling the same thing to a girl who was in special education.

Instead of letting these disparaging statements defeat him, Drama used the teacher's horrific ridicule to spur him to put more effort into school. Drama had fallen into the pattern that many bright students who were experiencing academic problems developed. He became a class clown in order to divert attention away from his academic issues. However, in fifth grade, he went from class clown and apathetic student to a hard-working and diligent scholar. "It was just wanting to fight back and wanting to come back and, in time, being able to say, 'I'm a success now.'"

In the same year, a school counselor came into his class and informed his class that people would pay for students to go to college if they worked hard and earned good grades. Drama also reported receiving encouragement from a family friend who was also his second and fourth grade teacher. She made herself available to him for tutoring and support. At one point, she took him aside during a trip to Mexico and said, "You gotta' help yourself and you gotta' help your people." This plea made a great impact on him and motivated him to work harder in school.

Drama was exited from the ESL program at the end of middle school and he recalled this as the time when he began focusing on his grades. He remembered there being a lot of peer pressure to skip class and homework assignments and go drinking, but he fought against this temptation and shared his determination with me saying, "I was so determined that I was going to be better than where my family was at the time and be better than what I was, being better than my friends. And I wanted to be better than the stereotype of the Latino."

Although this was his internal motivation, he used "wanting to avoid summer school" as an excuse with his friends. He gained confidence and self-identity as a student

and proudly announced to me that he was the “first Latino to earn a place on the honor roll” at his school. He joined Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) because his older sister was involved at the state level. Before leaving high school, his sister saw the need for a college center and sat one up in the school where students could find information on colleges and scholarships and get their questions and concerns answered about the college application process. His sister has since attended and graduated from CPU and his brother was an upper-classman there.

Although Drama reported that one of his friends was now in prison and many of his other friends have chosen to enter the workplace and start families, Drama has chosen to follow his sibling’s footsteps onto the CPU campus. He shared that he sometimes had doubts about the financial viability of his major in graphic arts, but he did not regret his decision to enroll in college. He remarked that CPU has expanded his perspective and given him broader opportunities. He appreciated the constant support and guidance he received from his parents throughout his educational journey and advised, “Sometimes parents don’t want to work. They think that it’s the counselor’s responsibility to do the work. I think parents are responsible to help out a bit and really push their kids like my mom pushed me.” For students, his words of advice were: “It doesn’t hurt to get help. Try your hardest, if you can’t succeed in certain areas, ask for help. It’s OK to raise your hand and get help.”

Abbey

“It was hard to work with a lot of the people in the regular classes because they wanted to goof off . . . so the honors classes were a lot easier for me”

Abbey described herself as an energetic social butterfly who loved to talk to everybody. This was an apt description that was personified during our interaction and

interview. Abbey was bubbly and eager to please as we navigated the interview questions and prompts. Her enthusiasm toward school and learning was immediately evident. At the time of the interview, Abbey was a freshman pursuing a degree in elementary education. Based on our interactions, I believed any class would have been lucky to have had such an energetic and passionate teacher.

Abbey was happy to report that she loved school from the beginning and devoured books as her reading skills developed. Although Abbey reported loving school, she also noted that she was highly distractible during elementary school and loved to talk. She also mentioned that a complication at birth created a medical condition that, of which she did not share specifics, periodically interfered with her plans and confidence. She noted missing a month of school during kindergarten due to an “accident” affiliated with her medical condition. By fourth grade, she was able to notice changes in her body connected with her condition and she started taking responsibility for her own health, taking her medicine more regularly, and making improvements in her sleep routine and diet. She did mention that part of her worries about being away from home stemmed from her concern that her mother would not be around to help if she experienced another “accident.”

Abbey spent the first part of her childhood in a small rural town in Arizona with the same characteristics as the town where her family resided in Colorado. Her current hometown was on the eastern plains, about 40 miles southeast of CPU. She was the oldest of five children. Both of her parents had their high school diplomas. Her mother worked as a bookkeeper and her father was currently on disability from a construction job. She described her mother as her best friend. “I can tell her anything and she won’t

judge me.” Abbey proudly mentioned that her mother had lost a substantial amount of weight recently and was starting a fitness club at her workplace. “She wants to change people’s lives one workout at a time.” She remarked that her parents were very open-minded and had always encouraged her to try new things. She noted that her mother was a constant source of support for her education. Abbey recalled a time when her mother did not understand how to do the math in Abbey’s homework assignment and she called a neighbor over to explain it to her. There was also a sticker chart posted on the refrigerator in the family’s kitchen to record completion of homework on a daily basis and Abbey remembered being grounded if her grades were low.

Abbey was very social throughout her early years and enjoyed frequent sleepovers and parties with her friends. Despite her social nature, as she entered middle school, she became more focused on academic endeavors. She remembered first discussing college in eighth grade when a school counselor came into the class and asked them to consider their postsecondary plans. At the time, Abbey wanted to be a doctor and realized that she had a lot of postsecondary education ahead of her. It was at that time that she learned about honors classes being offered at her school and she asked to be enrolled in the honors program. She liked these classes because the students seemed to be more interested in learning than those in regular classes and she did not feel like such a “nerd” expressing interest in the lesson or asking questions. She was also not shunned for being a member of the National Junior Honor Society. Abbey restructured her social group at this time to include the students in her honors classes. She identified this restructuring as providing some of the social supports that she needed to focus on academics and set her sights on college. During high school, she noted that her friends

were a source of information and emotional support throughout the college search and admission process.

Although her school offered the Talent Search program, Abbey was not aware of the benefits and did not join. She was active in the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) and student council, as well as the National Honor Society. Her mother encouraged her to get involved in school and her social nature made it easy for her to do so. Abbey reported not having a lot of free time in high school because her honors classes were very demanding.

Abbey remarked that she depended on her school counselor, as well as the advisor for student council, for a lot of information and guidance in the college process. She reported, "I was in her office 10 times a week asking about scholarships or about how to fill out this form or that." She credited her school counselor with helping her to develop a 4-year plan for high school that built her college application resume. Her counselor also helped Abbey investigate scholarship opportunities on the Internet and helped her discern what type of college was right for her. Abbey briefly looked at a school in Flagstaff, Arizona, but decided to stay in-state because, "I'd miss my family too much." Her decision to attend CPU rested on its size. She felt that the other colleges were too big and that she would have felt like a number there. It was the "friendly and familiar" atmosphere of CPU that attracted her to the campus. As an elementary education major, she mentioned the fact that CPU was recognized as the teaching school for the state as an added bonus. Abbey identified her mother's support as the key element in her path to college, but through her narrative, it was evident that the support that she received from her friends and high school counselor were large contributors as well.

Michelle

As I was writing this dissertation, my youngest daughter was beginning the last leg of her journey toward college as a traditional student whose parents both had advanced degrees. I could not help but compare her journey to those of the participants that I was interviewing. My daughter had the benefit of a well-forged path to college and parents who could provide the past experience and resources to smooth the way for her. My daughter was so confident that she would be on a college campus in the next 16 months that she unequivocally took it for granted and would definitely fit into Freeman's (2005) *Knower* category.

Yet, I was amazed as I listened to the financial, cultural, and personal struggles of these participants and their willingness to persist when barriers and situations would not afford them the same security as my daughter. While I knew it must have been a hard road for these students, I did not grasp the full impact of the difficulty until I was privileged to hear their stories. The discipline, fortitude, and resiliency demonstrated by these participants and their families were indeed inspiring.

I began this research with the anticipation of finding in the narratives of the participants the components necessary to clear a path to college for future first-generation students from rural areas. However, I now know that this journey was more complex than I originally thought and did not appear to be a series of components but rather a process. The use of a qualitative methodology allowed me to look at the common elements between narratives while keeping them intact within the process and context. To separate out the individual components would have caused me to lose sight of the interactive relationship between the factors that created the end effect of college

enrollment for these participants. Narrative Inquiry enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of how this process unfolded and how each of the elements built upon one another to develop college enrollment for first-generation students from rural areas.

The process for each student was unique and included the influences on several different levels. While I appreciated that they did not take this journey alone, there were parents, teachers, and sometimes whole families and communities there to help, the participants made the choice as individuals to step onto the path leading to a college education. This step was an important show of independence and took courage and belief in oneself. While I felt this research had begun to identify some of the elements needed to build a road to college for this population of students, there seemed to be others who had developed self-efficacy as a student and expressed the desire to attend college, who had not stepped onto the path to college. I was inspired further to explore what impelled these participants beyond motivation and self-efficacy to take that first step.

Summary

Each of these participants has taken the time and effort to share their individual story of dedication, determination, and support that has led to their enrollment in a 4-year institution. Time could never have allowed them to include each nuance and daily event that contributed to their educational journey or include the context within which they moved through these events and encounters with people. These stories have been told through the lens of hindsight and selective constructivist memory and contained elements that each participant found important and memorable to them when recalling their journey. They have also been interpreted within the context of the present, both by the narrators and myself. The goal of this chapter was to relay the unique aspects and

elements of each story with enough detail to allow the reader to determine for themselves how these narratives could be applied within the reader's context to broaden their understanding of the educational journeys of rural first-generation students. With that in mind, the next chapter focuses on the common themes identified across the 11 narratives.

CHAPTER V

THEMATIC ANALYSIS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Robert Frost

Each of the participants in this study has veered off the well-trodden path of family and employment taken by many of their rural parents and peers. Instead, these participants chose a route that led to a 4-year postsecondary institution. Although each of their paths developed uniquely, there were common elements that emerged that may add to our understanding of this group of rural first-generation students. Reviewing these reoccurring themes may help construct a more established passage to college for future first-generation students from rural areas.

The focus of this study was to explore the paths of rural first-generation students to college and to understand their unique experience, both as first-generation students and as students who have grown up in a rural area. Therefore, the factors of particular interest lie within Bronfenbrenner's inner three spheres, including individual traits as well as family, friends, school, and local community contexts. A graphic summary of the common influences identified by the participants within the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model can be found in Appendix G. The influence of these factors cannot be easily separated. They interacted with each other to help shape individuals' beliefs about

themselves and the world around them. Although a narrative following the path to college might imply a linear and sequential phenomenon, the process followed by these first-generation students was more transactional, winding back and forth, and doubling back on itself at times in order to establish and reinforce the beliefs, skills, motivation, and efficacy needed to enter a four-year institution.

The Self: Positive Academic Identity

An individual's behavior is a product of different spheres of influence, but there are personal character traits within each individual that also directly impact behavior. Although Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model offered an effective structure for organizing the influences that surround an individual, the accumulation of the skills, beliefs, connections, and knowledge needed to enter college was better explained through Bourdieu's theory of human, social, and cultural capital. Bourdieu (1977) identified individual aspects such as personal knowledge, skills, and motivations as major components of what he called human capital. As noted, human capital (along with social and cultural capital) was one of the three elements Bourdieu viewed as responsible for the opportunities available to individuals and their choices to take the opportunities offered.

One of the preliminary and seminal elements necessary on the road to college was the ability to visualize oneself as a college student (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). The ability to develop a possible or future self (Deci & Ryan, 1985) as a college student started with the establishment of a self-identity as a student and was facilitated through the integration of self-determination (Anctil et al., 2008), external encouragement and feedback, and group affiliation (Markus & Nurius, 1986). All of these elements related in a transactional manner and worked to solidify identity as a student. A student began

formal education with innate characteristics such as an ability to learn and intrinsic motivation to expand knowledge (Anctil et al., 2008). These inherent characteristics resulted in behavior that was encouraged by parents and teachers who reinforced continuation of the behavior from a more extrinsic level. The acquisition of skills and encouragement from others contributed to one's positive identity as a student (Anctil et al., 2008).

**Intrinsic Motivation to learn:
I love School!**

The intrinsic motivation to learn formed the foundation of positive self-identity as a student (Anctil et al., 2008). Many of these participants in this study entered the educational system with innate ability and an intrinsic motivation to learn that matched the common instructional methods and curriculum used in their schools. This match made school a stimulating environment for them and provided them with successful experiences (Celuch, Black, & Wartham, 2009).

Many interviewees reported loving school from the moment they stepped across the threshold in preschool. When asked how she felt about school when she first started, Jay replied, "I loved it. I always really loved school. It's just a place I can go. I love learning and I love broadening my mind and being smart." This sentiment was common amongst all the participants. Their abilities and intrinsic interests combined to form student-like behavior such as participation in classroom discussions, initiation and successful completion of assignments, and assimilation of knowledge and skills. Jayden gave an example of this internally driven student behavior, "I didn't really have a lot of homework but when I did, I was like, 'Yay! I got homework! I can get this done.'" Elaine showed an interest in math outside of school and recalled that one of her favorite

pastimes during early elementary school was completing math activity books. Many of the participants also expressed the love of reading and reported engaging in leisure reading on their own. All of these activities appeared intrinsic and organic and served as a foundation to increase their academic skills and competence in school.

External Reinforcement: Making the Grade

As they entered the upper elementary grades, the student-like behavior of these participants increased their academic competence, eliciting praise and encouragement from parents and teachers. This external reinforcement tapped into the human need for *relatedness* (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In addition to their love of learning, the participants' motivation to learn was now also driven by a desire for recognition and approval from teachers and parents. The narratives of the participants reflected this adoption of extrinsic motivation as their descriptions shifted from a simple love of learning to a focus on school achievement in the upper elementary grades. Comments such as "I always got good grades in school" (Garth), "I always wanted to get my work in on time" (Drama), and "I like to do well, I was pretty much a straight A student" (Elaine) were common.

Participants, as early as second grade, were also focused on learning and exhibiting scholarly behavior in order to get good grades and other recognition from their teachers. Interviewees recounted frequent praise from teachers and many were selected into national honor societies and received academic awards for their high academic achievement (Max, Drama, Gus, Elle, Ariel, Isabella, Abbey, Elaine, Jay, and Jayden). All of these experiences provided external recognition of the students' competence, which contributed to a positive academic identity and promoted further motivation to

continue engaging in scholarly behavior and affiliating with students who held the same academic identity.

It seemed that a blend of competence, positive self-identity, and innate self-initiation inspired these students to actively seek out academic challenge and remain persistent when they encountered struggles. For example, many participants sought out honors and AP courses and established personal academic goals (Jay, Gus, Drama, Jayden, Max, Abbey, Isabella, Elle, Ariel, and Elaine) that could offer expanded experience and the opportunity to further develop study and academic skills. The increased demands of these advanced courses required the development of discipline and persistence. The majority of the participants reported meeting the challenge of AP and honors classes by increasing their study time, working for extra credit, and practicing to improve their skills.

They also employed another element of self-determination, self-advocacy. One of the strong messages that Max had for prospective first-generation college students was not to be afraid to advocate for themselves, to ask for help, and to access all the resources and support that were offered. Max, along with several other students, mentioned going in before or after school to access extra help from teachers. Self-advocacy was also seen within the family and peer contexts and is discussed later.

In addition to asking for support with academic challenges, many participants also advocated for expanded opportunities such as advanced courses and volunteer positions in the community. Many of the interviewees reported being part of Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) or Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) (Drama, Elle, Abbey, Isabella, and Ariel). When described by the participants,

these organizations promoted oral presentation skills, goal setting, team work, and problem-solving skills. The volunteer positions that several participants acquired gave them the opportunity to develop time management skills, planning skills, and gave them pre-career experience.

Not all the participants left their elementary years with a firmly established positive self-identity as scholar. The narratives of several participants illustrated the impact of external recognition of academic competence in the development of academic identity and the importance of resiliency in the face of challenge. Gus, Drama, and Garth expressed a dislike of school in their early years. Drama went so far as to say, “I hated school so bad” of his elementary years. All three of them entered school as Spanish-speaking students and were placed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Gus, Drama, and even Max credited their ESL status as the source of their initial aversion to school. All three of them separately and spontaneously mentioned that, as students whose primary language was not English, little was expected of them academically. Drama and Gus both reported that their ESL teachers did most of their classroom assignments for them and that they were held to a much lower standard than their peers. The lack of academic challenge and lack of faith in them held by their teachers resulted in them losing belief in themselves as students. Drama, discouraged yet bright, concentrated his efforts on gaining attention by becoming the class clown. Despite the attention he received, he reported an underlying feeling of failure. He remarked, “I always felt behind” and “Lots of times I felt really dumb.”

Each one of these participants found their own way of handling their sense of inadequacy. As these participants became more proficient in English, they were excited

from the ESL program and were able to perform better academically. When they entered the regular classroom, they were given an opportunity to have more control over their academic successes and failures. It seemed it was at this point that they began to develop self-identity as a student. Gus recalled finding the student inside himself in his sophomore year of high school when he made the commitment to attend college. Drama, knowing that he was better than his fifth grade teacher's evaluation of him, abandoned his role as class clown, hit the books to prove his teacher wrong, and went on to receive recognition for being the first Latino on the high school honor roll.

In each one of these cases, these students had to rise above the lower standards and expectations set for them as ESL students to view themselves as scholars and find their own motivation to travel the path to college. It was in these stories that we realized resiliency could be forged by barriers as well as supported and could heighten a student's ability to meet a challenge. These stories also provided hope that a positive self-identity could be built later than the elementary years and could be developed with the smallest amount of external encouragement from others. Despite its origin or timing of development, positive academic identity built through self-motivation and initiative, and nurtured through encouragement was a seminal element along the path to college.

Jay's was the ultimate story in self-determination and resiliency, including the characteristics of persistence, intrinsic motivation, self-advocacy, and the drive for competence. She combined this self-determination with a clearly defined and consistent possible self as a music store owner and college graduate. Jay identified herself as the most influential person in her journey. She seemed to travel the path by herself. Several of the stories in her narrative indicated that, not only did her parents fail to provide

support, but she perceived them as creating barriers in her educational path. When she could not find the help she needed at home, she found support and information from other sources and relied on her own sense of self-determination to complete work, create opportunities, and achieve academic goals. Self-determination and a strong, clear view, and hope for the future can create resilience and the ability to thrive in aversive situations and in spite of them (Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Each of these participants described aspects of the human capital needed to be successful in a school setting, even if it developed later. Within their narratives, most participants articulated several clear examples of Deci and Ryan's concept of possible self. As early as their kindergarten year, some participants reported having aspirations of becoming a doctor, a fireman, a teacher, and a lawyer. Although these possible selves were not developed as clearly defined goals at the time, they provided practice in visualizing possible future selves and established a forward thinking perspective. As the participants reached the end of elementary school, they began refining their possible selves by reviewing some of the pre-requisites for these selected roles and matching them to their own skill sets and interests. For example, both Gus and Elle wanted to be astronauts, but as they approached the upper elementary grades, they realized this might not be a practical goal. Gus explained, "At first I wanted to be an astronaut. Then I guess, I was getting older. It kinda went down to a little more realistic profession. I was thinking a doctor." Elle explained her process of matching her skill set to her future role fairly clearly:

I wanted to be an astronaut. But that was just really when I didn't know any better. We grew up and [realized] . . . that to be certain things you have to have certain things and be good at certain things. And I just grew up, I developed what I knew I was good at . . . I noticed that I was really good at math. I thought that

maybe I could be a teacher because in elementary school I would help my classmates sometimes when they wouldn't understand something.

It was during late elementary school that Gottfredson (1981) noted that individuals began to eliminate future career paths, based on perceived limitations in human and social capital that they had available. This process of matching skill sets and possible selves was part of the mechanism by which individuals moved toward plausible selves. In order to consider a possible self as plausible, one must be able to visualize a path to becoming that possible self. Once that path was imagined, individuals could begin engaging in behaviors to bring plausible selves to fruition (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2003). Ariel and Elaine both were able to see themselves as nurses and, utilizing their strong self-determination, began to acquire the skills and experience that would get them there. Ariel volunteered in a hospital to gain experience in a medical setting. Elaine went as far as to take extra classes at the community college in order to earn her CNA enabling her to enter the nursing field early and gain background experience. Jay reported taking band in middle school in order to gain more formal music training in hopes of furthering the dream she had held since she was 8 of opening up a music store.

Two participants reported first considering college in eighth grade when a sibling was involved in the college choice process, but for many of the students the subject of college preparation and enrollment was first introduced in their eighth grade classrooms. Many realized at that time that college was part of the path to future career selves. Gus made the connection between going to college and his future goals fairly early: "I always knew that I had to go to college if I wanted to be a lawyer or like a teacher, yeah, I always figured myself going to work with a suit and wearing a tie and everything." Jay

also held a clear plausible self as a college student: “I’ve always been really confident about college. Like I’m always really good in school and I just thought I’d make it. I never really thought of what would happen if I didn’t.”

Although some participants had developed a stronger plausible image than others by the time they had entered high school, most participants engaged in behavior which promoted their identity as a future college student. Most participants initiated the search for colleges and scholarships in their junior year of high school. It was at this point that their status as Seekers in the college choice process changed to Knowers (Freeman, 2005).

Freeman (2005) found that students who started out in the Seeker category usually required some outside encouragement in order to help them visualize themselves as a college student. Family, school supports, and friends appeared to be the most important external influences that contributed to the participants’ journey as scholars.

Family: Role Models, Inspiration, Support

Family can have a powerful influence on the values and beliefs held by a student, as part of the Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem sphere that surrounds the self. Whether or not they grew up to adopt the thoughts and values of their family, the developmental context of the family has made an impact on them and contributed to their cultural capital. The influence of parents on the participants’ journey toward college was evident in almost every narrative. Consistent with the findings of Cunningham et al. (2007), most of the participants credited their parents, especially their mother, as primary contributors in their path to college. Many recounted that the majority of day-to-day parental interactions and supports connected with schooling were with their mothers.

Garth, for example, described his mother as one of the driving forces that had motivated him to complete college enrollment and continue in college: “She always wanted me to do something with my life. I want to make her proud.”

Max recounted the guidance that he had received from his mother that allowed him to separate from a group of friends who were making poor academic choices.

I grew up with my family always teaching me right from wrong. My mom was like, I don't care if they call you this or they tell you to do this, don't do it because you're stronger than that . . . You know you're better than that. That's what makes you strong, you know, making good decisions. That's why I separated myself from those people because they weren't good people. They were always doing bad stuff and I just wasn't like that.

Max adopted his mother's words as part of his possible self as being stronger than poor peer influence. Parents' words of encouragement or aspiration inspired their children to develop possible selves that could clarify goals and muster the motivation to turn possible selves into self-identities.

Even if parents did not explicitly mention college, the interviewees frequently reported hearing their parents express their wishes for their children to have a better life. Gus, Max, Elle, and Drama all acknowledged that their parents immigrated to the United States in order to build a better life for their families. For these students, the experience of witnessing their parents' financial struggles first-hand had a significant impact on them. Gus, Abbey, and Max each mentioned noticing their parents' struggles to maintain financial stability. They also acknowledged that expanding their earning power was a motivating factor in their decision to further their education. Although she acknowledged no real direct support from her parents, Jay observed:

I have always been aware of my mom and step-dad struggling for money and I've always had it in my head, if you go to college, you're going to have more money . . . I don't want to live the way they do. I want to have a better life for myself.

Drama's father went out of his way to provide Drama with first-hand experience of the type of job available to those without an education. Drama remembered taking away from this experience an added motivation to focus on academic achievement and a clearer vision of himself as a college graduate. Parents' aspirations were instrumental in the formation of collegiate possible selves for most of the participants and served as motivation for continuing efforts to continue their education.

Parents and other family members also provided inspiration as role models for the character traits sometimes associated with college attainment. For example, Elaine credited her parents for modeling a strong work ethic and cited her grandfather as a role model for life-time learning. Drama noted that his grandmother was an inspiration to him when she went to law school and completed her J.D. at the age of 72. Other participants noted that their parents provided strong role models of persistence and fortitude, self-advocacy, standing up for one's beliefs, risk-taking, goal setting, and self-improvement, all traits that could support college attainment for those forging a path as first-generation students. Role models can have a powerful impact on first-generation students by giving them the ability to see themselves as college enrollees and providing inspiration to achieve their goal of college attainment (Davis, 2010).

According to the participants, their parents demonstrated the value of education not only in their words but in their actions. Interviewees reported that they received active educational support from their parents. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) noted that maintaining high expectations and providing the supports needed to achieve high standards was one of the ways parents transmitted the value they placed on education. Monitoring grades and providing homework support was included in what Epstein (1990)

labeled as home-based parent involvement. This form of parental involvement could have direct effects on students' academic achievement and increasing their cultural as well as human capital toward college enrollment (Epstein et al., 2002; Jun & Colyar, 2002). Most participants reported that their parents actively and regularly monitored grades. Drama reported that his mother checked his grades every other week throughout elementary and middle school. He mentioned the consequences of a bad grade, "If I had an 'F' or a 'D' I couldn't go out with my friends. I couldn't watch TV or play video games and she would sit me down and make sure that I studied harder." Home-based parent involvement was most common among minority and low-income families (Fan et al., 2012).

The majority of the participants also reported academic support from their parents in the forms of help with homework. Some parents went so far as to recruit neighbors' help when they did not understand the assignment or stayed up late after work to relearn math in order to provide the necessary homework support. When students witnessed the effort put forth by their parents in monitoring and supporting homework, they received the message that homework was important and that they should put full effort into completing it. The majority of the participants indicated that their parents attended annual parent/teacher conferences. However, they did not seem to attribute much importance to this practice, and instead focused on the influence of their parents' daily support of their education through homework support and encouragement.

The narratives of the participants revealed that, in addition to providing school support, many parents provided opportunities for learning outside the classroom. Jayden's stories about her father were a prime example of such support. Jayden's father

was a single parent and his long hours as a trucker left precious little time for parenting. However, she recounted stories of nightly reading time with her father, trips to union meetings, the Colorado Senate floor, museums, and performing arts events. Jayden noted that the intent of these experiences was “So I could broaden my horizons.”

Many of the parents encouraged involvement in outside sports and supported them with regular attendance at games or providing coaching for the team. Involvement in sports offered individuals the opportunity to develop team leadership and character as well as exposure to different students and geographic areas. Some parents expanded the experiences of their children through family trips and outings or by encouraging volunteer work. Parents’ ongoing involvement in their child’s education through encouragement, progress monitoring, home support, and the provision of outside learning opportunities helped their child develop the necessary human and cultural capital to entertain college as a plausible self.

Although parents provided pre-collegiate support, most participants engaged in their college searches independently or with the support of a school mentor or program counselor. This finding was consistent with previous research indicating that parents of first-generation students oftentimes lacked the experience or knowledge to help their child with college selection (Crosnoe et al., 2002; Cunningham et al., 2007), college funding (Kenny et al. , 2003), and college admission process (Cunningham et al., 2007).

Garth remarked that he did not receive any help from his parents in navigating the college selection and admission process, but he did not seem to view this as a shortcoming and instead noted: “It’s kind of hard when nobody in your family knows anything about college. . . . Your mom doesn’t know how to help you. I don’t blame her

for not helping me because it's like, how do you help when you have no experience in it?" Isabella recalled that, despite his lack of experience with the college choice process, her father reassured her: "Nobody in my family knew anything about what going to college meant and what it cost, but my dad always told me that we would get it figured out."

The narratives of these participants provided a myriad of examples of how parents provided critical encouragement, inspiration, learning opportunities, and academic support that brought these students to becoming a Knower (Freeman, 2005). While the literature suggested that the traditional strategies of increasing parent knowledge of college costs, scholarship availability, admission requirements, and the college selection was helpful for students in finding their way to college, there was a much more complicated and intricate process involved in moving from good student to college freshman. While parents seemed to be the most important component at the *microsystemic* level, friends also played an important role.

Peers: Is It All In Who You Know?

One's self-identity includes a social component in which one affiliates with others who belong to groups that were perceived to share similar traits and goals. Group identities may include behavioral expectations, goal expectations, and attitude expectations that create group generated, communal possible selves (Oyserman, 2007). It was noted that almost all of the participants in this study started out in peer cultures that did not support college attainment. Drama noted that many of his friends did not care about education and that most of his friends dropped out of school before high school graduation: "I'm the only one of my friends that came to college." He recounted the

temptation from peer pressure could have steered him off the path to college. “There was a lot of peer pressure, wanting to go out and jacking around and just ditching school. There was a lot of peer pressure.” Max was able to use his mother’s encouragement to change his earlier peer group to another one that shared his goals.

Some of the participants handled the constant pressure from friends by restructuring their social circle to include friends with academic aspirations and interests common to them. Ambady, Paik, Steele, Owen-Smith, and Mitchell (2004) noted that individuation and separation from groups incongruent with one’s academic possible self could alleviate the “dampening of academic performance” (p. 405). Elle recalled splitting off from her friends during high school, “Cuz, like some of my friends, their priorities weren’t, in order. My priorities were, school and stuff, theirs was . . . like hanging out with their boyfriends or friends, just stuff like that.” She noted that the majority of her old high school friends either married or entered the work force after high school graduation.

Minority youth living within low SES contexts were often exposed to in-groups that were incongruent with an academic possible self and affiliation with these groups could form a stereotype image in the mind of the individual that, if adopted, could prevent attainment of an academic plausible self (Oyserman, 2007; Thomas, Townsend, & Belgave, 2003). Drama actively sought to avoid this stereotyped image of the Latino he described as a dropout with a low paying job.

One of the ways that interviewees re-structured their social circle (Elaine, Abbey, and Ariel) was through involvement in pre-collegiate programs and/or scholastic or leadership clubs. These organizations put the participants in contact with students who

shared and supported their goals of college attainment. According to the interviewees, this new group of friends provided academic support, information, expanded views and ideas, and encouragement that increased the social and cultural capital of these students. Perez and McDonough (2008) found peers to be a great source of college information for first-generation students. Elaine credited advice that she received from friends indicating the difficulty of transferring units from community college for her decision to go straight into a 4-year institution. She also mentioned the writing acumen of her best friend and how their interactions expanded her thoughts and vocabulary.

Associating with peers who were academically driven and focused can have a positive influence on students considering college enrollment (Johnson, 2000; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Ryan, 2000). First-generation and marginalized students increased their college attainment rate when they started affiliating with students who were academically focused and college bound (Gibson et al., 2005; McHatton et al., 2006; Sokatch, 2006), sometimes up to 10 times the rate of students who did not associate with academically minded peers (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010).

The narratives of the participants indicated that their original social circles that many of these students found themselves in until high school did not support college attainment. In these cases, each participant actively sought to restructure their social circle to include peers who shared their educational aspirations, or they chose to create a separate path to college from within their original circle of friends. Those who restructured their social circle seemed to report more peer support for their educational endeavors and were able to use these new social groups to increase their social and cultural capital. Affiliation with these new groups also further solidified and validated

students' self-identity as a scholar (Oyserman et al., 2006). The conduit to the development of these new social groups appeared to be the clubs and pre-collegiate programs offered by the school.

School: Opportunity, Guidance, and Support

The school environment offered opportunities to gain capital across human, social, and cultural levels. Human capital can be expanded through the acquisition of academic and study skills and a broadened knowledge base. Engberg and Wolniak (2010), as well as Freeman (2005), recognized the necessity of strong reading and math skills and a basic knowledge of history and science in preparation for college. Although participants identified parents and peers as sources of encouragement and support along their educational journey, the academic plausible self was built within the walls of their schools. Most of the participants utilized feedback from their teachers, advisors, and school administrators to build their self-identity as a scholar.

Personal Encouragement and Guidance

Feeling connected with teachers, on a personal level, was a prime contributor to increased engagement and academic success in school (Blum, 2005). In addition to the "good job" and gold stars they often received, many interviewees expressed the importance of feeling that their teacher cared about them as people. Isabella remembered that after-school talks with her third grade teacher helped her cope with her parents' divorce. Jay, who felt no support from her family, found it in her fourth grade teacher who stayed after school to help her with family problems. She remarked, "Teachers were the only intellectual people in my life." Drama recognized the personal praise and encouragement that he received from the woman who was both his second and fourth

grade teacher as a protective factor when his fifth grade teacher called him “stupid” and “a lost cause.” Drama held onto that previous bank of praise to maintain his sense of competence and to help create the resiliency needed to prove his fifth grade teacher wrong.

In reviewing the narratives of middle school experiences, it was evident that teachers and administrators began at this time to express to each participant their faith in them as potential college students. Jayden recalled, with clarity, the words her principal, “You know, you should probably start to think about this [college] because you’re really talented and you’re really smart.” Jayden singled this moment out as one of the most influential events that led to her decision to focus on college attainment.

The personal support and connection that these students experienced with school staff members became stronger once they entered high school. One of the outstanding elements in every narrative was the presence of a high school mentor. Although the mentor relationship may have evolved within different situations and involved staff from different departments and disciplines, it stood out as a salient influence in each of these students’ college choice process. Parents may support and shape college aspirations, but first-generation students cannot rely on their parents for the information and guidance needed to help them achieve those aspirations (Engle, 2009). All of the participants interviewed turned to an adult within their high school staff for guidance through the college preparation and applications process.

Her German teacher was Elle’s sole source of college information and guidance through the college selection and application process by reminding her of deadlines and reviewing personal statement and applications. Elle gave this teacher credit for

convincing her to go straight into a 4-year college, advising her that attending CPU for all 4 years would enable her to develop longer-term relationships and connections that might aid her in her job search once she graduated.

Gus had the benefit of a tremendous mentor. When his freshman reading teacher saw what Gus had scored at the college reading level on the state benchmarks, he began to urge and guide Gus toward college enrollment. In his freshman year, Gus remembered when his reading teacher approached him and said: “You know what? Hey Gus, you’re smart. What do you want to do with your life?” When Gus indicated an interest in becoming a lawyer, his teacher sat Gus up with an internship in a local law office. The experience sparked Gus’ interest in immigration law and allowed Gus to successfully attain U.S. citizenship. Gus noted that his reading teacher monitored Gus’ grades throughout high school and, when the time came, guided Gus through the college admissions process.

Some students used their Talent Search counselor as a mentor, while others accessed coaches and AP teachers. Many mentors were presented as role models of college attainment and provided a personal connection to college. Several mentors in the narratives were identified as CPU alums and acted as a conduit between the student and the CPU campus.

Mentors found amidst their high school staff were crucial factors in the successful college attainment of these participants. Although they often credited their parent(s) as an inspirational and supportive figure in their educational journey, their high school mentors had a large part in guiding them on the last leg of their sojourn onto a college

campus. The significant role that mentors played in the narratives of the participants offered a compelling argument for the provision of mentors to all at-risk students.

Group-wide Information and Support

Toward the end of middle school, many schools offered support on a group level aimed more directly at college preparation. School counselor presentations to classes on college admission requirements and pre-career planning expanded opportunities through clubs and activities, and the introduction of pre-collegiate program were all implemented at this time.

School Counselors

Many interviewees remembered first entertaining the prospect of college in middle school when their school counselor came into their classrooms to propose college as an option. Elaine recalled when her guidance counselor visited her class; the counselor indicated that they were all strong students and that this was the time to start defining their college plans. Elle recalled a similar process occurred in her eighth grade year. She vividly remembered the counselor's reassuring statement to the class, "Anything we wanted to do, we just needed to work for it and we could do it." Elle recalled the boost of confidence that she got from that statement of faith. These types of classroom presentations by middle school counselors seemed to initiate the consideration of college as part of a postsecondary plan and helped map out for them the path to college. These visits often sparked the first conversation that students and parents had regarding college which opened the door for parents to express college aspirations for their child.

As a student progressed into high school, school counselors can be a significant source of information for first-generation families (Cabrera et al., 2006; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Taylor & Karcher, 2009). However, in lower income schools and smaller districts, these individuals can become overloaded and unable to provide the kind of support needed (Bunnage, 2003). The participants' views of their high school counselors appeared mixed. While, in some instances, the interviewees noted that the high school counselors had come into their classes and helped them to be aware of the process; participants did not always find individualized support. In fact, many seemed to put little faith in them as guides on the college path. Elle did not access her high school counselor's help and felt that her counselor played favorites, focusing efforts and attention on a small group of students.

Like the counselor, she liked a group of people that she would help more than the rest of our class, with students she was sure were going to make it. So some people on the fence she might have been able to help, she didn't . . . I don't think she was fair to everyone. She didn't start informing us about scholarships until the end of senior and sometimes it was too late. Coming from our families, lots of kids that went to high school with us were not, they didn't have older brothers or parents that actually finished school and stuff. She should have approached people that were like, new to it, that didn't know the steps and stuff to go through it. I think she should have approached them sooner than the people who had parents with college experience.

Jayden remembered the counselors coming into her honors class to explain college application procedures but noted that their presentations were unclear. In fact, Jayden believed that this presentation resulted in her misunderstanding some deadlines and scholarship requirements.

Some viewed the high school counselor's support as both positive and direct. Several recalled school counselors coming into their AP and honors classes to give presentations on college planning, college selection strategies, and financial aid. Abbey

noted that they started giving information on available scholarships early in her sophomore year so that students could take advantage of special scholarships awarded to younger scholars.

The issues that these students experienced with school counselors seemed to arise from an overburdening caseload that may have forced counselors to prioritize their efforts. This triage might have been perceived as favoritism and severely limited the school counselor's ability to provide individual guidance and thorough presentations. Drama described his counseling center as a self-help center with Internet access and stacks of college catalogues that students could use in their college search. It was also possible that interviewees were not aware of the support provided by school counselors that was delivered behind the scenes. For example, it was likely that most of the career fairs and programming were developed by the school counselors.

Pre-collegiate Programs

School sponsored pre-collegiate programs played an important role for nearly half the interviewees. They identified their initiation into these programs in eighth grade as their first exposure to the concept of college as a postsecondary option. Most of these programs have been successful in their quest to increase college attainment in the first-generation population (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Talent Search is one of the three Trio programs established to provide academic and informational support to low-income and first-generation students and was most commonly mentioned by the participants. Students chosen to participate in these programs were first-generation students who had earned high GPAs and shown academic potential. The selective nature of the programs singled them out as potential college students and systemically defined them as scholars.

Ariel explained that the requirements to participate in her Talent Search program were very stringent, involving a high GPA, writing a paper, and reading a book in order to obtain entrance. Once a student was accepted, a myriad of services and opportunities were offered including visits to college campuses in Washington, DC and California, enrichment activities such as rafting and individual support with the college admissions process. The student meetings with a personal mentor were held during class time and required students to complete research projects on available financial aid and scholarships. She credited the Talent Search program with giving her the strategies and skills needed to select a college that was right fit for her. Most of the Talent Search programs described by the other participants offered the same types of services.

Although Talent Search programs have a parent component, Max was the only one who mentioned that his program included his family. Max's pre-collegiate program required his parents to attend several informational meetings. He remarked that the informational meetings helped his parents understand the benefits of college and gave them the information they needed to support him through the college choice process. Although all of the participants valued their pre-collegiate program as a valued source of information and guidance, Max believed so much in the benefits and impact of his pre-collegiate program that he has served as a student mentor for two consecutive summers.

Pre-collegiate programming offered schools the opportunity to show faith in their high potential students as future college graduates. The group affiliation, information, guidance, and campus visits offered by these programs helped to build the human, cultural, and social capital of participants and strengthened their self-identity as future college students. Part of the power of pre-collegiate programs lie in the links they helped

to form between students, mentors, advisors, and parents and the interactions they facilitate between students and colleges. Bronfenbrenner (1979) acknowledged that the more connections that are made between an individual's spheres of influence, the more powerful the impact. The potential impact of these pre-collegiate programs appeared great as they connected many aspects and influences in a student's path to college.

Clubs and Special Programs

Although not directly affiliated with college preparation, clubs and extra-curricular activities, as mentioned previously, can also provide opportunities to increase human, cultural, and social capital by providing leadership opportunities, practice with organizational and time-management skills, group goal setting, and team-building skills that build self-efficacy and relationships with others (Keser, Akar, & Yildirim, 2010).

In addition, clubs and sports often offered experiences outside the local area and expanded students' exposure to different environments and populations. Some clubs and sports offered training or conferences on college campuses that gave students a chance to experience campus life and visualize themselves as college students, as well as offering an opportunity to connect with a variety of students who shared common goals. After-school programs also offered the opportunity for these individuals to develop a relationship with a high school mentor who were identified as pivotal in college attainment. Many of the mentors identified by the participants started out as advisors in a club or sport in which the students were involved.

Several participants mentioned special school-sponsored programs that allowed students to explore various career interests and helped them clarify postsecondary plans. Ariel remembered school-sponsored college and career fairs that allowed her to entertain

different careers. At one fair, different college representatives were present who could answer her questions. Jayden mentioned a “med-prep” program at her school in which students interested in a medical career shadowed a medical professional during their work day at the local hospital. It was through her participation in this program that Jayden came to the clear realization that being a doctor was not for her.

Some students mentioned taking advantage of programs that offered extra academic support. Garth recalled the extra support his school offered to failing students. This Extra Learning Opportunity (ELO) was required for every student earning an “F” in any class and involved staying after school to receive tutoring until the grade was raised. Garth remembered spending 1 week in the program and the threat of returning motivated him to work harder to improve his grades. Max’s school established a program which made all teachers available for a special period before school where students could come in early for help. Max remembered taking full advantage of the opportunity on a daily basis.

Just as each grade provided students with the academic, organizational, social, and study skills to progress to the next grade level, a child’s progression from kindergarten through high school prepared him or her to enter the next phase in their educational journey to college. The amount of resources available to these students and the dedication of school staff to take up the personal guidance and mentorship of these students, as reflected in their narratives, were inspiring. At the microsystem level, parents, friends, and school personnel provided a unique contribution to helping these students progress from high school graduation to college freshman. It was also notable the degree to which the interactions (through the mesosystem) between the three areas of

influence played a role. As observed, when parents were less knowledgeable and peer models were not present, school mentors and programming took the lead in supporting first-generation college students. Encouraging students to access all the rich resources available to them through their schools was truly the key to preparing them for college attainment.

Community: It Takes a Village

Community Culture

Communities can mold and shape the values, aspirations, and perspectives of students growing up within their contexts (Bourdieu, 1977; Brofenbrenner, 1979). Students growing up within a rural culture may incorporate local perspectives on education, community, work, and family. The unique geography of Colorado offered the perspectives of students from two differing rural areas, the agriculturally-based communities of the eastern plains and the small mountain communities of the Rockies. Despite the differences in the geography of their surrounding areas, the themes presented by these students appeared very similar. One of the over-arching themes that emerged in this study was one of connectedness. This theme resonated throughout every area of influence and was very strongly evident in the interviewees' descriptions of their communities.

The sense of community could clearly be delineated when the participants began talking about where they grew up. Words like, safe, friendly, and comfortable pervaded most of the interviewees' descriptions of their home towns. Ariel grew up in an agriculturally-based town about an hour away from CPU. She characterized the collectivist nature of her town:

Yeah, the town is pretty small . . . if there is ever anything that goes on it's the kind of town where everybody knows. But people are very close in [name of town]. I think if you ever need anything you can always go to your neighbor or something like that. It's a very safe town. Everyone's comfortable with each other. Everyone knows each other . . . it feels like a safe town. A good place to grow up.

When Drama's parents left rural Mexico, they looked for a place similar to the one they had left behind and settled in a small agricultural town in rural northern Colorado. Drama was born in this town and his family has continued to live there. He explained:

Everybody knew everybody. It was really safe to live there. I remember walking to the store with my brothers and sisters, or walking to school. It was just really safe, no threat of gangs or anything. That is what my parents really liked. It was small and quiet

The quiet and safety offered by rural living was what seemed to attract many of these families to these areas. Safety was often created by the connectedness of a community and the feeling that your neighbors would help you if you got into trouble. Elaine shared an example of this collectivist spirit as she shared her story of receiving a scholarship from the farmers in her area who had developed a fund to encourage youth in her community to go to college.

One of the scholarships I got, I think they call it the Hawthorne Scholarship. They're local farmers that got together to start a scholarship and we had to write an essay. I was really honored that they donated their money to it. And they did it every year. That's how a lot of them work. There's some wealthy farmers that have been there for a long time. So they all do their share for the graduating class.

The connectedness of the communities was mimicked in their schools. Duke and Trautwetter (2001) noted a family feeling in most rural schools and observed more individual interaction and attention awarded rural students by their teachers. Teachers in rural areas have denser relationships with their students and the community (Kollie,

2011). The participants interviewed acknowledged this connectedness with their teachers. Many reported receiving attention from their teachers on a more personal level and felt that teachers valued them as people, not just students. This kind of personal connectedness could strengthen the impact of praise and encouragement, which can nurture self-identity and engagement as a student, adding to a student's capital on all levels.

A community culture of settling in the area to work and raise a family after high school graduation was prominent within many of the narratives. Max's friends could not understand why he would want to leave his community to attend college. Max repeated their words, "Why do you want to leave? It's better here because you have your friends and you know everyone." They were shocked when Max told them he had chosen to attend school 4 hours away. Elaine and Jay indicated that many of their friends were set on staying in the area after high school to help run the family farm and start a family of their own. The majority of the female participants (Isabella, Elaine, Elle, Jayden, Jay, and Ariel) reported that most of their friends and families expected them to stay in the area and raise a family. However, most female participants had set personal career goals that were independent of a marital relationship. Most of these girls carried visions of success for themselves rather than through marriage to a successful husband.

Rural Latino culture

A Latino subculture emerged from this group of rural students. Six out of the 11 participants self-identified as Latino. To some degree, these individuals expressed a greater tension between themselves, their families, their peers, and their culture when making the decision to attend college. In the case of minority youth, adopting the ethnic

stereotype into one's identity can undermine academic performance and narrow one's scope of possible selves (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Steele, 1997). Elle and Ariel remarked that they had to fight against the cultural expectations of marriage and a family after high school graduation. They described their friends as concentrating on their boyfriends and taking "easy" and remedial courses, while Elle and Ariel continued with college track courses. Max talked at length about his struggle to maintain his connection to his Latino heritage while striving for college attainment. He recalled being teased by his Latino friends as "being white washed." He also had a struggle explaining his desire to attend college to his father:

My dad is very machismo. You know, he's like, that Mexican man style. Because you know we are in a different country than being in Mexico . . . It's hard for other parents to understand, especially Hispanic parents to understand that you have college students. It's hard for Hispanic men to understand because if you graduate high school, they expect you to go to work.

Max went on to explain that after his father accepted the fact he was enrolling in college, the next hurdle was leaving the area. "I knew that it was going to be heartbreaking for them to see their child leave, especially in a Hispanic family where it is hard for a child to leave their parents." Max remarked that, since his parents' involvement in his pre-collegiate program and Max's enrollment in college, his parents have begun to appreciate college attainment and have been urging other parents in their social circle to encourage college attainment in their children.

Gus struggled against the cultural belief of his friends that, once out of high school, men were expected to earn money and support the family. His friends could not understand why he would spend his money on a college education when he could get a new car. Gus recalled that he tried to convince them, in vain, of the long-term benefits of

an investment in a college education. Gus also mentioned a research project that he conducted in high school, interviewing many of his Latino friends and family, to explore the reasons for the high dropout rate in Latino populations. One of the reasons that he cited was the fact that most public schools in Latin American countries terminate in sixth or eighth grade so parents came to the United States and believed that, when their children graduated high school, they were already ahead of the game and ready to enter the work force.

A second reason Gus identified for high rates of dropout was the issue of documentation. Gus explained that many Latino students may not have had the proper documentation of citizenship to apply for college or financial aid. Realizing that any hopes of college were out of their reach, many students did not see the point in putting effort into grades and graduation. They disengaged from school and dropped out. Although there were scholarships available for undocumented students through private institutions, public financial aid and student loans remained inaccessible (Gonzales, 2009).

Standing in contrast to the negative stereotype was the importance of a strong Latino role model. Drama made a powerful statement during his interview that he wanted to be: “. . . Better than my friends and better than the stereotype of the Latino.” One powerful combatant of stereotype was mentioned by several Latino students, a Latino role model. Many of the participants identified teachers and family members who were Latino role models who had secured a college education. Role models can be an inspiration for marginalized and under-represented students. Connecting these students

with successful adults who share their culture may motivate students to battle cultural stereotypes.

CPU and the College Community

Universities and colleges, especially those who offer residential enrollment, engage and incorporate a student not only intellectually but socially and culturally, as does any community. The college campus becomes the students' new community as they venture out from rural areas and onto college campuses. Each of these participants deviated from the more common scenario of a first-generation student enrolling part-time at a local community college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Instead, they chose to pursue a 4-year degree and enrolled in a 4-year institution straight from high school to expand their career and life-style opportunities by joining the college community.

The most common reason given for matriculating straight into a 4-year institution was the "college experience" that a 4-year college offered. Isabella explained that she could not get the experience she wanted living at home and attending a community college. The independence and expanded social and cultural experiences offered to residential students was what attracted many interviewees. Abbey reflected:

I never really thought about going to a community college because it didn't seem like a college. You get the dorm experience, you get to move out and not have to stay at home for the next 4 years while you go to community college. I felt like it [community college] was a level up from high school. You'd still go to school and come home and do homework, go to school the next day. But here you go to class, go to your dorm, hang out with your friends, do stuff with the school, go to sleep, yeah. I just felt that I could get more involved in an actual college.

For these students who come from small, rural communities, there is excitement in having access to activities and events. For example, Elaine mentioned liking:

. . . a 4-year experience and all the kind of stuff that goes with it, the clubs and sporting events. I love the sports and I love to watch the games. That's the difference between a 2-year and a 4-year college. Definitely the experience.

Although Garth lived close enough to commute to school, he chose to stay in the dorms in order to immerse himself in, and take advantage of, the full college community experience and establish a fuller connection to the CPU campus.

Nine of the 11 participants indicated that CPU was the only college to which they applied and each of them was definitive in their choice. The other 2 participants applied to other colleges, but eventually selected CPU. The college selection process of these participants involved several common components; of primary importance to these students was stepping foot on the college campus. As pointed out previously, individuals need to be able to visualize themselves as college students in order to entertain the possibility of college enrollment. They need to see themselves living and learning on a campus in order to establish an initial connection to a college and consider calling it their own. College tours can provide that opportunity and were commonly provided by their clubs or Talent Search visits. These campus visits allowed students to consider whether or not a college was a good fit for them. Max's comments reflect the sentiment of many of the participants:

We went to different colleges and I've been to Boulder a lot of times with this program [pre-collegiate program]. I felt "This is not my college. It's too big for me. It just doesn't feel right." [another Colorado university] felt the same. It was too big and didn't feel welcoming. When we came to visit [CPU], I don't know, you just know where you belong. As soon as I stepped here, it was really my college.

Interviewees referred to that feeling of "just knowing, a feeling of familiarity, comfort and belonging." Being immersed within the environment by stepping onto a campus was the primary way participants experienced this feeling. Visiting a campus as

a potential student could be critical to developing a connection to the campus. College tours and visits through their high school may be the only opportunity that first-generation students have to get a feel for a college campus.

Jay remembered her first step onto the CPU campus: “I took the tour of CPU at the very beginning of senior year and I fell in love with the campus. It’s so green and the people are friendly and there’s so much going on.” Hodges and Barbuto (2002) noted that college tours seemed to have more of an impact on college selection for students from rural areas.

Personal connections to the CPU college community through family members who were CPU students or high school staff who were CPU alums also played a role in their college choice. Garth, Elaine, and Jay all had mentors who had attended CPU. Drama and Abbey were familiar with CPU through their siblings’ enrollment. These school and family connections created a stronger initial connection to CPU. Knowing people who had attended a college may make it easier through association for students to see themselves there as well. Hodges and Barbuto (2002) also noted the importance of personal connections to a campus in the college selection of rural students.

CPU’s size and approachable nature were what most participants identified as deciding factors for them. Many rural students prefer smaller colleges (Maples, 2000) in hopes of getting more individual attention and personal contact with faculty, as well as making stronger connections with classmates (Guiffrida, 2008 Maltzan,2006). Abbey clearly identified size as a factor in choosing CPU: “It isn’t super small but it’s not super big where I feel like I’m a number instead of a person.” Students talked about the expanded resources, experiences, and diversity offered by CPU as a medium-sized

campus, but also noted the friendlier feeling often associated with a smaller campus. Drama commented on the small-campus feel of CPU: “It just had a feel, a small feel to the campus life. People were really nice and I learned that if you meet someone, you’re going to see them again. Unlike a big school you’re not really going to meet much people.” Elaine also commented that CPU was the right size for her: “I really wanted to go to [another Colorado university] because I love [the city it’s in] but they’re twice the size of CPU and CPU is plenty big enough for me.” Gus and Jay both expressed an appreciation for the rurality of CPU.

CPU’s locale was also a factor that attracted these participants. Hu (2003) pointed out that rural students were less likely to enroll in colleges that were not relatively local. Many of the participants narrowed their college search from the beginning by limiting their choices to in-state colleges. They identified the lower costs of in-state tuition as a factor in their decision, but it was usually quickly followed by the statement, “and I wanted to stay closer to home” in some form. The desire to maintain connections with their family, friends, and community were evident in most of the narratives. Abbey articulated her wish to stay connected when she commented, “I briefly looked at a school in Flagstaff and I decided I wanted to stay in-state because I’d miss my family too much.” Drama, who was close enough to commute to school, liked the daily contact with his family and the lower costs of living at home. CPU’s proximity to her home allowed Jayden to visit her children on the weekend. Six other participants also identified CPU’s proximity to their home as a major factor in their choice. The close proximity to home, community feel of the campus, and good financial value attracted these students to the CPU campus.

Summary of the Educational Journey

These participants began their educational journey armed with individual self-determination. They were self-motivated learners who understood that academic success was brought about through hard work. They exhibited persistence, self-initiation, and self-advocacy in the classroom which elicited praise and encouragement from their teachers and produced the experience of success in school. Continued success and encouragement in school formed the foundation of a positive student identity and a bank of resiliency that helped them overcome barriers and continue their path to college despite challenges. As the participants progressed into middle school, the drive for a sense of academic competence and recognition from teachers added to the intrinsic love of learning to urge these students to continue in their acquisition of knowledge and study skills. When the concept of college was presented to them as an option, usually in eighth grade, most of these students approached it with a strong positive self-identity as a student and they were able to entertain college as part of their future possible self. Many participants reported being actively involved in their school through clubs and sports, which honed organizational, team-building, and leadership skills and often expanded their experiences beyond their rural areas.

Encouragement from a parent, commonly their mother, was cited as one of the most important contributors to the participants' successful enrollment in a 4-year institution. Parents of the participants placed great importance on education, whether it was elementary school or college. Sometimes this took the form of simply supporting their child to do well in school, and other times it meant expressing their college aspirations for their children. They actively supported those aspirations through home-

based school support and exposure to learning opportunities in the broader environment. Family members also served as role models of persistence, life-long learning, and sources of inspiration.

The majority of the participants reported that in high school they reduced interactions with their established friends and restructured their social circle to include friends that shared their academic interests and educational goals. The restructuring of their social group increased their interactions with students who could provide information and encouragement of college preparation and increase the social and cultural capital of these students.

It was a struggle to maintain long-established friendships when peers put priorities on the social aspects of high school at the expense of academics. The general culture that surrounded these students in rural areas seemed to emphasize getting a job and starting a family after high school. The stable, grounded nature of the rural community also created pressure to stay in the area. Those growing up in Hispanic homes and social circles reported feeling strong pressure to adjust their postsecondary plans to align with the more common path of getting a job and starting a family.

Narratives reflected that positive relationships with teachers, mentors, and individual encouragement from various school staff helped to build a positive academic identity for these participants and seemed to support their transition from Seekers to Knowers. Personal connection was considered very important to these participants and the quality of interactions between students and their teachers was considered pivotal for these participants as a contributor to their perspective of themselves as students. Without opportunities, this personal connection may not have led to entry into a 4-year institution.

Many of the interviewees participated in a federally sponsored pre-collegiate programs that provided the information, structure, and connections needed to successfully matriculate into a 4-year college.

Connection was an overarching theme for these students. As residents of a rural community, they experienced deep and long-standing relationships with friends and community agents; and they seemed to seek out this same depth of connection through immersion in campus life. The “college experience” was an important aspect of their decision to attend a 4-year college. However, they also wanted to recreate the sense of rural connectedness when they selected their college. In addition to the in-state tuition and proximity to home, most participants selected CPU over larger campuses because of the sense of community that they felt at CPU. Participants remarked that the relatively smaller size of the campus and the friendly nature of students and staff helped them connect with the campus on a more personal level.

Implications and Recommendations

These participants have shared a wealth of valuable information that can be used to inform the efforts of families, schools, and communities to increase college attainment for rural first-generation students. The overall themes reflected in the narratives involved self-determination and positive self-identity as a scholar, parental shaping of college dreams and aspirations, the establishment of mentors to guide the college choice and application process, and the key importance of developing relationships and connections along the entire educational journey. These concepts could be used to further develop interventions at the student, home, school, and university level to help build the human, cultural, and social capital that helps support college attainment.

A positive self-identity as a student was viewed as an important pre-cursor to the consideration of college as part of a future *possible self*. Parents and schools were partners in building this positive academic identity for students. Parents nurtured their children's intrinsic motivation to learn by allowing them to follow their natural interests. A child learns through play, joining a child in this natural form of exploration and learning can model problem solving and a learning attitude. Providing children with attainable challenges and encouraging appropriate independence can support the development of persistence and a sense of competence that can serve students well when faced with an academic challenge. Creating and taking advantage of learning opportunities within the daily routines and reading with a child on a regular basis makes learning a part of everyday life. Parents can also support school efforts by following the example set by the parents in this sample, setting high standards for school achievement, monitoring academic progress, and encouraging students to put forth full effort.

While the parents helped to develop the foundation, schools were credited by the participants as the primary builder of their identity as a scholar. Elementary classrooms can maintain explicit focus on increasing students' self-efficacy as scholars by establishing high expectations for all students (especially those with ESL status) and providing the appropriate scaffolding and support needed to meet those expectations. Strength-based teaching can help students to focus on their strengths and successes, giving them the motivation to persist through challenges and increase their engagement in school. Teaching long- and short-term goal-setting practices early may cultivate self-determination and encourage students to develop and define possible selves. Goal setting can also allow students to connect consequences to behavior, informing them of their

responsibility for outcomes. School psychologists can be pivotal in helping teachers create an atmosphere in the classrooms that supports a positive academic identity in all students regardless of their challenges.

Most participants indicated that their parents were the major shapers and builders of their aspirations for college attainment. Parents should be encouraged to share openly their aspirations and dreams for their child. Sharing aspirations can facilitate the development of possible selves. Oftentimes, conversations about future careers and plans occurred separately in school and home. “Parent involvement in the college planning process greatly increases students chances of going to college, regardless of parents’ level of education” (Engle, 2009, p. 31). School psychologists can help educate parents on their early and crucial role in their child’s aspirations and efficacy by providing parent seminars and individual consultation.

Pre-collegiate programs offered a natural way to get parents informed and involved in their child’s college path. These programs can provide a conduit between the child, parent, school, and college that was invaluable. Only 1 of the participants mentioned a formal parent component in his pre-collegiate program. Parent involvement should be highly encouraged in these programs. Bringing parents into the discussions at school through career day activities or home/school assignments can give added strength and support to a child’s dreams. Including parents in postsecondary meetings with the school counselor may also increase parent information and involvement. As the student advances into high school, providing parents with information specific to the college application process and financial aid could increase their ability to support their child through this complex and arduous process.

Opening up discussions of career and life goals before students enter the stage when they start to eliminate their future options based on self-perceived limits gave the adults in their lives opportunity to encourage dreams. Discussion of career dreams early and continually making clear links for students between curriculum and career and life goals at all points of the student's educational journey can create purposeful learning.

Mentors were important and critical guides on the path to college for these participants providing encouragement, information, advice, and role models during the last leg of the journey. Each of the participants was blessed with an educator in their lives who took a special interest in them as a person and was willing to take the extra time to help navigate them through the college selection and admissions process, provide encouragement, and expanded opportunities.

Oftentimes, teachers can get bogged down with curriculum and assessment and could lose sight of the powerful impact that they could have in a student's life. Teachers, especially those in middle schools and high schools, should be encouraged to develop mentoring relations with several students during the year providing encouragement, support, and information to help students achieve their full potential, whatever that may be. Teachers should be encouraged not to limit their search for mentees to those students who have developed a clear path to college but to extend their efforts to those students who may not look like the traditional student, such as ESL students, less directed students, and under-achievers who may have great potential that was unrealized. As Elle acknowledged in her narrative, it was these marginalized populations that may benefit most from a mentoring relationship. The Talent Search program should also cast a wider net to include these students whose academic potential might not be as obvious. These

programs might include a component that trains teachers how to recognize these non-traditional students in order to provide program referrals. School psychologists could help remove barriers for academically talented students by assisting in clearing their path to college and could play an important role in assuring that these students were connected with a mentor during middle and high school.

The accounts of successful pre-collegiate programs in the majority of narratives suggested that these programs would benefit all students aspiring to college attainment. School counselors' efforts may be best spent establishing pre-collegiate programs in their school through acquired funding, trained personnel, and sponsorships and by providing ongoing program evaluation and improvements to such programs. School counselors and school psychologists can also focus on developing connections with local universities to provide campus experiences for students and college student mentors to provide role models and personal guidance through the admission process. Spreading the impact of school counselors by providing alternative ways of dispensing their knowledge should be explored. One of the ways that schools have addressed limited access to counselors was by subscribing to systems such as Naviance. Naviance is an online network that combines counseling resources and information that could be accessed by schools, school districts, and individual families can sign up to access. Services included career planning, help with postsecondary selection and admissions, and scholarship search (Naviance, 2012).

In addition, given the importance of early career exploration and planning, it has been noted that school counselors are often required at the high school level but not at the middle school and elementary level. Given the pivotal periods discussed by the

participants that occurred in elementary and especially middle school ensuring that school counselors were available in these earlier grades would seem prudent.

Building connections between all of the student's spheres of influence can create powerful supports for rural first-generation students. Pre-collegiate programs were a start to developing this support network, but the connection between the student and college could be specifically addressed through several activities. Using graduates of the local pre-collegiate programs and some of their classmates to establish student mentorships with elementary and middle school students can establish a personal connection to college for each student.

The importance of personal connectedness within rural environments should also prompt college recruitment departments to consider sending more college representatives out to rural areas to meet personally with rural students. The narratives of the participants also reflected an attraction to smaller or mid-sized college campuses that offered a sense of community. Colleges and universities might want to focus their efforts on building a sense of campus community. Mid-sized institutions that are better able to provide a community experience should emphasize this asset when targeting the market of rural students.

Although the scope of this study did not venture beyond the gates of the rural community, it was evident that there needed to be systemic structures in place to address the needs to first-generation students and their families. Colorado has recognized the importance of early career planning in reducing drop rate and has put into place the Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) initiative in 2009 requiring all 9th through 12th graders to have an individual career and academic plan. This was an effort at the

state level to implement early planning and support of possible selves. Systemic policies and procedures need to be put in place at the district level to support this statewide effort with specific programs and resources.

On a nationwide level, the rising cost of college tuition may be making moot our efforts to increase college aspirations in this rural first-generation population. Helping parents become more aware of college costs early and giving them strategies to save and seek out hidden sources of college financial aid may help make college available to more first-generation students. In addition, public college enrollment and financial aid has continued to elude undocumented students. As Gus noted in his narrative, when the prospects of future education and the expanded post-graduation opportunities that accompany them were taken away, students see no reason to invest their time and effort in school and they disengage. Making postsecondary educational opportunities more available to undocumented students may impact school engagement, employment and the capital of this population.

Future Research

This study provided a narrow sample that included first-generation students from rural areas of Colorado who were attending one Colorado 4-year institution. Research expanding to other rural areas of the United States may extend our understanding of first-generation students from different geographic rural regions. A study comparing the educational journeys of rural first-generation students who have attained college enrollment to those who have chosen to pursue other postsecondary options may help clarify which elements identified by the participants played more crucial roles in their journey toward college.

The participants in this study have secured college enrollment, but the ultimate goal was to graduate with a 4-year degree. Retention rates for this population were lower than the general population (44.9%) as compared to 59% of students from traditional college families (Glenn, 2008). If this statistic were applied to the current participants, only 5 would go on to graduate. Research on the retention of rural first-generation students to degree completion is needed in order to increase graduation rates. Exploring the characteristics, strategies, and supports used by 4-year institutions that have high rates of retention of rural first-generation students would prove valuable.

Most of the participants recounted that their initial thoughts of college occurred in eighth grade. How many of their classmates entertained the thought of college enrollment but abandoned it was due to lack of self-efficacy as a student, pre-conceived notions of the kind of student who goes to college, perceived financial barriers, or other malleable conditions. Introducing pre-collegiate programs earlier and evaluating their impact on the college enrollment in those populations that Freeman (2005) considered Dreamers, who eliminated the prospect of college early, might provide powerful intervention implications.

The stories of the Latino students in this study were compelling. Research on students whose parents were brought up with the Mexican or Latin American public school system and the ways it has molded their perspectives on education as they immigrated to the United States is worth further exploration. Examination of the educational journeys and college access process of undocumented students and the possible impact of increased college access to this population are greatly needed.

Jayden's narrative contained two areas of potential research opportunities. As a teenage mother, Jayden tabled her aspiration for college attainment and expressed the need to educate and inform adolescent parents of their educational opportunities and options. Further research on the educational journeys of teenage mothers, their postsecondary aspirations, and perceived barriers to college attainment might expand our understanding of women who find themselves in this situation and illuminate ways that we could support their educational goals. Although online learning did not work for Jayden, it may provide a viable option for other rural students who are not within close proximity of a college and wish to remain in their area. Further research on distance learning as a postsecondary option for rural students is warranted.

Conclusion

The narratives of these participants have provided stories of self-determination, personal and family resilience, persistence, and finding a sense of place. Each participant carved their own unique path, proving that there were many different ways to reach a college education without using the typical GPS system afforded traditional college students. As educators, we must not narrow our definition of a future college student and must recognize the potential college student within less traditional populations, such as those with behavioral problems, ESL students, teenage parents, and those students with limited economic resources.

All of these participants have continued to walk the path to a 4-year college degree. I admired each of these participants for their courage to venture onto the unfamiliar path toward the promise of a better quality of life. I am also very grateful to have joined them along the road for a very brief time as they shared their stories with me.

In the words of Robert Frost, all of these participants have taken the “road less travelled” and my hope for each of them is that it “has made all the difference.”

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APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT FLYER

VOLUNTEER PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

UNC Student Dissertation Research

Title

The Road Less Traveled: Tracing the Path of First-generation Students to College

The purpose of this study is to identify the elements in their educational journey that first-generation students from rural areas found most supportive in their decision to attend college.

PARTICIPANT INCENTIVES:

- \$10 STARBUCK'S GIFT CARD
- ELIGIBLE TO WIN A \$75.00 GIFT CARD TO AMAZON.COM

QUALIFICATIONS

PARTICIPANT

- Attended High School in a rural area (population of <2,700)
- Neither parent has earned a college degree
- Undergraduate: ages 18-25
- 90 minute interview at your convenience

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact:

Michelle Hodsdon
 Email: mchodsdon@aol.com
 Cell: (303) 587-4923

APPENDIX B

CHART OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1

General Demographics of the Participants

Name	Gender	Race	Class Status	Recruitment Source	Geographic Origin	Highest Level of Education of Parents	Major
Abbey	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	University 101	Eastern Plains	Mo: H.S. Fa: H.S.	Elementary Education
Max	Male	Latino	Sophomore	C. Chavez Center	Mountain Region	Mo: 6th grade Fa: 6th grade	Spanish/nursing
J-Girl	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	Psych. 120 class	Eastern Plains	Mo: 2 mos. of community college Step Fa: H.S.	Music Education
Ariel	Female	Latino	Sophomore	Psych. 120 class	Northern Colorado	Mo: H.S. Fa: H.S.	Nursing/Psychology
Drama	Male	Latino	Sophomore	C. Chavez Center	Northern Colorado	Mo: 6th grade Fa: 6th grade	Graphic Design
Jayden	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	Psych. 120 class	Eastern Plains	Mo: GED Fa: 2 yrs of college (no degree)	Psychology
Isabella	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	University 101	Mountain Region	Mo: A.A. degree Fa: Trade school	Psychology
Garth	Male	Caucasian	Sophomore	Psych. 120 class	Eastern Plains	Mo: H.S. Fa: 8th grade	Business Management
L	Female	Latino	Freshman	C. Chavez Center	Northern Colorado	Mo: 6th grade Fa: 6th grade	Business

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Gender	Race	Class Status	Recruitment Source	Geographic Origin	Highest Level of Education of Parents	Major
Elaine	Female	Latino	Sophomore	Psych. 120 class	Northern Colorado	Mo: H.S. Fa: H.S.	Pre-nursing
Gus	Male	Latino	Sophomore	C. Chavez Center	Mountain Region	Mo: H.S. Fa: Trade school	Political Science

Mo = Mother, Fa = Father

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Pseudonym: _____ Date of Interview: _____

Age: _____

Major: _____

Living on campus?: _____

Location of Interview: _____

Where?: _____

1. From what high school did you graduate? And what year did you graduate?
2. Does your family still live in the area where you went to high school?
3. Have you attended any other colleges? Jr. College?
4. What is the highest level of education completed by your parents?
5. Do you have any siblings or other immediate relatives who have college experience?
6. What is your age and ethnicity?
7. What is the primary language spoken in the home?

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Questions	Detail Probes	Elaboration and Clarification Probes
<p>Overall question: Going back to the very first time you can remember hearing about the concept of college, tell me about the journey that led you to attend a four-year institution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ When did you first hear about college? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What did you think of it , why would you go? ○ Who told you? What did they say? ○ Did you know anyone who went to college? ○ Did you think you would go at the time? ○ What made you think you could go? ○ Any barriers you saw at the time? ○ How did knowing about college effect your decision-making and planning in life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you talk to anyone about college? • What happened then?
<p>At what point did you start thinking that you might go to college?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Was there an event or contact with a person that prompted you to consider going to college? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Any changes in your life that prompted you to consider college? ➤ What things did you consider when you were entertaining the possibility of going to college? ➤ What were some of the drawbacks and barriers? ➤ What were the positives? ➤ Who did you seek out to talk to about it? ➤ Where did you get most of your guidance? ➤ Did anyone encourage or discourage you? 	<p>What happened next?</p>

Questions	Detail Probes	Elaboration and Clarification Probes
Tell me about when you decided to go to college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How did you decide ➤ What things did you consider in your decision? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the most important consideration? ○ What had biggest influence o your decision? ○ Who had biggest influence on your decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any friends thinking of going? • If not what made you deviate from their path? • Or How did you encourage each other? <p>Financial aid or hardship?</p>
Once you decided what did you do next?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How did you put that decision into action? ➤ How did your decision affect your approach to school? ➤ How did it affect relationships with friends and family? 	<p>Family and friends? Location? Abilities as a student?</p>
<p>Now that you have given me the general progression of your path, I would like to go back and explore some the details that you may not have mentioned:</p> <p>Tell me about where you grew up</p>	<p>What was growing up in your house and neighborhood like Tell me the story of how your family came to live there</p>	<p>Where were you in relation to town How did you and your family spend free time Favorite hangout What was a typical day when you were 8yrs 12yrs 16yrs What were your responsibilities around home?</p>

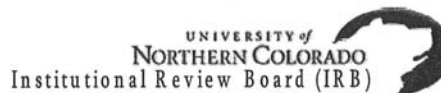
Questions	Detail Probes	Elaboration and Clarification Probes
Tell me about your parents	Describe mother’s personality, parenting style What was your relationship with mother like? Favorite story about mother? Describe father’s personality, parenting style What was your relationship with father like? Favorite story about father. How were they different from your friend’s parents Were you encouraged to try new things	Typical day for them What were their Favorite things to do What new things did they encourage you to do? What did you try?
Tell me about your parents and education	Was formal education important to your parents? What was the most important thing you learned from them? How were they involved in your elementary school education	How did they show it? Did they go to your back to school nights, teacher conferences, PTA, room parent, What was their policy on homework? Did they help you? Were there any conflicts with the school/ and how did they handle the conflicts?
What is your first memory of attending school Describe your school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What was the school Like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size, facilities, library, extra-curriculars, ➤ Did you enjoy school in the beginning? ➤ Did it ever change? ➤ What do you remember most about elementary school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you have a favorite teacher? • How did they influence you?

Questions	Detail Probes	Elaboration and Clarification Probes
Describe yourself as student in elementary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How were you different from your friends? ➤ What activities were you involved in. ➤ What happened in this stage that may have had an effect on your choice to go to college. ➤ Was college ever mentioned or talked about? ➤ What did you think about college? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What accomplishment in elementary school were you most proud of? • What was your biggest challenge? • What did you think about college? • Was college ever mentioned or talked about? • By whom and what was said?
Think back to middle school and describe your experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What was the school like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classes offered?, library, extra-curriculars?, Labs, ➤ Describe yourself as a student? ➤ What happened at this stage that may have had an effect on your choice to go to college? ➤ Any teacher stand out? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did they influence you? ➤ Did you ever talk to your school counselor? ➤ How did you decide what classes to take? ➤ What were you and your parents talking about the most? ➤ How did you set your schedule for freshman year? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were you involved in school? • Where friends involved in too? • Did parents ever encourage activities? • Ever think about your future? • What you wanted to be ? • How to get there? • Ever talk about the future? • Did they ever talk about your future?

Questions	Detail Probes	Elaboration and Clarification Probes
Tell me about when you decided to go to a 4 year college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How did you decide 4-year instead of 2-year? ➤ What did you see as the disadvantages and advantages? ➤ Who did you consult ➤ What were the most important factors you considered ➤ How did friends and family respond? 	Were other friends going?
Tell me about preparing to leave for college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What were you looking forward to? ➤ What was the hardest part of leaving? 	How did you cope with the hard parts of leaving?
How do you feel about your decision now? What were the crucial decisions that you made in this process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Things that support your decision ➤ Things you regret ➤ Changes you would make 	
What advice would you have for parents and students from your town who are considering a 4-year college.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ When would you start preparing and what would you do to prepare ➤ What was the most important to your journey? ➤ Was there a turning point that you could identify? ➤ What would you have change in your journey? ➤ What would you have kept the same? 	
Were these questions useful in helping you to describe and define your journey toward college enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Which were the most helpful ➤ Which were the least helpful ➤ What changes would you make <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the ordering • Wording • Content 	

APPENDIX E
IRB APPROVAL FORM

STUDENT'S COPY



April 28, 2011

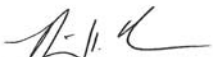
TO: Maria Lahman
Applied Statistics and Research Methods

FROM: The Office of Sponsored Programs

RE: Exempt Review of *The Road Less Traveled: Tracing the Path of First-Generation Students from Rural Areas to College*, submitted by Michelle Hodsdon (Research Advisor: Robyn Hess)

The above proposal is being submitted to you for exemption review. When approved, return the proposal to Sherry May in the Office of Sponsored Programs.

I recommend approval.



 Signature of Co-Chair 5-2-11
Date

The above referenced prospectus has been reviewed for compliance with HHS guidelines for ethical principles in human subjects research. The decision of the Institutional Review Board is that the project is exempt from further review.

IT IS THE ADVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITY TO NOTIFY THE STUDENT OF THIS STATUS.

Comments: 5-2-11

25 Kepner Hall ~ Campus Box #143
Greeley, Colorado 80639
Ph: 970.351.1907 ~ Fax: 970.351.1934

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT FORM PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: The Road Less Travelled: Tracing the Path of First-generation Students from Rural Areas to College

Researcher: Michelle Hodsdon
Phone: 303-221-2350
E-mail: Hods1387@bears.unco.edu

Advisor: Robyn Hess, Ph.D., Department of School Psychology, College of Education and Behavioral Sciences

Thank you so much for taking the time to let me get to know you and explore your path as a first-generation student. Research has recognized that the path to college for first-generation students can be a challenge. First-generation students from rural communities can face additional challenges that are unique to rural settings. Having successfully navigated those challenges, you can provide invaluable information as we develop programs to help prepare and support future rural first-generation students in their quest for higher education.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to engage in a 90-120 minute interview to share the path you build to college from the critical choices that you made, interactions with others, thought processes and emotional journeys. The interview will be face-to-face and we can meet at your home or a quiet agreed upon place.

I will want to meet with you again for about one hour after I have had a chance to review your story to make sure that I have represented your story accurately and to clarify any points or events that I may not have understood.

Each interview will be digitally recorded so that I have an accurate chronicle of your story. I will be transcribing the recorded interview into print and comparing it with the transcriptions of other first-generation students in order to identify some of the common elements in your paths that contributed to your success. The transcripts of our interview will be reviewed by my professor along with a summary of my experience with you.

In order to provide you with as much privacy as possible, I will ask you to choose a pseudonym or another name for us to use during the interview. This name will be used for the interview and transcripts in replacement of your real name. This permission form

containing your signature and full name will be kept in a secure file separate from the transcripts, for a period of three years and then shredded.

To thank you for your time and insight, I would like to provide you with a \$10.00 gift card to Starbucks and, upon completion of your second meeting to review the transcripts, your name will be placed into a drawing, the winner of which will receive a \$75.00 gift certificate to Amazon.com.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Subject's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX G

DIAGRAM OF THEMES PRESENTED WITHIN THE
CONTEXT OF PROFENBRENNER'S MODEL

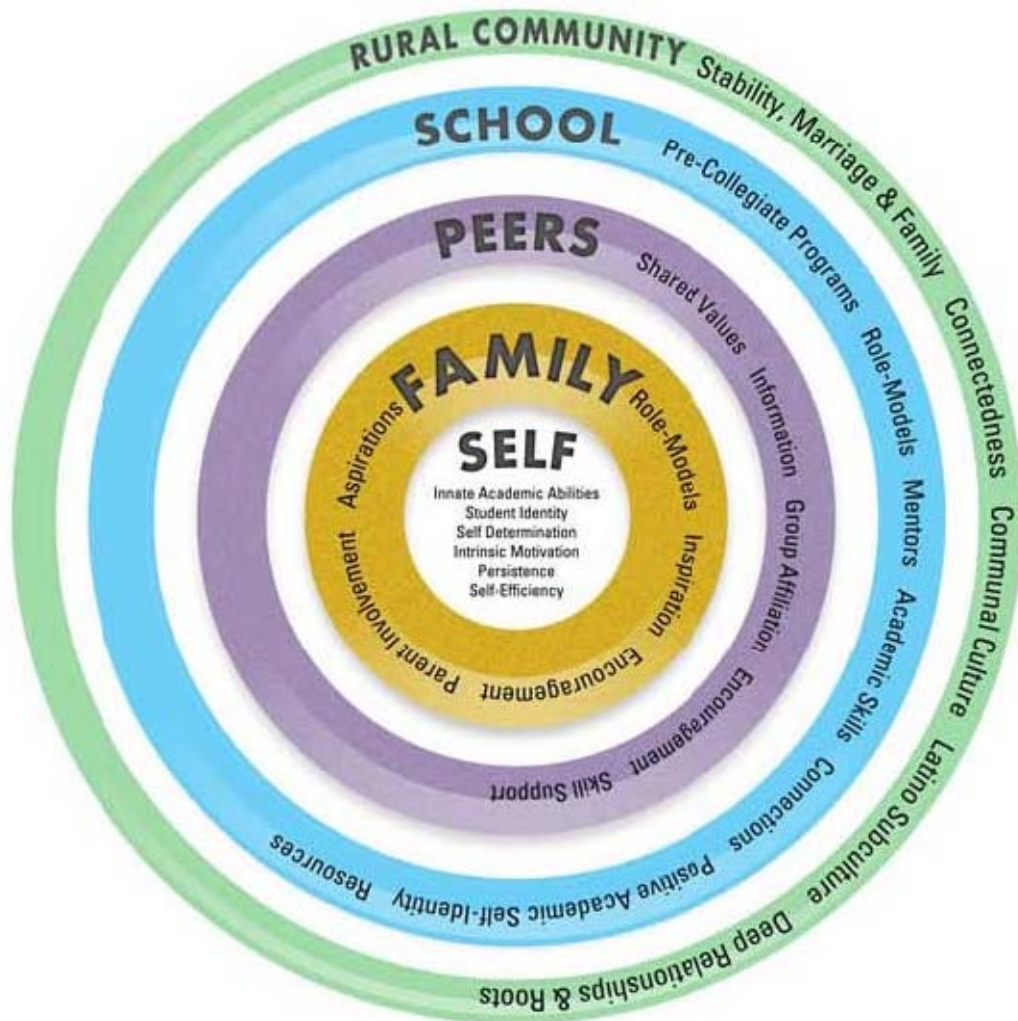


Diagram of the Themes Presented within the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

APPENDIX H

THE ARTICLE

ABSTRACT

Narrative inquiry was used to trace the educational journeys of 11 first-generation students from rural areas of Colorado in an effort to identify the experiences, people, and beliefs that impacted their decision to attend a 4-year institution directly from high school. Students were asked to convey their experiences growing up within the contexts of their family, social circle, schools, and rural communities identifying seminal experiences and people. Although each path was very unique, several common themes emerged across narratives. The importance of self-determination, parent encouragement, a social circle that shared the value of education, and the common goal of college attainment were noted. Pre-collegiate programs and the development of a high school mentor were deemed pivotal by participants in navigating the college admission process. Participants also noted a sense of connectedness in their rural communities that they sought to replace in their college community by selecting a smaller college with an atmosphere of approachability and friendliness. In tracing the path of these rural first-generation students, this study offers up the elements that can be used to forge a path to college for future first-generation students from rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of a college education have been clearly noted; college graduates not only earn almost twice as much as workers with a high school diploma, they are more engaged and healthier citizens in their communities (Adelman, 2002; Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2010; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Perna, 2000). Despite the benefits connected with a college degree, there are several groups of qualified students who are under-represented on college campuses. According to national statistics there is a 29% gap in the college attainment rates of first-generation students, or those whose parents do not hold a 4-year college degree, and the general college enrollment rate (NCES, 2010). The source of this gap may lie in the fact that first-generation students are especially likely to lack specific knowledge of the steps required in the college preparation and application process. They often are unaware of the financial requirements of college and how to access financial resources to meet them effectively (Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2009). They also lack information on the basic admission procedures and fail to make connections between career goals and the educational requirements needed to attain them (Tym, McMillon, Barone, & Webster, 2004; Vargas, 2004).

Students from rural areas are more likely than their urban cohorts to be first-generation students (Bergerson, 2007) and although just as qualified to enter college as their peers (Zucker, 2007) are choosing college at a lower rate (NCES, 2010).

Students from rural areas are under-represented on university campuses at a rate of 27% enrollment after high school, compared to an overall college enrollment rate of 69% nationwide (NCES, 2010). This gap comes into focus as 1 in every 3 students in the United States attends a rural school (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Rural communities offer a unique culture that values stability and groundedness and cultivates denser relationships and interwoven, multi-level connections between its members (Engle, 2009; Esveld, 2004). Students in rural schools developed denser relationships with school staff than their peers in urban areas (Kollie, 2011) and their school as a whole took on a more communal atmosphere (Duke & Trautweeter, 2001). Engle noted that these close-knit relationships could make it difficult for students to contemplate leaving the area in pursuit of a college education. McCracken and Barcinas (1991) found that rural students were more likely to attend local technical institutes and less likely to choose 4-year institutions than urban students. Technical schools may have offered a more viable option for rural students as Isreal, Beaulieu, and Hartless (2001) observed the limited number of job opportunities in rural areas for those holding a college degree.

Klug (2009) in her survey of perspective college students attending a college fair along Colorado's rural Western Slope was able to identify this populations' perceived access to information and resources and perceived parent and teacher to attend college. Klug cited limited information and guidance concerning the college preparation process as the contributing factors in the under-representation of rural students on college campuses. She noted that rural schools have few Advanced Placement courses, few college preparation programs and a general lack of *college mentality*. Rural schools may

have limited pre-collegiate counseling services (Bunnage, 2003) and programs (Lozano, Watt, & Huerta, 2009) that have been identified as pivotal sources of information and support in the college choice process of first-generation students.

Bui (2007), in reviewing the NCES data noted that first-generation students were more likely to go on to earn a B.A. degree if they started their postsecondary education at a 4-year, rather than a 2-year institution. First-generation college students enrolled in a 4-year institution have been able to address the barriers that often thwart their rural peers in reaching college attainment. Although some researchers have considered the question of college under enrollment among rural graduates, this topic has generally been overlooked in the research (McLendon, Heller, & Lee, 2009).

Hodges and Barbuto (2002) have been able to identify several factors that rural students consider over urban students when selecting a college. They observed that college tours made more of an impact on rural students than urban in college selection. Making personal contact with a faculty during college tours was also deemed important by these students. Hodges and Barbuto also noted that rural students considered the quality of a college's website was a determining factor in their college selection. Although they have been able to shed some light on the elements in college selection, the path by which rural students travel toward the decision to enroll in a 4-year institution remains dimly lit. Illuminating the path taken by first-generation students who have successfully enrolled in a 4-year college can help inform programming aimed at widening this path for successive first-generation students.

Bourdieu's (1977) Sociological model provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding and organizing the various factors related to college choice and attainment.

This model includes the elements of human, social, and cultural capital. As stated by Bourdieu, “Capital which takes time to accumulate, is a potential capacity to produce profits, and reproduce in an expanded form” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.46). Human capital is the capacity or potential within an individual through education, knowledge, and self-efficacy to produce desired outcomes such as employment, and economic or social gain. Cultural capital includes a person’s beliefs and values about themselves and the world around them that are influenced by his family and community that provide focus and motivation and define goals. Social capital is the ability to mobilize a network of connections to accomplish a desired goal (Bourdieu, 1986). This notion of capital, as it relates to first-generation students, is the potential generated through family, academic achievement, and events and experiences along their path that propelled these participants onto a college campus.

This model is considered as embedded within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of concentric circles to represent the various spheres or contexts that can influence an individual’s behavior. The inner circle includes the characteristics of the individual himself, the next circle of influence is the individual’s immediate social circle of friends and family, circles then radiates out to include, school or work, community and national environment. The factors of interest in studying the educational paths of rural students were contained in the inner three spheres and were separated into self, family, peers, school, and community. The purpose of this study is to use the flexible and in-depth exploration provided by the Narrative Inquiry method in order to provide more insight into the factors that positively influenced first-generation students to successfully enroll in a 4-year institution. The focus of this study is the participant’s educational journey

through life and the events, experiences, people, thoughts and feelings along the way that they have identified as contributing factors in their decision to attend a 4-year college.

The geographic diversity of Colorado offers an opportunity to explore the path of students from the agriculturally based areas of the plains as well as the mining and tourism based areas of the Rocky Mountains.

Methods

This study was conducted from within the Constructivist epistemology which espouses the belief that all meaning is constructed by individuals and is a unique creation of their interaction with the environment (Schwandt, 2007). Constructivism allows for the differences in perspective that emerge from the varying background and life experiences of these students. The qualitative method of narrative Inquiry was selected because it allowed a focus on the participants' stories. This method allowed participants to determine what was important to include as they recalled their life stories (Crotty, 1998). In this way, the researcher was given the privilege of bearing witness to and collaborating in the meaning-making process.

Setting

The study took place on the campus of a mid-sized university (student population of 12,499 according to the university's 2012 census report), situated in the north eastern plains of Colorado, a location surrounded by farms and agri-business. The university has been committed to the education of first-generation students through its partnerships with pre-collegiate programs serving at-risk students in the surrounding high schools. It actively recruits first-generation students and provides on-campus academic and social/emotional supports for first-generation students through the various mentorship

and support programs. According to the university website, 34% of the undergraduate student body is first-generation.

Participants

Eleven rural first-generation college students were interviewed for this study, ranging in age from 18-25 years. The first ten participants were interviewed and the field notes were reviewed after each meeting in order to monitor saturation. An eleventh participant was interviewed to insure that saturation had been reached. The participants reflected a convenience sample and were recruited from several different sources (e.g., academic and cultural support centers, participant pool for psychology research).. Latinos make up the fast growing group of first-generation students (Cabrera, Prabhu, Deil-Amen, Terenzini, Lee, & Franklin, 2006) so personal recruitment was also conducted at the Latin Cultural Center, an organization for Latino students on campus. Through this recruitment process, 2 participants were recruited from the first-generation student support program, five students were recruited from the introductory psychology class, and 4 students were recruited from the LCC.

All participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age and fit the definition of first-generation college students utilized by the federal Trio programs. First-generation students who qualify for the Trio programs are those whose parents may have had some college experience, but have not earned a 4-year degree. Further, all participants were enrolled in a 4-year institution after high school without first attending community college. They also needed to have graduated from a high school within an area that fits the U.S. Census Bureau's rural designation (i.e., less than 2,500 people and

outside of urban clusters). The general demographics for each participant are outlined in Table 1.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a narrative inquiry format. Participants were given the following prompt: “Thinking back to the very first time you can remember being introduced to the concept of college, tell me about the journey that led you to apply to this 4-year institution?” An interview guide was used as a tool to clarify interview responses and increase the richness of the participants’ stories. The interview guide was developed using Atkinson’s (1998) narrative life story method, *The Life Story Interview* focusing on the participant’s educational journey. Prior to use, the interview guide was reviewed by a faculty member with expertise in narrative inquiry and by a staff member from one of the support centers to ensure the guide was consistent with narrative inquiry and was applicable to first-generation college students. The question guide was piloted on 2 first-generation students in order to evaluate its effectiveness in providing rich, detailed narrative. These procedures were employed to maximize the trustworthiness of the study.

Once university permission was obtained, participants were recruited through the methods described above. The interviews took place in person and lasted 90-140 minutes, and followed the pace of the participant. Participants were given a choice of interview venues and all but one chose to meet in a reserved study room in the UNC main library. One participant opted to be interviewed in her college residence within the university campus apartments.

Table 1

General Demographics of the Participants

Name	Gender	Race	Class Status	Recruitment Source	Geographic Origin	Highest Level of Education of Parents	Major
Abbey	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	University 101	Eastern Plains	Mo: H.S. Fa: H.S.	Elementary Education
Max	Male	Latino	Sophomore	C. Chavez Center	Mountain Region	Mo: 6th grade Fa: 6th grade	Spanish/nursing
J-Girl	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	Psych. 120 class	Eastern Plains	Mo: 2 mos. of community college Step Fa: H.S.	Music Education
Ariel	Female	Latino	Sophomore	Psych. 120 class	Northern Colorado	Mo: H.S. Fa: H.S.	Nursing/Psychology
Drama	Male	Latino	Sophomore	C. Chavez Center	Northern Colorado	Mo: 6th grade Fa: 6th grade	Graphic Design
Jayden	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	Psych. 120 class	Eastern Plains	Mo: GED Fa: 2 yrs of college (no degree)	Psychology
Isabella	Female	Caucasian	Freshman	University 101	Mountain Region	Mo: A.A. degree Fa: Trade school	Psychology
Garth	Male	Caucasian	Sophomore	Psych. 120 class	Eastern Plains	Mo: H.S. Fa: 8th grade	Business Management
L	Female	Latino	Freshman	C. Chavez Center	Northern Colorado	Mo: 6th grade Fa: 6th grade	Business

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Gender	Race	Class Status	Recruitment Source	Geographic Origin	Highest Level of Education of Parents	Major
Elaine	Female	Latino	Sophomore	Psych. 120 class	Northern Colorado	Mo: H.S. Fa: H.S.	Pre-nursing
Gus	Male	Latino	Sophomore	C. Chavez Center	Mountain Region	Mo: H.S. Fa: Trade school	Political Science

Mo = Mother, Fa = Father

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and conducted using a pseudonym of the participant's choosing. Field notes were composed immediately after each interview, and included a description of the participant as well as any impressions that emerge during the interview. These field notes were added to the bank of evidence during the interpretative stage of the study. Member checks were completed in which participants were asked to review transcripts for accuracy and a follow-up phone interview with each participant was conducted in order to clarify any content.

Data analysis and data reduction

The content of the interviews was organized using Brofenbrenner's (1979) ecological model and spheres of influence and was organized chronologically within each sphere to form a chart, making it easier to review across participants for common themes. The charts were reviewed in order to identify themes, turning points and epiphanies of each story. Field notes and researcher journal entries were also reviewed to identify any impressions or moments of insight that occurred during the interviews. The analyses of each narrative were then compared with those in the stories of the other participants in order to identify common elements. A researcher's journal was kept during this time in order to create an audit trail of the thematic analysis. Once common themes in the data were identified, a colleague trained in qualitative research and school psychology reviewed the data for themes and her analyses were compared and discussed during peer review in order to increase qualitative credibility.

Findings

Brofenbrenner's (1979) ecological model has been utilized to organize the common elements in the educational journeys of the participants, but the influence of

these factors cannot be easily separated. They interact with each other to help shape an individual's beliefs about themselves and the world around them. Although a narrative following the path to college might imply a linear and sequential phenomenon, the process followed by these first-generation students is more transactional, winding back and forth and doubling back on itself at times in order to establish the beliefs, skills, motivation and efficacy needed to enter a 4-year institution as a freshman.

Self and Academic Identity

Many of the interviewees acknowledged starting their educational journeys with the intrinsic motivation to learn. Most of them expressed an early love of reading and Elaine remembered growing up begging her mother to buy her math workbooks to complete in her spare time. Jay put the general sentiment of the participants very aptly when she declared: "I love school, I love learning and I love broadening my mind and being smart."

As their narratives progressed into the upper elementary school years participants became invested in being a "good student" and began to focus on grades and other recognition from teachers. Comments such as, "I always got good grades in school" (Garth) and "I always wanted to get my work in on time" (Drama), and "I like to do well, I was pretty much a straight A student" (Elaine) were common.

These students exhibited many of the characteristics of self-determination such as responsibility for their own actions and education, persistence in the face of challenge, self-initiative, and self-advocacy. In taking responsibility for developing their academic skills, these participants sought out academic challenges, remained accountable for homework assignments, actively developed personal academic goals and planned for

their future. They were motivated to expand their base of experience by volunteering and strengthened their skills by actively seeking out support and help when they determined that they needed it. One of the strong messages that Max had for prospective first-generation college students was not to be afraid to advocate for themselves, ask for help and access all the resources and support that are offered. Abbey reported that she learned early, the advantages of raising her hand to ask a question and approaching the teacher to ask for help. On the final leg of their journey, these students were able to find the help they needed from mentors or counseling staff in order to successfully apply and enroll in college.

Not all the participants left their elementary years with firmly established self-efficacy as a scholar. Four of the participants entered school as Spanish speaking students and were placed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. The lack of academic challenge and lack of faith in them held by their teachers resulted in them losing belief in themselves as students. Drama recalled, “I always felt behind”, “Lots of times I felt really dumb.” As these participants became more proficient in English, they were exited from the ESL program and were able to perform better academically. When they entered the regular classroom, they were given an opportunity to have more control over their academic successes and failures. It seems it was at this point that they began to develop self-identity as a student.

Parent and Family Support

Most of the participants credited their parents, especially their mother, as primary contributors in their path to college. Parents were viewed by participants as strong sources of encouragement and support. Even if parents did not explicitly mention

college, the interviewees frequently reported hearing their parents express their wish for their children to have a better life. Gus, Max, Elle, and Drama all acknowledged that their parents immigrated to the United States in order to build a better life for their families. Many of the participants were privy to their parents' desires, but the actual experience of witnessing their parents' financial struggles first-hand had a great impact on these students. Several parents brought their child into their workplace in the fields or farm to show their child first-hand the hardships of manual labor. Drama, who was required to spend one summer working alongside his father at a local dairy, recalled his father's words: "You know how hard work is. You need to work hard in school so you don't have the jobs that we have. Because the pay is decent but they really break you down." Many of the participants acknowledged that expanding their earning power was a motivating factor in their decision to further their education.

Parents of participants also supported their college aspirations by setting high academic standards for their children and monitoring grades and homework to ensure that they had the skills to meet those standards. Parents also provided students with outside learning opportunities by making participation in sports and community classes and clubs available, instilling a love of reading, and planning family outings.

Participants also held up family members as role models of lifetime learning, strong work ethic, and self-improvement. Gus offered up his grandmother as an academic example who, at the age of 72 years, enrolled in law school and completed her J.D.

Although parents provided long-term support of their child's college attainment goals most participants reported that they were not able to provide guidance in the college

choice process. Garth remarked that he did not receive any help from his parents in navigating the college selection and admission process, but he does not hold his parents accountable:

It's kind of hard when nobody in your family knows anything about college . . . Your mom doesn't know how to help you. I don't blame her for not helping me because it's like, how do you help when you have no experience in it?

Max, who came from a Latino home, found it hard to explain to his father why he wanted to go to college instead of going straight into the workforce:

My dad is very machismo. You know, he's like, that Mexican man style. Because you know we are in a different country than being in Mexico. . . . It's hard for other parents to understand, especially Hispanic parents to understand that [your kids want to go to college] you have college students. It's hard for men to understand because if you graduate high school, they expect you to go to work.

Through participation in Max's pre-collegiate program, his father was able to see the benefits of a college education and supported his college choice.

Social Circle Support

In many cases, participants recollected battles with peer pressure in order to remain on the path to college. Drama recalled that he was the only one of his friends on the college track and his peer group did not support his choice: "There was a lot of peer pressure, wanting to go out and jacking around and just ditching school. There was a lot peer pressure." Many female participants were pressured to entertain marriage and family after graduation so many of their peers were focused on boys instead of academics. Gus struggled against the cultural belief of his Latino friends that once out of high school, men are expected to earn money and support the family. Many of the participants handled this pressure by restructuring their social circle to include students who shared their value of education and a common goal of college attainment.

School Supports

As noted, teachers and staff provided the positive encouragement and feedback that spurred these students to continue acquiring academic skills and knowledge. As the participants entered middle school, teachers and administrators began expressing faith in them as potential college students. Jayden recalled specific words of encouragement from her middle school principal: “You know, you should probably start to think about this [college]. Because you’re really talented and you’re really smart.” Jayden singled this moment out as one of the most influential events that led to her decision to focus on college attainment.

Eighth grade was the year that most participants considered the concept of college. It was usually prompted by a visit to their classroom by the middle school counselor or by an invitation to participate in a pre-collegiate program. School sponsored pre-collegiate program played an important role for nearly half of the interviewees. They identified their initiation in to these programs in eighth grade as their first exposure to the concept of college as a postsecondary option.

The federal Trio program Talent Search, set up to support college enrollment in first-generation students was the specific program mentioned by all but one student. Ariel explained that the requirements to participate in her Talent Search program were very stringent, involving a high GPA, writing a paper, and reading a book in order to obtain entrance. However, once a student was accepted, a myriad of services and opportunities were offered. Ariel reported visits to college campuses in Washington, DC and California, enrichment activities such as rafting, and individual support with the college admissions process. Other participants reported similar services offered by their

programs. Max was the only one who mentioned a parent component to his program. Max's pre-collegiate program required his parents to attend several informational meetings. He remarked that the informational meetings helped his parents understand the benefits of college and gave them the information they needed to support him through the college choice process. All the participants involved in these programs identified them as one of the most impactful resources in their educational journey.

Every participant mentioned a high school mentor who was the source of pivotal support in navigating the college preparation and admission process. These mentors were teachers, coaches, and club advisors who took the extra time to build a personal relationship with these students and provide them with advice and guidance. Gus' mentor, when he found out that Gus was interested in law as a career, set him up with an internship at a local law firm. Several mentors were alumni at the university in which the participants currently attend and were able to connect students with faculty and peers on campus. The mentorships formed through high school and pre-collegiate staff were deemed more critical in accessing the college admission process than any other school component for these students.

Students also mentioned several programs offered by the school that provided before school support from teachers for students wanting or needing extra help. Max reported taking full advantage of these programs and several students reported benefitting from the extra help provided. Other special programs involved opportunities to explore possible professional careers through lectures and shadowing experiences that allowed students to explore careers of interest.

Community and Connectedness

When asked to describe their home town, all of the participants commented on the communal and friendly atmosphere, and feelings of security and the connectedness associated with their community. Ariel grew up in an agriculturally-based town about forty minutes to an hour away. She characterized the collectivist nature of her town:

Yeah, the town is pretty small . . . if there is ever anything that goes on it's the kind of town where everybody knows. But people are very close in [name of town]. I think, if you ever need anything you can always go to your neighbor or something like that. It's a very safe town. Everyone's comfortable with each other. Everyone knows each other . . . it feels like a safe town. A good place to grow up.

This collectivist spirit was exemplified by the farmers in Elaine's area who pooled funds to establish a scholarship to send local students to college. The quiet and safety offered by rural living is what seemed to attract many of these families to rural areas. Many participants mentioned examples of the interconnectedness often found in rural communities, identifying their teacher is a family friend and the principal as a frequent customer when they clerk at the town drug store.

Several participants also reported struggling against the community culture to remain in town and get a job and raise a family. Max's friends could not understand why he would want to leave his community to attend college, asking: "Why do you want to leave? It's better here because you have your friends and you know everyone."

Students coming from the small town atmospheres of their rural communities seemed to seek a similar environment in their college communities. Students reported choosing their current college because of its smaller size and welcoming atmosphere. Abbeys clearly identified size as a factor in choosing her current university: "This isn't super small but it's not super big where I feel like I'm a number instead of a person."

Students talked about the expanded resources, experiences and diversity offered by their university as a medium-sized campus, but also noted the friendlier feel often associated with a smaller campus. Drama commented on the small-campus feel:

It just had a feel, a small feel to the campus life. People were really nice and I learned that if you meet someone, you're going to see them again. Unlike a big school you're not really going to meet much people.

College tours and personal connections to campus were deciding factors for these students. Many of the interviewees referred to that feeling of *just knowing* during their college tour.. It was like a feeling of familiarity or comfort and belonging. Max's comments reflect the impact of college tours on this sample:

We went to different colleges and I've been to Boulder a lot of times with this program [pre-collegiate program]. I felt "This is not my college. It's too big for me. It just doesn't feel right." CSU felt the same. It was too big and didn't feel welcoming. When we came to visit [CPU], I don't know, you just know where you belong. As soon as I stepped here, it was really my college

Several participants also mentioned the feeling of connectedness and familiarity they got from knowing someone who was currently attending or was an alumnus of their current school. When asked why they decided to attend a 4-year institution, many participants cited the "college experience" as the main reason for attending a 4-year institution as opposed to starting off at a community college. Abbey reflected:

I never really thought about going to a community college because it didn't seem like a college. You get the dorm experience, you get to move out and not have to stay at home for the next 4 years while you go to community college. I felt like it[community college] was a level up from high school. You'd still go to school and come home and do homework, go to school the next day. But here you go to class, go to your dorm, hang out with your friends, do stuff with the school, go to sleep, yeah. I just felt that I could get more involved in an actual college.

Elaine mentioned liking the:

Four-year experience and all the kind of stuff that goes with it, the clubs and sporting events. I love to sports and I love to watch the games. That's the difference between a 2-year and a 4-year college. Definitely the experience

Discussion

First-generation college students from rural areas have been able to meet the challenges presented by their first-generation status and utilize the supportive aspects of their rural communities to step out of the typical postsecondary paths followed by their rural peers. The purpose of this study was to examine the educational journeys of rural first-generation students who have successfully enrolled in college. Narrative inquiry was utilized in order to allow participants to identify the supportive and strengthening elements of their path to college that might be employed to pave the trail for further first-generation students from rural areas. Bui (2007) recognized that first-generation students are more likely to earn a Bachelor's degree if they started their college education in a 4-year institution. Therefore, participants selected for the study had enrolled in their current university directly from high school.

Previous research had identified the ability to visualize oneself as a college student as an elemental component in college attainment (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). Developing a positive academic self-identity (Anctil, Ishikawa, & Scott, 2008) through self-determination and encouragement (Deci & Ryan, 1985) allows students to entertain *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) as a college student. Most of the participants in this study entered the educational system with the innate ability, and the intrinsic motivation to learn that matched the common instruction methods and curriculum used in their schools. This match made school a stimulating environment for them and provided them with successful experiences in school (Celuch, Black, & Wartham, 2009).

Their abilities and intrinsic interests combined to form student-like behavior such as participation in classroom discussions, self-initiation and successful completion of assignments, and assimilation of knowledge and skills. The student-like behavior exhibited by the participants and their growing academic competence elicited praise and encouragement from their parents and teachers, and added an element of extrinsic motivation to the participants' natural inclination to learn (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The narratives of the participants reflected this adoption of extrinsic motivation as their descriptions shifted from the intrinsic love of learning in early elementary school, to a focus on school achievement in the upper elementary grades.

As the participants progressed into the middle school years, several more elements of self-determination (Anctil et al., 2008) were evident, persistence, self-initiative, and self-advocacy. Students reported increasing study time and accessing extra help when they encountered an academic challenge. They self-initiated homework and advocated for expanded learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. These qualities earned them academic accolades and awards and allowed them to affiliate with groups such as the honor society, all serving to strengthen their positive identity as a student. When the prospect of college was introduced to them in eighth grade, through class presentations or selection into the pre-collegiate program, these students had a strong enough academic identity to develop a *possible self* as a college student.

Parents of the participants contributed to the development of a positive academic identity through their expression of college aspirations and the desire of a better life for their child. Fan, Williams, and Wolters (2012) found that parents who expressed high academic expectations nurtured confidence and self-determination in their children,

particularly in Hispanic populations. Parents supported these high expectations by regular monitoring of grades and providing homework support. This form of parental involvement can have direct effects on a student's academic achievement and increasing their cultural as well as human capital toward college enrollment (Epstein et al., 2002; Jun & Colyar, 2002).

In addition to school supports, parents provided learning opportunities outside the classroom and were held up as role models and exemplars of character traits through family outings, the encouragement of leisure reading, providing opportunities to join community sports teams, and volunteer experiences. Gofen (2009) labeled the investments made by family in the form of encouragement, inspiration, progress monitoring, and home support as *family capital*. This form of cultural capital can give students the self-efficacy and inspiration to explore possible selves outside the realm of familiar repertoire and build the persistence and fortitude needed to turn possible selves into plausible selves. This type of support is the essence of resiliency.

Although parents provided pre-collegiate support, previous research has indicated that parents of first-generation students oftentimes lack the experience or knowledge to help their child with college selection (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Cunningham, Erisman, & Looney, 2007), college funding (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003) and college admission process (Cunningham et al., 2007). Most participants indicated that their parents did not have the experience to guide them and they engaged in their college searches independently or with the support of a school mentor or program counselor.

Almost all of the participants in this study started out in peer cultures that did not support college attainment. Many of the interviewees reported that their original friends were not focused on school but saw themselves focusing on marriage and family after high school. As a consequence, participants reported a tremendous amount of peer pressure to ditch classes and neglect homework. Ambady, Paik, Steele, Owen-Smith, and Mitchell (2004) noted that individuation and separation from groups incongruent with one's *academic possible self* can alleviate the "dampening of academic performance" (p. 405). Many of the participants at this time restructured their social circles to include friends with academic aspirations and interests common to them. Previous research has found that first-generation, and at-risk, marginalized students increased their college attainment rate when they started affiliating with students who were academically focused and college bound (Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2005; McHatton, Zalaquett, & Cronson-Gingras, 2006; Sokatch, 2006) sometimes up to ten times the rate of students who did not associate with academically minded peers (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010).

As noted, encouragement and feedback from teachers and school staff, laid the foundation for participants to consider themselves as future college enrollees.

Participants also took advantage of school sponsored clubs and sports teams that offered them opportunities to develop leadership, team building, goal setting, organization and time-management, and interpersonal skills that built capital toward college. These clubs often offered opportunities to visit college campuses and experience campus life and provided the small-group settings within which mentorships were built.

Every participant identified a mentor relationship in high school that was the source of pivotal support in navigating the college preparation and admission process.

Mentoring relationships were established through a variety of sources, some students found a mentor in one of their teachers, other students used club advisors, sports coaches or counselors in their pre-collegiate programs. These mentors provided not only the information and guidance needed to negotiate the college choice process, but provided the connection that was identified as so important by these students.

Five participants were enrolled in school-sponsored pre-collegiate programs that provided guidance, resources and information and on-campus experiences that were deemed crucial to these students in navigating the college choice process. Pre-collegiate programs offer schools a chance to show faith in their high-achieving students as potential college freshmen. Pre-collegiate programs also allow students to affiliate with students who share and support their college goal. Part of the power of pre-collegiate programs lies in the connections they help to form between students, mentors, advisors, and parents, and the connections they facilitate between students and colleges. Brofenbrenner (1979) acknowledged that the more connections that are made between an individual's spheres of influence, the more powerful the impact. The potential impact of these pre-collegiate programs appears great as they connect many aspects and influences in a student's path to college.

One of the over-arching themes that emerged in this study was one of connectedness. This theme resonated throughout every area of influence and was very strongly evident in the interviewees' descriptions of their communities. Words like, *safe*, *friendly*, and *comfortable* pervaded most of the interviewees' descriptions of their home towns. Participants acknowledged the sense of community and deep and inter-connected relationships that are typically found in rural areas (Engle, 2009, Esveld, 2004). This

connectedness was mimicked in their schools in the form of more personal support from teachers and staff than schools in urban settings (Duke & Trautewetter, 2001; Kollie, 2011). Participants sought to recreate this sense of community in their college experience by choosing a university that was smaller in size and with a perceived friendly and welcoming atmosphere. This aligns with previous research that suggests that many rural students prefer smaller colleges (Maples, 2000) in hopes of receiving more individualized attention and personal contact with faculty, as well as making stronger connections with classmates (Guiffrida, 2008 Maltzan, 2006). Hodges and Barbuto (2002) pointed out that connections made through campus visits and personal relationships with alumni attracted students to specific colleges. These factors were evident in the narratives of the participants who had teachers, coaches or siblings who were affiliated with their current university.

A Latino subculture emerged from this group of rural students. As students entering the educational system as English Language Learners (ELL), they struggled to establish a positive self-identity, noting that little was expected of them as students while they maintained their ELL status. As their skills in English developed they were held to regular academic standards and given more opportunity to develop self-efficacy as a student. When considering college enrollment, these students reported struggling against cultural norms that pressured them to focus on marriage and family after high school graduation. The Latino men interviewed noted a pressure from friends and family to get a job and help support family after high school.

When asked why they chose to attend a 4-year institution straight from high school, participants identified varying reasons but the most common one cited was for the college experience. Most of the participants sought the independence, activity, and engagement that living on a 4-year college campus could give them.

Implications and Recommendations

The overall themes reflected in the narratives involved self-determination and positive self-identity as a scholar, parental shaping of college dreams and aspirations, the establishment of mentors to guide the college choice and application process and the key importance of developing relationships and connections along the entire educational journey. These concepts can be used to further develop interventions at the student, home and school level to help build the human, cultural and social capital that helps support college attainment.

Self-determination and self-identity as a student were seen as defining factors in college attainment for these participants. Parents can encourage the development of self-determination in their child by encouraging their child's natural love of learning, taking their lead as they explore the world, providing learning opportunities in daily routines, and reading to their child on a daily basis. Providing children with high academic standards and encouraging age-appropriate independence supports the development of persistence and a sense of competence that will serve these students well when faced with academic challenge. Parents should be encouraged to share openly their aspirations and dreams for their child. Sharing aspirations also models the development of possible selves and inspires children to build possible selves of their own. Bringing parents into the discussions at school through career day activities or home/school assignments can give added strength and support to a child's dreams. Opening up discussions of career and life goals before students enter the stage when they start to eliminate their future options based on self-perceived limits, gives the adults in their lives opportunity to encourage dreams.

Schools can also contribute to the development of a positive academic self-identity. Elementary classrooms can maintain explicit focus on increasing students' self-efficacy as a scholar by establishing high expectations for all students and providing the scaffolding and support needed to meet those expectations. Strength-based teaching can help students to focus on their strengths and successes, giving them the motivation to persist through challenges and increase their engagement in school. Teaching long and short term goal setting practices early will cultivate self-determination and encourage the students to develop and define possible selves. Goal setting also allows students to connect consequences to behavior, informing them of their responsibility for outcomes.

Mentors were important and critical guides on the path to college for these participants, providing encouragement, information, advice and role models during the last leg of the journey. Oftentimes, teachers can get bogged down with curriculum and assessment and can lose sight of the powerful impact that they can have in a child's life. Teachers, especially those in middle schools and high schools, should be encouraged to develop mentoring relations with several students during the year, and should be trained not to limit their search for mentees to those students who have developed a clear path to college, but to extend their efforts to those students who may not look like the traditional student. Students that one might not recognize as potential college enrollees, such as ESL students, less directed students, and underachievers who may have great potential that is unrealized. As Elle acknowledged in her narrative, it is these marginalized populations that may benefit most from a mentoring relationship.

The accounts of successful pre-collegiate programs in the majority of narratives suggest that these programs would benefit all students aspiring to college attainment.

Pre-collegiate programs can effectively build connections between all of the student's spheres of influence, creating powerful supports for rural first-generation students. Using graduates of the local pre-collegiate programs and some of their classmates to establish student mentorships with elementary and middle school students establishes a personal connection to college for each student. Counselors' efforts may be best spent establishing pre-collegiate programs in their school through acquired funding, trained personnel and sponsorships and by providing ongoing program evaluation and improvements on such programs.

The importance of personal connection within the rural culture should prompt college recruitment centers to send representatives out to meet personally with students in rural communities. Smaller and mid-sized institutions should focus on building a sense of community on campus and emphasize this asset when marketing to rural students.

Public college enrollment and financial aid continues to elude undocumented students. As Gus noted in his narrative, when the prospects of future education and the expanded post-graduation opportunities that accompany them are taken away, students see no reason to invest their time and effort in school and they disengage. Making postsecondary educational opportunities more available to undocumented students may impact school engagement, employment and the economy of this population.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provided a narrow sample that included first-generation students from rural areas of Colorado who were attending one Colorado 4-year institution. Research expanding to other rural areas of the United States may extend our understanding of first-generation students from rural regions. A study comparing the educational journeys of

rural first-generation students who have attained college enrollment to those who have chosen to pursue other postsecondary options may help clarify which elements identified by the participants played more crucial roles in their journey toward college.

The participants in this study have secured college enrollment, but the ultimate goal is to graduate with a 4-year degree. Retention rates for this population are lower than the general population: 44.9%, compared to 59% of students from traditional college families (Glenn, 2008). Research on the retention of rural first-generation students to degree completion is needed in order to increase graduation rates. Exploring the characteristics, strategies and supports used by 4-year institutions that have high rates of retention of rural first-generation students would prove valuable.

Although there may have been an over-representation of Latinos in the sample, their narratives contained compelling stories. Research on students whose parents were brought up with the Mexican or Latin American public school system and the ways it has molded their perspectives on education as they immigrate to the United States should be explored. The exploration of the educational journeys and college access process of undocumented students and the possible impact of increased college access to this population is greatly needed.

Jayden's narrative and comments inspire further research on the educational journeys of teen mothers, their postsecondary aspirations and perceived barriers to college attainment that might expand our understanding of women who find themselves in this situation and illuminate ways that we can support their educational goals.

Although online learning did not work for Jayden, it may provide a viable option for

other rural students who are not within close proximity of a college and wish to remain in their area.

Conclusion

The narratives of these participants have provided stories of self-determination, personal and family resilience, persistence, and finding a sense of place. Each participant carved their own unique path, proving that there are many different ways to reach a college education without using the typical GPS system afforded traditional college students. As educators, we must not narrow our definition of a future college student and must recognize the potential college student within less traditional populations such as those with behavioral problems, ESL students, teenage parents, and those students with limited economic resources. All of these participants continue to walk the path to a 4-year college degree. I admire each of these participants for their courage to venture onto the unfamiliar path toward the promise of a better quality of life. I am also very grateful to have joined them along the road for a very brief time as they shared their stories with me. In the words of Robert Frost, all of these participants have taken the “road less travelled” and my hope for each of them is that it “has made all the difference.”

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